

What Is the Fruit of Repentance?



“When John the Baptist told the Jews that they must bring forth fruit worthy of repentance, what did he mean by ‘fruit’ (Matthew 3:8)?”

There are three things to be taken into consideration in answering this question.

1. Exactly what is “repentance”?
2. What is the significance of the expression, “worthy of”?
3. What is implied by the phrase, “bring forth fruit”?

We will examine each of these items.

What Is Repentance?

The Greek verb that is translated “repent” is **metanoeo**. Literally, it means “after thought.” It suggests the idea of thinking about a deed after the commission of it.

In the case of a sinful action, repentance requires a retrospection of the act and a subsequent feeling of sorrow for having committed the sin.

Repentance involves more than being sorry for the wrong act. This is beyond dispute. True repentance includes sorry but also a resolve to **stop** the wrongful conduct, replacing it with godly living.

J. H. Thayer commented upon the term in the following fashion. He said that repentance is:

“the change of mind of those who have begun to abhor their errors and misdeeds, and have determined to enter upon a better course of life, so that it embraces both a recognition of sin and sorrow for it and hearty amendment, the tokens and effects of which are good deeds” (1958, 406).

Here is a clear example of how this word was used in the New Testament to include more than just sorrow.

In response to Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-36), his listeners were “pricked in their heart” (Acts 2:37). Their sorrow at crucifying their own Messiah prompted them to ask, “What shall we do?”

Peter responded, in part, “Repent” (Acts 2:38a).

Obviously, repentance demanded more than mere regret. It required action that manifested a **change of life**.

Later on, Paul would write that “godly sorrow leads to repentance” (2 Cor. 7:10). The repentance of this text, therefore, must be **reformation**, not mere grief over the act.

What Does It Mean to Be Worthy of Repentance?

The expression “worthy of” (**axios**) originally had to do with comparing objects that were of equal weight. The metaphorical use in the New Testament may be employed of things both good or bad.

For example, someone who spends his time and energies in proclaiming the gospel is worthy of support — that is, financial support commensurate with his labor (Mt. 10:10; 1 Tim. 5:17-18).

Here's another example. A person who commits a capital crime (e.g., murder) is worthy of death (Acts 23:29; 25:11).

With reference to the issue at hand, the **change of life** that is characteristic of repentance must **correspond** to the gravity and nature of the offense. Otherwise, there simply is no repentance.

What Is the Fruit of Repentance?

Finally, what is the actual “fruit” required in genuine repentance? Several factors must be taken into consideration.

First, if the sin has been against another person individually, amendment must be addressed to that person.

When David committed adultery with Bathsheba, it is absurd to conclude that his confession to Nathan, “I have sinned against Jehovah” (2 Sam. 12:13), would have exhausted the scope of his repentance. Who would claim he had no responsibility to acknowledge the wrong to **Bathsheba**, his partner in adultery?

Too many people labor under the illusion that they can make a generic confession at a church service, without ever making things right **personally** with the victims of their sin.

Much less, even, is it the case that one may secretly repent of a sin, and subsequently, deny that the transgression ever was committed! Strange indeed is the meaning of repentance in such a person's spiritual lexicon.

Second, whenever possible, an attempt at **restitution** should be made. There are a number of Old Testament passages that make clear this point (see Ex. 22:1ff; cf. Lk. 19:8b). Though we are not bound by the specifics of Mosaic legislation, the principle is important nonetheless.

In the case of a murder, the destroyed life can never be restored, but the murderer might be able, to the best of his ability, help support the widow and children of his victim.

If someone steals money, it should be repaid to the extent of his ability. If a banker has embezzled a million dollars from the financial institution for which he has worked, he might never be able to repay that entire sum, but he should attempt to do what he can. If a person declares bankruptcy, he is morally obligated to repay his creditors (as much as is feasible).

We are not permitted to enjoy the fruit of our crimes. Of course, it is always possible that a victim of abuse might “forgive” the debt (Mt. 18:27), but the sinner must never take that for granted. We must never reason, “Because I cannot repair **all** my sins, I will make no attempt to remedy **any** of them.”

The conscientious Bible student is forced to conclude that any repentance without the full compliment of elements that define that term is no repentance at all.

SOURCES

Thayer, J. H. 1958. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark.

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