

Jesus came to Galilee
proclaiming the gospel of God:
“This is the time of fulfillment.
The kingdom of God is at hand.
Repent and believe in the gospel.”

~Mark 1:14-15

True Repentance and the Season of Lent



“No one pours new wine into old wineskins.
Otherwise, the wine will burst the skins,
and both the wine and the skins are ruined.
Rather, new wine is poured into fresh wineskins.”

~Mark 2:22

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In his book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis proclaimed that “fallen man is not simply an imperfect creature who needs improvement; he is a rebel who must lay down his arms...and this process of surrender...is what Christians call repentance.” Although we, as Jesus’ faithful disciples, must actively engage this every day of our lives, Lent is the special season when the Church invites us to kneel before the Cross, to consider the sins by which we have separated ourselves from God, and, in honestly recognizing them, to willingly enter into a period of profound change.

As such, the great 40 day Fast is a prayerful time of even deeper introspection and intensified penance, a period in which we humbly acknowledge our sinfulness, consciously turn away from our past failings and move toward a fuller life as followers of Jesus Christ, fully embracing his call to holiness. During Lent, we *surrender*, we *repent*, and at the end of Lent we should be different. Come Easter, we should be like new wineskins, ready to receive the abundant new wine of the Gospel, prepared to keep it within ourselves so as to then generously share it with the whole world.

But what does it mean to truly repent? Well, usually we reduce it to simply saying we are sorry for our sins and asking for forgiveness--and, indeed, this is part of it--but it means so much more! The Greek word for repentance that is used in the Gospels is *μετάνοια* (transliterated as *metanoia*), literally means “to change one’s mind.” This “change of mind” necessarily entails a profound interior conversion in which we firmly and deliberately turn away from a worldly way of thinking and acting, and embrace “the same mind that was in Christ Jesus,” as St. Paul counsels us (Phil.2:5). To truly repent, therefore, is to accept the challenging offer of a renewed way of life as Christ’s disciples. We begin to start thinking like Christ, and as a result our actions follow--we begin to live like Christ. **This is the ultimate goal of Lent; it is the true goal of our discipleship.**

5.) Ask God for mercy and grace, then dig in your heels, and make a decision to replace it with its opposite.

For example, if you find yourself slipping into prideful thoughts of “I’m better than so and so...,” with humility remind yourself that we are all equal before God, which is to say, we are all loved sinners, just works in progress, all much in need of God’s mercy.

Repeat this in your mind, until the sinful pattern has passed. Repeat steps 4 and 5 all day.

6.) The intention to replace the sinful pattern of thought with a holy one takes real effort; it’s work. Since, as we have now learned, there is an actual bodily impact, we need *some action* to help reinforce the new way of thinking with a new way of acting.

Therefore, do something to help you engender the opposite virtue, i.e., fasting and works of charity.

The importance of this step cannot be overemphasized.

7.) If you make it to step 4 but fall back into the pattern before making progress on step 5 or if you only notice that you’ve had sinful thoughts after the fact, simply go back to step 2 and move through again.

Be patient with yourself, it takes time, but never give up. Keep working; don’t stop cooperating with your partner the Holy Spirit.

8.) Seek the counsel of your priest who can offer you spiritual direction and practical advice to help you along the way.

9.) If you can truly say that, with God’s indispensable help, you have repented a sinful way of thinking and replaced it with a holy and virtuous one, go back to step 1 and start anew. This process never ends for us as Jesus’ disciples.

1. <https://www.attn.com/stories/2587/what-negative-thinking-does-your-brain>
2. <http://www.orthodox.net/gleanings/repentance.html>

Faced with a task so daunting, though, where do we even start? Quite simply: we start by starting! We begin by acknowledging and addressing just one habitual mental sin--this will be work enough! (This is the product of step 4 below). When done with the first mental sin, we should move to another, but **truly repenting** one habitual mental sin really is a sufficient goal for each of us during this great and holy Lent. So...let us now consider step-by-step how we can start to do this.

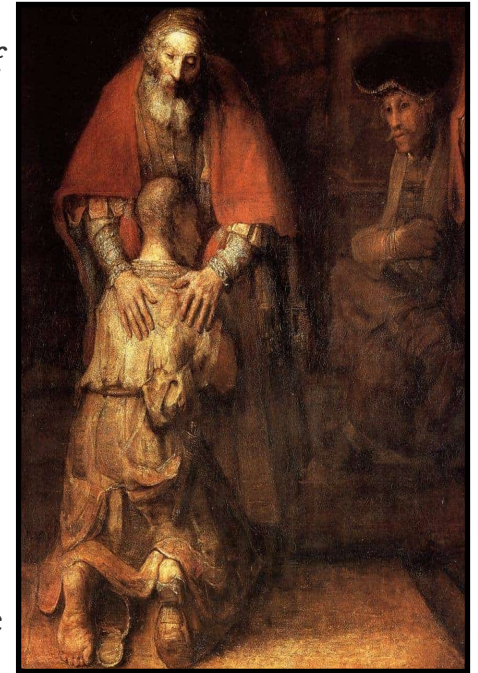
Some Steps to Start “Changing our Minds”

- 1.) Pray to the Holy Spirit, asking Him to show you just one sinful way of thinking that you currently employ. Be humble enough to ask and courageous to learn about yourself. When you have discovered this and admit it, then...
- 2.) Confess the sin during the Sacrament of Reconciliation--start fresh with a clean conscience, but know that we still have a habit that now needs to be overcome and replaced or it will likely return and sometimes become even more deeply rooted within us.
- 3.) Pray every morning, asking the Lord to help you become aware of the movements of your thoughts throughout the entire day.
- 4.) Do your best to monitor the way you are thinking: about yourself, about others, even about God.

The goal from this step is to start paying attention to something we usually just slip into--patterns of thought.

Try to be aware of the present moment and when that way of thinking comes along, very quickly call it what is: sin. Right away, then...

When we pray the Confiteor together at the beginning of every Holy Mass, together confessing our sins to the Lord, each of us acknowledges that we have sinned “in my thoughts, in my words and in what I have done or failed to do.” Have you ever noticed that we always first confess the sins of our thoughts? The very words of the liturgy implicitly recognize that all other sin--whether committed through word, action or inaction --has its origin in the way we think. Thus, we can see our real need to truly repent... to surrender...to change our minds...“to come to our senses” as did the prodigal son (Luke 15:17).



Now, if we're humble and really honest, we all must admit that we do indeed have habitual mental sins, or to put it another way, we have sinful ways of thinking. They have a way of creeping in unseen, certainly assisted by the devil, to quickly become fallen mental habits become so deep-seated, so entrenched in us that they impact us in ways that we probably don't even recognize, even impacting us physiologically.

In neuroscience, the expression “neurons that fire together, wire together” describes the concept that our brains are shaped by our thoughts and experiences. Our thoughts can alter the very structure of our brain, so that “the brain takes its shape from what the mind rests upon.”²¹ The upshot of this is that sinful ways of thinking not only wound the soul and darken the mind but even negatively impact the body. As a result, our whole selves--soul, mind and even body--quickly begin to spiral out of self-control.

To help us understand this, we can consider a rough pathway in a heavily wooded and uncleared area, overrun with small trees, heavy shrubbery and thick weeds. It can, over time, become a clearly defined and well-marked trail just by being repeatedly used. Though quite unfamiliar and perhaps even difficult to traverse at first, it becomes progressively easier with each hiking expedition. The more frequently it is traveled, the more quickly it becomes the well-established path of least resistance. Then, it is used all the more, thus becoming even easier to travel, and so on...



This is how it is with our patterns of thought. Now, this can clearly be of great benefit to us if we focus on our Lord and his teachings, recall the example of his Mother and the Saints, or meditate on the Gospels or the Psalms, since we will develop healthy, indeed, holy patterns of thought, and our lives will follow. Conversely, however, fixating on sinful matters will establish thoroughfares of thought that do not benefit us on our ongoing journey of discipleship. Such disordered considerations serve only to leave our truth-thirsting minds like old, brittle wineskins, utterly incapable of containing Him Who alone gives the living water that will truly satisfy.



Putting this dynamic into spiritual terms many centuries ago, St. Gregory the Great (d. 604) wrote: “For sin is that is not swiftly washed away by penitence becomes the cause of other sin...if it is not cleansed swiftly by repentance. Almighty God by righteous judgement allows the guilty mind of the sinner to fall to further guilt, so that the mind

which was unwilling to cleanse what it had done by weeping and correction begins to add sin to sin...with increasing blindness it is generated from the retribution of prior guilt so that certain punishments are, as it were, the very increase of the vices in the sinner...”²

We can easily summarize the powerful words of this great Father of the Western Church with the same terms we have been using: the mortal sins we commit, always begin in our minds and mark out the pathway for others sins to follow... and others sins *will* follow. The only way out is inner conversion, true repentance, which is to say, changing our minds with God’s help.

Even in coming to know all of this, however, we must acknowledge that this repentance is not easy, but with God’s grace, it is possible! Hopefully, we are already trying to turn the tide of our lives by overcoming the fallenness that impacts us in every possible way. However, if our pathways of sinful thought were developed over time, perhaps even without our awareness and effort (in fact, more than likely so because of our mental apathy and spiritual sloth), then consider how much more new patterns of thought--virtuous, wholesome and holy--can be established within us by our active engagement and willing cooperation with God’s grace!