

Repentance
&
Forgiveness

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There is much confusion and fuzzy thinking about the subject of repentance and forgiveness. What do these words mean and why and when are they necessary? What do they accomplish? The scriptures are very clear on both of these matters.

Repentance

Let us examine some of the scriptures concerning repentance. **Hebrews 12:17** says that Esau “*found no place of repentance,*” concerning his sale of his birthright to Jacob. This has no reference to Esau’s salvation, but rather to his father’s blessing. There was no way he could change his mind in this matter. This is what repentance means: to change one’s mind, his way of thinking.

John the Baptist, in **Matthew 3:8**, demanded “*fruits in keeping with repentance.*”-*NIV* Just as fruits are produced naturally by plants, evidence of change accompanies repentance. This results in “*works meet (fit) for repentance.*” That is, different ways of living or of responding to whatever was repented of.

Jesus said (**Mark 2:17**) that He came to call sinners to repentance. The apostles (**Mark 6:12**) preached that men should repent. Paul “*testified both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.*” The Gospel message is that all must repent and believe in Jesus to be saved.

Believers also have reasons to repent. The risen Lord Jesus addressed believers in **Revelation 3:19**, “*as many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore and repent.*” In **II Corinthians 7:10** Paul commends the Corinthians for their repentance in their attitude regarding the sin of fornication by one of their members and in chapter **12:21** he warns those who have not repented of their uncleanness and fornication and lasciviousness which they have committed. These were Christians who needed to repent. Jesus said in **Luke 17:3,4** that we need to repent to each other when we have wronged someone. This is something all too rarely done.

In **II Samuel 11**, we read of David’s great sin. He was guilty of adultery, attempted cover-up and murder (by proxy). In **chapter 12** he gave us an example of true repentance. First, he admitted that he had done wrong: “*I have sinned.*” These are the hardest words for a person to say. Second, he accepted his punishment: “*the sword shall never depart from thine house.*” That is one reason he wept so bitterly for his son

Absalom, he knew this was a part of his punishment. His sin was forgiven, but the consequences remained. Third, he published the *fifty first Psalm* and appointed it to be publicly sung in the temple as evidence of his repentance. This is the reason he was “*a man after God’s own heart.*” He did not justify himself as Saul had done.

The results of repentance are apparent to all. One of the “*fruits of repentance*” is sorrow for the sin or wrong done. (*Matt. 3:8*) Lest we think that God’s grace treats us differently, Paul wrote (*II Cor. 7:10*) “*Godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation not to be repented of.*” Paul was writing to Christians about Christians, not sinners. Salvation means deliverance. Repentance and confession is the only way of deliverance from sin. It is the only way of victory over the flesh.

John wrote (*I John 1:9*) “*if we confess our sins (plural), He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins (what we have done) and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.*” In verse seven he wrote, “*the blood of Jesus Christ cleanseth (present tense) us from all sin.*” True repentance restores fellowship between the offended and God as well as others who were offended. The mere passing of time changes nothing. Repentance changes everything.

Forgiveness

There is even more confusion about forgiveness than about repentance. Forgiveness is a response to repentance (**Acts 2:38**). The New Testament word for forgiveness means to remit, to release. In what is called the Lord's prayer in **Matthew 6:12** we read "*forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.*" In **Luke 11:4** we read "*forgive us our sins; as we also forgive every one that is indebted to us.*" In keeping with Rabbinic teaching, Jesus calls sins debts, either to God or to men. In **Mark 11:25-26** sins are called trespasses. To forgive is to remit the indebtedness (sins) of others. Forgiveness is a transaction between two of more parties. It is to be requested and granted or offered and accepted.

Repentance and forgiveness change the relationship between the offended and the offender. The mere passing of time changes nothing. When forgiveness is offered and accepted (**Acts 2:38**) or requested and granted (**Luke 18:13-14**) fellowship is restored. (**II Cor. 5:20**) The Pharisees said (**Mark 2:7**) "*only God can forgive sins*" (resulting acceptance with God). Jesus did not contradict them, but pronounces forgiveness (**Mark 2:10**) as proof of His deity. The apostles (**Acts 5:31-32**) linked repentance to forgiveness.

God forgives the sins of His children when they are confessed (***I John 1:9***). This is because of His faithfulness to us, His children. In like manner He expects us to be forgiving (***Matthew 6:14-15***). In ***Luke 17:4*** Jesus said that if a brother trespasses against us seven times in one day and seven times says “I repent” we shall forgive. We would likely think such a person insincere, but if he repents we must forgive. Again, repentance and forgiveness effect reconciliation.

In ***I Corinthians 5*** there was gross sin and no repentance. Paul demanded that the church, collectively, administer discipline. In ***II Corinthians 2:8***, when this sinning brother repented, Paul instructed them to forgive him and to “*confirm your love toward him.*” This does not mean that discipline is without love, but rather that forgiveness must also be given in love.

Since forgiveness is a transaction between two or more parties based on repentance, when there is no repentance there can be no forgiveness and no reconciliation. Unilateral forgiveness is meaningless. What, then, can we do? In ***Hebrews 12:14*** we are admonished “*to follow peace with all men*” and be sure that no “*root of bitterness*” (***Hebrews 12:15***) grows in our hearts. When there is nothing we can do, we must leave the matter with the Lord.

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