

**WHAT CHRISTIANS SHOULD KNOW VOLUME II (#WCSK2)
PART VII: REPENTANCE**

The series What Christians Should Know Volume II (#WCSK2) boosts your understanding and shows you how to apply Biblical principles to everyday life. All Scriptures will be taken from the New American Standard Bible (NASB) unless otherwise noted. Biblical references are examples and are in no way intended to be exhaustive. Many of the ideas here will build upon the series [What Christians Should Know Volume I](#) (#WCSK), which provides education on core beliefs and doctrines in the Christian faith. All of the lessons are best used as a general guide as you engage in your own Bible study.

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path” (Psalm 119:105).

How this concept applies to your everyday life: Repentance refers to a spiritual turning away from sin. Living a Christian life means living a life driven by a repentant heart and a repentant mind. Repentance means much, much more than saying, “I’m sorry,” and to genuinely repent, you have to understand what the concept really means and have the motivation to change.

Introduction

In Mark 1:14–15, Jesus proclaims to all those who are present, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.” In Luke 13:3, Jesus says, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Christ then repeats this statement in Luke 13:5. The repetition is a literary device used to emphasize something important. THE LORD was trying to draw our attention by italicizing, underlining, and circling the fact that unrepentance leads to death. Furthermore, in Matthew 3:2, Christ says, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand,” and then in 3:8, says, “Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance.”

In Acts 3:19, the apostle Peter says, “Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the LORD.” In fact, Peter also writes in II Peter 3:9 that repentance is so important that in His dispositional will, God wants *everyone* to come to repentance: “The LORD is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.”

Clearly, repentance is a crucial idea, but what does it really mean? Does repentance simply refer to saying, “I’m sorry?” or does it signify something deeper? Can anyone just repent, or do we have to have a relationship with God for it to be effective? What does

repentance have to do with faith? Why does repentance seem so hard? Is repentance not really repentance if you go back and do what you repented of in the first place? Is repentance a lifelong process, or is it a one-time event?

This lesson will answer these questions and more.

What is repentance?

In *Systematic Theology*, Wayne Grudem defined repentance as “a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake and walk in obedience to Christ.”¹ Our English word *repentance* is derived from the Greek word *metanoēō*, meaning to think differently; to reconsider or to change one’s mind for the better; to feel a moral compulsion or to have a sense of regret or remorse over a prior behavior. Repentance involves a mental awareness that something wrong was done, *and* that awareness is intimately connected to deep, emotional sorrow.

The entire Book of Lamentations is a perfect example of the expressed sorrow of Jeremiah over the desolation of Jerusalem. Of course, God handed the city and its people over to destruction because of their iniquity. In Lamentations 1:1–3, the prophet writes:

“How lonely sits the city that was full of people! She has become like a widow who was once great among the nations! She who was a princess among the provinces has become a forced laborer! She weeps bitterly in the night and her tears are on her cheeks; she has none to comfort her among all her lovers. All her friends have dealt treacherously with her; they have become her enemies. Judah has gone into exile under affliction and under harsh servitude.”

Jeremiah then qualifies the reason for this sorrow in verse 5: “For the LORD has caused her grief because of the multitude of her transgressions; her little ones have gone away as captives before the adversary.” In other words, Jeremiah feels regret over what is happening but also knows the reason why it’s happening: [sin](#).

The Psalms also include poetry expressed over the heartache caused by violation of God’s commandments. Psalm 51 is the most well known of this type of psalm. King David wrote it after he committed adultery with Bathsheba and Nathan exposed the affair.

It’s important to note that in these examples of David and Jeremiah, both men exhibited an *external* behavior because of an *inward* change of heart. So out of their repentant hearts emerged specific actions (confessions of wrongdoing with sorrow and laments). Throughout the Old Testament, there are many examples of people engaging in specific

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 713.

prescribed rituals in order to symbolize inward repentance. Wearing sackcloth and ashes or tearing of one's garments are two examples of the expression of deep, inward grief.²

As far as God is concerned, He wants us to render our hearts, not our garments. This means THE LORD is overwhelmingly more concerned with there being a deep, visceral emotional tear in our innermost being, as opposed to just tearing our clothes and engaging in a ritual. The danger, of course, with focusing on an external behavior is that anyone can perform the ritual without having a sincere motivation behind it. That makes the ritual formless and void. As it says in Joel 2:12–13, “‘Yet even now,’ declares the LORD, ‘Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments. Now return to the LORD your God, for He is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger, abounding in lovingkindness and relenting of evil.’” Repentance results from the total conversion of a human being, so you aren't grieved by one “big sin” or one “small sin” but by *all* sin. You don't want to just remove a few things from an unfavorable environment (and have two addresses), but you want to gather all your belongings and go to someplace safe without looking back. Repentance compels you to execute a complete and total return to God.

How repentance works

The first thing to take note of is that repentance is only possible if it is preceded by the [regeneration](#) of the Holy Spirit. There is an entire lesson devoted to this topic in *What Christians Should Know Volume I*, but in a nutshell, regeneration means being born again by the Holy Spirit and being given a new heart and mind. In this secret act of God, He imparts new spiritual life to us. Regeneration is part of the entire process of salvation that continues Christ's atoning sacrifice on the cross—that is, Christ has paid the price for our sins, and the Holy Spirit actualizes that work in our lives so that He can put sin to death and raise us up to new life. Our subsequent response to the work of the Holy Spirit regenerating us is repentance.

So where does [faith](#) fit into the picture? Basically, repentance and faith are married. Although we may have two labels for them, in the end they are inseparably woven together as one. It is impossible to have legitimate Biblical repentance without faith, and it is impossible to have legitimate Biblical faith without repentance. Turning away (repentance) from something means that you're simultaneously turning toward (faith) something. Of course, turning away from sin means that you're turning toward Christ. If you're not turning toward Christ, then you can't legitimately turn away from sin.³

Conversion is a term used to refer both to repentance and faith in God. Genuine faith and genuine repentance go hand in hand, and the reason why is simple: We, as sinners, are incapable of doing what God commands based on our own compulsion. We have to be freed from the shackles of sin by God in order to exhibit the fruits of genuine faith and

² See Genesis 37:34; II Samuel 3:31; I Kings 21:27; II Kings 6:30; Job 16:15, 42:6; Lamentations 2:10; Isaiah 15:3; Joel 1:13; Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13

³ Isaiah 43:18-19; II Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:9-10

genuine repentance. Faith is a positive response that enables us to believe and trust in God. Repentance is a negative response that turns us away from the evil things we used to do. Although to clarify both concepts, I have separated repentance and faith, both happen simultaneously. Again, the Holy Spirit never regenerates people and makes them repentant so that they can just be “neutral” and simply avoid sin.⁴ Similarly, when the Spirit imparts faith in people, that faith engenders a sincere desire to change behavior.⁵

Because repentance involves turning away from sin, it involves knowing about two things: the destructiveness of sin and the righteousness found in doing God’s will and following His commandments. Yet this knowing is only the first part of the process because many people may *know* what is wrong and what is right but still choose to do evil. As it says in Romans 1:28–32, “And just as they did not see fit to acknowledge God any longer, God gave them over to a depraved *mind*, to do those things which are not proper . . . and although they *know* the ordinance of God, that those who practice such things are worthy of death, they not only do the same, but also give hearty approval to those who practice them” (emphasis added). Even demons *know* that God is God.⁶ They just refuse to worship Him, and have no motivation to worship THE LORD.

Knowing simply means you can mentally distinguish between right and wrong, but people are motivated *to act* based on emotion or heart condition. As it says in II Corinthians 7:9–10, “I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that *you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance*; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. *For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret*, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death” (emphasis added). Here the apostle Paul makes it very clear that a regenerated person feels sorrow over what they have done wrong. This sorrow isn’t an end in itself but serves as a vehicle to help the individual turn away from sin without regret and into God’s hands. Repentant people grieve over what they did wrong and turn away from their destructive behavior *without feeling sorrow that they can no longer do what they used to do*.⁷

What repentance looks like: Psalm 51

One of the best places to look to understand what repentance looks like is to analyze Psalm 51, where King David, a man after God’s own heart,⁸ repents concerning his adultery with Bathsheba.

⁴ Deuteronomy 4:39–40; Psalm 119:30, 60; Luke 6:46; John 14:45; I John 5:3, 5:8; I Peter 1:14.

⁵ Romans 12:2; II Corinthians 5:17; Colossians 3:10; Ephesians 4:20–24.

⁶ James 2:19.

⁷ II Corinthians 7:9–11.

⁸ See I Samuel 13:14 and Acts 13:22.

Repentance relies on God's mercy. The first thing David writes is, "Be gracious to me, O God, according to your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions." David realizes that it is only by the grace of God that repentance has any value. After all, theoretically speaking, people could repent and sincerely turn from their old ways but be ignored by God. Thankfully for us, this is not the case. The Bible tells us that when we confess, our sins will be forgiven (I John 1:9), that we must repent so that our sins will be blotted out (Acts 3:19), and that God Himself has an earnest desire for all people to come to repentance (II Peter 3:9).

Repentance seeks for the person to be cleansed. Psalm 51:2 says, "Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." When we come before God and ask for forgiveness, He may pardon us, but the stain of sin remains. Hence, David asks to be *thoroughly* washed and to have not only his stain removed but to have a deep internal cleansing that also changes the desires of his heart. David, being truly repentant, doesn't just want God to graciously forgive him for this *act*; he also entreats God to change his heart condition so that he doesn't commit adultery again. David also recognizes that he cannot wash himself; only God can atone for sins.

This sentiment is further expressed in verses 7–10 when David writes, "Purify me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow. Make me to hear joy and gladness, let the bones which You have broken rejoice. Hide Your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquities. Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me."

Repentance admits guilt. Psalm 51:3 says, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me." Basically what David is saying is, "I'm guilty." He doesn't rationalize his sin or try to pretend as if he's "OK." He doesn't say, "This is who I am" or "It just felt right at the time." David simply says, "I am wrong." The reason why David knows he's guilty is because he is aware of God's commandments, the objective scale by which David is judged. David also knows that the only thing he can do with the guilty feelings resulting from his sin is to repent, confess, and ask God for forgiveness. Just as David realizes that he can't wash himself, he also recognizes that *only God* can remove his guilt by forgiveness.

Repentance respects and honors God. Psalm 51:4 says, "Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are justified when You speak and blameless when You judge." Ultimately, the reason why what David did was wrong is because it violates God's rules for creation. And, because God is God, David acknowledges that breaking God's rules ultimately is an offense to THE LORD. The sovereignty of God crushes all arrogance and humbles the person before the Creator. God is blameless, and His justice demands punishment. David subsequently does not bargain with God, knowing that he cannot win.

Repentance seeks to be close to God. Psalm 51:11–14a says, "Do not cast me away from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation and sustain me with a willing spirit. Then I will teach transgressors Your ways,

and sinners will be converted to You. Deliver me from bloodguiltiness, O God, the God of my salvation.” David makes it very clear here that a repentant person’s deepest fear is to be separated from God. Sin is what drives a wedge between David and THE LORD, and if a wedge remains, the bloodguiltiness will deliver David to damnation. Thus, David cries out for God not to depart from him and to restore his joy—joy that can only be restored with repentance and a return of proper fellowship with God. Not only that, David is fully aware of the cataclysmic destruction that unrepentance can have on others,⁹ and he seeks to assist *them* in turning from their ways. David does not want others to endure the same emotional turmoil as he has. The burden of sin, in a way, is a form of spiritual torture for someone with a penitent heart.

Repentance also seeks for others to be close to God. It is very important to put what David wrote in Psalm 51 in the context of why he wrote it—that is, what compelled him to repent. The answer can be found in II Samuel 12, where the prophet Nathan confronts King David and tells him that he has done wrong. In verse 9, Nathan tells David, “Why have you despised the word of the LORD by doing evil in His sight? You have struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword, have taken his wife to be your wife, and have killed him with the sword of the sons of Ammon.” It is *then* that David admits, “I have sinned against the LORD” (verse 13). Essentially one servant of God (a prophet) confronts another servant of God (a king) in private in order to expose a blatant sin *in order to bring the guilty party to repentance*. David even admits that the guilty must “make restitution” (verse 6) for what was done wrong. A key take-home point for us in modern society is that yes, we are all sinners, and no one is “better” than another. That being said, if it is clear that someone else known to you is violating God’s Law, repentance seeks for others to be close to God. Repentance thus isn’t selfish and has a vested interest in the well-being of a community of believers (i.e., the [church](#)).¹⁰ Hence, Nathan confronts David *not* simply to accuse him and then arrogantly walk away, but to expose the transgression so that David may turn from his evil ways. Implicit in the narrative of Nathan and David is the desire of one servant to assist in the walk of another, and in this particular case, ignoring the unrepentance of a king (and by modern extension, those in spiritual leadership) portends many negative consequences for those who serve under the king.¹¹

Repentance finds comfort knowing that God fixes brokenness. Psalm 51:15–17 says, “O Lord, open my lips, that my mouth may declare Your praise. For You do not delight in sacrifice, otherwise I would give it; You are not pleased with burnt offering. The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise.”

Here, David is broken. He is vulnerable. He experiences extreme anguish over sin, and his heart is sorry, ashamed, and remorseful. Yet David realizes that the only One who can

⁹ See Jonah 3:10 as a reverse example: a community of people repented and therefore God *relented* from bringing about disaster.

¹⁰ Acts 20:28.

¹¹ See also Proverbs 16:12; Jeremiah 23:1–4; Ezekiel 34:1–8; Mark 10:42–45; cf. Psalm 33:12; Proverbs 29:12; I Timothy 3:1–5.

repair his broken heart is God. This is where many people take a wrong turn on the highway of repentance. They feel broken and ashamed and thus turn *away* from God because they feel unworthy. They feel the need for *something else* to cover them so they can approach God. Yet, as David reveals, it is God who will give us the most captive audience when we have a broken spirit and a broken and contrite heart. Psalm 34:18 offers some of the most beautiful and consoling words when it declares, “The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.”

Repentance finds comfort knowing that God fixes brokenness, and repentance feels assured that when it comes to repairing a heart broken over sin, God is the *only* One who can fix it. People may exhibit wordly “repentance” by repeating a phrase, inflicting harm on themselves, engaging in a ritual, or doing acts of charity, but this is not what God desires. He wants us to render our hearts, not our garments.

R. C. Sproul writes, “The Bible tells us explicitly and shows us implicitly that God resists the proud and gives grace to the humble. David knows this to be true. As broken as he is, he knows God and how God relates to penitent people. He understands that God never hates or despises a broken or contrite heart. This is what God desires of us. This is what Jesus had in mind in the Beatitudes when He said, ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted’ (Matt. 5:4).’ This text is not simply about grieving the loss of a loved one, but also the grief that we experience when convicted by our sin. Jesus assures us that when we grieve over our sin, God by His Holy Spirit will comfort us.”¹²

It is from this stance that it now becomes clear that no person can develop the sincere desire to self-repent. So if you know there is something in your life that requires repentance, *you* cannot expect to wake up tomorrow and feel compelled to turn from your former ways. Because the Holy Spirit causes the transformation of a person’s heart, what a person can do is engage in sincere [prayer](#) and ask THE LORD to produce genuine repentance.

Conclusion

One of the key ideas that I wish to leave you with is that *repentance is a process, not an event*. Life experience tells us that we can repent of a sin (or sins), only to fall back into the same sin(s). For example, a man can feel deeply grieved over his addiction to pornography, repent of his sin, turn away from it for a time, and then fall back into the same sin when tempted or in a time of vulnerability. Because we are sinful by nature and because repentance is a process, as we grow and develop in our walk with God, we undergo transformative change *step-by-step*. Hence, the struggle involved in turning away from our inherently sinful nature toward righteousness and obedience can be very slow, tough, and frustrating. Thankfully for us, God is patient¹³ when it comes to our

¹² R. C. Sproul, *What is Repentance?* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2014), 28.

¹³ Romans 2:4; II Peter 3:9.

turning away from sin, and Jesus came specifically to call *sinner*s, not the righteous, to repentance.¹⁴

Moreover, many characters in the Bible were not immediate saints after God called them up to bat. For example, *even after* God chose and made a promise to Abraham,¹⁵ he still exhibited deceitfulness.¹⁶ Before Moses served as a mediator to deliver the Israelites from bondage, he was a murderer. Then, *even after* the Israelites were set free and God used Moses in miraculous ways, he was still prone to bouts of anger.¹⁷ *Even after* Elijah called down fire from heaven, he feared a human queen more than God Himself.¹⁸ And *even after* David was anointed as God's chosen king of Israel, he still committed adultery.¹⁹ All of these men were so important to the history of redemption that they were included in the Bible, and all of these men were corruptible human beings *even after* they were "chosen." All of this simply means that even the Biblical heavyweights slipped up from time to time. The only incorruptible person (Who also happens to be God as well) is Jesus. So if a full turning takes a while and you struggle, then congratulations—you are a normal human being.

As I mentioned in the lesson in [The Tabernacle](#), symbolically we live in the "dirt" of the world and constantly get our feet soiled as we engage in day-to-day activities. Yet it is the water-containing laver (representative of God's Word) that compels us to both look at ourselves and to wash, making ourselves clean. This touches upon the process of sanctification, a topic for a later lesson. The basic point here is that becoming more Christ-like *is always a continual process, not an event*. We are always supposed to be studying God's Word, praying, examining ourselves, and "washing" ourselves in His transcendent truth. This is what motivates us to repent.

The process of repentance, then, is mediated not by what *we* think is right, but by what God says. Because if, during the course of our journey with God, we change and thus our conscience changes, we cannot place eternal trust in something that is shifting. We can, however, place eternal trust in an unchanging God and His commands. And in order to turn away from what is bad, we have to know what is good and what God requires of us. So the more we learn about God, His principles, His morals, His Laws, and His commandments, the better idea we have about what is truly right and what is wrong. In the end, when we finally appreciate and understand what God desires, then we will develop a heart (and thus a desire for repentance) that aims to please God.

In an ideal scenario, God's Word animates our conscience, which then convicts us when we do something outside of God's commands. Paul writes in Romans 2:15 that God's Law is written onto our hearts, and our conscience bears witness to His Law. Even people

¹⁴ Luke 5:32; c.f. Luke 15:7.

¹⁵ Genesis 15:1–21.

¹⁶ Genesis 20:1–7.

¹⁷ See Numbers 20:1–13.

¹⁸ See I Kings 19:1–8.

¹⁹ II Samuel 11.

who are nonbelievers and unrepentant have a sense of the divine eternal principles written onto their hearts. Of course, in their case, their conscience may be a very soft, quiet voice that is ignored when they have a crisis of conscience. In the case of a repentant person, that voice is loud and unceasing, saying, "Stop!" The only way to ensure that the loud voice is in fact speaking the truth is to compare it with what God says.

When patients come in to see me in the office, they often have a type of pain, and although that pain is acutely troubling, it also serves a purpose: to let them know that something is wrong. That something wrong tells them that they need to see a doctor. For people with a repentant heart, their inner self strives to adhere to the external, divine, transcendent Law of God. Hence, when they violate that Law, their heart accuses them and they feel pain. That's when they come to the ultimate Physician, Jesus, the only One who can truly heal them. The fact that the afflicted came into the office in the first place is a step toward recovery because they recognize that they can't cure their sickness by themselves. And because of His grace, THE LORD doesn't want us to render our garments or to "do" anything in order to "prove" that we are sincere. Rather, the most sincere thing that we can do is to render our hearts and come to God in our broken spirit and contrite heart. The Physician can work wonders fixing a broken heart, but a physician can't help someone who thinks there is nothing wrong.

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