

All of Life is Repentance

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Martin Luther opened the Reformation by nailing “The Ninety-Five Theses” to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral. The very first of the theses was: “Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ...willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” On the surface this looks a little bleak! Luther seems to be saying Christians will never be making much progress. But of course, that wasn’t Luther’s point at all. He was saying that repentance is the way we make progress in the Christian life. Indeed, pervasive, all-of-life repentance is the best sign that we are growing deeply and rapidly into the character of Jesus.

The Transformation of repentance.

It is important to consider how the gospel affects and transforms the act of repentance. In ‘religion’ the purpose of repentance is basically to keep God happy so he will continue to bless you and answer your prayers. This means that ‘religious repentance’ is: *(a) selfish, (b) self-righteous, and (c) bitter all the way to the bottom.* But in the gospel the purpose of repentance is to repeatedly tap into the joy of our union with Christ in order to weaken our need to do anything contrary to God’s heart.

In religion, we only are sorry for sin because of its consequences to us. It will bring us punishment—and we want to avoid that. So, we repent. But the gospel tells us that sin can’t ultimately bring us into condemnation (Rom.8:1) Its heinousness is therefore what it does to God—it displeases and dishonors him. Thus, in religion, repentance is self-centered; the gospel makes it God-centered. In religion, we are mainly sorry for the consequences of sin, but in the gospel, we are sorry for the sin itself.

Furthermore, ‘religious’ repentance is self-righteous. Repentance can easily become a form of ‘atoning’ for the sin. Religious repentance often becomes a form of self-flagellation in which we convince God (and ourselves) that we are so truly miserable and regretful that we deserve to be forgiven. In the gospel however, we know that Jesus suffered and was miserable for our sin. We do not have to make ourselves suffer in order to merit forgiveness. We simply receive the forgiveness earned by Christ. 1John1:9 says that God forgives us because he is ‘just.’ That is a remarkable statement. It would be unjust of God to ever deny us forgiveness, because Jesus earned our acceptance! In religion we earn our forgiveness with our repentance, but in the gospel, we just receive it.

Last, religious repentance is ‘bitter all the way down.’ In religion, our only hope is to live a good enough life for God to bless us. Therefore, every instance of sin and repentance is traumatic, unnatural, and horribly threatening. Only under great duress does a religious person admit they have sinned—because their only hope is their moral goodness. But in the gospel, the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it easier to admit we are flawed. (because we know we won’t be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness) Our hope is in Christ’s righteousness, not our own—so it is not so traumatic to admit our weaknesses and lapses. In religion, we repent less and less often. But the more accepted and loved in the gospel we feel, the more and more often we will be repenting. And though, of course there is always some bitterness in any repentance, in the gospel there is ultimately a sweetness. This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. The more you see your own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God’s grace appears to you. But on the other hand, the more aware you are of God’s grace and acceptance in Christ, the more you are able to drop your denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions of your sin. The sin under all other sins is a lack of joy in Christ.

The disciplines of gospel-repentance

If you clearly understand these two different ways to go about repentance, then (and only then!) can you profit greatly from a regular and exacting discipline of self-examination and repentance. I’ve found that the practices of the 18th century Methodist leaders George Whitefield and John Wesley have been helpful to me here. In a January 9, 1738 letter to a friend, George Whitefield laid out an order for regular repentance. (He ordinarily did his inventory at night.) He wrote: *God give me a deep humility and a burning love, a well-guided zeal and a single eye, and then let men and devils do their worst!*

Here is one way to use this order in gospel-grounded repentance.

Deep humility (vs. pride)

Have I looked down on anyone? Have I been too stung by criticism? Have I felt snubbed and ignored?

Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until I sense (a) decreasing disdain (since I am a sinner, too), and (b) decreasing pain over criticism (since I should not value human approval over God’s love) In light of his grace, I can let go of the need

to keep up a good image—it is too great a burden and now unnecessary. Consider free grace until I experience grateful, restful joy.

Burning love (vs. indifference)

Have I spoken or thought unkindly of anyone? Am I justifying myself by caricaturing (in my mind) someone else? Have I been impatient and irritable? Have I been self-absorbed and indifferent and inattentive to people?

Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is (a) no coldness or unkindness (think of the sacrificial love of Christ for you), (b) no impatience (think of his patience with you), and (c) no indifference. Consider free grace until I show warmth and affection. God was infinitely patient and attentive to me, out of grace.

Wise courage (vs. anxiety)

Have I avoided people or tasks that I know I should face? Have I been anxious and worried? Have I failed to be circumspect or have I been rash and impulsive?

Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is (a) no cowardly avoidance of hard things (since Jesus faced evil for me), and (b) no anxious or rash behavior (since Jesus' death proves God cares and will watch over me) It takes pride to be anxious—I am not wise enough to know how my life should go. Consider free grace until I experience calm thoughtfulness and strategic boldness.

Godly motivations (a 'single eye')

Am I doing what I am doing for God's glory and the good of others or am I being driven by fears, need for approval, love of comfort and ease, need for control, hunger for acclaim and power, or the 'fear of man?' Am I looking at anyone with envy? Am I giving in to any of even the first motions of lust or gluttony? Am I spending my time on urgent things rather than important things because of these inordinate desires?

Repent like this: How does Jesus provide for me what I am looking for in these other things? Pray: *"O Lord Jesus, make me happy enough in you to avoid sin and wise enough in you to avoid danger, that I may always do what is right in your sight, in your name I pray, Amen."*