

Meaning of true repentance (1)

Reference: -RPT-S01-001-Mw-R01-P1

(Originally spoken on 12 February 1978, edited on 5 June 2001, revised on 16 July 2001)

Web site: <http://www.ajourneyinlife.org>

This message is protected by copyright © 2001 Lim Liong. Permission is given to reproduce part (where the meaning is retained and the part is not quoted out of context) or all, of it, for personal use or for distribution, on condition that **no changes are made** and the message is **distributed free** of charge. Please do so prayerfully and discreetly.

Unless otherwise stated, Scripture quotations are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

The paragraphs above as well as this paragraph must be included when the message is reproduced so that others who reproduce it will be conscious of the conditions stated above.

Headings:

- [Judas](#) Page 2
- [An example of inadequate repentance](#) Page 5
- [Peter](#) Page 8
- [Importance of repentance](#) Page 12
- [How true repentance may come about](#) Page 16
- [Repentance to become a child of God](#) Page 19

For the past week or so, as I understand it, the Lord has impressed upon me certain issues, which I hope to share with you – they directly involve the meaning of true repentance.

The word “repentance” is often used in relation to being accepted by the holy and righteous God, and it is important for us to understand the practical implications more clearly: how repentance applies to the non-Christian and to the Christian, and why it is relevant and important to all of us throughout our lives.

We read in Matthew 4: 17 the words of the Lord Jesus as He began His preaching ministry: “From that time Jesus began to preach and say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’” The Lord Jesus makes clear to us that

repentance is very closely associated with a meaningful participation in the kingdom of heaven. Repentance is central in the message that God wants to communicate to us because it is the way through which we can find life in the kingdom of God.

Let us look at two persons from the Scriptures to help us understand this subject – the lives of Judas and Peter. We know that Judas and Peter both failed the Lord Jesus. Judas betrayed the Lord Jesus for a sum of money, leading to His crucifixion. Peter failed the Lord Jesus when, in a time of danger, he denied knowing Him after He was arrested. However, the outcome of the lives of Judas and Peter were in opposite directions. The basic reason for the difference between these two is found in the meaning of the word “repentance” and the practical implications in their lives.

Judas

Let us turn to Matthew 27:1-5 and have a look at Judas.

Matthew 27: 1-5

- 1 Now when morning had come, all the chief priests and the elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put Him to death;
- 2 and they bound Him, and led Him away, and delivered Him up to Pilate the governor.
- 3 Then when Judas, who had betrayed Him, saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse and returned the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders,
- 4 saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See *to that* yourself!"
- 5 And he threw the pieces of silver into the sanctuary and departed; and he went away and hanged himself.

When this passage is read, many may feel very sad as they think about what happened to Judas. It is indeed a sad situation. Judas betrayed the Lord Jesus Christ for thirty pieces of silver but, when he “saw that He had been condemned, he felt remorse” – he felt sorry.

He felt sorry and he went to the chief priests and gave back the thirty pieces of silver, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." But they said, "What is that to us? See to that yourself!" This may seem as if Judas repented. If Judas had truly repented, would not God have accepted him? However, the Scriptures indicate that God did not accept him. The Lord Jesus referred to Judas when He said in His prayer, "not one of them perished but the son of perdition" (John 17: 12) and indicated that this was prophesied in the Scriptures. After Judas had betrayed the Lord Jesus and had taken his own life, Acts 1: 25 referred to him this way, "Judas turned aside to go to his own place", implying that he was not with God after he "turned aside". What was the reason?

In order to understand this, we need to appreciate the meaning of repentance as taught in the New Testament.

The kind of repentance that is acceptable to God has two important elements. The first element involves recognition that what we have done is wrong and it can include feeling sorry that we have done it. The second element involves a decision, a practical choice, to turn away from the wrong path that we have taken, to seek God for forgiveness and to take steps not to continue in that way.

We can see an example of this in Matthew 21: 28-31.

Matthew 21:28-31

- 28 "But what do you think? A man had two sons, and he came to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in the vineyard.'
- 29 "And he answered and said, 'I will, sir'; and he did not go.
- 30 "And he came to the second and said the same thing. But he answered and said, 'I will not'; yet he afterward regretted *it* and went.
- 31 "Which of the two did the will of his father?" They said, "The latter." Jesus said to them, "Truly I say to you that the tax-gatherers and harlots will get into the kingdom of God before you."

The first son said that he would go to work in the vineyard but he did not. He seemed to be obedient when in reality he was not. The

second son said that he would not, but after that, he regretted it and went. The second son recognized that it was wrong for him to say that he would not go; he felt sorry, and he decided to take the practical step of going to work on the vineyard. The two elements of repentance are present in this example of the second son: he recognized that he was wrong, and he chose to change his course of action to the right way.

In Matthew 3: 2, we are told that when John the Baptist began preaching, he said, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” John the Baptist emphasized that in order to be accepted by God, those who say that they are repentant must “bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3: 8). This means that it is not enough just to feel sorry or to say that one is sorry, but there must be a definite choice to live according to the meaning of turning away from the wrong path.

We know that Judas felt sorry, he regretted what he had done. He realized that he had betrayed innocent blood; he realized that he had sinned against God and in that sense we can say that one of the elements of repentance was present. However, his regret did not result in forgiveness, did not result in life, because his attitude towards God, his response towards God, was not changed – he did not make the definite choice to come to God for forgiveness and to walk in His ways. This is the critical point; this is the crucial issue, with regard to repentance that leads to life.

We know that there are many people in the world today who, after having done wrong, they feel very sorry, and yet, there is no positive change in their lives. They may feel very sorry and may become depressed but they do not come to God for forgiveness or seek His help to change their way of life. For example, a person who has committed murder in order to obtain his personal desires may recognize that he has done wrong. He may feel sad and sorry after what he has done and he

may also be afraid of the punishment for his crime. He may deeply regret what he has done. However, unless he decides to change his attitude and way of life, this will not be true repentance. There are different reasons for regret in different situations, but without a positive change in attitude and direction of life, it will not be true repentance. So although Judas felt remorse and was sorry, it did not result in true repentance.

An example of inadequate repentance

As it is very important for us to understand this subject clearly for our own lives, I have thought that I should share with you an incident that took place quite some time ago, which very sadly portrays inadequate repentance in a real-life situation that I witnessed. Some time ago, I met a man who appeared very pitiful. He was dressed in dirty clothes and he had not been sleeping for some time. He was rather weary and he said to me, "I have been wandering around, I have no place to go to; I have been chased out of my home." He asked for help, for a place to stay. I was conscious that the Lord has said that we must care for those who are in need, and so we brought him home and allowed him to stay with us. We did not really know who he was, but we felt sorry for him and wanted to help him. (As I look back now, in editing this message, I recognize afresh that it is rather dangerous to bring home someone whom we do not really know.)

As the days passed by, we came to know more about him. He was a barbiturate addict and he had been taking this drug (a sleeping pill) for many years. He obtained his supply of barbiturates from various doctors by telling them that he could not sleep. He needed money to support this habit and he became a trickster, seeking to persuade people to contribute to a charity of his own invention, but in reality keeping the money for his own use.

I decided that I should confront him with his wrongdoing and urge him to change his way of life. If he was not willing to change, I would not be able to help him. One day, I told him that I knew that he had told lies to me, and I asked him, "Why did you do so? Don't you know that this is wrong?" He was very quiet and he acknowledged that it was wrong. I shared with him the need for repentance, that he must change his way of life and that he must not continue to live in that way. I shared with him that God cared for him and wanted to help him change his life, but he must do his part – he must now change his attitude towards life and what he had been doing, and now turn to God and follow His ways, otherwise we could no longer help him.

When I shared with him, he began to weep. He said that he felt very sorry that he had lied. In the midst of his tears, he said, "Nobody cares for me, nobody loves me. Please give me a second chance." As far as I could understand in that situation, his tears were genuine. He was sorry for what he had done.

I said to him "We are willing to help you, but on one condition – that you really want to change, that you are willing from now on to tell the truth and walk in the path of truth and no longer continue lying and cheating and taking advantage of people." He said, "Yes, I will, I surely will, I promise". I then said to him, "If you really want to, that is good. For the next few days, you should stay at home and not go out." He said, "No, I cannot. I have an appointment and I have to go."

He decided to go out in spite of my instructions not to do so, and said that he would be back by a certain time. However, he did not come back at the time specified, but came back much later. The next morning, when I went to his room, he was asleep sitting on a chair, with his head resting on the table – preparing envelopes to seek for donations for his "charity". Although he had wept, he decided to carry on with his old

practice as a trickster. He was not prepared for the cost of changing his way of life. I asked him, "How can you do this – collecting such money for yourself?" He said, "No, I am collecting all this for a church." I said, "No, you are keeping it for yourself." He replied, "No, only half."

I had no alternative but to ask him to leave, as I could no longer help him. He was alarmed, and desperately begged for permission to stay on. I told him that he had to go, but I also told him how he could find help if he wanted to change. I was still willing to help him if he was willing to change, but not to come and stay.

The sad conclusion is that some time after that, it was brought to my attention that a man who was a barbiturate addict had died in a hotel, probably due to an overdose that he had taken of barbiturate with alcohol (which increases the potency of the barbiturate). The description fitted this man. I felt very sad because there was hope for him if he had truly repented – God would have helped him if he had truly sought His forgiveness and His help to change his way of life. Although he had felt sorry for what he did, he did not choose the path of true repentance that would have led to life – he was not willing because of the cost of it.

This is rather similar to what happened to Judas. He had been associated with the Lord Jesus for a few years. He knew the truths, he knew how he should live, but he did not choose to truly follow God and His ways. In John chapter 13, when the Lord Jesus washed the feet of the disciples, and Peter later said to Him, "Lord, not my feet only, but also my hands and my head" (verse 9), the Lord Jesus remarked, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you" (verse 10). In verse 11, the explanation for the remark is given: "For He knew the one who was betraying Him; for this reason He said, 'Not all of you are clean' ". This indicates that Judas had not really repented at that time in

his life and was therefore referred to as morally unclean, whereas the other disciples had repented and were described as “clean”.

Although Judas was closely associated with the Lord Jesus and he saw the power of God at work and he knew the values of life that are good and right, he had not truly repented in order to follow the Lord. He continued in the wrong way of life even when he was with the Lord Jesus. On one occasion, when Mary anointed the feet of the Lord Jesus with costly perfume, Judas said, “Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and given to poor *people*?” (John 12:5). The next verse explains what was in his heart: “Now he said this, not because he was concerned about the poor, but because he was a thief, and as he had the money box, he used to pilfer what was put into it.”

After betraying the Lord Jesus, there are no indications that Judas decided to change his way of life. Although he felt sorry, he did not come to God for forgiveness in order to obey Him and honour Him. Instead, he took his own life, in a state of hopelessness. Although we are not specifically told regarding what was in his heart at that time, the words of the Lord Jesus in Mark 14: 21 indicate that the outcome of Judas’ life was negative. The Lord Jesus said, “For the Son of Man *is* to go, just as it is written of Him; but woe to that man by whom the Son of Man is betrayed! *It would have been* good for that man if he had not been born.” We see therefore that feeling sorry in itself does not necessarily mean true repentance – there must be a definite change in our attitude, change in our direction of life, a positive response to God from our heart.

Peter

Let us now look at the life of Peter the apostle. He was a man with many weaknesses. He was impulsive and showed fleshly self-confidence. However, he became a great man in the kingdom of God. The important difference between Peter and many others with similar

weaknesses is that Peter, recognizing his weaknesses, repented and changed for the better. He learned from God; he was willing to be taught and to take steps to change in the right direction and to trust God. That was why when the Lord Jesus washed his feet, He said to him, “You are clean but not all *of you*.” Peter had truly repented, had followed the Lord Jesus sincerely, but he was weak and he did not understand himself accurately. He thought that he loved the Lord so much that he was prepared to go through anything for the Lord, but he failed. In Matthew chapter 26, we read of Peter denying the Lord Jesus on three occasions. He had said that he was willing to die for Him, but when the situation of danger arose, he failed to stand up to the test. When the cock crowed and Peter remembered what the Lord Jesus had said, he “wept bitterly” (Matthew 26: 75).

When Peter suddenly realized that he had dishonoured the Lord by denying that he knew Him, he felt very sorry for what he had done. However, the important principle is that Peter did not merely feel sorry; there was true repentance in his heart. There was a genuine love for God and he took steps to obey the Lord after his failure. Let us look at Matthew 28: 16, 17.

Matt 28:16-17

- 16 But the eleven disciples proceeded to Galilee, to the mountain which Jesus had designated.
- 17 And when they saw Him, they worshiped *Him*; but some were doubtful.

We can see that Peter still loved the Lord and he wanted to serve Him. That is why the eleven disciples (this refers to the eleven who were from the twelve disciples but without Judas) went to Galilee, to the mountain that Jesus had commanded them. So Peter was obedient to the Lord. He went to the mountain as the Lord Jesus had instructed them. He not only felt sorry but he also chose to take the positive path – he obeyed the Lord.

In Luke 24: 44-49, we have a similar record where the Lord Jesus revealed Himself to the eleven and told them what they ought to do.

Luke 24: 44-49

- 44 Now He said to them, "These are My words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things which are written about Me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled."
45 Then He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures,
46 and He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day;
47 and that repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.
48 "You are witnesses of these things.
49 "And behold, I am sending forth the promise of My Father upon you; but you are to stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high."

In verse 47 when the Lord Jesus mentioned “repentance for forgiveness of sins”, it is a reference to the kind of repentance that will lead to forgiveness and life from God and this is central to the message that should be “proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem”.

The Lord Jesus instructed them to stay in Jerusalem until they were empowered by the Holy Spirit, to fulfil the task that He had given them. Peter was an impulsive and impatient man. It would not have been easy for him to wait patiently, having witnessed the resurrected Christ. However, when we turn to Acts chapter 1, we see that Peter obeyed the instructions that the Lord gave them. Having recognized his wrong, Peter was now resolved to follow the Lord, to obey Him.

Acts 1:12-14

- 12 Then they returned to Jerusalem from the mount called Olivet, which is near Jerusalem, a Sabbath day's journey away.
13 And when they had entered, they went up to the upper room, where they were staying; that is, Peter and John and James and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James *the son* of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas *the son* of James.
14 These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with *the women*, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

They were all gathered together, devoting themselves to prayer. They stayed in Jerusalem, waiting and praying, according to the

instructions that the Lord gave to them. Repentance involves obedience to the Lord.

This principle of repentance also applied to the rest of the eleven, because all of them fled at the time of difficulty. All of them also said they were willing to die with the Lord Jesus, but they fled when the people came to arrest Him. They also failed the Lord, but they also repented and sought to follow the Lord, to obey Him.

It is in this context of submission to God, obedience to Him, that Peter was filled with the Holy Spirit.

Acts 2:1-4

- 1 And when the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place.
- 2 And suddenly there came from heaven a noise like a violent, rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting.
- 3 And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves, and they rested on each one of them.
- 4 And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

Peter was then empowered to do God's will. He began to preach the gospel in obedience to God. Even when he was arrested and brought before the religious authorities, he testified boldly on behalf of the Lord Jesus. He had previously denied knowing the Lord Jesus when he was questioned about his association with Him, but now he was no longer afraid, and instead, he said, "We must obey God rather than men":

Acts 5: 27-32

- 27 And when they had brought them, they stood them before the Council. And the high priest questioned them,
- 28 saying, "We gave you strict orders not to continue teaching in this name, and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching, and intend to bring this man's blood upon us."
- 29 But Peter and the apostles answered and said, "We must obey God rather than men.
- 30 The God of our fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross.
- 31 He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.

- 32 And we are witnesses of these things; and so *is* the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey Him.”

He was no longer afraid, not because of his own power and ability, but, because of the power of God. He now had the courage to stand before the people to speak God’s message. As a result of Peter’s preaching, many people turned to the Lord. Peter was able to serve God because he truly repented.

After Peter had learnt this lesson, he sought to help others to be faithful to the Lord. As Peter grew mature and stable in his faith, he sought to help others benefit from the lesson that he had learnt from the Lord. He knew that if we are truly repentant after we have failed, we must be perseverant and be willing to suffer together with the Lord and to honour Him in our lives. In his letter to fellow Christians, he wrote:

1 Pet 4:12-16

- 12 Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you;
 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing; so that also at the revelation of His glory, you may rejoice with exultation.
 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.
 15 By no means let any of you suffer as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler;
 16 but if *anyone suffers* as a Christian, let him not feel ashamed, but in that name let him glorify God.

The apostle Peter explains that if we choose to follow the Lord and His ways even in times of difficulty, the Lord will help us and we will be blessed, “because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.”

Importance of repentance

Throughout the New Testament, as well as the Old Testament, the basic emphasis and message is one of repentance – changing the direction of our life from the negative to the positive – turning away from our self-centred way of life, and choosing to submit to God, to live

a life of holiness, a life of moral meaning and goodness, to learn to know God and to love Him and to love others.

The primary purpose of the Scriptures is not to teach us the physical and material aspects of how the world was created, or the performance of various ceremonies, or philosophies and ethics. The emphasis of the Scriptures is on the right relationship with God arising from true repentance. It is a moral message helping men to come to repentance and to receive life through faith, and to grow in holiness. That is why we find that “repentance and faith” is the basic message in the New Testament: we must bring this message of repentance to the world, so that as men repent and turn to God in faith, trust in the Lord Jesus Christ for what He has done for them on the Cross, they will find forgiveness and life.

However, repentance does not mean merely turning away from evil. It includes the determination to live a life of righteousness to the highest level that we can, with God’s help. When the apostle Paul tells us that God inspired the Scriptures, he also explained that God’s intention is that we should learn from the Scriptures to become people of moral quality: “All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3: 16, 17).

We must remember that true repentance is of great priority in our lives. God has concentrated on this principle, and we must never forget it. As an example of this principle, let us turn to 2 Corinthians 7: 8-13.

2 Cor 7: 8-13

- 8 For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it - *for* I see that that letter caused you sorrow, though only for a while -
- 9 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*, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.

- 10 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.
- 11 For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.
- 12 So although I wrote to you *it was* not for the sake of the offender, nor for the sake of the one offended, but that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God.
- 13 For this reason we have been comforted.

The context is that the Corinthian Christians had not taken action against a man guilty of serious immorality. When Paul wrote to them, he had told them that they must take disciplinary action – they must excommunicate this man who had committed such immorality. It is in this context that he wrote the second epistle telling them how he felt. He said, “For though I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it; though I did regret it”. After having written the letter, Paul had initially felt sorry because it brought grief to the Corinthian Christians but he did not regret writing to them because ultimately it was for their good. In reality, it grieved the Corinthians “only for a while” because this led them to repentance. And so, the apostle Paul said, “I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to *the point of repentance*”.

This passage helps us to appreciate the meaning of true repentance. Paul saw that the Corinthian Christians had not only felt sorry but they were now prepared to take action; their attitude towards the matter had changed. Previously they had not treated the matter with sufficient seriousness. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 5: 2 “And you have become arrogant, and have not mourned instead, in order that the one who had done this deed might be removed from your midst.” After Paul wrote to them, they recognised that it was wrong for them not to do something about it, because it dishonoured God. They now obeyed though it was very painful to them. They were grieved that they had to do it but they did so, in obedience to God. In their repentance, they took corrective action. We see this expressed in verses 9 and 10:

2 Cor 7: 9, 10

- 9 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*, in order that you might not suffer loss in anything through us.
- 10 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.

There is a helpful kind of sorrow that we should not regret. It is described as “the sorrow that is according to *the will of God*” or “godly sorrow”. This kind of sorrow leads to true repentance because the person not only feels sorry and regrets what he has done, but he also decides to change his course of action, to come to God, to submit to Him, to obey Him and to trust Him. This kind of repentance leads to God’s help, God’s salvation. This is the kind of repentance illustrated by the life of the apostle Peter. He felt sorry; as he repented, he turned to God for help and his life was changed through God’s help. It led to salvation; it led to God’s enabling, God’s forgiveness, and God’s power.

However, Paul also said, “the sorrow of the world produces death”. He contrasts the true repentance with the inadequate type of “repentance”: feeling sorry, but without the change of direction in life, without seeking God’s forgiveness and God’s help. The sorrow of the world can refer to the sadness and misery in this world arising from different reasons but this kind of sorrow does not lead to a meaningful outcome because there is no hope. It includes people in the world who feel sorry when they have done wrong but the sorrow does not bring any hope because it does not lead to a positive choice to change their way of life with, God’s help.

So the basic difference between these two kinds of sorrow is that one results in hopelessness, because apart from God there is no hope, while the other results in life, because there is a repentant turning to God for help. God is the source of ultimate forgiveness. He is the author of salvation.

How true repentance may come about

Repentance may begin when certain situations or events occur. As a result, we may feel sorry for what we have done, or we may come to see that what we have done is wrong.

At times it may begin in our feelings. For example, we may have been careless or inconsiderate, and suddenly, we realize that we have seriously hurt someone, and he dies. This event may lead to our feeling very sorry for what has happened (and our feeling may be rather overwhelming) and we feel sorry that we have done something wrong.

It may also begin in situations when we think through what is taking place in our lives. Having taken a course of action, having lived in a certain way, we evaluate our lives and recognize that there is something not right in our lives. At times it may occur after someone has spoken to us and we become more conscious of the way we have lived our lives. As a result of this, we may come to recognize that we have done something wrong or come to see that our way of life is not pleasing to God.

So we see that we may come to the point when we feel very sorry for something we have done, or we come to recognize that the way we have chosen is not the right path. This is the first step. This must lead to the next step, which is a crucial step, if true repentance is to take place.

This step can be described as a change of attitude or we can say a change of heart. This involves the will and it is very important for us to remember this. Having felt sorry that we have done wrong, or having seen that the path that we have taken is wrong, it must now affect our will: we must choose to do something positive about it.

We must not merely feel sorry and leave it alone: there must be a change of heart; our attitude must be changed and we must now turn to God for forgiveness and for His help, to enable us to live the right way. This may lead to our deciding to change our way of life – seeking God’s forgiveness, and determining to be more careful and considerate towards others, to be more prayerful and to seek God’s help in our daily life.

When we come to understand where we have gone wrong, it must lead to a decision to change our way of life, to submit to God and follow what is meaningful to Him, otherwise that understanding will not be helpful to us.

The final step is action. As our attitude is changed, as we exercise our will to do what is right, there will be positive action if the change in our heart is adequate. We must act upon what we see is right to do – whatever is appropriate that is consistent with the meaning of our change of direction. With the change of values there must result a change of life. The action means basically a change of life. When John the Baptist preached repentance, he said, “Therefore bring forth fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3: 8). True repentance results in action: there must be fruit that arises from it. There are times when there is some change in attitude, but when we recognize that it is costly to take that path, we may choose not to do so – in this instance, the change of attitude is not adequate. Taking action means that we are willing to choose the path that is consistent with our change of values and change of direction, even though the path may be difficult or costly.

However, we must not have the wrong idea and think that true repentance must always result in visible practical action. True repentance takes place in the heart and the outward manifestations depend on what is suitable for the person concerned.

The Scriptures tell us about a criminal who truly repented and who was therefore forgiven, though there was no major outward visible action that he could take. There were two criminals who were crucified together with the Lord Jesus. Initially, both of them were not repentant: “And the robbers also who had been crucified with Him were casting the same insult at Him” (Matthew 27: 44). However, one of them subsequently repented. This probably came about because as he witnessed the way the Lord Jesus loved others, he recognized that he was wrong and chose to come to Him for help.

In Luke 23: 34, the Scriptures tell us that when He was crucified on the cross, the Lord Jesus prayed, saying, “Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing.” He prayed for His enemies because He loved them with a pure love. Subsequently, the criminal repented and he sought the Lord Jesus for help, saying, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” (Luke 23: 42). The Lord Jesus saw the true repentance in his heart and He said, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23: 43).

This criminal was about to die; he could not come down from the cross and show the change in his manner of living. However, there was a change of heart: his attitude towards God and towards the Lord Jesus Christ had changed. He no longer reviled the Lord Jesus; now he appreciated Him. He had decided not to continue in his old way of life. The action that he took was shown in the way he responded to the other criminal, as recorded in Luke 23: 39-41.

Luke 23: 39-41

- 39 And one of the criminals who were hanged *there* was hurling abuse at Him, saying, “Are You not the Christ? Save Yourself and us!”
- 40 But the other answered, and rebuking him said, “Do you not even fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation?”
- 41 “And we indeed justly, for we are receiving what we deserve for our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”

We can therefore see a change of heart in this man, as result of which the Lord Jesus said to him, "Today you shall be with Me in Paradise." So although this man had no more time, no more opportunity on earth, to work out his faith in the Lord while on earth, the Lord Jesus, seeing the response in his heart, accepted him.

So let us take comfort in the fact that God can see our heart even though man may not. However, we must also recognize that there may at times be a great disparity between the attitude of our heart that represents what we desire, and the actions in our lives that represent the substance, the quality and the depth of that attitude. Many who seek to live righteous lives may often find that what they desire so much may not correspond with the way they live each day in practical choices. A change in attitude may not be readily manifested in a change in the manner of life unless the change in attitude has become deeply rooted in the person's character, when moral and spiritual substance has been developed through perseverance in the context of choosing God's ways, trusting Him and depending on Him.

Repentance to become a child of God

Repentance is essential for a person to be born again to become a child of God because action without repentance is of no value. There are many people who have never repented of their sins but they are willing to do things, to take actions, which they think are good. For example, they may give money to the poor, they may read the Bible, they may attend church meetings, they may join the choir, they may even preach, but there is no real change in their heart.

They may carry on doing the things that they like, according to their self-centred desires, yet they may think that God will accept them because they do things that they think are good. At times we may even

pray to God, we may even say, "I am sorry", but if there is not a genuine change of heart, change of attitude, towards God, then there is no true repentance, and we cannot become children of God. There are many who may regard themselves as Christians, but if there has never been a true change in their heart, God will not accept them, and, unless they truly repent, they will still come under judgment.

In the book of Jonah, we see the prophet Jonah preaching to the people of Nineveh, warning them of God's judgment. As a result of his preaching, the people repented. The king of Nineveh issued a proclamation to call upon his people to repent and the people obeyed. God forgave them because they changed their attitude and turned from their wicked ways and submitted to God. We read this in Jonah 3: 5-10

Jonah 3: 5-10

- 5 Then the people of Nineveh believed in God; and they called a fast and put on sackcloth from the greatest to the least of them.
- 6 When the word reached the king of Nineveh, he arose from his throne, laid aside his robe from him, covered *himself* with sackcloth, and sat on the ashes.
- 7 And he issued a proclamation and it said, "In Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles: Do not let man, beast, herd, or flock taste a thing. Do not let them eat or drink water.
- 8 "But both man and beast must be covered with sackcloth; and let men call on God earnestly that each may turn from his wicked way and from the violence which is in his hands.
- 9 "Who knows, God may turn and relent, and withdraw His burning anger so that we shall not perish?"
- 10 When God saw their deeds, that they turned from their wicked way, then God relented concerning the calamity which He had declared He would bring upon them. And He did not do *it*.

The Lord Jesus referred to this repentance in Luke: 11: 32

Luke 11: 32

"The men of Nineveh shall stand up with this generation at the judgment and condemn it, because they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and behold, something greater than Jonah is here."

In order to become a child of God, we must first truly repent and come to God and ask for His forgiveness, choosing to turn from our old

self-centred ways in order to follow His ways. As we sincerely thank the Lord Jesus for His death for us and acknowledge Him as our Saviour and Lord, the Holy Spirit works in our heart and brings about the new birth and we become children of God.

[Continued in: **Meaning of true repentance (2)**]