

# Meaning of true repentance (2)

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## Repentance for the child of God

Let us now concentrate on what repentance means for the Christian. It does not mean that once we have repented of our sins, we have trusted in the Lord Jesus Christ, received His forgiveness, and become a child of God, we no longer need to repent. The Scriptures emphasize the importance of repentance for the Christian because quality of moral character requires a life-long process of transformation. We must continue to repent whenever we fail and seek the Lord's help to change into His likeness. We must nurture a humble and contrite spirit in order to grow in the purity of our heart.

The Lord Jesus said to His disciples in Matthew 5: 4, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted”. The word translated as “mourn” in this verse can refer to mourning in the general sense of misery, but it is used with particular emphasis in specific contexts. For example, in Revelation 18: 7, 8, the meaning is that of misery in a time of suffering, in a prophecy regarding God’s judgment on a sinful context.

**Revelation 18: 7, 8**

- 7 “To the degree that she glorified herself and lived sensuously, to the same degree give her torment and mourning; for she says in her heart, ‘I SIT *as* A QUEEN AND I AM NOT A WIDOW, and will never see mourning.’
- 8 “For this reason in one day her plagues will come, pestilence and mourning and famine, and she will be burned up with fire; for the Lord God who judges her is strong.

In James 4: 9, the same word is used, as a call to repentance: “Be miserable and mourn and weep; let your laughter be turned into mourning and your joy to gloom”. As I understand it, in the context of Matthew chapter 5: 4, the meaning is similar in direction to the right attitude of hungering and thirsting after righteousness and being poor in spirit. If we maintain a healthy spirit of mourning, we will receive grace and comfort from the Lord. However, it is likely that it also includes mourning for others as well, in the same direction of desiring their repentance. Other passages where this word is used may help us appreciate these meanings:

**Luke 6: 25**

“Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.

**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.

**2 Corinthians 12: 21**

I am afraid that when I come again my God may humiliate me before you, and I may mourn over many of those who have sinned in the past and not repented of the impurity, immorality and sensuality which they have practiced.

The primary aspect of importance is that we need to maintain a healthy repentant spirit in our own lives and desire the same for others, because we have come to recognize the importance of being holy and righteous before God. Learning to mourn in the right way in our hearts helps us to maintain the right direction in our lives.

In the book of Revelation, we read of the Lord Jesus instructing the apostle John to write to the church in Ephesus with these words, “Remember therefore from where you have fallen, and repent and do the deeds you did at first; or else I am coming to you, and will remove the lampstand out of its place – unless you repent” (Revelation 2: 5). We see therefore that repentance is very important for the Christian.

The importance of a repentant spirit is clearly emphasized when God tells us His willingness to dwell with the one who is humble and contrite in spirit and to help such a person in his need.

**Isaiah 57: 15**

For thus says the high and exalted One  
Who lives forever, whose name is Holy,  
'I dwell on a high and holy place,  
And also with the contrite and lowly of spirit  
In order to revive the spirit of the lowly  
And to revive the heart of the contrite.'

If we want to keep close to God, we must maintain a spirit of repentance, a humble and contrite spirit. We must continue to repent throughout our lives whenever we sin. There are also different depths of repentance. When we repent deeply and there is significant positive response in our heart, we will be able to develop a better quality in our being. If we do not repent when we have gone astray, we will become more and more distant from God in our heart.

At times it is very difficult to be humble and contrite. When someone tells us that we are wrong, or when we are rebuked, we may

feel angry because our pride is hurt, and we may react against the one who tells us. However, if we are willing to be humble and contrite, and willing to acknowledge when we have failed, we can ask God for His forgiveness and thank the person for helping us in our moral and spiritual growth. If we maintain this kind of repentant and contrite heart, we will continue to learn and to grow, benefiting from God's grace towards us.

If we recognize that this repentant heart is very important, we must then consider how this can be worked out in practice, how action can follow from the attitude. This is something that I have been thinking about for a long time and gradually it has become clearer to me how important it is that we learn to prepare ourselves so that we can translate attitude into action effectively in all situations of life. As we nurture a sincere love for God in our heart, and as we determine to be true to Him, are there steps that we can take to help us live a life of faithfulness to Him in the varied situations that we go through each day?

This principle was impressed upon me as I reflected on the area of spending time daily in reading the Scriptures and in prayer. For quite some time, I had been lacking in sleep and feeling very tired and as a result I had not spent as much time with the Lord in prayer and reading the Scriptures, as I should. Last night, my mother told me that I looked quite sick and she asked me to take care of myself, to eat more and to have enough sleep.

Although it is true that I was lacking in sleep, I knew that beyond the physical reasons, there was another more important reason why I was not spending so much time with the Lord in that way: I was not sufficiently disciplined in my devotion to God, in exercising myself to develop my fellowship with Him. Although I had often been uncertain

as to whether it was the most helpful way, to get up early in spite of lack of sleep, I should have worked harder in disciplining myself in this area.

It is likely that the Lord was seeking to help me appreciate these issues through what happened this morning as I prepared for this message: I had been feeling very tired for so long and yet, this morning as I resolved to get up early, even though I was still lacking in sleep, I found that as a result of spending that time with God in prayer and reading the Scriptures, I was so refreshed that I was no longer sleepy, no longer so tired. I felt myself much fresher than I had been for a long time, basically because of the life of God, not because I had enough sleep. (However, sleep is an important factor that we need to take into consideration, and seek to have adequate sleep where suitable. We must also not assume that we will not be sleepy if we practise getting up in this way).

### **Importance of discipline**

As I pondered over this, one thing was impressed upon me: the importance of discipline in our lives. If we want to translate attitude into action in our daily life, then one very important principle to remember is the issue of discipline, the importance of developing our will-power: not the kind of will-power in the sense of our self-will and self-dependence, but developing our will-power as a disciple of Christ, in a spirit of dependence on God.

I have often asked myself this question: "Is it the most helpful thing to get up so early in the morning, especially when you do not have enough time to sleep?" I have evaluated this issue before the Lord on many occasions and tried out different approaches. My conclusion had been that it would be helpful because it gives priority to a meaningful time with the Lord before we begin the day. However, in the midst of

significant lack of time for sleep, I had also re-evaluated this on various occasions, to understand the degree of flexibility that should accompany this general approach.

Some people say that they spend their “Quiet Time” better at night. It is true that we are different in our temperaments, in our constitutions, and what is best for one may not always be best for the other. It is something that each of us would need to seek the Lord to understand which is most appropriate in our own context.

However, there is one principle that arises from this, which I want to share with you. If, in your understanding of your situation, you are convinced that it is good for you to get up early, for example, at 5 a.m., to spend time in prayer and reading the Scriptures, then, by disciplining yourself to get up at that time even when you feel very tired, it can be very helpful for your spirit; it can be very helpful for the development of your will-power, in the Lord. I hope that you will ponder over this, and find out whether it is true in your life.

Even in times when you lack sleep and you feel very tired, when the alarm clock rings, if you choose, exercise your will, while looking to the Lord, and get up, however tired you may be, get up and wash your face and spend time to read the Scriptures and pray, you will find that each time you do that, your will-power is strengthened. Every time you discipline yourself in this way, your will grows stronger and the next time you will find it easier to do it. But each time you say, ‘I am so tired,’ and you go back to sleep even though you believe you should get up, your will power is weakened, and the more you do that, the more tired you may become. That is what I had been experiencing during the past few weeks: I felt so tired and when I heard the alarm ring, I said to myself, ‘I am too tired to get up; it is very hard to get up,’ and so I went back to sleep. The more I did that, the more tired I became, because I

was not being refreshed in my spirit. As the Lord reminded me of this, I began to exercise myself again, to get up when I heard the alarm clock ring.

However, it is very important to know that this exercise is helpful only when it arises from a meaningful attitude within the heart. It is only when you are convinced that it is something pleasing to God, something helpful for your life, something you would gladly do, that the exertion in this way will be helpful for your spirit. If you do it with the wrong attitude, with the wrong motive, it will also weaken your spirit – you may grumble or complain when you find it difficult, or you may become proud when you become more disciplined. It must be done with a humble and contrite spirit, seeking to obey God and to honour Him, and depending on His enabling to do so. It must not be an empty outward form but the expression of the spiritual meaningfulness in your walk with God. (It does not mean that when you do not wake up early, it must imply that your spiritual state is poor – it is the meaning within your heart that determines the quality of your life.)

This is something that you could ponder over before the Lord. The helpfulness of this principle applies to all areas of life – whenever we exercise our choice to discipline ourselves to do something that we are convinced is good and meaningful before God, we will grow stronger in our spirit. Whenever we give in to our emotional desires instead of choosing what we believe is meaningful before God, our spirit grows weaker.

When we learn well in this principle of discipline, we will be able to translate attitude into action far more effectively. In 1 Timothy 4: 7, 8, the apostle Paul instructed Timothy with these words, “But have nothing to do with worldly fables fit only for old women. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness; for bodily discipline is only of little profit, but godliness is profitable for all things, since it holds promise for the present life and *also* for the *life* to

come.” We should exercise discipline with the purpose of developing moral quality of our being, and not just to fulfil certain expectations of others or to hold on to an outward form of doing things.

There are people who say that we should have the freedom to do whatever we like. “When we feel like doing something, we do it and when we do not feel like doing it, we do not do it – then we are not hypocritical. Why must we have so many rules and regulations to bind us? It is very burdensome!”

If your life is in danger and you need a surgical operation, would you entrust your life to a surgeon who operates when he feels like doing it and who would stop operating if he does not feel like carrying on? Or, would you want a surgeon who will operate because it is the responsible thing to do, even when he is tired and he does not feel like operating but he would do so to save your life? We know that a man who lives by his feelings rather than by moral meaning is not a dependable man. When his mood is good, he will treat you well; when his mood is not good, you had better run away from him!

It is only when we discipline ourselves to do the things we believe are good and right before God that we will develop quality in our character and we become reliable and stable. Discipline that arises from our love for God and for what is good will help us to develop consistency in our character in the path of righteousness. God is consistent and perfectly reliable in His moral perfection. If you want to be like Him as His child, then you must “discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness”. Quality of discipline in our lives in this way is an expression of meaningful repentance in our hearts, as we choose to turn away from what is negative, and choose to live by what is good and meaningful before God.



You should also consider other areas in your life, areas that you find difficult, areas that you do not feel like doing but you know you should. You could deliberately choose to do the things that you do not feel like doing but which you know are helpful to do. That is one aspect of it. The second aspect is to deliberately exercise yourself to deny yourself the things that you like to do but which you know are not helpful to you.

These may not be major areas. However, whenever we exercise ourselves to reject the negative and to choose the positive, in a spirit of dependence on God, we will grow in the quality of our character. When we do so, we have to exercise our will to choose what is good, in spite of the unpleasant feelings that may deter us from the helpful path. (This does not mean that feelings are bad in themselves.) Likewise we choose not to do the things we feel like doing that are not helpful for us. We learn to deny ourselves so that we will be able to reject all the things that are not positive. If we do this together with God, asking Him to empower us by His Spirit, our character will become stable, we will become useful to God and we will become reliable in Him. However, we should begin with areas that are of greater moral significance, and increase the scope more and more as we grow stronger.

## **Developing personal convictions**

There is one final principle that I want to share before closing: it is the principle concerning how the kingdom of God can be established in the world.

We look again at 2 Corinthians 7: 12.

### **2 Cor 7:12**

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.

When the apostle Paul said, “it was not for the sake of the offender, nor for the sake of the one offended”, he did not mean that those aspects were not important to him. Certainly, he cared for the offender as well as for the one offended. However, he wanted to tell the Corinthian Christians what the primary purpose was: “that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God”.

What is the significance of this verse?

When the apostle Paul said, “that your earnestness on our behalf might be made known to you in the sight of God”, he viewed this as a very important issue. It was very important because of the principle of “on our behalf”, which in meaning in this context, can also be translated as, “in our stead”, or “in our name”, or “as our representative”. That means, Paul is saying “that your earnestness on our behalf, in our stead, might be made known to you in the sight of God”.

Paul sought to teach the Corinthians the principle of acting on his behalf. That means, when he taught them to take disciplinary action in that situation, these Corinthians were actually acting on behalf of Paul: it was as if Paul was there, pronouncing on behalf of God, that this person should be disciplined, and taking action. They were taking action on his behalf. As an apostle with his authority, he was teaching them to do that, so that they would understand that the principles of God’s kingdom must now be manifested in their lives, that they must likewise, with conviction, live according to the principles of God’s kingdom. We know that Paul followed Christ. What Christ was basically concerned about had now become the concern of Paul. This must now be transmitted to others, including the Corinthians.

Paul explained to the Corinthian Christians that his main concern was to help them develop deep convictions regarding what was

important in the kingdom of God. The convictions that Paul had developed in his own life regarding what is in the heart of God must be effectively transmitted to the Corinthians. Paul had learnt deeply the principles of the kingdom of God. He loved God deeply and he loved the principles of God's kingdom, and he wanted to transmit these realities to others. What was primary in the heart of the apostle Paul was the kingdom of God: how God's kingdom should be established on earth, how man should love God, obey Him, honour Him and live according to His ways.

When the apostle Paul said, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1: 21), he was sharing what was most important in his life. However, he was not satisfied that this was his way of life; he wanted to help others so that they would also live that way. He therefore wrote in Colossians 1: 28, 29, "And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ. And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me." The apostle Paul sought to transmit to others what he had come to value, to treasure and to live by, after he had deeply repented and found forgiveness and life through the Lord Jesus Christ.

When Paul learnt to live his whole life for God, he sought to teach the Corinthian Christians to do likewise. They had to learn to act on his behalf, in his stead. This means that these Corinthians must now learn such that the principles of God's kingdom become so much a part of their lives – similar to what the apostle Paul had learnt. They must develop their own principles, their own convictions. Although Paul was the one who taught them, ultimately it came from God, and they must live by these principles because they believed in them for themselves.

When Paul knew that there was such immorality in Corinth, he was heart-broken, but the Corinthian Christians were not. That is why

he was very angry. Paul was heart-broken because he saw that they were not honouring God in their lives. The Corinthians seemed to say, "It is not so serious. We can leave it alone." Paul wrote to them to help them see that it should not be that way. Instead, they must also be deeply concerned about the immorality, just as Paul was deeply concerned, because Paul was following the Lord Jesus in His values. The Corinthian Christians must now develop their convictions about these issues and deal with the problem, as Paul would have dealt with it, as the Lord Jesus would deal with it.

Hence, we read in 2 Corinthians 7: 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."

Paul was glad because as a result of the letter he had written to them, the Corinthians repented; they came to see that they were wrong, they came to recognize how they must regard sin, how they must value righteousness. They became indignant, not just because Paul was indignant, but also because they had come to recognize that this was the way they should live their lives. They repented of their failure and took the practical steps in obedience to God.

This important principle is meaningfully seen in the way the Lord Jesus has sought to transmit what is in His heart to His disciples. He said to His disciples after His resurrection, "Peace be with you; as the Father has sent Me; I also send you" (John 20: 21). As the Lord Jesus sent the apostles out into the world and taught them in the years that followed, they increasingly absorbed, understood, and became identified with, the concerns in the heart of the Lord. Just as He is deeply concerned about God's kingdom, the disciples also became deeply concerned about God's kingdom. That means, they learnt to appreciate the values and the

meaning of the ultimate goal, and they became increasingly committed to these values.

As we seek to appreciate the meaning of true repentance, we must be conscious that God intends that when we learn this for ourselves, we should transmit what we have learnt to others, the way that God would want it to be transmitted. We must increasingly learn to be like God in the way He is concerned about sin and about righteousness. We will then take action, not only because God has commanded, but also because our hearts are now one with Him. When God sees sin, He is angry. Are we also angry in the same way, with the same kind of meaning? Or are we angry because our personal interests are threatened? When we see others suffering or failing to do what is good, do we have the same compassion that God has for them? When we see others living their lives without hope, do we have the same desire to rescue them, as God does? Or are we concerned only about our own lives?

God has a primary objective for our lives and it is that the character of the Lord Jesus should be formed in us – become part of us. He wants us to become “conformed to the image of His Son” (Romans 8: 29). The apostle Paul told the Galatian Christians that he laboured hard with the purpose of helping them such that “Christ is formed in you” (Galatians 4: 19). When the character of Christ is formed in us, we will care for the people in the world just as He cares for them. We will labour for their well-being – that they will come to love God deeply – just as He is seeking to help them in that direction. There are different degrees of Christ being formed in us and hence there will be different depths of our love for others.

## **Summary**

When we feel sorry for the wrong we have done, or when we come to understand that we have taken the wrong course of action, this does not mean that we have truly repented. True repentance must involve the exercise of our will – when we have chosen, decided, to change our way of life, from the negative to the positive. We must change our attitude towards what is wrong – to reject it; and we must change our attitude towards God – to submit to Him and to obey Him.

What is present in our heart must then be expressed in action, in the form of good choices in specific situations and issues of life. These choices take place within the heart and they are manifested in outward forms where appropriate. In order to translate attitude into action, we must learn to discipline ourselves in all areas of our lives, deliberately, and consistently, choosing the path that is good and meaningful before God.

## **An encouragement**

Finally, we also need to remember that the path of deep repentance is very difficult and we may fail even when we have worked hard. In such a situation, we must not be discouraged but be assured that God sees our heart. He understands what we are seeking to do, and He is compassionate and will help us if we persevere. We must not give up, but we must get up, when we falter and fail.

We must not excuse ourselves when we fail, neither should we be discouraged and allow the evil one to accuse us and bring about a sense of condemnation in our lives. We can be forgiven, we can be cleansed, if we remain humble and contrite in spirit and come to the Lord for help.

As we grow in Him, God intends that we seek to help others to develop in the same direction, to become like the Lord Jesus in His character. We must develop deep personal convictions for our own lives and help others to do the same.