

All of Life is Repentance

Martin Luther opened the Reformation by nailing the “Ninety-five Theses” to the door of Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany. The very first of the theses stated that “our Lord and Master Jesus Christ . . . willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”¹ On the surface this looks a little bleak. Luther seems to be saying Christians will never make much progress in life. That, of course, 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 *selfish*, *self-righteous*, and *bitter all the way to the bottom*. In the gospel, however, the purpose of repentance is to repeatedly tap into the joy of our union with Christ to weaken our impulse to do anything contrary to God’s heart.

Religious Repentance is Selfish

In religion we are sorry for sin only because of its consequences for us. Sin will bring us punishment—and we want to avoid that, so we repent. The gospel tells us that, as Christians, 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.

Religious Repentance is Self-Righteous

Furthermore, religious repentance is self-righteous. Repentance can easily turn into an attempt to “atone” for one’s sin—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 for our sin. We do not have to make ourselves suffer to merit God’s forgiveness. We simply receive the forgiveness earned by Christ. God forgives us because he is “just” (1 John 1:9). That is a remarkable statement. It would be unjust of God to ever deny us forgiveness, because Jesus earned our acceptance! In religion we try to earn our forgiveness with our repentance. In the gospel we simply receive it.

Religious Repentance is Bitter All the Way to the Bottom

Last, religious repentance is bitter all the way down. In religion our only hope is to live a life good enough to require God to bless us. Every instance of sin and repentance is therefore traumatic, unnatural, and horribly threatening. Only under great duress do religious individuals admit they have sinned, because their only hope is their moral goodness. In the gospel the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it easier to admit that 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 as traumatic to admit our weaknesses and lapses.

Whereas in religion we repent less and less often, the more we feel accepted and loved in the gospel, the more and more often we will be repenting. Although there is some bitterness in any repentance, in the gospel there is ultimately a sweetness. This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth. The more we see our own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God’s grace appears to us.

On the other hand, the more aware we are of God’s grace and our acceptance in Christ, the more able we are to drop our denials and self-defenses and admit the true dimensions of our sin. The sin underlying all other sins is a lack of joy in Christ.

An Order for Gospel-Grounded Repentance

If you clearly understand these two different ways to go about repentance, then (and only then!) you can profit greatly from a regular and exacting discipline of self-examination and repentance. I've found that the practices of eighteenth-century Methodism and its leaders, George Whitefield and John Wesley, have been helpful to me here. Whitefield, who ordinarily conducted his personal inventory at night, laid out an order for regular repentance. He once wrote, "God give me a deep humility, a well-guided zeal, a burning love and a single eye, and then let men or devils do their worst!"² Following 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 (1) decreasing disdain, since I am a sinner too, and (2) 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 is now unnecessary. I reflect on free grace until I experience grateful, restful joy.

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 (1) no cowardly avoidance of hard things, since Jesus faced evil for me, and (2) no anxious or rash behavior, since Jesus' death proves that God cares and will watch over me. It takes pride to be anxious, and I recognize I am not wise enough to know how my life should go. I reflect on free grace until I experience calm thoughtfulness and strategic boldness.

Burning Love (vs. Indifference)

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

Repent like this: Consider the free grace of Jesus until there is (1) no coldness or unkindness, as I think of the sacrificial love of Christ for me, (2) no impatience, as I think of his patience with me, and (3) no indifference, as I think of how God is infinitely attentive to me. I reflect on free grace until I show warmth and affection.

Godly Motivations (a "Single Eye")

Am I doing what I do 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 other people (Luke 12:4-5)? Am I looking at anyone with envy? Am I giving in to 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: Consider how the free grace of Jesus provides me with what I am looking for in these other things. Pray, "Oh 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."

Notes

¹ Martin Luther, "Disputation of Doctor Martin Luther on the Power and Efficacy of Indulgences" (1517), Thesis 1.

² George Whitefield, quoted in Arnold A. Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the 18th Century Revival*, 2 vol. (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1970), 1:140.