

What Is Repentance?

Article by

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Charles Spurgeon writes:

Repentance is a discovery of the evil of sin, a mourning that we have committed it, a resolution to forsake it. It is, in fact, a change of mind of a very deep and practical character, which makes the man love what once he hated, and hate what once he loved.

J. I. Packer writes:

Repentance means turning from as much as you know of your sin to give as much as you know of yourself to as much as you know of your God, and as our knowledge grows at these three points so our practice of repentance has to be enlarged.

John Piper writes:

Repenting means experiencing a change of mind that now sees God as true and beautiful and worthy of all our praise and all our obedience.

For further reflection, see John Piper's article titled "[Thoughts on Jesus' Demand to Repent.](#)"

Thoughts on Jesus's Demand to Repent *Letters from Cambridge #2*



Article by

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As part of my sabbatical here in Cambridge, England, I am working on a book with the tentative title *What Jesus Demands From the World*. The demand to repent is as basic as it gets in Jesus' message. It is equally basic to, and almost synonymous with, the command, "You must be born again" ([John 3:7](#)). One of my concerns is to show that repentance in Jesus' message is not behavior but the inner change that gives rise to new God-centered, Christ-exalting behavior. Here are some thoughts to help make the meaning of repentance more plain.

From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." ([Matthew 4:17](#))

I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. ([Luke 5:32](#))

The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here. ([Matthew 12:41](#))

Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ([Luke 13:3](#), [5](#))

The first demand of Jesus' public ministry was, "Repent." He spoke this command indiscriminately to all who would listen. It was a call for radical inward change toward God and man.

Two things show us that repentance is an internal change of mind and heart rather than mere sorrow for sin or mere improvement of behavior. First, the meaning of the Greek word behind the English "repent" (*metanoeo*) points in this direction. It has two parts: *meta* and *noeo*. The second part (*noeo*) refers to the mind and its thoughts and perceptions and dispositions and purposes. The first part (*meta*) is a prefix that regularly means movement or change.¹ So the basic meaning of repent is to experience a change of the mind's perceptions and dispositions and purposes.

The other factor that points to this meaning of repent is the way [Luke 3:8](#) describes the relationship between repentance and new behavior. It says, “Bear fruits *in keeping with* repentance.” Then it gives examples of the fruits: “Whoever has two tunics is to share with him who has none, and whoever has food is to do likewise” ([Luke 3:11](#)). This means that repenting is what happens inside of us that leads to the fruits of new behavior.

Repentance is not the new deeds, but the inward change that bears the fruit of new deeds. Jesus is demanding that we experience this inward change.

Why? His answer is that we are sinners. “I have not come to call the righteous but *sinners* to repentance” ([Luke 5:32](#)). What was Jesus’ view of sin? In the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus describes the son’s sin like this: “He squandered his property in reckless living . . . [and] devoured [it] with prostitutes” ([Luke 15:13, 30](#)). But when the prodigal repents he says, “Father, I have sinned *against heaven* and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.” Therefore, throwing your life away on reckless living and prostitutes is not just humanly hurtful; it is an offense against heaven—that is, against God. That’s the essential nature of sin. It’s an assault on God.

We see this again in the way Jesus taught his disciples to pray. He said that they should pray, “Forgive us our *sins*, for we ourselves forgive everyone who is *indebted* to us” ([Luke 11:4](#)). In other words, sins that God forgives are compared to the ones people commit against us, and those are called *debts*. Therefore, Jesus’ view of sin was that it dishonored God and put us in *debt* to restore the divine honor we had defamed by our God-belittling behavior or attitudes. That debt is paid by Jesus himself. “The Son of man came . . . to give his life a ransom for many” ([Mark 10:45](#)). But for us to enjoy that gift he says we must repent.

Repenting means experiencing a change of mind that now sees God as true and beautiful and worthy of all our praise and all our obedience. This change of mind also embraces Jesus in the same way. We know this because Jesus said, “If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God.” Seeing God with a new mind includes seeing Jesus with a new mind.

No one is excluded from Jesus' demand to repent. He made this clear when a group of people came to him with news of two calamities. Innocent people had been killed by Pilate's massacre and by the fall of the tower of Siloam (Luke 13:1-4). Jesus took the occasion to warn even the bearers of the news: "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:5). In other words, don't think calamities mean that some people are sinners in need of repentance and others aren't. *All* need repentance. Just as all need to be born anew because "that which is born of the flesh is [merely] flesh" (John 3:6), so all must repent because all are sinners.

When Jesus said, "I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:32), he did not mean that some persons are good enough not to need repentance. He meant some *think* they are (Luke 18:9), and others have already repented and have been set right with God. For example, the rich young ruler desired "to justify himself" (Luke 10:29) while "the tax collector . . . beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' [and] went down to his house justified [by God!]" (Luke 18:13-14).

Therefore, none is excluded. All need repentance. And the need is urgent. Jesus said, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise *perish*." What did he mean by *perish*? He meant that the final judgment of God would fall on those who don't repent. "The men of Nineveh will rise up at the judgment with this generation and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here" (Matthew 12:41). Jesus, the Son of God, is warning people of the judgment to come, and offering escape if we will repent. If we will not repent, Jesus has one word for us, "Woe, to you" (Matthew 11:21).

This is why his demand for repentance is part of his central message that the kingdom of God is at hand. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15). The gospel—the good news—is that the rule of God has arrived in Jesus to save sinners before it arrives at his second coming in judgment. So the demand to repent is based on the gracious *offer* that is present to forgive, and on the gracious *warning* that someday those who refuse the offer will perish in God's judgment.

After he had risen from the dead Jesus made sure that his apostles would continue the call for repentance throughout the world. He said, “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that *repentance* and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” ([Luke 24:46-47](#)). So the demand of Jesus to repent goes to all the nations. It comes to us, whoever we are and wherever we are, and lays claim on us. This is the demand of Jesus to every soul: Repent. Be changed deep within. Replace all God-dishonoring, Christ-belittling perceptions and dispositions and purposes with God-treasuring, Christ-exalting ones.

For Christ and his kingdom,

Pastor John

¹ For example *meta* is used as a prefix in the word *metabaino* (transfer or change from one place to another), *metaballo* (change one’s way of thinking), *metago* (lead or move from one place to another), *metatithemi* (convey from one place to another, put in another place, transfer), *metamorphoo* (change in a manner visible to others, be transfigured), *metastrepho* (cause a change in state or condition, change, alter), *metaschematizo* (change the form of something, transform, change), etc.

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