

Matthew 4:17

“Repentance”

Although it is an oversimplification, but one could argue the Protestant Reformation was launched due to a faulty translation in the Latin Vulgate. Translated by Jerome in the 4th century, the Vulgate translated Matthew 4:17 as “do penance” instead of “repentance.” This laid the foundation for the medieval Catholic system. Eventually, Martin Luther was confronted with the theological and pastoral challenge of indulgences which led to his posting of the infamous 95 Theses. The first theses summarized the issue well, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”

But what does that mean? There can be no doubt that repentance lies at the center of Scripture and even of the gospel (see for example, Mark 6:12; Luke 5:32, 13:3; Acts 3:19). Knowing what the term means is critical to applying it to our lives.

First, let us explore **The Definition** of repentance. Combining both the Hebrew and Greek words often translated “repent,” it is clear the word means both “to change your mind” and to “turn back.” In the New Testament, the word is always in the same context. It is a command for sinners to choose to abandon their sin in favor of faith in Christ.

Its meaning can be summarized in two ways. First, we are exhorted to *Turn Away*. Repeatedly, the prophets and the apostles call on sinners to turn away from their sin. This requires sorrow over sin and an understanding of what sin is and the damage it does to others and our relationship with God. Imagine driving down the road. It is impossible to arrive at your destination if you are going in the wrong direction. In that situation, we need to turn around. That is repentance.

Repentance is more than turning away, it is also a *Turning Toward*. To return to the previous metaphor, it is no more progressive if you turn off the road onto another wrong road. It isn’t enough to turn around; we must also move toward where we ought to go. Repeatedly, Jesus calls on sinners to repent by following him (see Matthew 9:9, 16:24). Perhaps the best example of how repentance is a turning from and a turning toward, consider the rich, young ruler. After claiming to have kept the commandments, Jesus demanded he surrender his idolatry and “come, follow me” (Matthew 19:21). The man refused unwilling to turn away and to turn toward Christ.

This leads to **The Distinction**. With a basic understanding of the meaning of “repent” it seems best to distinguish between what it is and what it is often confused to be. First, let us explore what repentance is *not*. First, repentance is not prayer or other religious duties/rituals. A contrite heart mended by God saves. Religion can be a poor substitute for repentance. Often, it is used to avoid repentance through mere ritualism, tradition, and duties. It is possible to practice one’s faith without addressing our sin. We must, instead, repent.

Secondly, repentance is not sorrow. Feelings of regret are a component of repentance, but not enough. It is easy to regret our decisions but regret alone are insufficient to move us away from sin and toward Christ. I often regret overeating and vow to never do it again immediately after Thanksgiving dinner. It only takes a few hours before my regret proves insufficient to change my behavior.

Finally, repentance is not perfection but, rather, the beginning of our transformation. Scripture is refreshingly open how the people of God struggle. Paul, for example, lamented his wicked flesh. The things he wants to do he doesn't, and the things he doesn't want to do he does.

With that said, what, then, is repentance? First, repentance is the absence of defiance. Too often we confuse repentance with the absence of struggle, when in reality, it is the absence of defiance. Every parent has that kid who will look you in the eye while you are telling them not to push the button and push it anyways. At its core, repentance is accepting that Jesus is Lord of everything no matter what. He is in the right. Repentance is the surrender of personal sovereignty. We seek his will, his way, and we seek to grow in his wisdom. Remember, repentance is not perfection. We will struggle and fail, but what matters is what we do when we struggle and fail.

Secondly, repentance is the presence of Spirit-led transformation. While speaking to pastors, Alister Begg would often say, "young pastors overestimate what they can accomplish in a year and underestimate what they can accomplish in ten." The same is true with sanctification. We all want to break the addiction now! We all want to change now! We all want to heal now! We all want the pain to go away now! We all want our marriage to be better now! Gospel repentance is the work of the Holy Spirit by which he transforms us from the inside out. Some may experience immediate benefits whereas most will require boring, daily spiritual disciplines.

This leads, finally, to **The Discipline**. Repentance requires *A Change in Attitude*. Scripture constantly exhorts a transformed mind (see, for example, Romans 12:1-2; Philippians 4:8). Repentance leads to us viewing ourselves, our God, and our world differently. We no longer linger on our past sins, mistakes, or shame but, instead focus on Jesus Christ and his finished work.

Secondly, repentance requires *A Change in Action*. The story goes that during a heated battle, one of the soldiers under Alexander the Great became so paralyzed with fear that he fled the battle scene. When the battle concluded, he was and brought to the tent of Alexander the Great himself. The Emperor asked the young man, "Son, what is your name?" the soldier replied, "My name is Alexander." The Emperor responded, "Well son, you either change your conduct or change your name." So it is with us.

There's an old story of a farmer who noticed a lamb and a pig escaped his farm. He looked everywhere to no avail, finally deciding to return to bed. He awoke at first light to the sound of a bleating lamb. He followed the sound of the constant cries to a bog where he found both his missing lamb and pig wallowing in the mire. The pig was enjoying himself, but not the lamb. She was trying with all her might to escape but couldn't. Her only hope for freedom was to cry for help. So, it is with repentance. If we want to finally escape the mess of sin in our lives, all we can do is cry for help. The good news is that the Lord will answer and he will rescue us.