

Ten Facts You Should Know About REPENTANCE

“Repent,” urged Peter, “and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). These divinely inspired words, spoken on the Day of Pentecost, the annual holy day that became the “birthday” of the New Testament church, show that *repentance* is the first prerequisite for receiving the Holy Spirit. “Repent” was the first command issued on the day the church was “born,” the first word used to answer the all-important question, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (2:37).

The writer of the book of Hebrews places “repentance from acts that lead to death” (Hebrews 6:1, NIV) at the head of a list of six “elementary truths of God’s word” (5:12, NIV). Repentance is a part of the very “foundation” (6:1) of the true Christian faith, so is much too important to be glossed over or neglected to any degree.

The importance of this essential doctrine is underscored by the fact that New Testament narratives specifically mention repentance in their summaries of the preaching of John the Baptist (Matthew 3:2), Jesus Christ (Matthew 4:7), and the apostle Paul (Acts 20:21). This should not be surprising since Jesus, who commissioned His followers to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19), said that “repentance and remission of sins should be preached to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem” (Luke 24:47).

A correct understanding of repentance is absolutely fundamental to biblical Christianity. The candidate for Christian baptism must know what repentance means, what to repent of, and how to distinguish between real and counterfeit repentance. He or she should also have a solid understanding of how repentance relates to Godly sorrow, divine grace, and saving faith.

Paul informs us that “these times of [past] ignorance God has overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). Repentance, then, is a subject deserving of careful study. The admonition to repent is for all men of all races and nationalities, and is an essential component of the good news of the Kingdom of God. As New Testament scholar David A. deSilva, Ph.D., rightly states, “Repentance is the divinely appointed means of repairing the relationship between God and humankind...” (*Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Development*, p. 1011). It is our hope that this booklet will help many come to a good understanding of this “divinely appointed means” of reconciliation, and apply it to their own lives.

The ten facts that follow, if carefully studied, will supply the reader with a solid foundation of knowledge about this important subject.

FACT #1: REPENTANCE IS A CHANGE OF MIND AND BEHAVIOR.

To repent means to *change*, or “have a change of mind.” W.E. Vine states, “In the N.T. the subject [repentance] chiefly has reference to repentance from sin, and this change of mind involves both a turning from sin and a turning to God” (*An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 953). This change of mind is a change of attitude and mental perspective, which results in a change in behavior. It means turning *from* the way of life that is contrary to God’s law, and turning *to* the way of life that is defined by God’s law, which consists chiefly of the Ten Commandments, but includes other commandments, statutes, and judgments, as well. Repentance means to surrender one’s life—one’s whole being, both mind and body—to God’s will as expressed in His revealed Word.

Negative and positive sides of repentance

Negatively, repentance means turning from *sin*, which is defined in 1 John 3:4 as “the transgression of the law” (KJV). On the positive side, repentance means turning to *righteousness* through a life of faith and obedience, the opposite of sin and disobedience. Most of the commandments of God’s law are negative (they begin with “You shall not...”), but each one has a positive side, as well. The commandment forbidding the worship of false gods means “Worship the true God.” The commandment against idolatry means “Worship God in spirit and in truth.” The commandment forbidding taking God’s name in vain means “Praise His name, and bring honor to His name by your good example.” The commandment against murder means “You shall cherish the gift of life.” And on it goes.

Repentance entails putting away the sinful activities defined by the commandments, and adopting the wholesome attitudes and behaviors of the positive side of God’s law.

The fruits of repentance

Repentance begins with a change of mind and results in a change of conduct. In Acts 3:19, Peter urges his hearers to “Repent...and be *converted*”—or, *turn* and be *changed*! Turn to God by accepting His terms and provisions, and then follow through with action.

When certain self-serving hypocrites came to the Jordan River where John was baptizing, John challenged them to show proof of their repentance: “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance,” the Baptist said, adding that “every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Matthew 3:8, 10, NIV).

Luke’s account includes examples of the fruit of repentance: “So the people asked him [John], saying, ‘What shall we do then?’ He answered and said to them, ‘He who has two tunics, let him give to him who has none; and he who has food, let him do likewise.’ Then tax collectors also came to be baptized, and said to him, ‘Teacher, what shall we do?’ And he said to them, ‘Collect no more than what is appointed for you.’ Likewise the soldiers asked him, saying, ‘And what shall we do?’ So he said to them, ‘Do not intimidate anyone or accuse falsely, and be content with your wages’” (Luke 3:10–14).

John, whose ministry focused on repentance, and whose baptism is even called a “baptism of repentance” (Acts 19:4), knew that those who were truly repentant would prove their repentance by their actions. Repentance is *change*, not only change of mind, but change of behavior, as well.

Paul’s understanding of repentance was the same as John’s. Recounting his conversion before King Agrippa, Paul told of how he “declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and *do works befitting repentance*” (Acts 26:20). Like John, Paul knew that the *inner* state of repentance, if firmly rooted and nurtured, would inevitably express itself through *outward* works.

“Repentance” that bears no fruit

Again and again Scripture makes it plain that the inner quality of repentance produces “works befitting repentance,” or a change in behavior. When a person confesses repentance but has no change of behavior—no “fruit in keeping with repentance”—then there is one of two possibilities: either that person’s repentance was “short-circuited” by the cares of this life or unforeseen circumstances (see Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23), or it never truly existed in the first place.

Internal and external qualities

The internal and external qualities of repentance are so interwoven that one cannot be separated from the other. Behavioral science informs us that just as our attitudes influence our actions, our actions influence our attitudes. In other words, the internal quality we call repentance (an “attitude”) influences the way we behave. It motivates us to obey God’s commandments and accept His provisions for salvation. Similarly, putting God’s instructions to practice influences our attitudes; it encourages the mental disposition, or “attitude,” we call repentance.

FACT #2: THE CALL TO REPENTANCE IS AT THE HEART OF THE KINGDOM MESSAGE.

As mentioned previously, John the Baptist, the divinely chosen herald of Christ’s first coming, came preaching a message of repentance: “Repent,” he urged, “for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2). Jesus, too, called for repentance: “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand’” (Matthew 4:17). The apostle Paul went to the Jews and Greeks alike “preaching the kingdom of God,” a message of “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21, 25).

Notice how, in each case, the call for repentance is linked to the message of the Kingdom of God. Note also that the statements above are *summaries* of the things John, Jesus, and Paul preached. This is most revealing. It tells us that the call to repentance is at the heart and core of the Kingdom message.

Jesus touched on many important subjects in His famous “Sermon on the Mount,” and illustrated truths about the Kingdom of God through scores of parables. Yet, interestingly, Matthew summarizes Jesus’ preaching ministry with a single line: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In truth, all that Jesus taught relates to repentance and the Kingdom in one way or another.

Repentance and the heirs of the Kingdom

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus expounds the characteristics of the heirs of the Kingdom: They are not given to anger, violence, or pride; they mourn the injustices of society; they long for fairness and justice; they are merciful; they eschew immorality and perversion; and they are willing to endure hardships of every sort rather than compromise what they know to be right (see Matthew 5:1–12). Heirs of the Kingdom are called upon to acquire these qualities, but obtaining such qualities is not possible for the impenitent. Repentance is required.

The whole of the Sermon on the Mount concerns the question of what one must do to enter the Kingdom of God. It provides an overview of the changes of mind and conduct heirs of the Kingdom are required to make: They hold God’s law in high esteem (5:17–20); recognize that sinful acts such as murder and adultery begin in the heart and sometimes require radical preventative measures (5:21–30); honor divinely ordained institutions such as marriage (5:31–32); highly value truthfulness (5:33–37); are always willing to put aside grievances and bear extra burdens in order to turn bad relationships into good ones (5:38–48). They closely examine their own motives and priorities, seeing to it that in all they think and do they “seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness...” (6:33).

Such qualities of character are rarely seen in today’s world. They are the fruit of the radical commitment known as *repentance*.

Parables of the Kingdom

Many of Jesus’ “Kingdom parables” (parables that illustrate the Kingdom of God through some common activity or situation; “the kingdom of heaven is like...”) focus on the necessity and true nature of repentance.

In the parable of the wheat and the tares (Matthew 13:24–30), the Kingdom is compared to “a man who sowed good seed in the field.” The story involves a man who sows a field with wheat, and an enemy who comes by night and sows tares among the wheat. When the grain sprouted and produced a crop, it was discovered that tares were mingled with the wheat. The owner of the crop instructed his servants to let the wheat and tares grow together until the harvest, at which time the wheat will be gathered into a barn and the tares will be burned.

Jesus interprets the parable this way:

He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear (Matthew 13:36–43).

The “tares” are those who “offend” and “practice lawlessness.” Lawlessness means “without law.” The tares disregard God’s law. They display a spirit diametrically *opposite* of repentance. The “wheat,” on the other hand, represents the “righteous.” The Psalmist declares, “For *all Your commandments* are righteousness” (Psalm 119:172). The righteous, then, are those who keep God’s commandments. They are the ones who have turned *from sin and to obedience*. Like the “good seed” that produced a good crop, they produce “works befitting repentance.”

In the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21–35), the kingdom of God is compared to “a certain king who wanted to settle accounts with his servants” (verse 23). One servant, unable to pay his debt, begged the king for mercy, and the king responded by forgiving the man his debt. The servant then went out and refused to extend the same mercy to a man who was indebted to him. In the end, the unforgiving servant was delivered to the torturers “until he should pay all that was due to him” (verse 34). The primary lesson for us appears in verse 35: “So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses.” But there is also a lesson here about the nature of true repentance. Genuine repentance is not mere self-pity; it is both a change of mind *and* a change of behavior. It involves recognizing that the recipients of mercy are doubly responsible for *being* merciful.

When a person truly repents of his past offenses against God, and casts himself on God’s mercy, relying wholly on His compassion and accepting His provisions for salvation, then that person can *know in his heart* that his sins have been forgiven. If his repentance is real—*from the heart*—and not mere self-pity, then he will be impelled (but not forced) to extend to others the same mercy he has received. *That’s* the way true repentance works.

Other Kingdom parables similarly illustrate the principal components of repentance. The parable of the wedding feast (Matthew 22:1–14), for instance, stresses the importance of responding positively to God’s invitation and accepting His provisions for salvation. The parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14–30) urges diligence and faithfulness in carrying out the tasks God has assigned to us. These are the actions and qualities of the repentant heart, and the stories urging these actions and qualities are “Kingdom parables” because no one will enter the Kingdom without a heart attuned to and conditioned by the will of God as expressed in His commandments.

It's easy to see why Jesus' message is summed up in one line: "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!" The good news of the Kingdom *is* a message of repentance.

FACT #3: THE MESSAGE OF REPENTANCE IS ESSENTIAL TO THE GREAT COMMISSION.

Since the message Jesus commands His followers to take to the world is the message He brought, this fact is closely related to the previous one. The "great commission" Christ left for His disciples is summarized in Matthew 28:18–20:

And Jesus came and spoke to them [the eleven disciples—verse 16], saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

The *Son* (Jesus) has "all authority...in heaven and earth." He acquired His authority from His *Father*, and exercises His authority on earth through the ministries of *Spirit*-filled disciples (precisely the reason Jesus mentions "Father...Son...Holy Spirit" here). In other words, though Jesus is now *bodily* absent, His work continues through His disciples. He is *spiritually* present with them; and through them, *He continues calling for repentance in preparation for the Kingdom of God.*

Jesus says "that *repentance* and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). The message of "repentance and remission of sins" began to be proclaimed in Jerusalem on the Day of Pentecost, when Peter preached a powerful message showing that Jesus was the promised Messiah, and concluded with, "*Repent*, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the *remission of sins*; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38).

FACT #4: GOD COMMANDS REPENTANCE.

Some "hyper-Calvinists" seem to believe that salvation is solely a matter of God's sovereign will, completely aside from human free will. Heavy emphasis is placed on predestination, unconditional election, and irresistible grace. Human cooperation—including repentance and obedience—in the salvation process is considered a conditioned response, an action of divine grace alone. This means that the salvation God offers is not, in the true sense of the term, an "offer." Though He commands all to repent, and punishes those who do not, ultimately casting them into a lake of fire, only those select few conditioned by divine grace will repent—only they *can* repent—and it's not a matter of free choice. Those who repent choose repentance because they are incapable of resisting divine grace.

Such a soteriology reduces God's command to repent to so many empty words. What is a "command" if there is no option to obey or disobey? Are we to suppose that God's command to repent is devoid of options?

In “Fact #5” below we will see that repentance is indeed a gift of God, but this does not mean that the offer of salvation does not involve a real choice with real options.

A universal command

The apostle Paul, disgusted by the idols he saw all around him in Athens, informed the philosophers of the Areopagus that “these [past] times of ignorance God overlooked, but now [through the preaching of the gospel] commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30). The accountability to which God holds a person is in direct proportion to his knowledge of truth. God had “winked at,” or “overlooked,” many of the idolatrous customs of the past because of widespread deception, ignorance, and superstition. But *now*—now that the good news of Jesus Christ and His Kingdom is being proclaimed, and the light of truth is penetrating the darkness of this present world through the preaching of the good news—God is commanding “all men everywhere” to turn to Him in repentance! The call for repentance is not restricted to any one race or nation; it is for everyone (“all men everywhere”).

Of course, there’s still an overabundance of deception and superstition in the world. That doesn’t mean that God is no longer calling men to repentance; it means that the church still has much work to do. God’s command to repent is directly related to how well the church does its job. The preaching of the Word is precisely *how* God commands all men to repent.

A real choice!

Make no mistake, God’s command to repent demands a response. Those who have ears to hear the command have a *choice* set before them: They can obey God by repenting of their sins and accepting His provisions and conditions, or they can refuse to obey Him and go on living life the way they want to, thereby *resisting* the very grace that brought them the opportunity for salvation in the first place.

Yes, grace can be resisted and rejected! The choice God sets before us is as real a choice as the one He set before the people of Israel when He commanded them to obey His law and warned them of the consequences of breaking the covenant: “I call heaven and earth as witnesses today against you, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and cursing; therefore *choose life*, that both you and your descendants may live” (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Today, if you hear God’s call to repentance, you have the same choice set before you. Choose life!

FACT #5: REPENTANCE IS A *GIFT* OF GOD.

This is not a contradiction. God commands repentance; yet, repentance is a *gift* of God. If a “gift” is *forced* on someone, it is not a gift at all! The same is true of the gift of

repentance. God doesn't force anyone to repent; He simply makes the *opportunity* to repent available. This is the sense in which repentance as a gift should be understood.

God exalted Jesus "to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to *give repentance* to Israel and forgiveness of sins" (Acts 5:31). When certain Jewish Christians witnessed the conversion of Cornelius and his household, "they glorified God, saying, 'Then God has also *granted* to the Gentiles *repentance* to life'" (Acts 11:18). Paul hopes that, through Timothy's efforts in correcting certain offenders, "God perhaps will *grant them repentance*, so that they may know the truth" (2 Timothy 2:25).

But how does the process work? Through what means does God "grant them repentance"? God, through His Spirit, leads a person to an awareness of both sin and righteousness, thus enabling Him to "hear" the command to repent. Jesus promised that, after His departure, the Holy Spirit would come and "*convict* the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment: of sin, because they do not believe in Me; of righteousness, because I go to My Father and you see Me no more; of judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged" (John 16:8–11). The Spirit convicts the world of sin and righteousness through the church's preaching of the good news.

God often uses the circumstances of day-to-day life in bestowing upon us the gift of repentance. The gift may come through the positive Christian example of a neighbor, or from reading a booklet on an intriguing biblical topic, or from watching the *Armor of God* television program, or from a chain of events spanning many weeks or months, or even years. Shocking events in the news, such as the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, may be the catalyst that enables a person to receive God's gift of repentance. On the other hand, positive events, such as people coming together to help relieve the suffering of others, may have an awakening effect through which God can bestow the gift of repentance. God can and does use the events of life—ordinary and extraordinary—to awaken people to their need of repentance.

FACT #6: REPENTANCE IS THE FRUIT OF GODLY SORROW.

The apostle Paul says that "godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Godly sorrow is contrition motivated by a love for God. Such sorrow, says Paul, *produces* repentance. It is not the totality of repentance; it serves as a first step in the process of repentance, or change in attitude and behavior. The "sorrow of the world," on the other hand, is nothing more than self-pity. It "produces death" because it is *self-centered* rather than *God-centered*.

Contrition is important, but genuine repentance cannot be measured by how many tears a person sheds or how much time he has spent whimpering and sobbing while curled in the fetal position. Repentance *involves* deep feelings, but is not in itself a mere visceral response. As discussed above, it is a God-centered CHANGE of heart and mind. It is a *choice*, not a whim. It is based on *love*, not mere hurt feelings or self-pity. It is *conviction* and *commitment*, not an emotional state into which (or out of which) a person helplessly

falls. The fruits of repentance do not flow naturally from a wellspring of tingling sensations or warm fuzzy feelings; they are actions requiring deliberate *choices*.

Confession of sins

John writes, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we *confess our sins*, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us” (1 John 1:8–10).

A major key to true repentance is *confession*. Unfortunately, our confession is often limited by what we are willing to admit. We humans have the uncanny ability of mentally revising past events, deceiving ourselves into believing that past sins were somehow less than sinful. We dupe ourselves into thinking that deadly sins are mere “weaknesses.” We hide our motives, not only from others, but also from ourselves. Somehow, we're able to shove our true motives into the darkened recesses of our minds, and pretend that certain of our past sinful actions were prompted by good intentions.

Confession means being completely *honest* with oneself—and with God. It means *admitting*—privately, prayerfully—one's true motives, and resolving to never again pretend that those motives are other than what they are.

King David seems to have suppressed his guilt after committing adultery with Bathsheba and sending her husband to a sure death on the front lines of combat. But once he was forced to face squarely what he had done, he confessed his sin and repented deeply and bitterly.

*Have mercy upon me, O God,
According to Your lovingkindness;
According to the multitude of Your tender mercies,
Blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
And cleanse me from my sin.*

*For I acknowledge my transgressions,
And my sin is always before me.
Against You, You only, have I sinned,
And done this evil in Your sight—
That You may be found just when You speak,
And blameless when You judge (Psalm 51:1–4).*

David allowed the light of divine judgment to penetrate the darkness of his innermost being and expose his sins for what they were. Rather than hide from reality by pretending that his transgressions were “not really all that bad,” David *confessed*—from the heart—what he had done, and threw himself upon God's mercy. His sorrow was *Godly* sorrow,

not mere self-pity; and his confession was wholehearted confession, not a self-serving cover-up.

FACT #7: REPENTANCE IS THE FRUIT OF GOD’S GOODNESS.

Perhaps most of us associate repentance with fear of what might happen to us if we do not repent. That’s a healthy fear, and those who live immorally *should* be fearful. But fear of punishment or condemnation is not the only factor that may lead a person to repentance. Paul asks, “Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the *goodness of God leads you to repentance*?” (Romans 2:4). Similarly, Peter says, “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

God’s goodness is expressed in His patience with us. From the finite human point of view, God is “slow” in delivering His promises; but what we call “slowness” is really God’s *patience* with us. His desire is that we come to repentance, and He patiently gives us every opportunity to do so.

Most people do not commit to a life of obedience to God’s law as soon as they come to a knowledge of the truth; it usually takes time—*years*, in some cases. Fortunate for us, God is merciful, rich in kindness and patience—He is *good*! When we do finally repent and surrender our lives to Him, He most graciously, and without hesitation, pardons our transgressions.

The purpose of human existence

There is another sense in which God’s goodness leads to repentance. His goodness is revealed in His awesome plan for humankind. Many, upon seeing what God has in store for His image-bearers, have come to see the goodness of God as they never could before and, as a result, have turned to Him in wholehearted repentance.

The awesome destiny of man is stated succinctly in Paul’s epistle to the Romans:

*For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are **the sons of God**. For you did not receive the spirit of bondage again to fear, but you received the Spirit of adoption [sonship] by whom we cry out, “Abba, Father.” The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are **children of God**, and if children, then heirs—**heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ**, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together (Romans 8:14–17).*

Believe it or not, YOU were born for the very purpose of becoming a *child of God*—literally! It is a mistake to try to “metaphorize” away the plain meaning of the above text. The expressions “sons of God,” “Spirit of sonship,” “children of God,” “heirs of God,” and “joint heirs with Christ” are not metaphors, as the immediate context and other

passages clearly show. God literally wants to share His *divinity* with His human creatures. He wants to bring us into His divine *family*.

Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure (1 John 3:1–3).

It is this *hope*—knowledge of God’s plan for each of us—that motivates us to “purify” ourselves, or turn to God in wholehearted repentance and surrender our lives completely to Him. True repentance, then, is not only a product of Godly sorrow; it is also a product of the goodness of God as we recognize it in His wonderful purpose and as we experience it in His influence in our lives.

FACT #8: REPENTANCE IS NECESSARY FOR SALVATION.

This statement may seem redundant for those who have read all the material up to this point, but it needs stating for the simple reason that some people, zealously opposing the notion of salvation by “works,” tend to underemphasize (or fail to emphasize at all) the necessity of repentance. If they do talk about repentance, they prefer to speak of it as something that God causes altogether, but not as something requiring our cooperation with God. They believe that when we speak of repentance as something *we* do in cooperation with the divine will, we are attributing salvation to our own efforts, which is tantamount to teaching “salvation by works.”

Paul never said that salvation does not involve our cooperation with God. When he condemned the notion of justification by “works of the law,” he was specifically addressing the Judaizers, who wanted to require non-Jewish converts to perform certain ritualistic acts that God never required of them. His point was that there is nothing a person can do to *cause God to owe him salvation*. That’s *not* to say, however, that human cooperation, which involves the human ability of making free choices, is not involved in the process of salvation.

Scripture is clear in pointing out that *your* decision of whether to repent while the window of opportunity is open to you has everlasting repercussions. Therefore, we should not hesitate to say that *your* decision to repent is an absolute requirement for salvation.

As stated previously, “repentance from dead works” is the first of the foundational doctrines listed in Hebrews 6:1–2. “Dead works” are, as the New International Version indicates, “acts that lead to death.” To repent of such acts is to *stop* committing them. To *stop* doing one thing means to *start* doing the opposite. If this change of direction can be described as “works,” then, in that sense, “works” are required for salvation! That still does not mean, however, that you have done something to cause God to owe you

salvation. Salvation is a free gift of God, and repentance is a condition for receiving the free gift.

An analogy might be helpful here: A father gives his son a car as a high-school graduation gift. Had the son not graduated, he would not have received his father's gift. The father did not owe his son a car; he *gave* him the car. The car was a gift even though the son was required to graduate before he could receive it. Similarly, God wants each of us to receive the free gift of salvation, but He requires us to cooperate with Him before He will give it to us. Cooperation with God begins with *repentance*.

Repent or perish!

Jesus, commenting on certain fateful events of the past, warned His listeners, “[Un]less you repent you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:2,5). Repent or perish! Ultimately, that's the choice each of us will have to face. Peter's statement that God does not desire “that any should perish but that all should come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9) carries the same message: Those who do not ultimately “come to repentance” will surely “perish.”

The message of the prophets God sent to Israel presented the same choice:

“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways,” says the Lord GOD. “Repent, and turn from all your transgressions, so that iniquity will not be your ruin. Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit. For why should you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of one who dies,” says the Lord GOD. “Therefore turn and live!” (Ezekiel 18:30–32).

Here, God is speaking to the people of Israel in terms expressed in the Sinai Covenant, but the principle of “repent or perish” is universal, and underscores the importance of our cooperation with God in the salvation process.

FACT #9: REPENTANCE IS INSEPARABLE FROM “SAVING FAITH.”

When a Philippian jailer asked, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas gave him the answer: “*Believe* on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:30–31). In Mark's version of the “great commission,” Jesus says, “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who *believes* and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mark 16:15–16). When an Ethiopian eunuch asked, “What hinders me from being baptized?” Philip replied, “If you *believe* with all your heart, you may” (Acts 8:36–37). When the Samaritans “*believed* Philip as he preached the things concerning the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, both men and women were baptized” (Acts 8:12).

Candidates for Christian baptism need only “believe.” But what does that mean? What kind of “belief” is required for salvation, and what does it have to do with repentance?

Saving faith

Can faith that produces no works save a person? James addresses this very question in his short epistle:

What does it profit, my brethren, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can faith save him? If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, “Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,” but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit? Thus also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, “You have faith, and I have works.” Show me your faith without your works, and I will show you my faith by my works. You believe that there is one God. You do well. Even the demons believe—and tremble! But do you want to know, O foolish man, that faith without works is dead? (James 2:14–20).

In this text, “having faith” and “believing” are synonymous. But, as James points out, the kind of faith (believing) that produces no fruit is useless. Even the demons, he says, have that kind of faith. It is nothing more than intellectual assent. The faith, or belief, that pleases God—true “saving faith”—is the faith that results in obedience to God’s law and acceptance of His provisions for salvation.

James’ illustration makes the point well. The “love of neighbor” that would motivate a person to do nothing more than tell his cold, hungry, and homeless brother or sister to “depart in peace, be warmed and filled” is not love at all. And any “faith” that motivates a person to do nothing but say “I believe” is not the faith that saves! *True* faith—the kind that saves—is a faith that produces positive behavioral changes. It is a *trusting conviction* that motivates a person to *repent*—change his mind and his behavior—and bring his life into harmony with the will of God. *This* is the kind of “believing” the scriptures cited at the beginning of this section refer to. “Believe on the Lord Jesus and you shall be saved” does not mean that all who give intellectual assent to the story of Jesus “shall be saved.” The “believing” that saves is the kind of believing that results in repentance and conversion.

Examples of faith

The book of Hebrews states that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1, RSV). It was *assurance* and *conviction* that moved the men and women of Old Testament times to perform positive deeds in compliance with God’s will. “But without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him” (verse 6).

Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, and many others “obtained a good testimony through faith” (verse 39). In all these examples, we see the principle that James so plainly sets forth: that genuine faith—“saving faith”—is the assurance and conviction that produces action. Such faith, then, is interrelated with and inseparable from repentance.

Saved by grace through faith

Paul writes, “For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast” (Ephesians 2:8–9). Some believe this statement conflicts with James’ comments on faith and works. But nothing could be further from the truth. Paul is writing of the kind of faith James commends. James commends the faith that produces works, and this is precisely what Paul has in mind when he says that salvation comes by God’s grace through faith, as his next statement clearly shows: “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus *for good works*, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them” (verse 10).

The author of Hebrews speaks of the “foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God” (Hebrews 6:1, NIV). The way repentance and faith are put together here reflects the writer’s understanding of these foundational doctrines: They are two interrelated aspects of one important subject.

FACT #10: REPENTANCE DOESN’T END WITH INITIAL CONVERSION.

Perhaps many of us think of repentance as a one-time act—something we do at the beginning of our walk with Christ. But there’s more to it than that. There is an initial repentance, but it is important to realize that repentance is also a *process*. It involves continuous introspection, frequent exposure to the Word of God, regular prayer, and perhaps occasional fasting. Perhaps the word that best describes repentance as a way of life is *growth*—a continuous chain of changes leading to maturity.

Repentance as a process is more than an occasional act of contrition—though that is definitely a part of it. It is also a God-centered *state of mind* that influences every aspect of one’s life. It is sharpened through paying attention to the “nudging” of the Holy Spirit, which always directs one along the path established by God’s law; it is dulled through neglecting the Spirit’s convicting presence.

Leaving the sphere of the Spirit’s influence is a serious matter. James was speaking to Christians who had lapsed into worldliness when he wrote:

Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded. Lament and mourn and weep! Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He will lift you up (James 4:7–10).

Christ’s admonitions to the seven churches of Asia Minor are filled with urgent warnings to repent and turn away from practices that conflict with God’s will (Revelation 2 and 3). Paul called upon the church at Corinth to discontinue fellowship with an immoral church member until he had repented of his sinful activity (1 Corinthians 5:1–5). “Your glorying is not good,” Paul said. “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” (verse 6). Paul was calling for both individual and communal repentance.

As stated above, repentance involves a state of mind, a disposition. More than a one-time *act*, it is a *life of obedience* that involves continual changes—spiritual *growth*—and a continuous desire to do the will of God, not merely for the purpose of reaping the rewards of obedience, but because it is right in the sight of God.

Of course, none of us have achieved absolute perfection. We occasionally slip and stumble, and sometimes fall headlong into sin. Thankfully, God will accept our repentance and forgive us as soon as we turn to Him and ask for His help. That the sinning Christian can cleanse himself through repentance and be restored to God's favor is clearly taught in Scripture:

“Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us *cleanse ourselves* from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Corinthians 7:2).

God's desire is to bring all to repentance and grant us the gift of salvation. As long as we yearn for His loving embrace, even if we've temporarily strayed from Him, He is always there for us, always ready to receive us back into full fellowship with Him.

What should you do?

If you have come to a knowledge of the truth—knowledge of God's law; of His way of life, particularly as expressed through His Ten Commandments; of His provisions for salvation through Jesus Christ, who offered Himself for the sins of the world; of the resurrection of the dead; of the Kingdom of God and reward of the saved—and if you truly believe the good news of Christ and His Kingdom, then Peter's timeless words are for you:

“*Repent, and...be baptized* in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38).

If you are one who previously came to a knowledge of the truth, responded in repentance and baptism, and received the gift of the Holy Spirit, but have since drifted away from God, perhaps returning to old habits or allowing despondency and doubt to overwhelm you, then God's Word has a message for you, as well:

“If we *confess our sins*, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).

Whether you are new to the faith or are a “backslidden” Christian, God desires to receive you into the loving fellowship of His family.

The next step is up to you.

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