

# FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

*Systematic Theology Series*

## SOTERIOLOGY

*The Doctrine of Salvation*

*By Grace Alone, Through Faith Alone, In Christ Alone, To the Glory of God Alone*

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### UNIT 5: CONVERSION — REPENTANCE AND FAITH

*The Soul's First Conscious Response to Sovereign Grace*

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#### Lesson 13

## Repentance

*The Gift of Turning from Sin to God*

*Not Merely Regret, but a Revolution of the Heart*

*“God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life”*

*Key Texts: Acts 2:38; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 2 Timothy 2:25; 2 Corinthians 7:9–11; Mark 1:15; Luke 15:7, 10*

*“The sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death.”*

**2 Corinthians 7:10, NASB 1995**

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## Introduction

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With Lesson 13, this Soteriology series enters its fifth unit, Conversion: Repentance and Faith, and turns from the Spirit's sovereign work in the hidden depths of the soul (effectual calling, regeneration, the new heart) to the first conscious, deliberate, whole-person response that the Spirit's work produces in the believing sinner. That response is conversion, and conversion, in the New Testament's account, is never a single act but always a twofold movement: repentance (the turning from sin) and faith (the turning to Christ). The two movements are theologically distinguishable and will be treated in separate lessons (repentance in this lesson, faith in Lesson 14), but they are experientially inseparable: you cannot genuinely turn to Christ without turning from sin, and you cannot genuinely turn from sin without turning to Christ. They are the two sides of the one coin of conversion.

Repentance has suffered at the hands of its interpreters more than perhaps any other doctrine in the Christian tradition. It has been reduced, on one side, to the mere feeling of regret, a temporary emotional discomfort in the wake of sin's consequences that bears no relation to a genuine change of direction. It has been inflated, on the other side, into a works-based prerequisite for grace, a sufficient degree of suffering or self-mortification that must be performed before God will extend mercy, a penitential treadmill that keeps the sinner working toward an acceptance that is never quite reached. Against both of these distortions, the New Testament presents repentance as something at once far more radical than mere regret and far more gracious than a prerequisite for divine favor: a Spirit-wrought, whole-person revolution of the inner life that involves genuine change of mind, genuine sorrow over sin, genuine confession before God, and genuine turning of the whole person away from sin and toward the God who offers mercy in Christ.

The Greek word that stands behind the English "repentance" is *metanoia*, literally, a change of mind (*meta*, after or change; *nous*, mind). But the term's full New Testament significance far exceeds the merely intellectual connotation that "a change of mind" might suggest in ordinary English usage. In the New Testament, the mind is not a detached intellectual faculty; it is the seat of the whole person's thinking, evaluating, and intending. A *metanoia* is therefore not merely a change of intellectual opinion about the proposition that sin is wrong; it is a radical reorientation of the whole person, understanding, affections, and will, away from sin and toward the God who is the proper object of human life's deepest allegiance. The revolution of the heart that *metanoia* describes is nothing less than the first conscious expression of the new nature that regeneration has implanted.

This lesson will proceed through six major sections: repentance defined in its full biblical scope; repentance as the gift of God (not a human achievement but a Spirit-wrought grace); the four elements of genuine repentance (conviction, contrition, confession, conversion); the critical distinction between worldly sorrow and godly sorrow; the inseparability of repentance and faith; and the ongoing nature of repentance as the perpetual posture of the Christian life, not merely its threshold. Throughout, the governing conviction is that repentance is simultaneously one of the most demanding and one of the most liberating realities in the whole of the Christian life: demanding because it requires the soul's honest reckoning with its own sinfulness before a holy God; liberating because it is the path by which the burdened, guilty, sin-entangled soul enters the freedom of the forgiveness that the God of all grace has provided through the blood of His Son.

A pastoral orientation before we begin. Repentance is the most personally searching of all the doctrines in this series, because it is the one that requires not intellectual agreement or theological precision but the soul's honest self-examination before the face of God. The student who can articulate the definition of *metanoia* with technical

accuracy but who has never wept over her own sin, never genuinely turned away from a specific pattern of transgression, and never experienced the specific relief of the forgiven soul may know the doctrine without having received the grace. The goal of this lesson is not merely to produce doctrinal clarity about repentance but to lead every student of the doctrine into the experience of repentance itself, the ongoing, honest, Spirit-led turning from sin toward the God whose mercy is always more generous than the worst thing any penitent has done.

# I. Repentance Defined

## *A Whole-Person Revolution, Not Mere Regret*

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### **A.** *The Biblical Vocabulary of Repentance*

The New Testament employs two primary terms for repentance that together capture its full scope. The first is *metanoia* (noun) and *metanoeo* (verb), from the Greek *meta* (change, or after) and *nous* (mind), the foundational word that describes the change of the whole person's thinking, evaluating, and intending with respect to sin and God. The second is *epistrophe* (noun) and *epistrephō* (verb), meaning a turning or a turning around, the directional term that captures repentance as movement, as a change of trajectory, as the soul's literal turning from one direction to another. Both terms are necessary for the full picture: *metanoia* captures the inner transformation (the change of mind and heart), while *epistrophe* captures the outer expression of that transformation (the actual turning of the life in a new direction). The fullest statement of the relationship between the two is Paul's description of his own ministry in Acts 20:21: testifying "both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ", repentance toward God (the turning to, with *epistrophē* implied) as the inseparable companion of faith.

In the Old Testament background that shapes the New Testament's language, two Hebrew terms carry the substance of what *metanoia* and *epistrophe* express. The first is *shuv*, the most common Old Testament word for repentance, meaning literally to turn or to return, a directional term that captures the movement of the whole person from a path of sin back to the path of covenant faithfulness. The second is *nakham*, meaning to be sorry, to relent, or to feel grief over something done, the emotional/affective dimension that is the inner dimension of the turning that *shuv* describes. The prophetic literature consistently pairs the two dimensions: the genuine repentance the prophets call for is both the inward sorrow (*nakham*) and the outward turning (*shuv*), both the grief over sin that sees it as God sees it and the actual redirection of the life that the grief produces. Joel 2:12–13 captures both in its classic prophetic appeal: "Return to Me with all your heart, and with fasting, weeping and mourning; and rend your heart and not your garments. Now return to the Lord your God, for He is gracious and compassionate" (NASB 1995). The outer acts (fasting, weeping, mourning, tearing of garments) are commanded in their inward form (rending the heart) rather than their outward form alone, a distinction that places the entire weight of genuine repentance on the inner revolution rather than its external expression.

The first word of Jesus' public ministry, as Mark records it, is the word "repent": "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel" (Mark 1:15, NASB 1995). The opening word of the kingdom's proclamation is not an invitation but an imperative: *metanoeite*, present imperative, a command to ongoing, continuous repentance. The first demand of the gospel is not a doctrinal test or a moral qualification but a directional command: turn. And the turning that the gospel demands is not a once-for-all act of initial decision that exhausts repentance in the moment of conversion but an ongoing orientation of the whole life toward the God who is near. The kingdom of God is at hand: therefore repent, continuously and persistently, as the appropriate posture of a person living under the reign of the King whose arrival has changed everything.

### **B.** *The Whole-Person Character of Repentance*

The lesson's subtitle, "Not Merely Regret, but a Revolution of the Heart", captures the essential distinction between genuine repentance and its counterfeits. Repentance is a whole-person event, involving every dimension of the inner life in a comprehensive turning. The Westminster Shorter Catechism's definition (Q.87) captures this comprehensiveness: "Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience." Every phrase carries weight. "A true sense of his sin", not merely the social embarrassment of being caught, not merely the pragmatic regret over consequences, but a genuine perception of sin as the violation of the living God who is worthy of better. "Apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ", repentance is always oriented toward the God of mercy, not merely away from sin. "With grief and hatred of his sin", the affective dimension that distinguishes genuine repentance from mere intellectual acknowledgment. "Turns from it unto God", the directional movement that is the external expression of the inner revolution. "With full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience", the volitional and behavioral commitment that is inseparable from the turning.

Three dimensions of the inner person are engaged in genuine repentance, corresponding to the three dimensions of the new heart described in Lesson 12. The mind is engaged: repentance involves a genuine change of understanding about sin, coming to see it as God sees it, as the violation of the One who is infinitely worthy of love and obedience, as the rejection of the good and the embrace of the ruinous. The affections are engaged: repentance involves a genuine change of feeling about sin, the sorrow that 2 Corinthians 7:10 calls "godly sorrow," the grief over having offended and dishonored the God who is worthy of all honor, the hatred of the sin itself rather than merely of its consequences. And the will is engaged: repentance involves a genuine change of direction in the life, the actual turning away from sin and toward God that is the external expression of the inner revolution. When all three are present together, changed understanding, changed affections, changed direction, genuine repentance has occurred. When any of the three is absent, what appears to be repentance is one of its counterfeits.

## II. Repentance as the Gift of God

*Not a Human Achievement but a Spirit-Wrought Grace*

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### A. The Biblical Evidence That Repentance Is Given

The most important preliminary truth about repentance, the truth that establishes its character as grace rather than works and its source as divine rather than human, is the New Testament's consistent description of repentance as a gift of God rather than a human achievement. This is not the popular account of repentance, which tends to treat it as the sinner's contribution to the process of salvation, the part she does (repent and believe) in response to the grace that God then extends (forgiveness and new life). The apostolic account is precisely the opposite: repentance is something the sinner does (it is a genuine act of the whole person), but it is something she does because the Spirit has given her the ability to do it. Repentance is genuine, active, and personal; and it is gift, sovereign, and Spirit-wrought.

Acts 11:18 provides the most direct statement of the gift character of repentance: "God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life." The response of the Jerusalem church to the report of the Gentiles'

conversion is not “The Gentiles have repented” (as if their repentance were the human cause of the salvation that followed) but “God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.” The granting is God’s sovereign act; the repentance is the gift He grants; the life it leads to is the outcome of the whole. The word translated “has granted” (Greek: *edoken*, from *didōmi*, to give) is the ordinary New Testament word for gift-giving. God gave repentance to the Gentiles in the same sense in which He gives any other saving grace: sovereignly, freely, without condition in the recipients.

Second Timothy 2:25 provides a closely parallel statement in the context of pastoral care: “with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth.” The “if perhaps God may grant” is not an expression of theological uncertainty but of human ignorance about the Spirit’s sovereign work: the pastor who corrects those in opposition does so in dependence on the God who alone can grant the repentance that produces genuine change. The pastor’s gentleness is important; the gospel’s clarity is important; the correction itself is important. But the repentance that Paul hopes for is not the product of the pastor’s skill or the correction’s persuasive force; it is the sovereign gift that only God can grant. This grounds pastoral patience with those who resist the gospel: the preacher and pastor cannot produce repentance; they can only present the truth and pray for the God who grants repentance to be pleased to do so.

Acts 5:31 provides the Christological grounding of the gift: “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (NASB 1995). The exalted Christ grants repentance from His position of supreme authority, it is a royal and salvific gift, distributed by the King from the throne of His ascended glory. The connection of repentance with forgiveness in the same verse is also instructive: repentance and forgiveness are twin gifts from the same exalted Lord, not a human prerequisite and a divine response. Christ grants both, and the granting of repentance is as much an act of sovereign grace as the granting of forgiveness.

### ***B. How the Gift Character of Repentance Shapes Its Reception***

The gift character of repentance has profound implications for how repentance is experienced and proclaimed. First, it means that repentance is not the sinner’s contribution to a cooperative salvation in which she does her part (repents) and God does His (forgives). Repentance is itself a part of God’s gift, something He produces in the heart of the sinner by the Spirit’s work, not something the sinner produces from within the resources of her own will and then presents to God as the qualifying act for His mercy. This does not make repentance less genuine, less personal, or less active, the person who has been given repentance genuinely repents, with the whole person’s authentic turning. But it means that the ground of her repentance is the Spirit’s sovereign gift rather than her own moral willpower.

Second, the gift character of repentance means that the appropriate pastoral posture toward the unrepentant is not exasperation at their failure to perform their required duty but earnest prayer that the God who grants repentance would be pleased to do so in their case. Paul’s instruction in 2 Timothy 2:24–26 models this posture: the Lord’s servant must be gentle, patient in teaching, “with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance.” The gentleness is not weakness; it is the posture of someone who knows that the outcome depends on God’s granting rather than on the corrector’s compelling. The firmness in correcting and the gentleness in manner coexist in the person who understands both the urgency of the call to repentance and the sovereignty of the One who alone produces genuine repentance in the human heart.

Third, the gift character of repentance is the ground of the most genuine humility in the repentant soul. The person who has understood that her repentance was the Spirit's gift, that the grief over sin, the change of mind about sin's nature, the turning of the whole life away from sin and toward God were all the product of the new heart that the Spirit implanted rather than her own native moral sensitivity, has had every basis for spiritual pride systematically removed. She did not repent because she was more morally responsive than those who have not yet repented; she repented because the Spirit granted what she could not generate from within the resources of the old nature. The appropriate response to this recognition is not passive indifference (the repentance was given and does not require active personal ownership) but the most thoroughgoing humility and the most personal gratitude for a grace that found her where she was and turned her in a direction she could not have found on her own.

### III. The Four Elements of True Repentance

#### *Conviction, Contrition, Confession, and Conversion*

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##### **A. Conviction: Seeing Sin as God Sees It**

The first element of genuine repentance is conviction of sin, the Spirit-produced perception of sin in its true character: as the violation of the infinite God, as the embracing of that which is destructive and ruinous, and as the personal, specific offense against the One who is worthy of the sinner's complete love and obedience. Conviction is the prerequisite of repentance: it is impossible to turn from something you do not genuinely see as requiring turning from. The superficial religiosity that acknowledges "I have made some mistakes" without any deep sense of the nature of those mistakes as sin against the living God is not conviction but self-assessment, a calibration of personal conduct against a standard that is ultimately the person's own rather than God's.

Genuine conviction sees sin in at least three specific dimensions. First, it sees sin as the transgression of a holy God's righteous law, not merely as a departure from a social norm or a personal ideal, but as the violation of the specific, binding, just requirements of the One who has the right to govern His creatures' conduct and who is infinitely worthy of the love and obedience that sin withholds. The psalmist's great penitential psalm captures this precisely: "Against You, You only, I have sinned and done what is evil in Your sight" (Psalm 51:4, NASB 1995). The primary offense of sin is against God, not against the human consequences it produces; and genuine conviction sees it from that perspective.

Second, genuine conviction sees sin as the specific, personal, inexcusable responsibility of the one who committed it. The failure of conviction that rationalizes, minimizes, or deflects the responsibility for sin, "The woman You gave me" (Adam), "The people's pressure made me do it" (Saul), is precisely the kind of thing that genuine conviction does not permit. David's response to Nathan's parable of the ewe lamb, "I have sinned against the Lord" (2 Samuel 12:13, NASB 1995), without deflection, without qualification, without excuse, is the model of genuine conviction's personal ownership of the sin. Third, genuine conviction sees sin as deserving of the specific, just, terrible punishment that God's holiness requires: the wrath of God poured out against every transgression. The prodigal son's conviction in Luke 15:17–19, "I will get up and go to my father, and will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight; I am no longer worthy to be called your son'", includes both the

honest acknowledgment of specific sin and the recognition of his own unworthiness of the relationship he has violated.

### ***B. Contrition: Godly Sorrow Over Sin***

The second element of genuine repentance is contrition, godly sorrow over sin, the affective dimension of the inner revolution that conviction has begun. Contrition is the heart's emotional response to what conviction has shown: having seen sin as God sees it, the genuinely repentant soul grieves over it as God grieves over it. This is the element of repentance that distinguishes it most clearly from the cold, purely intellectual acknowledgment of sin as a logical category ("I acknowledge that my action violated the divine law") and from the cold, purely behavioral resolution to do better ("I will not do that again"). Genuine repentance feels the weight of what conviction has revealed, and the feeling is sorrow, the specific, Spirit-produced sorrow that 2 Corinthians 7:10 calls "godly sorrow."

The distinction that Paul draws in 2 Corinthians 7:10 between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow is among the most pastorally important distinctions in the entire New Testament: "The sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation, but the sorrow of the world produces death" (NASB 1995). The two sorrows can appear similar from the outside, both involve emotional distress in connection with sin, but they are radically different in their nature, their object, and their outcome. Godly sorrow is grief over sin itself as an offense against God, as the violation of His holiness, as the rejection of His love; it is sorrow that is directed at the sin rather than at the consequences of the sin, and that persists even if the consequences are avoided or removed. Worldly sorrow is grief over the consequences of sin, the social embarrassment, the relational damage, the legal jeopardy, the internal pain, rather than over the sin itself; it is a sorrow that would disappear if the consequences were removed, because it was never about the sin in the first place. This section will be developed more fully in Section IV.

The Psalms provide the most extended and most personally searching account of contrition in the biblical canon. Psalm 51, David's great penitential psalm after his adultery with Bathsheba and his murder of Uriah, is the paradigm of genuine contrition: "Be gracious to me, O God, according to Your lovingkindness; according to the greatness of Your compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me" (vv. 1–3, NASB 1995). Every element of genuine contrition is present: the knowledge of the transgression ("I know my transgressions"), the constant awareness of the sin's reality ("my sin is ever before me"), the primary orientation of the sin against God ("Against You, You only, I have sinned," v. 4), and the desperate dependence on the divine mercy rather than on any personal merit ("according to Your lovingkindness... according to the greatness of Your compassion"). The depth of David's contrition is precisely proportional to the depth of his perception of what his sin actually was.

### ***C. Confession and Conversion***

The third element of genuine repentance is confession, the honest, specific, personal acknowledgment of sin before God (and, where appropriate, before those who have been sinned against). First John 1:9 provides the foundational promise for the confessing sinner: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (NASB 1995). The specific structure of the promise, "If we confess... He is faithful... to forgive", establishes that confession is the condition of forgiveness, not in the sense

of a meritorious act that earns forgiveness, but in the sense of the honest acknowledgment that opens the soul to the reception of the mercy that God freely extends to the penitent.

The genuineness of confession requires specificity: not the vague, general acknowledgment that “I have sinned” (which may be an acknowledgment of category membership rather than personal ownership of particular sins) but the honest, specific naming of the specific sins that conviction has revealed and contrition has grieved over. This is the pattern of Psalm 51: not “I acknowledge my general sinfulness” but “I have sinned against You in this specific way”. It is the pattern of the prodigal son: not “I have been somewhat imperfect” but “I have sinned against heaven and in your sight.” And it is the pattern that makes confession a genuine act of spiritual honesty rather than a religious exercise of self-preservation.

The fourth element of genuine repentance is conversion, the actual turning away from sin and toward God that is the external expression of the inner revolution that conviction, contrition, and confession have produced. This is the epistrophe dimension of repentance, the turning of the life in a new direction, the behavioral and relational expression of the inner change. Genuine repentance always produces this element; a repentance that involves genuine conviction, genuine contrition, and genuine confession but produces no change of direction in the life is not genuine repentance but one of its emotional counterfeits. Luke 3:8–9 captures Jesus’s characteristic insistence on fruits of genuine repentance: “Therefore bear fruits in keeping with repentance” (v. 8, NASB 1995). The fruits are the evidence of the genuineness of the repentance; their absence is the evidence of the repentance’s counterfeit character.

It is important to note that conversion as the fourth element of repentance does not refer to the same event as conversion used in the broader sense of the conscious turning to Christ in faith. In the narrower sense, as the fourth element of repentance, conversion refers specifically to the actual turning of the life away from the specific patterns of sin that repentance has addressed. This turning is the behavioral fulfillment of what conviction perceived, contrition grieved, and confession acknowledged. Together, the four elements, conviction, contrition, confession, conversion, constitute the full scope of genuine repentance, with each element necessary and each building on the preceding.

## **IV. Worldly Sorrow and Godly Sorrow**

### *The Critical Distinction That Identifies Genuine Repentance*

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#### **A. 2 Corinthians 7:9–11 Examined**

Second Corinthians 7:9–11 is the New Testament’s most extended treatment of the distinction between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow, and it provides the pastoral tools for identifying which kind of sorrow is operating in a given person’s experience of remorse. The passage is remarkable for its contextual occasion: Paul is reflecting on the impact of his severe letter to the Corinthians, which had produced in them genuine sorrow and genuine repentance. His reflection provides both a description of the Corinthians’ genuine repentance as a case study and a theological analysis of the two kinds of sorrow that his reflection generates.

“I now rejoice, not that you were made sorrowful, but that you were made sorrowful to the point of repentance; for you were made sorrowful according to the will of God, so that you might not suffer loss in anything through us. For the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation,

but the sorrow of the world produces death” (vv. 9–10, NASB 1995). Paul’s rejoicing is not at the sorrow itself but at what the sorrow produced, repentance. The sorrow was the instrument; the repentance was the goal. And the sorrow that produced genuine repentance was sorrow “according to the will of God”, a sorrow that was oriented by and measured against the divine perspective on the sin, not merely the human experience of its consequences.

The characteristics of godly sorrow that verses 10–11 identify are a pastoral gold standard for distinguishing genuine repentance from its counterfeits. “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” (v. 11, NASB 1995). The earnestness (*spoudē*): the urgency and energy with which the Corinthians pursued the correction of the wrong, not the passive acceptance of consequences but the active engagement with the problem. The vindication (*apologian*): not self-justification of the sin but the desire to be cleared of any further complicity in it. The indignation (*aganaktēsis*): a holy anger at the sin itself, not merely its consequences.

The fear (*phobon*): a healthy, reverential fear of God whose holiness the sin has violated. The longing (*epipothesis*): a desire for the restoration of the relationship with God and with those harmed by the sin. The zeal (*zēlon*): the motivated pursuit of what is right and holy as the response to having pursued what was wrong and unholy. And the avenging of wrong (*ekdikēsis*): the determination to address and correct the specific wrong that the sin produced. Together these seven characteristics constitute the full profile of genuine repentance in action, not the passive emotional experience of feeling bad about something done, but the active, energetic, comprehensive response of a person who has genuinely seen and genuinely turned.

## ***B. Worldly Sorrow and Its Counterfeits***

The worldly sorrow that Paul contrasts with godly sorrow, and that he says “produces death”, is not the absence of all sorrow but the presence of a sorrow that is directed at the wrong object and therefore produces death rather than life. Worldly sorrow is grief over the consequences of sin rather than over sin itself, the sorrow of a person who wishes she had not been caught, who is distressed by the relational damage her sin has caused, who suffers from the internal pain of guilt without any genuine perception of sin as the violation of God. This sorrow has the emotional appearance of repentance without its essential substance.

The most vivid New Testament contrast between genuine repentance (with godly sorrow) and its counterfeit (with worldly sorrow) is the contrast between the repentance of Peter and the “repentance” of Judas. Both men betrayed Christ in a crucial hour: Peter by three denials, Judas by the act of betrayal itself. Both experienced sorrow in the aftermath. But the character of the sorrow was utterly different. Matthew 27:3–5 describes Judas’s response: he felt remorse (Greek: *metameletheis*, a different word from *metanoia*, suggesting regret rather than genuine change of mind), returned the thirty pieces of silver, and then went and hanged himself. The sorrow was real but not godly: it was directed at the consequences of the sin (the death of an innocent man, the worthlessness of the silver) rather than at the sin as the violation of God, and it produced no movement toward the God of mercy but only the final act of self-destruction.

Peter’s response could not have been more different. Luke 22:61–62 records: “The Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord... and he went out and wept bitterly.” The sorrow was intense and personal; but it was sorrow oriented toward the Lord who had looked at him, toward the word of the Lord that he had violated, toward the person of Christ he had denied. The bitterness of the weeping was the bitterness

of godly sorrow, and it led, through John 21's remarkable restoration narrative, to the transformation of the denier into the preacher of Acts 2. Godly sorrow produces repentance without regret, leading to salvation; worldly sorrow, however intense, produces death.

The pastoral application of this distinction is delicate but indispensable. The person who is distressed by the social consequences of her sin, who feels genuine remorse about the relational damage, the lost reputation, the broken trust, is not necessarily experiencing godly sorrow, even if the emotional intensity of the remorse is high. The diagnostic question is not "How much are you grieving?" but "What are you grieving about?" Is the grief primarily about the consequences to yourself and others, or primarily about the sin as the violation of the God you love and who loves you? Is the sorrow producing earnestness, indignation, and zeal (the marks of godly sorrow from 2 Corinthians 7:11), or is it producing paralysis, self-pity, or the desperate attempt to undo the consequences without genuinely addressing the sin (the marks of worldly sorrow)? The pastor who can help a penitent answer these questions honestly is doing some of the most important work of the pastoral office.

## **V. Repentance and Faith: Two Sides of One Coin**

### *The Inseparable Companions of Genuine Conversion*

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#### **A. The New Testament's Pairing of Repentance and Faith**

The New Testament consistently pairs repentance and faith as the two inseparable elements of genuine conversion, so consistently that many passages treat them as virtually synonymous or as two aspects of a single act. Acts 20:21 provides Paul's most explicit pairing: "testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ." The two are named together as the single content of his gospel proclamation, not as two sequential steps that come at different points in the process, but as the twofold turning that constitutes genuine conversion. Mark 1:15 pairs them equally directly in Jesus' inaugural proclamation: "Repent and believe in the gospel." The two imperatives stand side by side, inseparable in the single command that opens the ministry of the kingdom.

The relationship between repentance and faith is best captured in the image of two sides of a single coin. The coin is conversion, the soul's whole-person turning in response to the Spirit's regenerating work and effectual calling. Repentance is the negative side of the coin: the turning from sin, the turning away from the self-enthroning that sin represents, the turning away from the world's attractions as the soul's governing love. Faith is the positive side: the turning to Christ, the whole-person trusting of the Savior as the only sufficient ground of the soul's acceptance before God, the turning toward the One from whom everything that sin has destroyed can be received as an inexhaustible gift. The coin has two sides, but it is one coin: you cannot have one side without the other.

This inseparability has profound practical implications. It means that a person who claims to have turned to Christ without turning from sin has not genuinely done either. Genuine faith in Christ, genuine reception of Him as Lord and Savior, necessarily involves the recognition that the sin from which He saves is the sin one has committed and from which one now turns. A "faith" that embraces Christ as Savior while retaining an untroubled allegiance to the patterns of sin from which He saves is not genuine faith in the New Testament's sense; it is the reception of a religious identity without the reception of the Christ who defines it. Similarly, a person who claims to have turned

from sin without turning to Christ has not genuinely repented, because genuine repentance is always a turning toward God in Christ, not merely a turning away from sin toward a religious vacuum.

Acts 3:19 states the inseparability with explicit directional language: “Repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” The “repent” and “return” together constitute a single movement: the turning that repentance effects is a returning, a coming back to the God from whom sin has estranged the sinner. The return is both to God and from sin; the repentance and the return are inseparable. And the outcome, the wiping away of sins and the coming of times of refreshing from the Lord’s presence, is the fruit of both together.

### ***B. Can Repentance Be Prior to Faith?***

The question of the logical order of repentance and faith within the experience of conversion has generated some discussion in the Reformed tradition, and a brief treatment of the question will serve to clarify the relationship. In the *ordo salutis*, regeneration logically precedes conversion (repentance and faith together), because faith and repentance are the first fruits of the new life that the Spirit has implanted. Within conversion itself, can one speak of repentance as logically prior to faith, or faith as logically prior to repentance, or are they genuinely simultaneous?

The most theologically consistent answer is that repentance and faith are simultaneous in their occurrence, even though they are analytically distinguishable. They are the two aspects of a single act, the soul’s whole-person turning in response to the Spirit’s effectual calling, and they are no more temporally separable than the two sides of a coin are spatially separable. What can be said is that genuine faith, genuine reception of Christ as Lord and Savior, logically implies the repentance that accompanies it (faith in Christ as Savior from sin implies a turning from the sin from which He saves), and genuine repentance, genuine turning from sin to God, logically implies the faith that accompanies it (turning to God in response to conviction of sin requires a confidence in His mercy that is the substance of faith). The two are mutually implying: each is incomplete without the other, and in the experience of genuine conversion they occur as one.

The practical implication for preaching is significant: the gospel call should always include both elements together. The call to repentance without the call to faith leaves the sinner with nowhere to turn; the call to faith without the call to repentance invites a cheap grace that receives Christ without the honest self-assessment that genuine reception of Him requires. The apostolic pattern, “Repent and believe” (Mark 1:15), “repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21), “turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God” (Acts 26:18), consistently pairs the two, because the gospel that produces genuine conversion always addresses the whole of what conversion involves.

## **VI. The Ongoing Nature of Repentance**

### *Not the Threshold but the Perpetual Posture*

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#### ***A. Luther’s First Thesis and Its Meaning***

Martin Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses, which ignited the Protestant Reformation on October 31, 1517, open with a statement about repentance that is among the most theologically significant single sentences in the history of the

church: “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Luther’s opening thesis was not primarily about the specific abuses of the indulgence system, though those abuses are clearly in view; it was about the nature of repentance itself. The Roman penitential system treated repentance as a specific, repeated act, a sacramental transaction in which specific sins were confessed to a priest, specific penances were performed, and specific absolutions were pronounced. Against this understanding, Luther insisted that Jesus’ call to repentance in Matthew 4:17 was a call to a lifelong orientation of the whole Christian life, not to a series of repeated sacramental acts.

Luther’s insight was exegetically grounded in the present imperative form of the verb *metanoëo* in Mark 1:15 and its parallel. A present imperative in Greek does not merely command a specific act but commands a continuous, ongoing state or disposition: “Keep repenting” or “Be of a repentant orientation” rather than simply “Do an act of repentance.” The kingdom of God is at hand: therefore maintain the repentant posture that is appropriate for those living under the reign of the holy King. This ongoing orientation of repentance is not the same as the initial repentance of conversion (though it shares the same essential character); it is the settled, daily, Spirit-maintained disposition of the believer to acknowledge sin before God honestly, to grieve over it genuinely, and to turn from it continually, as the appropriate response of a redeemed sinner who is simultaneously justified and still in the process of being sanctified.

The ongoing nature of repentance is also implied by the New Testament’s frank acknowledgment that the genuine believer continues to sin. First John 1:8–2:2 is the most direct treatment: “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1:8–9, NASB 1995). The ongoing confession of ongoing sin presupposes the ongoing necessity of ongoing repentance. The Christian does not reach a level of spiritual maturity at which repentance becomes unnecessary; as long as she is in the body, in the world, and in the war between flesh and Spirit, there will be specific sins to confess, specific sorrows to feel, and specific turnings to make. Repentance is the perpetual rhythm of the genuine Christian life, the ongoing expression of the new heart’s honest relationship with the holy God.

### ***B. Joy in Heaven over Repentance: Luke 15***

One of the most striking and most theologically revealing features of the New Testament’s account of repentance is the response it evokes in heaven. Luke 15:7 records Jesus’ declaration: “I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance” (NASB 1995). And verse 10: “In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.” The repentance of a sinner is, according to Jesus, the occasion of extraordinary joy in the presence of God and the angels, more joy, on this occasion, than over the continued righteousness of the ninety-nine.

This disclosure about the divine perspective on repentance is pastorally transformative. The sinner who comes to God in repentance is not approaching a reluctant tribunal that must be persuaded to extend mercy by the quality of the sinner’s suffering; she is approaching the Father of the prodigal, who “saw him when he was still a long way off, and felt compassion for him, and ran and embraced him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20, NASB 1995). The joy in heaven over one repenting sinner is not the grudging satisfaction of a magistrate who has finally received the required payment; it is the exuberant celebration of a father who has found what was lost. The God who

commands repentance is the God who rejoices over those who repent; and the sinner who comes to Him in the full honesty of genuine repentance comes to a God who is already running to meet her.

The parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15:11–32) is the most complete narrative portrait of genuine repentance in the entire New Testament, and each element of the repentance sequence is explicitly present in the text. Conviction: “But when he came to his senses” (v. 17), the awakening of genuine perception about the nature and consequences of his sin. Contrition: the inward recognition that he had sinned against heaven and against his father (v. 18–19). Conversion: “So he got up and came to his father” (v. 20), the actual turning of the life that follows the inner revolution. And the response of the father, running, embracing, kissing, ordering the celebration, is the divine model for how repentance is received in the economy of grace: not with suspicion, not with a waiting period to confirm the genuineness of the change, not with the resentment of one who has been wronged and requires more suffering before extending mercy, but with the most lavish, spontaneous, unconditional welcome that a father’s love can express.

Acts 2:38–39 closes the biblical account of the occasion and the fruit of repentance: “Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself” (NASB 1995). The scope of the promise, “for you and your children and for all who are far off”, is as wide as the divine call itself. The invitation to repentance is universal; the specific reception of the promised Spirit is for “as many as the Lord our God will call to Himself.” The external call and the effectual call are both present in this single verse: the invitation is for all, and the reception is for those whom God will call. And the God whose call produces the repentance is the God who made the promise of the Spirit, and who, therefore, calls with the certainty and the generosity of the One who has both the power and the will to give what He has promised.

*“Repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.”*

**Acts 3:19, NASB 1995**

## Theological Terms and Definitions

|                          |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |
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| <b>Repentance</b>        | The Spirit-wrought, whole-person turning from sin to God, involving the mind (a change of understanding that sees sin as God sees it), the affections (a change of sorrow that grieves over sin as God grieves over it), and the will (a change of direction that turns the life away from sin and toward God). Repentance is a gift of God (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25; Acts 5:31), not a human achievement that qualifies for divine mercy. It is the genuine, active, whole-person response of the sinner to the Spirit's work, and it is inseparable from faith as the two aspects of the single coin of conversion.                                                             |
| <b>Metanoia</b>          | Greek: "a change of mind", the primary New Testament term for repentance, from meta (change) and nous (mind). Despite the literal meaning, metanoia in the New Testament context is far more than an intellectual change of opinion; it is the comprehensive reorientation of the whole person, understanding, affections, and will, away from sin and toward God. Used in Jesus' inaugural proclamation (Mark 1:15), Peter's Pentecost sermon (Acts 2:38), and throughout Acts and the Epistles. Distinguished from metameleia, which denotes mere regret or remorse (the word used of Judas in Matthew 27:3) rather than the genuine whole-person turning that metanoia describes. |
| <b>Epistrophē</b>        | Greek: "a turning" or "a returning", the directional New Testament term for repentance that captures the movement of conversion as a turning around, a change of trajectory. Where metanoia captures the inner transformation (the change of mind and heart), epistrophe captures the outer expression (the actual turning of the life in a new direction). Acts 3:19 ("repent and return") explicitly pairs the two terms to capture the full scope of genuine repentance: the inner revolution and the outward redirection together.                                                                                                                                               |
| <b>Godly Sorrow</b>      | The sorrow "according to the will of God" described in 2 Corinthians 7:10, the grief over sin as the violation of God and as offense against His holiness, rather than merely over the consequences of sin. Godly sorrow is directed at sin itself (not its consequences), persists even if consequences are removed, and produces the seven characteristics Paul names in verse 11: earnestness, vindication, indignation, fear, longing, zeal, and avenging of wrong. Distinguished from worldly sorrow, which grieves over consequences rather than sin itself and "produces death" rather than repentance.                                                                       |
| <b>Worldly Sorrow</b>    | The sorrow over the consequences of sin rather than over sin itself, the grief that would disappear if the consequences were removed because it was never about the sin as the violation of God. Described in 2 Corinthians 7:10 as producing "death." Illustrated by Judas' metameleia (remorse) in Matthew 27:3–5: genuine emotional distress but directed at the consequences (the death of an innocent man) rather than at the sin as the rejection of God, and producing not the turning of repentance but the self-destruction of despair. Distinguished from the godly sorrow that produced genuine repentance in Peter after his three denials.                              |
| <b>Conviction of Sin</b> | The Spirit-produced perception of sin in its true character: as the transgression of a holy God's righteous law, as the personal and inexcusable responsibility of the one who committed it, and as deserving of God's just wrath. Conviction is the prerequisite of repentance (impossible to genuinely turn from what is not genuinely perceived as requiring turning from) and is itself a work of the Holy Spirit (John 16:8: "He will convict the world concerning sin"). Conviction is not the same as condemnation (from which the justified believer is freed, Romans 8:1) but the honest spiritual perception that precedes and produces genuine repentance.                |
| <b>Contrition</b>        | The affective dimension of genuine repentance, the godly sorrow over sin that the Spirit produces in the convicted heart. Contrition is the heart's emotional response to what conviction has shown: having seen sin as God sees it, the genuinely repentant soul grieves over it as God grieves over it. Distinguished from mere regret (sorrow over consequences) by                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |

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|                      | its object (the sin as violation of God) and its outcome (producing genuine turning rather than self-pity or paralysis). Paradigmatically expressed in Psalm 51:3 (“my sin is ever before me”), Luke 22:62 (Peter weeping bitterly), and Luke 15:17–19 (the prodigal son’s “coming to his senses”).                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| <b>Confession</b>    | The honest, specific, personal acknowledgment of sin before God, the third element of genuine repentance. Grounded in 1 John 1:9 (“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins”). Genuine confession requires specificity (naming specific sins, not merely acknowledging general sinfulness), personal ownership (not deflection or rationalization), and honesty (acknowledging the sin as it is, not minimizing it). Confession before God is the primary form (Psalm 51:4); confession to those sinned against may also be appropriate (Matthew 5:23–24; James 5:16). Confession is a condition of receiving forgiveness in the sense of the honest acknowledgment that opens the soul to God’s mercy, not a meritorious act that earns it. |
| <b>Conversion</b>    | In its narrower sense (as the fourth element of repentance), the actual behavioral and directional turning away from sin and toward God that is the external expression of the inner revolution of conviction, contrition, and confession. In its broader sense, conversion refers to the whole-person turning of the soul in response to the Spirit’s effectual calling, comprising both repentance (the turning from sin) and faith (the turning to Christ). The broader conversion is the first conscious, deliberate response of the regenerate sinner to the gospel, the first fruits of the new life that regeneration has implanted, expressed in the twofold turning that constitutes the sinner’s entry into the conscious Christian life.                             |
| <b>Shuv / Nakham</b> | The two primary Hebrew terms for repentance in the Old Testament. Shuv (to turn, return) is the most common Old Testament repentance term, capturing the directional movement of the whole person away from sin and back to God. Nakham (to be sorry, to relent, to feel grief) captures the affective/emotional dimension of the turning. The prophets consistently employ both: Joel 2:12–13 commands both the outward turning (shuv: “return to Me”) and the inward sorrow (nakham implied: “rend your heart”). The New Testament’s metanoia/epistrophe pairing reflects the same two-dimensional character of genuine repentance found in the Old Testament.                                                                                                                |

## Practical Application

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### **A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?**

We must believe that genuine repentance is radically more than regret and radically more gracious than a prerequisite for divine favor. It is more than regret because it involves the whole person, mind, affections, and will, in a genuine revolution that is oriented toward God rather than merely away from the consequences of sin. It is more gracious than a prerequisite because it is itself a gift of God, not the sinner's contribution to a cooperative salvation. These two truths together establish the character of genuine repentance as simultaneously demanding (it requires the soul's full, honest, whole-person engagement with sin as God sees it) and liberating (it is received from the God who already runs to meet the penitent before the turning is complete). We must believe both without allowing either to undermine the other: genuine repentance is demanding enough to distinguish it from its counterfeits, and gracious enough to keep it from becoming a works-based pathway to merit.

We must believe that repentance is not the threshold of the Christian life but its perpetual posture. Luther was right: the entire life of believers should be one of repentance. This does not mean the entire life should be one of misery or self-flagellation; it means the entire life should be characterized by the honest, ongoing, Spirit-maintained practice of seeing sin honestly, feeling it rightly, confessing it specifically, and turning from it continuously. The believer who has not repented of anything since her initial conversion has either achieved the extraordinary rarity of the sinless life (which 1 John 1:8 denies) or has lost the habit of honest self-examination before God that genuine repentance requires. The ongoing practice of repentance is not a sign of spiritual failure; it is the sign of a living faith that takes both the holiness of God and the reality of remaining sin seriously.

We must also believe that the God to whom we repent is the Father of the prodigal, not the judge of the guilty. The most important single thing the sinner needs to know in order to repent genuinely is that the God before whom she is turning is the God who runs to meet her, whose arms are already extended, whose joy at her return is already real, and whose forgiveness is already prepared and waiting. The sinner who fears that her repentance may not be sufficient, or that her sin may be too great, or that God's mercy may not extend to the specific thing she has done, needs to hear the story of Luke 15:20 again and again until it displaces the false picture of a reluctant God who has been worn down by the penitent's suffering. The Father ran. The Father embraced. The Father kissed. This is the God to whom repentance turns.

### **B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?**

The emotional register that the doctrine of repentance should produce in the believer is a combination of honest grief and confident hope that exactly mirrors the character of godly sorrow as Paul describes it in 2 Corinthians 7:10. The honest grief is the willingness to let the Spirit's convicting work do its full work in the heart, to see specific sins as they actually are (violations of the living God, not mere imperfections in a fundamentally good person), to feel the sorrow that the Spirit produces over those specific sins (not the performance of sorrow for religious effect, but the genuine grief of a soul that has seen what it has done to the God it loves), and to allow that sorrow to produce the earnestness, indignation, and zeal that Paul identifies as the marks of godly sorrow in action. The confident hope is the simultaneous assurance that the God before whom the sinner turns is the God who "willingly" and "learnyenjoys" receiving the repentant, whose mercy is as inexhaustible as His holiness is infinite, and whose joy at the returning sinner's turning is as real as His grief over the sin itself.

Desire the ongoing practice of repentance as the normal rhythm of the healthy Christian life. Not the morbid, compulsive introspection that turns every hour of spiritual life into an inventory of failures, but the honest, regular, Spirit-led practice of bringing specific sins before God with specific confession and specific grief and specific turning. Desire the freedom that genuine repentance produces, the freedom of the prodigal who has come home and knows himself to be fully received, the freedom of the person who has named her sin honestly and received the specific, personal assurance of 1 John 1:9 that the God who is faithful and righteous has forgiven and cleansed. The burden of unconfessed sin is heavier than the burden of confessing it; the relief of genuine repentance is more complete than the relief of any other spiritual transaction the Christian life offers.

Desire, for those in your pastoral care, the same godly sorrow that Paul rejoiced to see in the Corinthians, the sorrow that produces repentance without regret, leading to salvation. The pastor who genuinely loves the people in her congregation will long for them to repent genuinely, not because their repentance satisfies a divine requirement that she is responsible to enforce, but because she knows that the path through genuine repentance leads to the Father's house and the Father's embrace, and the path that bypasses genuine repentance leads to the "produces death" of worldly sorrow unresolved and sin unaddressed.

### **C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?**

- Read Luke 15:11–32 slowly and completely, identifying each of the four elements of genuine repentance in the prodigal son's experience: conviction (v. 17, "when he came to his senses"), contrition (v. 18–19, his acknowledgment of sin against heaven and his father), confession (v. 21, the actual words of confession spoken to the father), and conversion (v. 20, "he got up and came to his father"). Then identify the father's response at each stage: before the son has spoken a word, the father is already running. Ask: does your own experience of repentance typically move through all four elements, or does it tend to stop at one of the first three (conviction without contrition, contrition without confession, confession without genuine turning)? What specifically prevents you from moving through the complete sequence?
- Read 2 Corinthians 7:9–11 carefully and work through the seven characteristics of godly sorrow in verse 11 (earnestness, vindication, indignation, fear, longing, zeal, avenging of wrong). For each characteristic, identify what it looks like in practice when applied to a specific sin you have recently confessed. Are all seven characteristics present in the way you have responded to that sin? Which characteristics are most clearly present? Which are absent or weakest? And what does the absence of any of the seven suggest about the completeness of your repentance with respect to that specific sin?
- Practice a structured discipline of daily examination and repentance for one month, using the following pattern: (1) Ask the Spirit to show you specific sins committed in thought, word, and deed during the day, not a comprehensive inventory of your entire sinful nature, but the specific things of today. (2) Bring each specific sin before God with specific confession (naming the sin as it is, not minimizing or rationalizing). (3) Receive the promise of 1 John 1:9 specifically for each specific sin ("He is faithful and righteous to forgive"). (4) Ask for the Spirit's help to turn from any patterns that need specific turning. Report to your study group at the end of the month what you have discovered about the practice of ongoing repentance.
- Memorize Acts 11:18 ("God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life") and use it as the pastoral framework for your prayer for unrepentant people in your life. Note the two theological affirmations in the verse: that repentance is something God grants (sovereign, Spirit-wrought), and that it leads to life (its outcome is positive and glorious, not merely negative and corrective). When you pray for specific unrepentant people, pray with the confidence that God is able to grant what you are asking, and with the urgency that comes from knowing what the repentance you are asking for leads to.

- Identify one specific sin or pattern of sin in your own life that you have most consistently failed to address with genuine repentance, a sin that you acknowledge in a general way but have not brought through the full four-element process of conviction, contrition, specific confession, and specific turning. This week, bring that specific sin through the full process: ask the Spirit to produce genuine conviction (see it as God sees it), genuine contrition (grief oriented toward the sin as the violation of God, not merely its consequences), specific confession (naming it honestly before God), and specific conversion (identifying the specific practical steps of turning from it). Then bring a trusted pastor or spiritual friend into your accountability for the turning.

**Key Texts:** Acts 2:38; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 5:31; 3:19; 2 Timothy 2:25; 2 Corinthians 7:9–11; Mark 1:15; Luke 15:7, 10, 11–32; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 51:1–4; Joel 2:12–13

## Study and Discussion Questions

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### Opening Question

- Before engaging this lesson, what has been your functional understanding of repentance? Have you thought of it primarily as an emotional experience (feeling sorry), a behavioral act (stopping a specific sin), a religious exercise (confessing to a priest or pastor), or something else? How does the lesson's definition, "a Spirit-wrought, whole-person turning from sin to God, involving the mind, the affections, and the will", either confirm or challenge your prior understanding? And when you reflect on your own most recent experience of what you would call repentance, which of the four elements (conviction, contrition, confession, conversion) was most clearly present, and which was most clearly absent?

### Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read 2 Corinthians 7:5–11. What was the occasion of the repentance Paul describes (vv. 8–9)? What does Paul say he rejoices over, the sorrow itself or what the sorrow produced? In verse 10, what is the distinguishing characteristic of sorrow "according to the will of God," and what does it produce? What does worldly sorrow produce? In verse 11, Paul names seven characteristics of the godly sorrow the Corinthians exhibited, list all seven. What does each characteristic contribute to the picture of genuine repentance in action? And what is the cumulative effect of all seven together: does this look like passive regret, or active, energetic, whole-person engagement with the reality of the sin?
- Read Luke 15:11–32. In verses 17–19, trace the prodigal's internal process before he acts: what does he perceive ("when he came to his senses..."), what does he plan to say, and what does he acknowledge about his own sin and unworthiness? In verse 20, what does he do, and what is the father's response before the son has spoken a word? In verse 21, what does the son actually confess when he reaches the father? Compare the confession he planned (v. 19) with the confession he actually made (v. 21): what did he drop? What does the father's response (vv. 22–24) reveal about the divine disposition toward the penitent? And what does the elder son's response (vv. 25–32) reveal about the wrong understanding of repentance and forgiveness that the parable is correcting?
- Read Acts 11:1–18. What provoked the Jewish believers in Jerusalem to contend with Peter (v. 2)? What does Peter's account emphasize about the source of the Gentiles' response to the gospel (v. 15–17)? What conclusion does the Jerusalem church draw in verse 18, and how is the repentance the Gentiles received described (the exact phrase)? What does the word "granted" (Greek: edoken) establish about the character of the repentance, is it something the Gentiles did on their own initiative, or something God gave them? And what does the phrase "repentance that leads to life" establish about the outcome and purpose of genuine repentance?
- Read Mark 1:14–15 and Acts 20:17–21. In Mark 1:15, what are the two imperatives Jesus issues, and what is the present-tense significance of both? In Acts 20:21, what two things does Paul describe as the consistent content of his entire ministry? How does Acts 20:21's description of Paul's ministry establish repentance and faith as genuinely distinct but inseparable? And what does Paul's description of his testimony as directed "both to Jews and to Greeks" establish about the universal scope of the call to repentance?
- Read Psalm 51:1–13 as a model of genuine repentance. Identify each of the four elements of repentance in the psalm: where does conviction appear, where does contrition appear, where does confession appear, and where does conversion appear? What specific language does David use in verse 4 to establish the

primary relational dimension of sin (against whom is sin ultimately committed)? What does David request from God in verse 10 that goes beyond the forgiveness of specific sins? And how does the movement of the psalm from petition (vv. 1–12) to praise and proclamation (vv. 13–17) reflect the fruit of genuine repentance received?

### ***Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)***

- The lesson argues that repentance is a gift of God (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25; Acts 5:31), not a human achievement that qualifies for divine mercy. Evaluate this argument. Does the gift character of repentance undermine its genuine, active, whole-person character, if God gives the repentance, is it still genuinely the sinner's repentance? How does the gift character of repentance relate to the gift character of faith (Ephesians 2:8–9; Philippians 1:29)? And how does the gift character of repentance establish it as part of the sovereign work of the Spirit described in regeneration, rather than as an autonomous human contribution to a cooperative salvation?
- The lesson makes the strong claim that repentance and faith are “two sides of one coin”, inseparable aspects of the single act of conversion. Evaluate this claim. Can a person genuinely turn to Christ (faith) without turning from sin (repentance)? Can a person genuinely turn from sin (repentance) without turning to Christ (faith)? What specific New Testament evidence supports the inseparability claim? And how does the inseparability of repentance and faith guard against both the error of cheap grace (faith without repentance) and the error of moralism (repentance as a works-righteousness prerequisite for faith)?
- Luther's first thesis, “the entire life of believers should be one of repentance”, is presented as a recovery of the New Testament's understanding of repentance as a perpetual posture rather than a specific religious act. How does this interpretation of the present imperative *metanoete* (Mark 1:15) support Luther's claim? And how does the ongoing nature of repentance relate to the ongoing nature of sanctification, is Luther's claim simply a description of the sanctified life under a different name, or does it add something specific to the sanctification account?
- The lesson distinguishes godly sorrow from worldly sorrow using the Judas/Peter contrast as a case study. Is this contrast exegetically sound, does the New Testament actually intend for the reader to understand Judas's *metameleia* (Matthew 27:3) as worldly sorrow that leads to death and Peter's experience as godly sorrow that leads to repentance? What specific textual features support this reading? And what are the pastoral implications of the distinction, how does a pastor diagnose whether a person's expressed sorrow over sin is godly or worldly?
- The lesson describes Luke 15's parable of the prodigal son as containing all four elements of genuine repentance (conviction, contrition, confession, conversion). It also draws attention to the father's response: running to meet the son before a word was spoken. How does the father's anticipatory welcome relate to the theology of repentance as a gift of God? Specifically: if the father is running to meet the son before the confession, does this suggest that the welcome is independent of the repentance, or does it reflect the divine readiness that makes genuine repentance possible and safe? And how does the parable guard against the error of treating repentance as a prerequisite that must be sufficiently performed before grace is extended?

### ***Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)***

- The lesson argues that genuine repentance is simultaneously more demanding than mere regret (it requires whole-person engagement with sin as God sees it) and more liberating than a prerequisite for grace (it leads to the Father's embrace, not a waiting period of probation). In your own experience of repentance, which

of these two dimensions tends to be most distorted? Do you tend to make repentance too easy (treating mere regret as sufficient, without the genuine turning that conviction and contrition should produce)? Or do you tend to make repentance too heavy (treating it as a performance that must reach a certain level of suffering before forgiveness is extended)? What specific aspect of the lesson's account of repentance addresses your specific distortion?

- The lesson's treatment of Luke 15 presents the father's running as the divine model for how repentance is received. But many Christians relate to God in repentance more like approaching a judge than a father, with the assumption that the reception depends on the quality of the sorrow, the thoroughness of the confession, or the sincerity of the turning. Is this your experience? What specific false beliefs about God's disposition toward the penitent produce that experience? And how does the specific, vivid, almost embarrassing excess of the father's response in Luke 15:20–24 address those false beliefs?
- The lesson identifies the ongoing nature of repentance as a mark of spiritual health rather than failure. Do you practice repentance as an ongoing, regular rhythm of the Christian life, or do you treat it primarily as the emergency response to specific, serious sins? What does your practice reveal about your functional understanding of your own ongoing sinfulness, of God's ongoing readiness to forgive, and of the ongoing necessity of the kind of honest self-examination before God that genuine repentance requires? And what specific change in your daily or weekly rhythm of prayer and self-examination would better reflect the "entire life of repentance" that Luther describes?
- The lesson's treatment of repentance as a gift (Acts 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:25) changes the pastoral posture toward unrepentant people from exasperation (why won't they just repent?) to earnest prayer (God, please grant them the repentance that leads to life). Identify specific people in your life whose unrepentance you have found most frustrating. How would your posture toward them change if you understood that their repentance depends on God's sovereign granting rather than on their own willingness? What specific prayers would this understanding produce? And how does the combination of praying for God to grant repentance and faithfully presenting the gospel as the occasion through which the Spirit moves reflect the proper relationship between divine sovereignty and human means in the call to repentance?

## Prayer Focus

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Begin this lesson's prayer time with a reading of Psalm 51, not as a historical text about David's sin but as your own prayer, in your own voice, for your own sins. Read it slowly enough to let the specific language press into the specific reality of your own life before God. The recognition of transgression that David names in verse 3 ("I know my transgressions") is not a theological category; it is a personal acknowledgment that the specific things you have done, in thought, word, and deed, in what you have done and what you have left undone, are genuinely there, genuinely yours, and genuinely requiring the kind of honest reckoning that the psalm models. Read Psalm 51 until you have genuinely made it your own prayer, not merely read it as David's.

From the ground of Psalm 51's honest self-accounting, move to specific confession. Ask the Spirit to do the convicting work of John 16:8, to bring to mind the specific sins of thought, speech, and action that require specific acknowledgment. Bring each one before God with the kind of honest, specific, undefended naming that genuine confession requires. Not "I have been somewhat impatient" but "I have treated [specific person] with contempt and called them a fool in my heart." Not "I have not been as devoted as I should be" but "I have spent the time that belongs to You on the things that belong to me." The specificity is not morbid; it is the condition of the specific assurance that 1 John 1:9 provides.

Receive 1 John 1:9 as the specific, personal response to the specific confession you have just offered: "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." The faithfulness and the righteousness of the God who forgives are not the conditioned responses to the quality of the confession; they are the character of the God who has promised and who does not lie. Receive the forgiveness as the gift of a God who is faithful and righteous, not reluctant, not conditional on the quality of the sorrow, not withheld until the penance is complete, but freely and immediately extended to the honest, specific, genuine confession that the Spirit has produced in you. This is the relief that genuine repentance leads to: not the continued weight of acknowledged-but-unforgiven sin, but the specific, personal, complete forgiveness of the God who is faithful.

Pray with joy for the repentance of those who are not yet repentant, specifically, the people in your life and community whom you most earnestly want to see turn to God. Pray not with the demanding urgency of someone who wants God to force a response but with the same joy that Luke 15:7, 10 describes as the appropriate divine posture toward every repenting sinner. Pray as those who know that the Father is running to meet every returning prodigal, who are asking, in prayer, that the Spirit would produce in specific people the conviction, contrition, confession, and turning that lead to the Father's embrace. And pray for those who preach the gospel that the Spirit would attend their proclamation with the effectual grace that produces repentance and faith, that the external call would be accompanied by the internal work that grants what the external call invites.

Close with a corporate reading of Acts 3:19 as a declaration of the gospel's invitation and its promise: "Repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord." Speak it as both an ongoing personal commitment (we are repenting and returning, continuously and perpetually, as the posture of the entire Christian life) and a corporate testimony to the watching world (this is what we have found: that the God before whom we turn is the God who wipes away sins and sends times of refreshing from His presence). Let the joy that Luke 15 says fills heaven over every repenting sinner be present in

the room as you declare together the invitation that the God of all grace has extended to every person who will turn.

*“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”*

**1 John 1:9, NASB 1995**

**Key Texts:** Acts 2:38; 11:18; 17:30; 20:21; 3:19; 2 Timothy 2:25; 2 Corinthians 7:9–11; Mark 1:15; Luke 15:7, 10, 11–32; 1 John 1:9; Psalm 51; Joel 2:12–13

***Soli Deo Gloria***  
*To God Alone Be the Glory*

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## **FAITHFUL TO THE WORD**

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