

REPENTANCE

Jesus and John the Baptist began their message with, “Repent.” Repentance is a change of mind, which also affects a person’s will and feelings. It means remorse or regret when people are dissatisfied with what they have said or done. To tell people to repent includes the judgment that they have not been good enough and need change their ways. Most people regard it as an insult when they are told to change their minds. Many people whose basis for morality is what they want, react: “How dare you tell me what to do or not to do!” “Let me live my life as I want to!” “I do not discriminate about what you do, so leave me alone!”

Not all remorse and regret is repentance. A murderer or a thief who has been caught and imprisoned may regret that he has been caught, but not be sorry at all for the harm he has done. Regret at the gallows is not necessarily repentance. Even some theologians have set the bar too low. They say that, if you cannot feel contrition (sorrow for sin), attrition will do in a pinch. As if a person who is not sorry, but merely wishes that he could feel sorry, could placate God in such a way! Repentance ought not to be regarded as placating God by doing something like going through prescribed rituals. Prophets like Hoses, Joel, and Amos give examples where people were unhappy about droughts, plagues of locusts, famine, poor harvests, sicknesses, and earthquakes, without genuinely returning to the Lord. Hosea wrote about a form of repentance that was frivolous and confident of results. Notice the light-hearted tone: “Come, let us return to the LORD. Although He has torn us apart, He will heal us. Although He has struck us down, He will bandage our wounds. After two days, He will revive us; on the third day, He will raise us up, so that we may live in His presence. Let us acknowledge the LORD, let us press on to know Him. His coming forth is as sure as the dawn. He will come to us like the rain, like the spring rain, which sprinkles the land” (Hos. 6:1-3). God replied that their love was like a morning cloud. He did not even want their sacrifices. They thought that going through certain motions would earn God’s favour. God did not want torn garments, but torn hearts (Joel 2:13).

Repentance before God means acknowledging that His precepts for our lives are right, and that He has threatened His wrath and punishment on those who do not fear Him and go their own way. It means acknowledging guilt, and genuine sorrow. There were formal ways in which people expressed sorrow, such as dressing in sackcloth sitting in ashes, and fasting. However, such actions in themselves, without sorrow for sin, frank confession to God, and a sincere intention to change one’s ways, are worthless. They fool people into thinking that the mere performance of the ritual has removed God’s wrath. When Jesus told people to hide the fact that they were fasting, the point was that God sees the heart. A pious show may impress other people, but it does not impress God. The same applies to paying money for an indulgence, enumerating one’s sins before a confessor, saying a rosary so many times, or going on a pilgrimage. Sinful people cannot make up for what they have done wrong by their own pious works.

True sorrow for sin is inadequate if attention is paid only to some specific sins. Being sorry for sin means recognising what sin is. It involves original sin. It entails a confession that, with Adam and the rest of humanity, we have fallen natures, which have been corrupted by sin. By nature we are sinful and unclean.

When John the Baptist proclaimed, “Produce fruits worthy of repentance” he was not saying anything novel. Isaiah asked, not for bowed heads and sackcloth, but for the kind of fast that the Lord loved, freeing the oppressed, feeding the hungry, sheltering homeless people, and clothing naked people (Isa 58:5-7). Zechariah criticised external expressions of sorrow like fasting. They can make people feel good, and easily fool them into forgetting what God looks for. “When you fasted and mourned in the fifth and seventh months during these past seventy years, did you really fast for Me, yes, for Me? When you were eating and drinking, were you not the ones who were eating, and were you not the ones who were drinking?” (Zech 7:5-6). When people turn to God with all their hearts, there is a place for fasting, weeping, and mourning (Joel 2:12).

Sorrow for sin before God must be unconditional. When David and Bathsheba’s son was close to death, David fasted and wept for a long time. He hoped that God would see his expressions of sorrow, and be induced by them to have mercy and keep the child alive. Once the child died, he stopped, because he could not bring the child back to life any more by such exercises (2 Sm 12:15-23). That was mistaken use of the external motions of sorrow. Our regret is not something that of itself can move God to mercy.

Besides mistaken forms of sorrow that make people feel good about themselves, sorrow for sin on its own leads only to despair. Saul and Judas provide examples of that. The true end of sorrow for sin is conversion, or the Holy Spirit’s gift of trust in the cost of forgiveness that Jesus Christ has paid for sin. Talking about sorrow for sin on its own leads either to self-confidence because one’s actions have placated God, or to despair. Only when people return to God in faith in Him will He relent of the evil that He had purposed (Jr 26:3) and forgive sin and guilt (Jr 36:3).

The true end of sorrow for sin is faith in the Gospel, and in the absolution. Trust that sin is forgiven and that grace is obtained through Christ is all-important. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace (Augsburg Confession XII). When we confess our sin, the real focus is not so much on the confession as on the assurance of the absolution. God has bound Himself to the words of men. “Thereby our sins are forgiven before God in heaven” God’s holy means of grace provide the remedy for sinners.

In the *Smalcald Articles* Luther drew attention to a concentration on sorrow in the heart, confession with the mouth, and fulfilling satisfactions, which caused people to overlook faith. “In this way, late medieval pastors were directing the people who came to penance to place confidence in their own works. From about the tenth century pastors used these words from the pulpit, ”Spare my life, Lord God, until I do penance and improve my life.” Luther commented, “Here there was no Christ. Nothing was mentioned about faith, but instead people hoped to overcome

and blot out sin before God with their own works. We also became priests and monks with this intention: we wanted to set ourselves against sin” (SA III, iii, 11-13).

John the Baptist called not only for sorrow for sin, but for faith in the Gospel. He pointed his hearers to Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world. He offered baptism for the forgiveness of sins. The end of repentance is faith in God’s final remedy for sin, and that alone gives peace to the troubled conscience.

We need to beware of superficial Christianity, which assumes that repentance means only the time when a person first come to faith, or that repentance is in the long past for the mature believer. Some superficial Christians make a big fuss about charismatic gifts, but end up focussing on what they do, speaking in tongues. Repentance is never something people graduate from. The first of Luther’s Ninety-Five Theses made the point that God’s requirement is not “Do penance” as the late Middle Ages interpreted it, but that the whole lives of believers should be repentance. It is ongoing, because we are locked in an ongoing struggle against our sinful natures. There is no triumphalism that looks at our own successes. Believers who are realistic join Paul in his lament, “What a wretched person I am! Who will rescue me from this body, which is bringing death?” (Rm 7:24). Faith produces the conviction that, if God is for us, no one can be against us, and that we are more than conquerors through Him who has loved us (Rm 8:31, 37). Such faith does not rest on ourselves, but on Jesus Christ, whose full pardon we receive because of His innocent suffering and death on our behalf.