

## Repentance and Forgiveness

**Pete:** I became a Christian by acknowledging my sin to God (repentance). The same is true for every believer. However, repentance isn't a one-off event. Throughout my faith journey and despite my good intentions, I have continued to sin in different ways and I've needed to turn back to God, acknowledge my sin and ask for forgiveness again. There have also been occasions when I have resisted repenting to God in the hope that somehow I would get away with it. This never happens! There is no hope of succeeding in this! In such times it seems as though dark shadows begin to form over my heart and I lose my peace with God. I know that repentance will set me free but I just don't want to do it. Those dark shadows soon turn into hopelessness. The longer I resist God the harder it gets to turn back to him. Now I am in danger of giving the devil a foothold in my life. My internal darkness grows; it changes my external appearance and affects my relationships as I turn into a miserable person. I lose hope, I cease to care and depression sets in. While all this is going on, I know that God is still there and I know that all it takes is the smallest amount of humility, expressed in repentance, and he will help me. The internal battle rages but as little by little I turn in repentance to the Lord, out of his love for me I become more and more aware of God willing me forward. Thankfully these times have ended well. By his ever present grace I repent and receive his forgiveness and life returns. My troubled times have given me a tremendous appreciation of the life changing power of repentance and forgiveness. They are doorways of escape from death and into life. They are doorways to reconciliation both between me and God and between me and others.

King David testified to the power of repentance. Notice how his resistance to repent impacted him physically.

### **Psalm 32:3-5**

*'When I kept silent, my bones grew old. Through my groaning all the day long. For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me. My vitality was turned into drought of summer. I acknowledge my sin to You and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and You forgave the iniquity of my sin.'*

### **Sin separates.**

You may have heard someone say, 'If I have sinned against you then I am sorry.' If someone says this to you then ask them to clarify what sins they think they may have committed. Sin is not an abstract concept. Sin is a real force of separation and understanding of sin needs to be clear, not a maybe. A person cannot really repent of sin if they do not know what their sin is. This is why when God is showing an area of sin that needs dealing with, it is always specific rather than a vague sense of guilt. This following verse outlines the effect of sin. Here we see that our sin against God results in the loss of sight of God to the extent that he will not hear our prayers. Just as we experience this in our relationship with the Lord, the same is true in our relationships with other people. Sin breaks trust between people and causes both a heart and physical separation.

### **Isaiah 59:2**

*'But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden His face from you, so that He will not hear.'*

## Repentance

The English word 'repent' comes from a Greek word meaning 'to change one's mind'. Repentance therefore is primarily a decision not an emotion. The proof of a changed mind is seen in outward actions and changes. Therefore repentance starts within and ends with an outward change.

**Read Luke 15:11-32** for a good example of repentance.

Take notice of these verses...

v17 – *'but when he came to his senses (or to himself).'*

v18 – *'I will arise and go back to my Father.'*

## Forgiveness

Forgiveness on the other hand is the act of pardoning somebody in response to their repentance for a mistake or for a wrongdoing they have made. Forgiveness is a decision to release an offender from all future punishment. It is a legal matter, not primarily a means to deal with your emotional response to a wrongdoing. Like repentance, forgiveness is an inward change of mind that results in outward change.

1. Forgiveness only comes after repentance.

Jesus in the following passage shows the clear and necessary connection between repentance and forgiveness.

**Luke 17:3** - We are to...

*"Take heed to yourselves. If your brother sins against you rebuke him and if he repents, forgive him."*

Paul also makes the same point.

**Colossians 3:13**

*'...even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do'.*

In this verse we are instructed to forgive as God has forgiven us. God only forgives in response to repentance so we must do likewise. Yet there is something else to see in all of this:- What is the heart of Christ toward the unrepentant sinner? God has a merciful and compassionate heart and is always ready to forgive in response to repentance. In **I Peter 1:16** as believers we are instructed to be '*holy and He is holy*', or in other words: be like him. So if Christ has a forgiving attitude, then so should we.

Having a forgiving attitude toward the one who has sinned against us does two important things. First, it means that when repentance is genuinely offered we are immediately in a place for offer forgiveness in return; we no longer hold offence in our hearts. Second, having a forgiving heart guards and releases our heart from negative emotions when those who have sinned against us remain unrepentant.

It is interesting to note that the bible never tells us to 'forgive our enemies'. But it does tell us to 'love our enemies'. We can still love those who are unrepentant toward us and our love for them might bring them to the point of repentance. When they repent we can forgive and they will no longer be our enemy and full reconciliation can take place. The

following scriptures teach us that as we love those who spitefully use us or persecute us even if they are unrepentant then we are expressing the mercy of God and we are described as his sons.

**Matthew 5:43-48**

*“You have heard that it was said ‘You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven, for he makes the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust.”*

2. Forgiveness must be genuine.

**Matthew 18:35**

*‘So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you from his heart does not forgive his brother his trespasses.’*

3. If we refuse to forgive the repentant, God will not forgive us.

**Matthew 6:14-15**

*‘For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.’*

4. In our relationship with God, repentance comes before faith.

**Mark 1:14-15**

*‘The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.’*

**Acts 20:21**

*‘...testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ.’*

It is also true that our ongoing relationship with God will involve repentance. If sin separates - then the more I am aware of my sin and repent the closer my walk will be with the Lord.

**1 John 1:8-9**

*‘If we say 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.’*

The word “confess” means “to agree with.” When we confess our sins to God, we are agreeing with God that we were wrong, that we have sinned. As we confess our sins God forgives us on an ongoing basis because he is ‘faithful and just’.

5. Everything begins with a thought.

The more you are aligned to the Spirit of God, the quicker you will discern your own thoughts and recognise which thoughts, if followed, will result in sin. Thoughts of sin will enter your mind - having those initial thoughts is not sin, but it becomes a sin if

you go on entertaining it in your mind. The key is to capture those thoughts before they develop (**2 Corinthians 10:4-5**)

### **Final thought**

If you know you have sinned then sort it out quickly. The longer you leave it the harder and more damaging it becomes. The word of God highlights our need for change. Repentance is the doorway to change. Faith activates change and it is this that we will look at in the next session.

### **Suggested Further Study**

Handling Your Emotions