

GODLY SORROW VS. WORLDLY SORROW

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Today in modern evangelicalism, there is a movement within churches (especially among its leaders) to make the gospel more relevant to their audience. In essence, what they are conveying to the lost world and to their congregations is that the gospel of Jesus Christ is really not enough. The church needs to add something to the gospel in order for it to be accepted. Perhaps that comes in the form of pragmatic programs for children, youth, or even senior adults. While programs are bringing the people in, in most cases the gospel is being lost. While this is taking place, God's people are starving for the Word and the lost are perishing in their sins. What both saint and the sinner needs to know is the gospel of God's grace, which is offered to sinners as a gift by "repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ."¹

Ever since the Fall of man in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3, there has been an attempt to cover his sin. In Genesis 3:7, Moses alludes to the very fact that after the woman and man disobeyed God, they attempted to cover their nakedness with fig leaves. Man, in his fallen state, has attempted to work, will, and worship his way back into a right standing with the Holy God of the Bible. Of course man is a complete failure at doing so, since Scripture is clear- man's standing before God is one of "being dead in their trespasses and sins".² Therefore, something greater has to take place in order to place man back into a right relationship with His creator. He

¹ Acts 20:21. All Scripture will be cited from the *English Standard Version* unless otherwise stated.

² Ephesians 2:1.

must be made spiritually alive to see his own sins against his God. This happens when God grants faith to believe and repentance to turn from one's sin.

Therefore, this paper will expose the superficial similarities between "godly sorrow" verses the false teaching of "worldly sorrow" known as penance. The argument will be presented by, first defining the difference between repentance and penance; second, by giving biblical examples of penance and repentance; third, by showing biblical teaching on repentance; and fourth, by giving personal application for one's life and the ministry.

Defining Repentance vs. Penance

The gospel of Jesus Christ and all it entails is centered upon two key doctrines. The first one is faith *in* Christ and him alone. The second is repentance *toward* God. These two biblical doctrines are extremely important to understand, as it pertains to "true" conversion of a person's soul. In order for a person to understand what salvation is, they must have an understanding of repentance, but also have experienced biblical repentance. Apart from biblical repentance there is no forgiveness of sin, no satisfying of God's wrath, and no eternal salvation. According to Thomas Watson in his book *The Doctrine of Repentance*, "I am sure that repentance is of much importance that there is no being saved without it."³ Thus, getting the doctrine of biblical repentance correct is of crucial importance for one's eternal salvation.

In his *Systematic Theology*, Dr. Wayne Grudem defines biblical repentance as "a heartfelt sorrow for sin, a renouncing of it, and a sincere commitment to forsake it and walk in obedience to Christ."⁴ According to Dr. Grudem's definition, there are three aspects of biblical repentance. The first is an understanding of one's sins, which leads to a brokenness over sin. Secondly, there

³ Thomas Watson, *The Doctrine of Repentance*, 12-13.

⁴ Wayne Grudem, *An Introduction To Biblical Doctrine: Systematic Theology*, 713.

should be an understanding of their sin as it is taught from the Scriptures. Thirdly, there should be an individual and personal decision of turning from one's sin and a turning toward God.

This is a similar view which one finds in the teaching of Louis Berkhof's *Systematic Theology*. Berkhof's definition is similar to Grudem's as he writes, "That repentance is that change wrought in the conscious life of the sinner, by which he turns away from sin."⁵ Both Grudem's and Berkhof's definition deal with the same issues of man's intellect (understanding of sin), emotions (feeling the weight of sin), and volition (the individual's decision to turn from sin). The dealing with the complete man shows the entire man is underneath the weight of God's condemnation and in need of all faculties to be redeemed.

Both Grudem and Berkhof's definitions leave out something John Calvin regarded as an important aspect of repentance. Calvin believed that repentance stemmed from a serious fear of God and consisted in the mortification of the old man and quickening of the Spirit. Mortification and renovation are obtained by union with Christ in his death and resurrection."⁶ The "fear of Lord" is what Solomon affirmed "as the beginning of knowledge."⁷ A serious fear of God, a heartfelt knowledge of sin, and a desire to turn from their sin toward God is true biblical repentance.

Thus, biblical repentance is a gift of grace given by God to the sinner, whereby the sinner turns from his sin and turns to God in faith by believing in His Son Jesus Christ for the forgiveness. As John Colquhoun adds, "This repentance, accordingly, forms a part of religion, not of an innocent person, but of a sinner."⁸ In addition to when the sinner is converted to God

⁵ Lois Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 486.

⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 388,390.

⁷Proverbs 1:7.

⁸John Colquhoun, *True Repentance*, 9.

through Christ, that person has a new relationship with his sin and a new relationship with His God. He no longer loves the sin he once loved, and he no longer hates The God he once hated. Thus, biblical repentance becomes a way of life for the new believer in Christ.

At the same time, just as there is a type of repentance that leads to salvation, there is a repentance, which does not lead to salvation. This repentance is known as a “worldly sorrow” or “penance which leads to death,”⁹ This type of repentance is one Augustine referred to, which “damns many.”¹⁰ Unlike biblical repentance, which is brought about by God, man brings about penance. In Richard Robert’s book *Repentance: The First Word of the Gospel*, he describes penance as acts of self-castigation produced by a sorrow for sin.”¹¹ This sorrow is a natural feeling of sorrowfulness because of a lifestyle one has lived, things one has done, or just feelings of regret in general. So, a person will try to pay penance somehow in order to save himself by his own efforts or works. The worldly sorrow (penance) that leads to death is nothing more than the outworking of man’s flesh since the fall of Adam in the Garden.

A few distinctions here might help clarify the difference between biblical repentance and penance. First, penance is always man-centered or what man can do. As it is in the Catholic church, the doctrine of penance is what man can do for the payment of his sin, rather than what man is before a Holy God. This type of theology and thinking has become a way of life, not just for the Catholic church, but in a lot of different religious denominations as well. But, not only is it a religious attitude, it is a rooted problem within each human heart; men try to pay for their own sins by their good works and sufferings.”¹²

⁹ 2 Corinthians 7:10.

¹⁰ Watson, 92.

¹¹ Richard Owen Roberts, *Repentance: The First Word of the Gospel*, 92.

¹² John C. Miller, *Repentance and Twentieth Century Man*, 17.

Secondly, penance concentrates on what man sees and feels within himself. Penance focuses upon the emotions or feelings of the person, rather than the offense of the person toward God. Ultimately, penance makes God out to be the one in need of repenting. John Miller points out, “As a natural consequence, the man doing penance will see God as owing him a debt; living in self-pity, he becomes almost unshakably convinced that if there is any forgiving to do he must forgive God for making him such a rotten sinner. The man doing this is throwing away his eternal soul. He is willfully locking God out of his life.”¹³ The reason why penance will never satisfy one’s soul is because it continually sees God as the one who owes, rather than the sinner.

Thirdly, penance lacks power from setting the sinner free. The person who is trusting in penance for their sins lives a spiritual life without any power or joy. The very reason why the sinner lacks joy or power in his life is due to the fact that penance is founded upon self-trust. Penance’s lack of power to set sinners free is one reason so many professing believers live a lifestyle of sin. As Watson so clearly stated, “An old sin may be left in order to entertain a new, as you put off an old servant to take another. So, a man move from one vice to another but remains a sinner still.”¹⁴ The reason why penance lacks the power to set sinners free is because it is based upon the work of the person, rather than the work of God.

Fourthly, penance seeks out a human priest other than Christ.”¹⁵ When the offender senses guilt over his lifestyle or the crime he has committed against God, he will often default to look for forgiveness in a person other than Christ. Yet, another person, whether a priest, pastor, or the pope, will never bring a lifestyle of forgiveness, joy, or rest to that person. Penance that

¹³ Ibid, 23.

¹⁴ Watson, 16.

¹⁵ Miller, 29.

seeks out another priest other than the Lord Jesus Christ will bring no contentment. It will only bring discouragement, defeat, and depression.

Biblical Examples of Repentance and Penance

Throughout the centuries, God's heart has been to redeem His creation to Himself. So, in the Bible, one finds God bringing about this redemption through the gift of repentance to His people. God does not change, and His ways are irrevocable. Although God does not change, man is a constantly changing. Yet, God still loves and shows compassion toward His people. Instead of destroying His creation, particularly His people, God graciously extends grace by granting repentance to His people by changing their heart, mind, and soul in returning to their Creator. Biblical repentance is mentioned throughout the Bible, but it is found particularly in the life of King David.

King David was "a man after God's own heart,"¹⁶ yet found himself captured by an adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. In Second Samuel chapter 11, David was supposed to be at war, yet he found himself lusting at the women bathing. Not only did he watch the women, but he inquired of one particular woman name Bathsheba. This woman's husband, Urriah, was at war fighting, yet David sent for her. After being brought to King David and lying together, she became pregnant with David's child. David who was found in a conundrum due to Bathsheba's pregnancy and fear of her husband discovering it, strategized to have Urriah put to death. Not only was David an adulterer and a liar, but he also became a murderer. Bathsheba had the child, which was afflicted and finally died. This led David to get up from his position of prayer before the Lord, interceding for the child's well-being, and went to the Temple to worship His God.

¹⁶ 1 Samuel 13:14.

Although the narrative of David, Bathsheba, and Uriah is found in Second Samuel the complete commentary of result to David's sin is found in Psalm 51. This Psalm is one of "true repentance" toward God. The Psalm is known as a "Penitential Psalm."¹⁷ Some commentators say this Psalm was written perhaps two years after the adulterous affair with Bathsheba. The very first verse of this Psalm is full of contrition, emotions, and brokenness over his sin toward God when David writes, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!"¹⁸ The prayer of David was not man-centered, but it was quite God-centered. This is biblical repentance.

It was God who could have mercy, love, and the ability to wash David and cleanse him from his sin. David was unable to pay anything to God for his sin, but he desired to be cleansed wholly. One sees the heartfelt brokenness over his sin, the guilt toward God, and the desire to turn from his sin. David clearly testifies by confessing his sin against God and desiring for Him to forgive him. David knew only God could do such a work of grace in his life of lying, manipulation, adultery, and murdering. So, true repentance of sin is truly a work of God's grace in a person's life—God takes away the guilt, shame, and grants them joy in the Lord.

However, unlike David, there are those who sought "the Lord with tears in seeking repentance and were unable to find it."¹⁹ Judas is an example of someone who had a worldly sorrow or sought penance, which led to his suicidal death by hanging himself. Judas was one of the Lord's disciples. He followed Jesus during his earthly ministry and even served the disciples

¹⁷ *English Standard Version Study Bible*, 999.

¹⁸ Psalm 51:1-2.

¹⁹ Hebrews 12:17.

as the “money bag holder.”²⁰ Judas’s life and actions proved not only that he was a sinner, but he was an unrepentant sinner. He walked with Jesus daily, yet he never acknowledged his need for Him.

This led to his deceitful plan to hand over the Prince of Glory to the religious crowds. On the night before the crucifixion, Judas hands over Jesus to the religious crowd for his thirty pieces of silver. It was only after he handed over Jesus for the thirty pieces of silver that Judas “repented” or “changed his mind”²¹ and his conscience began weighing on him. This caused him to return the money to spare the life of the One who was innocent. Judas’s offering of penance for his sin toward the innocent would not suffice, because this betrayal had to take place in order “that the prophecy might be fulfilled.”²²

In both narratives of King David and Judas Iscariot, one can see the stark contrast between biblical repentance and false repentance. King David was broken, contrite, and obviously distraught over his sin toward God and those he had offended. Yet, Judas was only concerned about his well-being because he felt remorse and regret, but it was less than repentance, which is ultimately a change of mind, emotions, and heart. David’s heart was changed before God, which led him to confession and worship. Judas’s heart was hardened even while trying to pay his way out of the wrong he had brought upon an innocent man. In Judas’s false repentance, he found himself guiltier than ever, thus leading him to take his own life. Penance will never satisfy the laws demand, nor will it set the sinner free.

Biblical Teaching on Repentance

²⁰ John 12:6.

²¹ Matthew 27:3.

²² Zechariah 11:13.

Throughout both Old Testament and New Testament texts, the doctrine of repentance is taught. “In the Old Testament the verb ‘repent’ is the Hebrew word *niph’al*, which occurs about thirty-five times.”²³ This word usually signifies a relenting or changing in how God deals with man for either good or bad. Five times in the Old Testament *naham* can also refer to human repentance or relenting. “The LXX (Septuagint) translates *naham* with *metanoeo*, which can either mean human repentance or divine relenting.”²⁴ In the New Testament, the understanding of repentance is found as meaning “to turn back from, away from, or toward” in the religious sense.”²⁵ In either case of the Old Testament or New Testament, biblical repentance is one of “turning about” which is a gift of God’s grace given to sinners.

In Isaiah 55:6-7, he gives a beautiful picture of biblical repentance from the Old Testament, as he urges sinners, “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near; let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, that he may have compassion on him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” The call of repentance affects a person in three areas of their lives; 1) their intellect 2) their emotions, and 3) their volitions. Each one of these aspects of repentance are mentioned in Isaiah’s call to sinners to repent and turn to the Lord.

The New Testament teaching of repentance is found in various texts and implied throughout Scriptures. The word “repent or repentance” is found in a couple of different forms in the New Testament. “They are used as a noun *metanoia* occurs twenty-three and *metanoeo* (verb) thirty-four times.”²⁶ The teaching and preaching of repentance was widely known in the day of

²³ Everett F. Harrison ed., *Wycliffe’s Theological Dictionary*, 443.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 444.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 444.

²⁶ Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 1021.

John the Baptist and Jesus himself. In Matthew 3:1, the author exclaims, “In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”²⁷ In this passage Matthew uses the word for repentance *metanoeo* as a verb. John the Baptist is exhorting the people to “consider their sin, turn from it, change their mind and ways before the living God. Jesus continues this theme throughout his earthly ministry. The gospel according to Mark records Jesus declaring, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel.”²⁸

The doctrine of repentance is vital for one to enter the kingdom of God. It is so important, it is recorded that Jesus taught this doctrine throughout the gospels. The coming of Christ, which is the coming of the kingdom and teaching of repentance, will “alter all life-relationships.”²⁹ The coming of kingdom or of Christ will bring “repentance not to those who are righteous but to sinners.”³⁰ The gospel of Luke proclaims that “the heavens rejoice when a sinner repents.”³¹ The preaching of repentance is not left to itself as a command for sinners to achieve, but as a gift of grace to be received by faith in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This is what the Apostles preached and taught throughout the book of Acts and for the church until the return of Christ.

Therefore, the Apostle Paul warned the church at Corinth not to confuse the doctrine of repentance (godly sorrow) with the false teaching of penance (worldly sorrow). In Second Corinthians 7:10, Paul distinguishes between the two and reminds the Corinthians how God used

²⁷ Matthew 3:1.

²⁸ Mark 1:15.

²⁹ Wycliffe’s Theological Dictionary, 444.

³⁰ Mark 2:17.

³¹ Luke 15:10.

his letter to bring them to “godly sorrow” (biblical repentance). But, he reminds them how to tell between their “godly repentance” and “worldly repentance” because their repentance had brought “life to them instead of death.”³² The “godly sorrow” is characterized by “remorse, caused by having lost God’s approval and the consequent resolve to reverse one’s conduct and live for God. Whereby, the “worldly sorrow” is characterized by a grief that comes from the world and its approval.”³³

Thus, we should focus on the teaching that the life-giving work of the Spirit in granting repentance will produce a life filled by the Spirit. The grace gift of repentance will produce great joy and freedom of one’s sin and guilt. This truth can be found in the Westminster Confession of Faith called “Of Repentance unto Life,” which says, “Although repentance be not rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God’s free grace in Christ; yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.”³⁴ The pardon of God’s free grace through repentance toward God and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ sets the sinner free to experience the joy of not being guilty or condemned any longer.

Personal Application for One’s Life and Ministry

In exposing the superficial similarities between “godly sorrow” and “worldly sorrow,” there are important lessons to be learned. Although the two are very different, “godly sorrow” and “worldly sorrow” can appear to be the same. Therefore, it is crucial for individuals to understand what true repentance and false repentance is for the life of a sinner. People’s eternal souls hang in the balance of their understanding and experience of true repentance in their life.

³² 2 Corinthians 7:10.

³³ *ESV Study Bible*, Note on 2 Corinthians 7:10.

³⁴ Roberts, 66.

Not only is repentance needed for the unbelieving sinner, it is still needed for the one who has been given repentance and truly been converted to Christ.

Today, there seems to be confusion of what biblical repentance looks like in the life of a believer. There is a numbness to sin in the lives of those who are lost, but that same numbness can also be a reality to those who profess faith in Jesus Christ. The numbness can be caused from a few things, but more than likely, it starts from a misunderstanding of what repentance is and is not. Biblical repentance is not teary-eyed person who is sorry for their actions, yet continues in their sinful behavior. Biblical repentance is not just pulling oneself up by the proverbial bootstraps in order to stop doing bad and start doing good. Biblical repentance cannot be selected whenever one desires to just start doing right or reforming oneself. Biblical repentance is more than just human effort; it is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in changing a person's heart, mind, and soul.

The proper understanding of what biblical repentance is and how it functions should help us in our ministries. Properly understanding repentance through a biblical lens helps us in our understanding of how to help sinners find their way to Christ. The last thing lost sinners need is for someone to tell them to stop doing bad and start doing good. This type of theology and methodology will leave a person miserable, like Judas. Helping people to properly understand themselves in light of God, Scripture, and the cross of Jesus is what will give hope to the hopeless and help to the helpless.

However, the proper understanding of biblical repentance is not just for the lost sinner who needs Christ, but it is also for the saved saint. The Christian believer is in need of repentance each day he lives as well. Jesus reminded his disciples of their need for daily repentance in teaching them how to pray when he said, "... And forgive us our debts, as we also

have forgiven our debtors.”³⁵ Wayne Grudem mentions the need for daily repentance when he says, “It is true that initial saving faith and initial repentance occur only once in our lives... The same attitude should continue throughout the Christian lives.”³⁶ Often people fail in their understanding believing that once they have repented, they never need to repent again, which has opened the door for “professing” believers to live a life of sin and carnality, which is eternally dangerous.

Therefore, the believer who has experienced and is continually experiencing repentance is able to help those who have not experienced biblical repentance. This truth is what the Apostle Paul when he said, “Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself lest you too be tempted.”³⁷ Before I am able to help another poor sinner, I myself must be right before the Lord in my walk by repenting of my sin, and then I am able to help others.

Living this truth out as a pastor is one of difficulties. I have often told our congregation that it is much easier to preach these truths than live them out. Yet, this is the call God places not only on pastor’s lives, but on the life of every Christian. Each Christian has been called by God to serve one another and those without Christ. So, in order to faithfully serve God, one another, and our neighbor, we must come before the Lord each day in humble repentance, acknowledging that our strength and our help comes from him. We are unable to accomplish our work He has given us if we are filled with our pride. Therefore, we must live a lifestyle of biblical repentance before God, our family, and our neighbors, pointing to God and giving Him all the glory.

³⁵ Matthew 6:12.

³⁶ Grudem, 717.

³⁷ Galatians 6:1

BIBLE STUDY

The greatest concern you should have as a non-believer is your eternal soul. Since God created man in His image (Genesis 1:27) and breathing His eternal life into man, not only are we eternal beings, but we are spiritual beings that will live eternally. The thought of eternity does not usually cross many people minds and if it does it is only for a short period. Yet, the truth is that man will dwell somewhere for eternity. The Bible, which is our sole authority, tells us the dwelling place for unbelievers in a place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Luke 13:28). This place is known as Hades.

Likewise, there is a need for one to be greatly concerned of spending an eternity in separation from the God, which created them. but more than that they should have a correct view of how to be saved from their separation from God. This Bible study is to help you see and correct any wrong view as it pertains to salvation by penance, rather than salvation by biblical repentance.

As stated already in the prior reading, repentance consists of the change. It is a change wrought by God in the mind, emotions, and will or volition.

A personal illustration of false repentance verses biblical repentance. I used to drive an eighteen wheeler over the road delivering books to books stores all over the United States. One thing our company prided itself in was 3 weeks prior to Christmas we received a 5% bonus check if the drivers went all year without an accident or speeding ticket. If you did receive a ticket or accident it usually was on certain percentage and you still receive some bonus money. As usual, I often would often receive a speeding ticket by breaking the speed limit. When I received the ticket was always sorry for breaking the speed limit and I would even tell the police officer, my wife, and my company I was not going to break the limit again. However, before the ticket was

even paid I was back to breaking the speed limit. The problem was I was only sorry because I had got caught. I was not sorry or repentant because I had broken the law, the law that God in His goodness had ordained to keep drivers and others safe on the roads.

In this Bible study I want you to look up several Bible references and ask yourself does this or has this affect my mind, emotions, or will. Some points to help you will be made along the way in understanding biblical repentance verses penance.

Read 2 Corinthians 7:5-16 on the difference between the two. What is it that stands out to you in these verses?

1. When a person has experienced biblical repentance one will see and understand things about their sin they could not see or understand before.

- What does John 14:26 say? (write out your understanding)
- What does Jeremiah 17:9 and 1 Corinthians 13:12 say about your heart?
- What does Romans 7:15-21 say about your failure to obey?

2. When a person has experienced biblical repentance it causes one to see Christ in a whole new light. Biblical repentance causes one to see Christ precious, lovely, and the greatest of all.

- What does 2 Peter 2:7 say?
- Am I willing to lose everything in order to have Christ? Read Psalm 73:25-26

3. When a person has experienced biblical repentance it causes one to seek the Spirit's help in prayer. When you pray although at times you start cold, you end with life, joy, and peace.

- Read Romans 8:26. What does this verse say about the Spirit's help in one's prayer life?

4. When a person has experienced biblical repentance there will be a burden placed on one over their sin. In other words one's sins will make them sick.

- Read Matthew 11:28. What does Jesus say about sin?

- What does Romans 7:24 say about one's sin?
5. When a person has experienced biblical repentance there will be a love kindled in them for the love of Christ.
 - Read Romans 5:5. What does this teach us about what happens when we experience repentance?
 6. When a person has experienced biblical repentance there will be a love for God's Word that they did not have before.
 - Read Psalm 119:19 and Psalm 19:10. What does this teach us about God's Word?
 7. When a person has experienced biblical repentance there will be a love for God's people.
 - Read Hebrews 10:24-25 and 1 John 2:9-11. What does this teach us about loving God's people?
 8. When a person has experienced biblical repentance there will be a joy when God's work thrives.
 - Read Romans 1:8. What does this teach about God's work prospering?
 9. When a person has experienced biblical repentance there will be a desire to be stripped of one's own righteousness and clothed with Christ's righteousness.
 - Read Matthew 5:6 and 2 Corinthians 5:21. What does this teach us about the righteousness of Christ?
 10. When a person has experienced biblical repentance there will be a desire to know Christ better today than yesterday. [Spiritual growth is a evidence of spiritual life.]
 - Read 2 Peter 3:18. What does this teach about the growth in the knowledge of Christ?
 11. When a person has experienced biblical repentance there be will the every present reality of their inadequacy and their utter dependency for Christ as the Lord more now than before.
 - Read Matthew 16:24 and 1 Corinthians 1:17. What does this teach about our inadequacy and our dependency of Christ for everything?

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