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## The Ultimate Race Course!

If you have sinned, do not lie down without repentance; for the want of repentance after one has sinned makes the heart yet harder and harder.

~John Bunyan

Repentance is a grace of God's Spirit whereby a sinner is inwardly humbled and visibly reformed.

~Thomas J. Watson, Sr.

Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death.

~2 Corinthians 7:10



# SIX

## The Ultimate Race Course!

I had the privilege of competing in the first Fort Lauderdale Tin Man Triathlon back in 1983. It was a much, much smaller version of the Ironman Triathlon held in Hawaii annually. Our event covered a mile ocean swim, a 25-mile bike ride, and concluded with a 10K run. (The Ironman consists of a 2.4 mile swim; 112 miles on the bike up and down mountainous terrain, topped off by a marathon run. I told you mine was a much smaller version!) The event was held on Fort Lauderdale Beach, and the course was set up for maximum viewing pleasure for all of the fans. After the straight one mile ocean swim from south to north, the bike portion was set up on a 13 loop course on Highway A1A, which required each competitor to complete 180 degree turn-arounds at the south and north ends of the course. After 25 miles on the bike, we finished with a 6.2 mile run.

It was a windy day with very rough seas; during the swim we battled waves and a strong current. I was the last official competitor to complete the water portion of the race, just ahead of the 1-hour cutoff point. Many competitors were helped from the water by Fort Lauderdale Ocean Rescue personnel. They tried to get me out near the end, but after all the struggle I went through to cover that mile distance, I figured if they were going to take me out, they would have to recover me from the bottom of the ocean!

Those of you who know a little about swimming immediately recognized that my time was *very* slow. And as slow as I was on the clock, it seemed like an eternity in my mind. I recall looking to the shore line and the buildings that lined A1A time and time again, thinking that I was swimming in place in front of the same building forever! But God was gracious, and He brought me around the final buoy and onto the shore.

The bike and the run portion went much better. After the arduous swim and swallowing way too much sea water, I was really encouraged by the layout of the course. Although we rode 25 miles, the 180 degree turns at the north and south ends kept us in front of family and friends for much of the race. The crowd proved to be a great source of motivation and inspiration for all of the competitors that day.

The ultimate race course for our spiritual lives also has a number of 180 degree turns. These are called **repentance**. Mark 1:15 records the first words of our Lord's public ministry as, "Repent and believe the gospel." This command provides us with a two-part biblical model for living out the Christian faith: repentance and faith—not yearly, monthly, or even weekly, but daily!

You will remember that in Chapter Four of this study we examined the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man. As God grows our understanding of His holiness and our sinfulness, He also increases our desire to repent and believe in the Gospel. This is the key that unlocks the chains that keep us in bondage to performance and pretense.

So let's unpack this thing called repentance, based on the truth contained within Acts 20:20-21.

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

### **WHAT REPENTANCE IS NOT**

The great reformer John Calvin said that our hearts are idol-making factories. This should give us great caution when it comes to repentance. So sinful and selfish is the human heart, that what we might consider to be true repentance may actually be nothing more than a vehicle for satisfying our own sin nature.

We may be sorry for something we did, but only because of the negative consequences of our actions. We may be grieved by our bad behavior, but only because it has disrupted our lives in some way. We want to get back to a place of "comfort," so we marinate a moment or two in a bit of guilt, feel really bad, and perhaps even try to make up in some way for our misbehavior. This is *not* "repentance that leads to life" (Acts 11:18), because it is all about us. It is man-centered, not God-centered. We haven't brought God and His honor into our self-centered repentance.

So, first and foremost, repentance that leads to life is not about the self, it is about the Savior. Here is a perfect example of what repentance is *not*, found in Acts 24:24-25.

After some days Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was Jewish, and he sent for Paul and heard him speak about faith in Christ Jesus. And as he reasoned about

righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment, Felix was alarmed and said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you."

With chains on his hands, the apostle Paul stood before Felix, the Governor of Judea, and preached the Word of God: "righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment." And what was the response from Felix? He was alarmed!

How many sit in churches all over the world, listening to the faithful preaching of the Word, and respond with alarm? A stirring of the heart because one is afraid of God's righteous judgment does *not* rise to the saving of the soul or the sanctifying of the saint. James reveals that Satan's demons shudder with fear at the thought of God (James 2:19); that fear does not lead to life! Alarm moved Felix only to the point of procrastination, which led him to his place in Perdition, condemned with all those who have said, "Go away for the present. When I get an opportunity I will summon you." A conscience seared by sin and cowering before the Truth of the Almighty is not a picture of biblical repentance toward God.

Perhaps the best and most famous example in all of Scripture of what repentance is not is the account of Judas after his ghastly betrayal of Jesus.

Then when Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he changed his mind and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, "I have sinned by betraying innocent blood." They said, "What is that to us? See to it yourself." And throwing down the pieces of silver into the temple, he departed, and he went and hanged himself. (Matthew 27:3-5)

Judas clearly had a change of mind, as evidenced by his actions in this passage. Men can change their minds . . . but only God can change the heart. Judas' sense of the enormity of his evil seized him and caused him to return the blood money he had received from the chief priests and elders. He uttered the striking words, "I have sinned." And in his last desperate act to rid himself of shame and guilt, he committed suicide. He was more concerned with removing his feelings of guilt and the consequences of his sin than he was in running toward God and crying out for mercy. Guilt is not repentance toward God.

C. H. Spurgeon profoundly pointed the way down paths of repentance that do not lead to God in a sermon entitled *Two Essential Things*, delivered in 1889.

In some there is a repentance of sin which is produced by a sense of shame. The evil-doers are found out, and indignant words are spoken about them: they are ashamed, and so far they are repentant, because they have dishonored themselves. If they had not been found out, in all probability they would have continued comfortably in the sin, and even have gone further on in it. They are grieved at having been discovered; and they are sorry, very sorry, because they are judged and condemned by their fellows. It is not the evil which troubles them, but the dragging of it to light.

Many who profess regret for having done wrong are not sorry for the sin itself, but they are affected by the opinion of their fellow-men, and by the remarks that are made concerning their offence, and so they hang their heads. Truly, it is something in their favor that they can blush; it is a mercy that they have so much sense of shame. But shame is not evangelical repentance; and a man may go to hell with a blush on his face as surely as if he had the brazen forehead of a shameless woman. Do not mistake a little natural fluttering of the heart and blushing of the face, on account of being found out in sin, for true repentance.

Some have a repentance which consists in grief because of the painful consequences of sin. The man has been a spendthrift, a gambler, a profligate, and his money is gone; and now he repents that he has played the fool. Another has been indulging the passions of his corrupt nature, and he finds himself suffering for it, and therefore he repents of his wickedness. There are many cases that I need not instance here, in which sin comes home very quickly to men. Certain sins bear fruit speedily: their harvest is reaped soon after the seed is sown. Then a man says he is sorry, and he gives up the sin for a time; not because he dislikes it, but because he sees that it is ruining him: as sailors in a storm cast overboard the cargo of the ship, not because they are weary of it, but because the vessel will go to the bottom if they retain it. This is regret for consequences, not sorrow for sin.

Some exhibit a repentance which consists entirely of horror at the future punishment of sin. This fear is healthful in many ways, and we can by no means dispense with it. I do not wonder that a man who has lived a liar, a forger, and a perjurer, should, in the hour of his discovery, put an end to his life...but if this fear goes no further than a selfish desire to escape punishment, no reliance can be placed upon its moral effect. If they could be assured that no punishment would follow, such persons would continue in sin, and not only be content to live in it, but be delighted to have it so.

Another kind of repentance may be rather better than any we have spoken of, but still it is not repentance toward God. It is a very good counterfeit; but it is not the genuine article. I refer to a sense of the unworthiness of an ill life. I have known persons, upon a review of their past, rise above the groveling level of absolute carelessness, and they have begun to enjoy some apprehension of the beauty of virtue, the nobleness of usefulness, and the meanness of a life of selfish pleasure.

A few of those who have no spiritual life, have, nevertheless, keen moral perceptions, and they are repentant when they see that they have lost the opportunity of distinguishing themselves by noble lives. They regret that their story will never be quoted among the examples of good men, who have left "footprints on the sands of time." Musing upon their position in reference to society and history, they wish that they could blot out the past, and write more worthy lines upon the page of life. Now, this is hopeful; but it is not sufficient. We are glad when men are under influences which promise amendment; but if a man stops at a mere apprehension of the beauty of virtue and the deformity of vice, what is there in it? This is not repentance toward God.<sup>1</sup>

After reading such precise and profound teaching on false repentance, it would serve us well to marinate in it for a moment and prayerfully consider if we ourselves have been indulging in this foolish behavior. Because we are so self-absorbed, it is easy to repent for all the wrong reasons. Rather than repent for having offended a holy, righteous, and perfect God, who sent His only begotten Son to take

all of our sins and die in our place, we can center our repentance on ourselves . . . our shame . . . our guilt . . . our penalty . . . our punishment. It's like the alcoholic who repents of the headache and vomiting in the morning but not of the drinking binge the night before. And at the end of the day, he returns to the bar for another round! This is not repentance toward God.

During my season as a teacher at Westminster Academy in Fort Lauderdale from 2002– 2007, there were more times than I can count when I would be writing up a student for misbehavior or walking them to the dean's office, only to hear these words: "Coach Boland, I am so sorry for what I've done. I promise I will never do it again."

I would respond, "Are you sorry for what you have done? Or sorry for having been caught and the consequences that are going to follow?" Generally that question ended professions of student-centered repentance and gave me great opportunities to minister at a heart level. One of the most important lessons I wanted them to learn was never to believe that the *fear of consequences* was the same as *forsaking of the sin*. Sadly, far too many in the church today have never graduated from high school in their understanding of repentance that leads to life. The confession of their lives is to weep before God and walk right back into a life of sin.

## WHAT REPENTANCE IS

The best way to define **repentance** is to go straight to the pages of sacred Scripture.

Godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death. (2 Corinthians 7:10)

The most important thing to notice in this verse is found in **the direction of the repentance**. It is toward God—"Godly grief produces . . . repentance." Repentance must be God-centered if it is to be repentance at all. We must see our sin—all of our sin—as an offense toward God.

David evidenced this when he wrote, "Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight" (Psalm 51:4). I cannot tell you how much that verse bothered me in my early walk with Christ. Didn't David sin against Bathsheba, her husband Uriah, the servants he sent to inquire of the woman, all the soldiers off at war, and ultimately all of Israel? Yes, of course he did! But God's grace in David's heart allowed him to see his offense at the deepest level of its wickedness: he had sinned

AGAINST GOD! Without rising to this level, David's great psalm of repentance would have been nothing more than a song of self-centered grief. David understood what Paul exclaimed in the words, "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from this body of death?" He knew the only place to flee for deliverance from such a terrible stench was to God alone.

The man who truly repents has been gripped by the knowledge that his greatest crime is that he has offended his Father in heaven. To be sure, he has sinned against men by satisfying the desires of his sinful flesh with his offence. But he understands that it is a far greater crime to have wronged his God. As the image-bearer of God, he is consumed with a godly sorrow for having misrepresented his God before a watching world.

I remember my pastor and friend Tullian saying during a meeting, "What kind of God do those around you see in the life you are living today?" Our sin and disobedience is a misrepresentation of God that gives the world around us cause to blaspheme our God and think our faith is of no effect.

Near the vital heart of repentance, right in its core, is a sense of the meanness of our conduct toward God. Especially our ingratitude to him, after all his favor and mercy. This it is that troubles the truly penitent heart most: that God should love so much, and should have such a wretched return. Ingratitude, the worst of ills, makes sin exceeding sinful. Sorrow for having so ill requited the Lord is a spiritual grace. A tear of such repentance is a diamond of the first water, precious in the sight of the Lord.

True repentance is also toward God in this respect, that it judges itself by God. We do not repent because we are not so good as a friend whom we admire, but because we are not holy as the Lord. God's perfect law is the transcript of his own perfect character, and sin is any want of conformity to the law and to the character of God. Judge yourselves by your fellow-men, and you may be self-content; but measure yourselves by the perfect holiness of the Lord god, and ho, how you must despise yourself! There is no deep repentance until our standard is the standard of perfect rectitude, till our judgment of self is formed by a comparison with divine character. When we behold the perfection of the thrice holy Jehovah, and then look at ourselves, we cry with Job, "Mine eyes seeth thee. Wherefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes."<sup>2</sup>

Repenting of sin as sin against a sinless God is the foundation upon which the life of faith in Jesus Christ is built. One of the most important aspects of true repentance toward God is rooted in the heart, not just the hands. Again, David provides for us the perfect example of this in his Psalm of repentance: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (Psalm 51:10).

David did not simply focus on changing his behavior. He desired for God to change his heart. External actions were not enough for David in his model of repentance, and it must not be enough for us either. The key to this heart transformation is found in Jesus, who is the only One who can rescue us from both the penalty of sin and the power of sin.

Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that He may send the Christ who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. (Acts 3:19-20)

The deeper our understanding of the Gospel, the greater will be our demonstration of repentance as a way of life. Only when we understand David’s story as our story will we stop being surprised by our sin and openly confess it before God.

Do you recall the last time you considered the sin of some character in Scripture and foolishly told yourself, “I’m really not like *that!*” News flash: you really *are* like that, and so am I! We are sinners by nature and habit; the sooner we come to terms with this truth, the sooner we will begin a lifestyle of repentance toward God without the fear of being cast down into the pit of hell. David knew he could not fix the problem with his heart. So he went to the only place where he could find healing; he ran to God.

## **REPENTANCE AS A WAY OF LIFE**

Because sin is our condition—it is *not* just the acts we commit—repentance toward God must be a way of life, a style of living, not just a weekly, monthly, or yearly act of a broken heart. It is the power of the Gospel that gives us the strength and courage to live a life of repentance and faith. God’s forgiveness is guaranteed because of the blood of the Lamb, so we never need to shy away from the confession of our sins. We no longer have to pretend that we are better than we actually are. We can “approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:16, NIV).

The author of Hebrews assures us that “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin” (Hebrews 4:15 NIV). And so, because our Savior “suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted” (Hebrews 2:18).

God knows the truth about us and loves us anyway. Therein lies the power to practice repentance as a way of life. The Gospel empowers us to cry out with Isaiah and Peter, who knew instantly the gulf of gargantuan proportions that lies between the holiness of God and our own sinful hearts—a gulf that can only be bridged by God’s grace.

“Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!” (Isaiah 6:5)

Simon Peter . . . fell down at Jesus’ knees, saying, “Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord.” (Luke 5:8)

If we would pause long enough to consider the heart’s cry of both of these men, we would recognize that we are no different; the same yawning chasm lies between God’s perfection and our imperfect performance. The Gospel frees us to confess our sins and receive the forgiveness of God. Christ empowers us to rely upon His strength to turn away from sin the next time we are confronted by it. And when we stumble and fall, as we surely will, we cry out again, and get back in the battle! “The righteous falls seven times and rises again” (Proverbs 24:16).

This is the life of the Christian. This is the life of those who understand the Gospel and have made the commitment to live in its strength. This is the life of those who can cry out with Paul, “O wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25 NKJV.)

As we close out this all-important chapter, we must remember that repentance is not turning from one category of human works to another category of human works—from doing something bad to doing something good. Everything we do is stained with the sin nature we inherited from our first parents. Repentance is turning from human works to God alone. What an awesome God we serve, who gives us this privilege each and every day!

The Westminster Shorter Catechism provides this definition.

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.

To be sure, new obedience is the fruit of true repentance toward God, but our pardon is not dependent upon what we do. Repentance is turning toward God alone and relying on His love, mercy, and grace; then, out of a heart overflowing with thanksgiving, we desire to do good—not for our gain . . . but for His glory.

1. C. H. Spurgeon, *Two Essential Things*, Sermon delivered on March 3, 1889 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington
2. C. H. Spurgeon, *Two Essential Things*, Sermon delivered on March 3, 1889 at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington



## BROTHER TO BROTHER

1. The great reformer John Calvin said that our hearts are idol-making factories. Why should this idea give us great caution when it comes to repentance?

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2. Why is sorrow for something we've done because of the negative consequences of our actions *not* repentance that leads to life?

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3. A careful reading of this chapter should give you three types of repentance that does not lead to life? I've given you one of these in the previous question; what are the other two?

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4. Did the extended quote from Charles Spurgeon provide any other types of false repentance?

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5. You should have written out several types of repentance that do not lead to life. Do any of these describe your own actions?

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6. How would you define repentance that leads to life? What separates real repentance from these false types of repentance?

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7. Where can you find the power that will give you the strength and courage to live a life of repentance and faith? Explain your answer.

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8. What are the areas of your life where you need to exercise true, biblical repentance?

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