

What is Repentance Unto Salvation?

What is repentance? What is it supposed to be "feel" like if feelings play any part? What is repentance supposed to *prompt* a person to do? Is repentance a "once for all" issue that happens prior to embracing salvation? Is repentance something that Christians should exercise throughout their lives?

Let's start with basics.

Group 1: Repentance is linked to the way we should WANT to live

Some evangelists, pastors and teachers teach that a person cannot authentically be saved unless and until they stop *wanting* to live in sin. In other words, there must be a deliberate, sorrowful determination that one makes in order to actually become saved. Without the desire to live properly *before* the person becomes saved, that person does not have true salvation and cannot actually know that they have it. Their salvation then is fully linked to whether or not they also have the earnest desire to live a holy life *after* they become saved. Folks in this group tie repentance not only to a correct understanding of who Jesus is and what He has accomplished for us, but they go further to include in repentance a true desire to turn away from all sin and to in effect, turn over a new leaf.

Here's an example of someone within this camp preaching to people about what constitutes true repentance leading to salvation. I've omitted the name of the person so that preconceived notions might be avoided (but if you go to the link, you'll see who it is).

*What you need to know is that salvation is by faith, and faith alone in Jesus Christ. And faith alone in Jesus Christ is preceded and followed by repentance — **a turning away from sin, a hatred for the things that God hates and a love for the things that God loves, a growing in holiness and a desire** — not to be like Britney Spears, not to be the like world, and not to be like the great majority of American Christians; but to be like Jesus Christ. [1; emphasis added]*

The above may sound good, but is it? Look closely at the words in bold. The person is not defining repentance, but *reformation* of a person's character. A thief or an alcoholic can reform by choosing either not to steal any longer or by getting professional help to overcome their alcoholism. However, just because a thief or alcoholic *reforms* their life, it does not mean that in God's eyes, they are a "better" person because of it. Many who come to Christ become simply aware of the fact that in and of themselves they cannot earn salvation. They cannot "right" themselves. It *may* involve a real rejection of their life and the sins that keep them down, but biblical repentance is often something else entirely.

Reforming someone's character is not the same as having repentance for who we innately are due to our resident sin nature, which is enmity toward God (Romans 8:7). I hope you would agree with that. Reformation, as good as it might be in addressing certain problem areas in a person's life and their impact on society, cannot do what true repentance does for the person.

According to God, our inner person does not need *reformation*. It needs *death* and replacement, which only comes through the salvation offered by Jesus.

Group 2: Repentance is fully realizing our need for salvation in Christ

Folks within this second group come to see we are inextricably lost in and of ourselves and there is nothing we can do to correct that situation by our own power. In other words, their attitude toward Jesus completely changes when presented with truth. To these folks, repentance is literally the act of changing one's mind toward Jesus; who He is and what He came to achieve for us.

As Ironsides notes below, this change of mind may be mingled with or preceded by or followed by true *penitence* (the act of feeling real sorrow for one's sins and sinful state), but this is not a prerequisite for receiving salvation.

...repentance is not to be confounded with penitence, though penitence will invariably enter into it. But penitence is simply sorrow for sin. No amount of penitence can fit a man for salvation. On the other hand, the impenitent will never come to God seeking His grace. But godly sorrow, we are told, worketh repentance not to be repented of. There is a sorrow for sin that has no element of piety in it-- "the sorrow of the world worketh death." In Peter's penitence we see the former; in the remorse of Judas, the latter. Nowhere is man exhorted to feel a certain amount of sorrow for his sins in order to come to Christ. When the Spirit of God applies the truth, penitence is the immediate result and this leads on to repentance, but should not be confounded with it. This is a divine work in the soul. [2]

The betrayer Judas was said to have been "penitent" or remorseful, but that feeling did not lead to salvation for him. It simply caused him to kill himself in despair. Penitence has its place but it is not to be confused with biblical repentance.

The person who realizes with finality that no effort on their part will help them earn salvation for themselves, but they truly need salvation is undergoing repentance. This is the clear understanding that salvation is offered to each person only because of God: His love, His grace, His unmerited favor. I've done nothing to earn or even deserve salvation. It is a completely free gift of God offered to me in spite of my abject unworthiness, reproach and filthiness.

But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness, (Romans 4:5)

Isn't this exactly what Abraham, Noah and many, many others did throughout Scripture? They *believed* God and their faith was counted as righteousness. This result - the *imputation* of Christ's righteousness to our account - is based on nothing except our faith in God and His finished work. Romans 4:22-24 has this to say about the subject of imputation.

And therefore it was imputed to him for righteousness.

Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him;

But for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead...

What is *the* prerequisite for imputed righteousness? Our *faith* in Him, feelings of remorse (which may also be included, but by themselves can do nothing). This is essentially, a *change in our attitude* toward Jesus. When we believe in Him (who He is and what He has done for us), we are given salvation and with it, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to our account.

On page 36 of Harry Ironsides' book, *Except Ye Repent*, he makes the following statement.

Repentance is the very opposite of meritorious experience. It is the confession that one is utterly without merit, and if he is ever saved at all it can only be through the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ, 'who gave himself a ransom for all.' Here is firm footing for the soul who realizes that all self-effort is but sinking sand. Christ alone is the Rock of our salvation.

Can it be anything else? It is Christ and Him alone! Why then are so many today saying that in order to receive salvation, the person must first show a deep sorrow for sin and a willingness to *turn* from sinful practices *before* they can be saved? This is their definition of repentance. Yet the Bible offers examples of people who received Jesus with absolute *gladness* being so thrilled with their newfound salvation that they could not wait to tell others!

The first person I quoted at the beginning of this article teaches that unless there is a lifelong and continuing visible increasing progression toward more holy living born of a continual penitent attitude, that person's salvation is in question. This is diametrically opposed to Scripture as I understand it. This type of teaching actually pushes a works-based salvation and forces the person to focus within instead of on God.

In a future article, I will deal more with what a Christian's life is supposed to look like *after* the person becomes saved and let's remember not one of us (including me) is *perfect*. Our lives will be littered with failures and sin.

Does the Christian's life need to exhibit repentance at any level ever again? How a person *lives* after becoming a Christian is distinct from the moments leading up to that person receiving salvation. We only need to look to the Bible to see many examples of this in the lives of people who were actually called "saints" by the Holy Spirit as He moved holy men of old to write the Bible and yet those "saints" often made horribly sinful decisions.

The real difference between group number one and group number two above can be summarized as **Lordship Salvation vs Free Grace**. I purposefully did not start out with these labels because I wanted people to think about what the Bible says and where it leads. Does the Bible teach a "lordship salvation" or does it present "free grace" that no one can earn under any circumstance and is ours through faith in Jesus' atoning work on our behalf?

Certainly, folks *might* feel sorrow for their sin/sin nature. Others may experience tremendous joy and relief because of their newfound salvation. This issue also can create tension in Christians who come to think they're either not really saved or they've lost their salvation. We'll deal with that as well.

Besides answering some of the other questions I've posed, I'll also deal with what is known as the "holiness movement" and its ramifications.

Beyond this, I'll also be dealing with a biblical character who may not be considered a "sinner" by most, but yet still had to be brought to an awareness of his sin to repentance.

Stay with me and questions/comments are always welcome.

[1] http://jesus-is-savior.com/Wolves/paul_washer.htm

[2] http://jesus-is-savior.com/BTP/Dr_Harry_Ironside/Except_Ye_Repent/01.htm