

FRUITFUL REPENTANCE

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Commended to The Word

INTRODUCTION

The subject of repentance is widely misunderstood and misapplied even by sincere believers who want to participate in everything the Lord has for them. Part of the confusion about repentance comes from so-called mature Christians who wrongly imagine that spirituality is measured by how little sin is in a person's life. Because they want others to think highly of them, they try to maintain a facade of near perfection—or they consider repentance as something they already did at the time they were converted.

But repentance is not just for first-time prodigals. It's a lifetime calling because spiritual maturity is mostly about being changed from what we were and how we used to think. True followers of Jesus become increasingly aware of additional sins He uncovers. If we claim we have no sin left in our lives, we are calling God a liar because He says we do.ⁱ Fruitful repentance says, "Oh Lord, I'm wrong again." Admitting we have been wrong and welcoming the Lord to straighten out our thinking is a lot better than trying to pretend that we are just fine the way we are!

Although, there are times God will sovereignty change us without our knowledge of what, exactly, the problem issues have been in our heart, His usual pattern for transforming us is to lead us in repentance. Repentance increases spiritual life inside us, and it leads to "times of refreshing."ⁱⁱ

Once you understand how fruitful repentance operates, you will want to repent as often as you can. Repentance is not something to dread or avoid, but it's a spiritual activity to embrace. According to the Book of Mark, the "good news" began with John the Baptist's call for people to repent.ⁱⁱⁱ An invitation to repent isn't a very appealing introduction to life in the Lord. Or is it?

Roger

Take, for example, my friend Roger. Even though he was the "strong silent type" who felt uncomfortable around people, our conversations were pleasant over the three years after he and his wife moved to California to open a charter plane business. I had high hopes for our first lunch appointment because of the signs of progress (change) I had observed in him. I figured our meal would be short on niceties and fairly Spartan—much like the briefings he conducted while training fighter pilots in the Air Force. Besides, his dry wit gave me something to look forward to as I approached the restaurant.

The waitress had barely left our menus on the table before Roger launched out with more sentences in a row than I had ever heard him utter: "Everything's changed for

me now. I used to care about my business—thinking that was why God sent us to California. It isn't. It's what is happening inside me—what God wants to keep doing in me. And, Daniel, I've never thanked you. I'm a completely different man. I've changed so much since I really gave God control of my life."

Whew. I was still taking all that in when Roger began telling me about a video he no longer liked to watch. I thought he was about to confess an addiction to something X-rated. But he was speaking about a home video made during his last few days in the Air Force. When things got bad with his charter business, he would watch it and

reminisce on "good old days" when life was simpler. When he was harder; when he faced life like a soldier without mercy.

*Jesus is the one
whom God exalted
to His right hand
as a Prince and a
Savior, to grant
repentance to
Israel, and
forgiveness of
sins.*

Acts 5:31

The man he used to be made him uncomfortable. The bravado, and proud bearing of *Video-Roger* embarrassed him. "I don't even like the person I used to be," he exclaimed. "I can't believe I wasted so much effort on keeping him around!"

All this was from a man who had walked with Jesus for several years. Imagine if there had been no opportunity for Roger's fruitful repentance after the day of his salvation. *Video-Roger* would have starred in every home video for the rest of his life!

Like all people who repent, Roger came to a realization about himself. Awaking from a kind of mental-emotional stupor, He found himself asking, "What have I done?"^{iv} Evidence of what had been tripping him up in life stood before his eyes.^v He was embarrassed—not because someone shamed him, but because his old way of life was now so foreign and lifeless to his new way of thinking: "I can't believe that stuff had such a grip on my life."

Repentance freed him from the hold things had on him. That is fruitful repentance—when our mistakes and foolish choices no longer dictate our future.

FUTILE REPENTANCE

For much of my life with the Lord, the thought of repentance discouraged me. I dreaded repenting of my "big" sins because, no matter how earnestly I repented, I found myself in the unenviable position of doing the same wrong things again—and feeling doubly guilty. It was bad enough to have sinned, but it was even worse to have now lied to God: I told Him I was sorry for my sins, but there I was doing those very

sins again. My shame for committing a just-repented-of offense was greater than the guilt I felt for not repenting.

I felt unspiritual and unworthy because the roots of habitual sins (in my case, laziness, willfulness and selfishness) seemingly grew too deep to be dug out by my meager attempts at repentance. My futile efforts to live up to my promises to God “*not to ever do that again*” seemed to accomplish nothing lasting. I heard an echo of my father’s instruction about how to weed our garden when I was a boy: “You have to get the roots or the weeds will just grow back.”

Repenting was like trying to tackle a dry field of large, deep-rooted weeds with a light hoe. The weeds kept coming back, mocking me with their entrenched durability. No matter how energetically I struck the hoe to the soil, determined to drive the blade to the weeds’ roots, it bounced off the hard-packed dirt. I learned to resent repentance.

I did not like repentance because it didn’t seem to do any good. Why bother repenting and going through all those self-flagellations of the soul, only to have to do it all over a few days or weeks later? *After all*, I thought, *there are only so many times I can say, “I’m sorry” for doing the same thing.*

CYCLE OF FRUSTRATION

The usual repentance scenario in my life was a cycle: I sinned; I repented (“*I’m sorry*”); and, I asked God to forgive me. Not a bad pattern for any believer—except mine was the same sin—over and over! I continued to commit the same sin I had only recently brought to God in repentance. Each successive stab at repenting became ever more earnest and filled with incredible promises of how I would never again do the sin I had just done. With every imaginable adjective, I described my remorse again and again. I began to require of myself certain religious rigors—punishments, if you will—vainly trying to protest to myself and to God that I really meant I was sorry, and I really did repent, even though I had little lasting fruit to show for it.

Some years ago, the futility of it all crashed in on me with unexpected force. The “lazy” weeds had scattered their fast-growing seeds in my soul, and I had a bumper crop of selfishness and indolence. Other people might not have even noticed how overgrown my heart had become because I control its obvious manifestations in public where everyone thought of me as a model husband. Truthfully, I hardly did anything at home. I had a fundamental unwillingness to inconvenience myself to help my wife change diapers or do housework.

Such a corruption may not seem that significant in contrast to other plagues of the heart, like stealing or lying or carrying a bitter grudge in my heart. For me it was. In fact, I sometimes consoled myself by concluding I wasn't as lazy as some other husbands—especially those who stole and lied and were unforgiving. My laziness was a clear, unmistakable violation against God and my family.

*For the good
that I want, I
do not do, but
I practice the
very evil that I
do not want.
Romans 7:19*

FAILED REPENTANCE

Failed repentance left me feeling more terrible. So often and so willfully did I continue in my sin, that I ceased going through the exercise of coming to the Lord and specifically bringing up my sin as an issue of our conversation. I just pretended that, even though God knew everything in my life, if I did not talk to Him about my sin, I wouldn't have to feel so badly about committing it again. At least I would not be a hypocrite—as well as a sluggard!

I knew God could and would forgive my sin, but I felt disqualified from receiving that forgiveness because I needed it so often. *Surely*, I reasoned, *repeating my sin so frequently has tried His patience and mercy beyond what they can withstand*. The batteries that powered mercy and grace needed to recharge. There had to be a limit to the number of mercies I could get in a week's time...

I was sincerely and thoroughly disgusted with myself for not doing better. I presumed that God felt the same about me, and my pathetically ineffective repentance. *God was angry with me. I was a repeat offender, and He was mad at me—all the time. I just knew it!* Consequently, I struck an unspoken deal with God: I would not tell Him (again) about my sin, if He would not tell me He was mad at me. We could agree to disagree. By mutual agreement (all mine), we would avoid the subject of my sin; we wouldn't bring it up in our conversation.

That produced another level of guilt. Reading my Bible, praying and going to church became ways of trying to get back on God's good side, back in His favor. I offered them as penance. Instead of *pursuing God* in hope and love, I tried to make up for deficiencies in one area of my life by excelling in others. None of those activities did anything to get at the root of my trouble with laziness.

Despite all my inner wrongness, I still wanted to follow God fully. I fought a daily war because I did not want to concede to thoughts and actions that I knew were wrong—even though I continued to do them. Like the apostle Paul explained it, I was doing the very thing I did not want to do—and not obeying God like I longed to do.^{vi}

On top of it all, I was disillusioned with repentance. Perhaps I had approached repentance like an exercise regimen—it would be unpleasant, rigorous and boring, but it would get me in shape! *After so many workouts, shouldn't I be in better shape,* I asked myself. Even though I repented of my character sins so many times, I did not see any meaningful victory over them.

So, I gave up on repentance.

REPENTANCE REDEFINED

Such was my personal experience with repentance. The folklore about repentance made matters even worse. By “folklore,” I mean all those unstated impressions I had picked up throughout my life, which characterized repentance as something angry. Everyone whom I had ever heard say, “Repent,” had an angry, stern or demanding tone of voice. I remembered strange-looking doomsayers coming to my college campus carrying placards, which read, “Repent. The end is near.” They were wild, weird and definitely not winsome. No one felt drawn to them.

Even John the Baptist stuck in my imagination as a burly, bearded, caveman-looking person in animal skins, wagging his finger in people’s faces, yelling, “Repent!” Sometimes I thought of repentance as a line drawn in the dust of some Wild West town, by the booted toe of a gunslinger that boldly dared anyone to cross it. I felt nothing kind, inviting or good about repentance, and I could not understand how such a harsh, fruitless exercise could possibly be good news for anyone.

I was not to realize until sometime later that my problem with repentance stemmed mostly from misunderstanding both what real repentance is and what it accomplishes in people’s lives. One night while lying on my living room floor, thinking about what seemed to be impossible situations in people’s lives and asking God to give me an answer to help them through their crises, the Lord answered me saying, “Repentance. Lead them to repentance.”

That puzzled me. It wasn’t the answer I was expecting. I wanted Him to do something—give a promise, bring a miraculous breakthrough, change some circumstances (in answer to prayer, of course). Since repentance hadn’t been an answer too much of anything in my life, I couldn’t imagine that it would really help anyone else. Besides, I felt reluctant to encourage others to do something that I wasn’t doing myself.

Not wanting to add hypocrisy to my list of *I’ll-repent-about-them-someday* sins, I began afresh, with renewed interest, to see what the Bible really has to say about

repentance. Wanting to understand what such a discouraging subject could offer to people who needed hope for the difficulties in their lives, I carefully looked up every passage I could find that used the word, *repentance*. What I discovered has forever changed the way I view repentance...and my eagerness to repent.

RETURNING

As we have all heard, *repentance* can be translated “to turn around, to turn back.” It implies feeling sorrow for what has been done. I had always presumed that if I were really sorry, I would turn around and do the opposite of what I had been doing. I would be sorry enough to stop my sin. Repentance struck me as an impersonal command, “Hey, you! Turn around and quit your sinning!” It was like a drill sergeant in boot camp. Unless I manifested a complete, immediate turnaround, I couldn’t claim to have honestly repented.

I had interpreted the angry ‘Turn-or-Burn’ placards from my college days as “If you haven’t completely turned away from your sin—maintaining an unblemished track-record of never, ever committing it again—you have not repented (“You liar, you cheat, you hypocrite”). Because I had not been able to stop my laziness completely, I presumed that I had not really repented. I wasn’t sincere. I didn’t, in actual fact, want to give up my sinful ways, etc.

But *repent* can also imply “to fetch back home.” Repenting is not just turning around at God’s barked command, without direction, without any sense of welcome or invitation. Rather, repentance is an invitation by God to turn our lives around and set our hearts toward home. It is the perfect answer for people who are lost, or who are out of touch with the person God wants them to be—and who they want to be themselves. I began to see that repentance is more of an invitation than a command. It’s not just something He wants me to do, but a process He wants to get started...so that He can complete it!

Repentance does not mean to abase ourselves, sob and acknowledge to God how disgusting we are. Repentance is a cry from the lost, acknowledging when we find ourselves living some place (somehow) where we do not belong. “Oh my goodness. I’m headed in the wrong direction. This car is out of control. I’m trying as hard as I can, but I cannot get the wheel to turn back on the road.”

Repenting is the first step in the return-to-owner process—of God re-establishing His original design in our lives. He longs to “get us back” to how we were meant to be. He wants us returned from the scattered places where we’ve ended up living. Just

as He promised to gather Israel from all the nations where their sins had driven them into exile,^{vii} He wants to bring us back to a place of His promise.

EXCHANGING

When I travel to a foreign country, my first order of business after retrieving my luggage is to take a small amount of cash to the exchange bureau to convert it into the local currency for taxi fares, tips and other incidentals. The process I go through is always the same: I put my money on the counter and ask for the currency of the country where I will be conducting my business. Without exception, the teller whisks away my U.S. dollars and replaces them with Swiss francs, Thai baht, etc.

That is the perfect picture of the power of repentance. It gets stuff changed!

To *repent* can also be translated “to convert” or “to exchange.” Nations conduct business in their own currency, and if I want to pay a taxi driver in Estonia, I cannot use Philippine Pesos. No matter how many hundreds of thousands Vietnamese Dong I might offer a street vendor in Amsterdam for freshly baked caramel waffle cookies, the unrecognized paper bills will prompt curiosity, but no sale. The Euro and the Dong are worlds apart—as foreign to one another as each nation’s language. To understand one another, a traveler from Greece and a tourist from Korea will need a translator. If they are staying at the same hotel in Sochi, Russia, they will both need to exchange their own currencies for Rubles.

*Instead of your
shame you will
have a double
portion, and
instead of
humiliation they
will shout for joy
over their portion.
Therefore they
will possess a
double portion in
their land,
everlasting joy
will be theirs.
Isaiah 61:7*

God’s ways and thoughts are not like ours.^{viii} You might say our worlds operate under two completely foreign governments and economies. We have different customs and different ways of approaching life. If we use an analogy for our natural thoughts, habits and sins, we could call them the currency of our lives. We have learned how to get things by behaving and thinking in various ways, like different denomination bills.

In repentance, we take the “currency” of the world—thoughts, feelings, desires and actions in our lives, which are wrong—and “exchange” them for the currency of the Kingdom in the same way we convert dollars for Bulgarian Leva. Repentance trades in one for the other. Earthly money will get us nowhere in God’s Kingdom. In fact, our natural money is illegal tender in His land, and repentance is the only way to convert earthly

currency, to transform evil thoughts and actions (like my sin) into Kingdom thought and behavior.

The Lord is eager to make that exchange. He knows we cannot conduct much Kingdom enterprise with our foreign monies. He wants to convert our ways and thoughts into His. See in this, I began to realize that repentance was not the difficult workout experience I thought it had to be to accomplish anything. When I go to the money exchange counter at banks all over the world, the process of converting my money is fairly quick and painless. Whatever money I slide under the window is quickly whisked away into a drawer. Shortly thereafter, the teller slides an equivalent amount of local currency back to my side of the window.

If I walk away from the bank and then remember that I'll need more cash for the taxi and a meal, I can return to the teller without penalty or shame. There is no limit to the number of times I can ask to change my money. The exchange takes place every time I lay my dollar bills under the window. Without conversion—an exchange from one currency to the other—our thoughts and ways will not be able to match up to His. The good news is that the exchange rate is two-for-one!^{ix}

RESTORATION

According to Psalm 19:7, the word of God is so perfect that it has the power to “repent (restore) the soul.”^x God designed each of us according to a master plan in His heart. Sin has disfigured that original design. We aren't what we were meant to be. I certainly was not the husband of God's intent (or my wife's dreams). I wasn't even the husband that *I wanted* to be.

It began to dawn on me that some of the “turning around” that was supposed to accompany repentance might not be accomplished only by my struggling effort to reform myself. Perhaps the Lord would accomplish portions of it for me. Here, at least, was the promise that the word of God would be doing some of the work. I could see that the goal of repentance was not just to stop my sinning, but also to restore me to my God-intended condition.

The more I meditated on “the kindness of God” that leads us to repentance,^{xi} the more I began to think of repentance in terms of 5th grade math. My 5th grade teacher had a policy that we could turn in our work before it was actually due and he would mark the incorrect answers—not where we made a mistake in the working out of the problem, he just marked the ones that needed to be re-done.

That is repentance. It can be translated “to reconsider, to come to different conclusions.” Repentance is the opportunity to have my answers checked before they are due. And I get to re-consider how I arrived at them.

Another way to think about repentance is “leaving behind” the ways of the world in order to “turn to” the ways of the Lord. It is putting down the cup of poisoned wine offered to us by the world and taking up, instead, the wine of great abundance and life that the Lord has already poured for us. As I’ve said before, repentance always involves an exchange—one thing for another. It is not merely a *turning from* something wrong; it’s a *turning to* that which is right.

Repentance is never haphazard. Without a deliberate action of turning to that “something right,” we will again find ourselves led to direct confrontation with that “something wrong.” If all we do is try to turn away from something, we will keep coming back to it—but if we turn to Him and His righteousness, we will find a more, sure and lasting escape. God offers us an exchange, a trade-in—not just a turning away.

WELCOMING

Thus, a more accurate picture of repentance emerges in our understanding of God ‘welcoming us home’ and offering to exchange our filthy rags for a fine, new set of clothes. Repentance is not trudging off to some isolated, distant spot to prepare for a flogging by a stern and angry God. What I had been doing for so many years was not true repentance; it was religious counterfeit.

True repentance is what the prodigal son stumbled into—not the rehearsed speech on his way home to his father, but the unexpected welcome and celebration he received when he arrived back home (Luke 15:11-32). He was convicted and came to his senses in the pigsty, but he could not repent there. He had to return home. Only at home could his rags be replaced with rich garments. Only there could his father give him a new ring of authority and family privilege. The repentance was the going home—not the many previous attempts he made to straighten himself out while he was living far away from home.

Most of us try to repent in the pigsty—we keep living there, telling ourselves we really should not be living there. But we can’t truly repent in the pigsty. We must go home to Father God and simply acknowledge we have been living in the wrong place. For most of my Christian life, I had confused *reforming* with *repenting*.

TRUE REPENTANCE

When faced with my gross sins of selfishness and laziness (or with numerous other consuming failures in my past and present), I had vague fears that the reason I never stopped my sinning was because I had never truly repented. How can we know if we are repenting, or just trying to fool God and ourselves? The Bible even answers that old question very pointedly.

It is vital for our own spiritual wellbeing to discern true repentance. But it is also essential for us as we become involved in other people's lives and are given the opportunity to counsel them. We will meet people who claim to have tried to live according to God's ways, and yet things in their lives have not changed. It seems to them that God's ways do not work. It is at this point that we are tempted, in our desire to be compassionate, to make excuses for God as if He had failed them or lied to them. So, what are some of the traits of true repentance?

SPIRITUAL GROWTH

According to Acts 26:18, true repentance will always lead to increased spiritual inheritance. We will inherit more of what God has in mind for us—more understanding of His ways, more resilience against sin, etc. People who never seem to make any progress in the way of the Lord—people who get saved and move on a bit, only to get stuck in an eternal limbo, are usually people who do not make it a regular practice to repent. Repentance will always bear the fruit of increased spiritual growth and inheritance. If we want more of the way of the Lord in our lives, we will want to repent more and more.

Repenting of and turning from our sin will ultimately reveal other sins, which have been blocking our growth. As I began repenting of my laziness, I discovered other patterns of selfishness in my life, which were offshoots of what I had previously thought were only an isolated, particular shortcoming in my character. Exchanging more of our old lives and submitting them to the “conversion table” of the Kingdom makes us more accustomed to perceive things spiritually and, thereby, better able to comprehend the riches of God's inheritance bequeathed to us. Thus, real repentance points us to previously hidden sins that we will want to get rid of in our lives, and repentance then leads us to new truths we will want to see operating in our lives.

TRUST

Another indication of true repentance is demonstrated by our choice to put our complete trust in God's way. Mark 1:15 says to repent, and put your trust in the *good news*. We have not fully repented unless we are willing to embrace the Lord's way and

trust that His way *will* work. If we admit to doing something wrong, but at the same time continue to take things into our own hands in an attempt to secure ourselves, we are only repenting halfway.

Here is how partial repentance speaks: “OK, God, I’ll stop doing that. I will not do that which You have just convicted me about. But I do not really trust that Your way—the way You say I should do things—will get me everything that I need. So, I’ll carry on with my contingency plan just in case You do not come through for me.”

Most sin is the consequence of us attempting to get for ourselves what we think we want, need or deserve. For me, it was relaxation and rest. Since God is not “delivering the goods” we crave, we put our trust in our own resources and ourselves. Only when we come to trust the Lord to give us each day what we need, can sin be effectively exchanged for righteousness through faith and repentance. Repentance says, “Yes, Lord, I’ll do it Your way. I’ll trust that You are going to come through for me.”

Thus, our hearts are truly repentant only when we so cling to the Lord that we become inclined to the belief that He really is our *only* hope. As long as we leave room for other options, other alternatives—including giving up on God—then we have not repented. Repentance is not something we try for a while to see if it works. In repentance, we give up our right to have other options.

CONVICTION

So wonderful is repentance that it is spoken of in Scripture as a God-granted gift (Acts 11:18), which always follows *conviction*. Like so many other Christian words, “conviction” has been spiritualized to the point where its meaning hardly registers with us at all. If someone is convicted of a crime, it means he or she has been caught, tried and pronounced guilty. We cannot repent of something we cannot openly admit we are *doing*, and we cannot repent of something we do not believe is *wrong*. Not until we have been caught, tried and pronounced guilty (in our own hearts and minds) can we repent.

Repentance says, “I did wrong.”

Repentance is not merely being sorry for getting caught, either. It is not merely confession. It is taking responsibility for our own actions and bearing the consequences of those actions. Repentance never makes excuses. It never blames or says things like, “The only reason I think that way is because of how I was raised...” or “They made me...” Repentance never tries to make a case for self-defense nor does it try to explain away its guilt.

When God convicts or corrects us, He always does so in *hope*—that is, instead of focusing on what we have not done, or, what we have not been that we should have been—godly conviction points to what we can start doing and start becoming. Conviction is good news. It says, “Here is one more detail of death in your life which you can *exchange, convert, or turn in* for another installment of life.”

This is why we should welcome conviction as the psalmist did:

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; try me and know my anxious thoughts; and see if there be any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.” ~Psalm 139:23-24

If I am deathly ill, I want the doctor to be able to diagnose my problem and start me on the road to recovery. In the same way, I want the Lord to convict me by pointing out my sin. Since sin can be forgiven, there is a cure for it.

Our desire to end up well must always be greater than the desire to be told that nothing is wrong. We must be more eager to be corrected than we are not to have been wrong, otherwise, we will miss our opportunity to be forgiven and healed.

Confession (acknowledgment) and repentance of sin are the provision for our growth and maturity. Those who think they no longer need both are called liars according to 1 John 1:10, and Jesus has nothing to say to them.

FALSE CONVICTION

As with the prodigal son, unless conviction takes place in the pigsty, we will not repent and go back home. Many people who claim they have been convicted have not really become convinced of their guilt. Without conviction convincing us of our guilt, we will tend to avoid the real issue. For heartfelt, genuine conviction, we can be tempted to substitute false and easy conviction. We plea bargain and admit to a lesser crime. Some of the more common pseudo-convictions people confuse with genuine conviction are:

“Poor Me”: This is said by people who want us to feel badly for them either because of the consequences they face as a result of their sin, or because of how terribly difficult the situation was that pushed them into the sin. They bemoan their condition before and after sin, and act like martyrs for whom we should feel sorry. The sin itself gets lost in the shuffle of self-pity.

True repentance is sorry only for the sin, and asks no sympathy for the sinner. God will grant mercy, but not excuses or exceptions.

“Whoops!”: People who say this feel badly that they got caught. Rather than coming openly and freely to confess their sin(s), they make full disclosure and demonstrate sorrow only *after* they have been found out. Once the sins they have been hiding are exposed, they regret it, but know they would continue to have done it if they hadn't been caught. They are upset because they were not careful enough.

True repentance, on the other hand, is eager to confess, and a repentant heart is grateful when its sins are found out. Real conviction has a much more difficult time registering in someone's heart *after* he or she is caught than it does *before* he or she is caught.

“What About...”: People under this false sense of conviction want to know when they will be off probation, when their ministry can resume, and exactly what is expected of them during their restoration period. They want to get beyond the inconvenience of their sins' consequences. They come wanting to negotiate a temporary contract, which will limit their disadvantages while they are undergoing rehabilitation. Their sentences often begin with, “I suppose I'll have to...” or “What about this—is this part of what I have to give up, too?”

True repentance, by contrast, is so consumed with the awful fact of what it already knows (the sin committed), that it cares to know nothing except the wonderful fact of Jesus' sacrifice. True repentance sits selflessly silenced and humbled by God's love, without trying to pin down an exact program or timing for restoration to ministry.

“Learned Lots”: You hear this mostly in people's testimonies of how they walked away from the Lord, lived in rebellion, enjoyed the pleasures of sin, then were finally restored back to God. Their conviction grows philosophical, and they try to convince themselves and others that they “learned a lot while away from God.” Through some glib reading of Romans 8:28, they try to minimize the loss that sin causes in their lives by marveling at how God can use even their sins for His purposes.

Conversely, true repentance sees no glory, no good, no advantage gained through sin. A truly repentant heart knows that compared to all we might have learned while walking *with* the Lord in obedience, we learn nothing of eternal value, nor do we produce any lasting fruit, while walking *away* from the Lord in rebellion. Obedience is always better than sacrifice (1 Samuel 15:22).

WHAT PREVENTS REPENTANCE

Isaiah 6:10 sheds further light on what real repentance is and why it seems so elusive for some people. God says a peculiar thing when He says,

“Render the hearts of this people insensitive (fat), their ears dull (heavy), and their eyes dim (besmeared), otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and return and be healed.”

This passage makes it sound almost as if God will be *forced* to forgive them if they repent. He seems to have no choice in the matter. When people have sensitized hearts, sensitized ears, and sensitized eyes, God forgives them. God will always remain true to His word. If the lack of any one of these qualities hinders repentance, what can we learn about our spiritual eyes, ears, and hearts that will help us repent eagerly and openly?

“Fat Heart”

A *sensitized* heart, we find, is the opposite of what the Bible calls a *fat, lusty, greasy* heart. An insensitive heart carries with it the idea of a drooling glutton who desires only to accumulate more and more for himself and who is never satisfied with what he has. The best visual picture I can give you is the character, “Jabba the Hut,” in Steven Spielberg’s movie, “The Return of the Jedi.” Whenever we discover such selfish greediness in our hearts—a wanting of this and that and everything else—we will not find ourselves repenting. Lusting and wanting to get for ourselves is the basis of most sin.

Repentance says “no” to ourselves. As soon as we give up our pursuit for ourselves, our hearts will become ready for repentance.

“Dull Ears”

Repentance also comes from a *sensitized* ear. Its opposite, a *dull* ear, is one that is heavy and overburdened, weighed down with so much “knowledge” that it cannot hear any more. If we ever come to the place where we think we have heard it all, then we are in danger. Our ears have become so filled up that we cannot hear another thing. We have lost our ability to be teachable, to be changed.

It is only when we conclude—*Maybe there is something more I haven’t heard before*—that we can come to a place of repentance. *Dull ears* are quick to decide, *I already know that*, but the knowledge never goes past their ears and into their lives.

Furthermore, *dull ears* are heavy ears which hear nothing but the sound of one's own breathing, and which get caught up in the plight and sorrow of one's own struggle to survive. Many cases of depression are rooted in self-pity, and are partially the consequence of having *dull ears*.

By no means am I implying that all or even most depression is caused by unwillingness to respond to correction. In fact, depression already has plenty of guilt associated with it. Depressed people don't need to be told that their depression is their fault. But sometimes, our refusal to receive correction can lead to depression. If people are willing to hear correction and respond to that correction in repentance, much of their depression will be eliminated.

Only with open ears that welcome outside perspectives and input will we repent. Once we think we know everything, we eliminate our opportunity to respond to voices of conviction in our soul. That false knowledge is a lie told to us to keep us from being released into fruitfulness.

"Dim Eyes"

Sensitized eyes are on God. *Dim eyes* are, conversely, narcissistic, and given to a kind of self-stimulation and self-gratification, like someone closing his eyes to concentrate on his own fantasies and imaginations. When our eyes become *dim*, we become centered on ourselves, and our own concerns. We become so focused upon meeting our own needs and desires, we cannot see anything else, not even God. *Dim eyes* view the process of repentance—a process meant to restore—as an undesirable event, which bothers self-sufficiency and the isolation of self.

Instead of wanting to repent, instead of delighting in the prospect of change, someone with *dim eyes* gives way to self-pity because it seems that God is requiring too much, or that He is asking him or her to give up too much. The essence of self-stimulation is giving yourself what you want, exactly how and when you want it. Wanting things our way will discourage repentance. People with *dim eyes* can often be heard complaining, "No one understands."

The Bible warns us about not wanting to follow sound doctrine—but wanting to have our ears tickled and to accumulate for ourselves teachers in accordance with our own desires (2 Timothy 4:3). If we find ourselves more interested in looking for someone who will agree with us than we are in finding someone who will tell us the truth, then our eyes have become *dim*.

People are truly repentant when they say, “I’m wrong . . . How do I not be wrong?” They do *not* try to justify themselves. They do not insist on their own terms and conditions. They do not resist the truth. They simply say, “I was wrong, and I don’t want to continue doing or being wrong, no matter what it costs me.”

THE FRUITFUL WORK OF REPENTANCE

Matthew 3:8-10 reveals another wonderful truth concerning repentance. As John the Baptist preaches about the coming of the Kingdom and about being baptized for the repentance of sins, he challenges the Pharisees and Sadducees:

“Therefore bear fruit in keeping with repentance; and do not suppose that you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father’; for I say to you that from these stones God is able to raise up children to Abraham. The axe is already laid at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

In other words, John is saying that the judgment of God will search us to the very roots of our hearts. If those roots do not bear the fruitfulness that comes from repentance, then we will be cut off at that point of barrenness and cast into the fire, away from God’s mercy and forgiveness.

Nevertheless, this frightening prospect has a promise-filled side, too. Repentance is not a superficial exercise. It is not accomplished simply by going through a ritual of religious motions. Rather, it is a sincere and purposeful endeavor, a continual process.

We often become discouraged about repentance because we forget that it is a *process*. The decision to repent happens at a particular point in time, but the changes in our behavior or attitude take place gradually. The fruit of repentance is the result of planting seeds of righteousness and then nurturing those seeds in order to reap a harvest of joy. It takes *time*. If we do not realize this truth, our discouragement will soon turn to hopelessness, and we will begin to withdraw in shame from the very One that can save us.

This is when the adversary usually enters the picture. He begins his strategy of condemnation and deception. He tells us the “truth” about ourselves—that we are indeed helpless, hopeless and *horrible*—and then he lies to us about God, saying that He is malicious, merciless and *angry*. If we do not understand the process of repentance, we will ultimately find ourselves estranged from God, isolated in our fear.

THE FRUITFUL PROCESS

So let us look at the process of repentance. In the beginning, God will convict us of *past* sins. He will cause us to look back at times in our past when we have done something wrong. He will convict us of that sin, and we will repent. The more He convicts us of that sin in our distant past, the more conscious we become of it. We become so painfully alert to that sin, that we start seeing it cropping up everywhere. The time-lapse shortens between committing the crime and being convicted of it.

Thus, we continue repenting not for the distant past, but for our recent past. Then God will take us to the next step where He convicts us while we are *in the midst* of doing something wrong. We easily misinterpret this progressive work of repentance as hypocrisy. We feel like the worst sinners imaginable because we are sinning even while we're being convicted.

The enemy pours on the persuasion to stop all this repentance nonsense. "Look," he says, "it is not working. You are a terrible Christian. Look what you are doing." Repentance has now progressed from concentration on something we *have* done to something we are *now* doing. That's where many Christians break off the fruitful process. They feel like they are hypocrites—they've been infected with the leaven of the Pharisees.

I discovered this principle working in my life. God alerted me to the awful fact of my selfish laziness in not helping my wife, Pamela, vacuum or change the baby's diapers. Many instances of past failure came to my mind. I was convicted and asked for forgiveness—I wanted to change. As time went along, I became acutely more aware of those selfish, slothful tendencies in the midst of what I was (or wasn't) doing.

From there, God began to convict me of the fact that I would be prone to selfishness in the future, and He asked, "What are you *going* to do?" At that point, I had the option of repenting of something I *would have done* if God had not convicted me. I could then exchange my wrongness for His righteousness. That is what changes our behavior. That is what it means to "[bring forth] bear fruit in keeping with repentance" (Matthew 3:8-10). Repentance moves us from acknowledging past sins, to confessing current sins, to repenting of future sin possibilities.

Suddenly, the change that had been happening in my heart as I had been repenting (and feeling like a hypocrite) produced a real change in my behavior—and in the baby's diapers. My repentance had been fruitful: it brought forth the exchange for which I had been longing. Since that victory over habitual laziness, I have been

discovering many more sins than I thought possible, but I have yet to find a sin, which is immune to the fruit-bearing process.

Repentance is a process. The more we repent, the closer the repentance comes to the very moment when we sin. With even more repentance, our hearts and eyes and ears are sensitized while we sin, and eventually we repent *before* we sin, and that sin ceases to have its death-hold on us. If we do not repent of the *past*, we will never learn to repent in the *present*, and we will never learn to repent in the *future*. The way God has made for us to get out of sin is repentance—and God's way works.

ⁱ 1 John 1:8-10

ⁱⁱ Acts 3:19; 11:18; 26:18

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 1:1-4

^{iv} Jeremiah 8:6

^v Ezekiel 18:30

^{vi} Romans 7:14-23

^{vii} Ezekiel 28:25

^{viii} Isaiah 55:8

^{ix} Isaiah 40:2

^x Psalm 19:7

^{xi} Romans 2:4