



# What Does It Mean To Repent?

DISCOVERING GOD'S WORD BIBLE STUDY SERIES

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What does it mean to repent? “Repentance” is a term that is used frequently in religious discussions, but is rarely (if ever) used elsewhere. Consequently, we need to take some time to learn about the true meaning of repentance in order to properly obey the commandment of God.

## **Repentance Is A Commandment Of God**

Repentance is not just something which is good for an individual to do. Instead, repentance is an essential element to obtaining the salvation God has provided through Jesus Christ! Consider the following passages in which God commands repentance – and also note what repentance accomplishes.

(1) Luke 13:3, 5: “I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish...I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.” Jesus clearly commands repentance – twice in this passage. He states that repentance is necessary in order to avoid perishing (to be understood in a spiritual sense).

(2) Acts 2:38: “Then Peter said to them, ‘Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.’” This command comes as Peter and the other apostles are asked, “Men and brethren, what shall we do?” (Acts 2:37). Notice that these individuals must repent (and be baptized) in order to have their sins forgiven. Without repenting, they would die in their sins!

(3) Acts 3:19: “Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.” Once again, repentance (and conversion) is necessary in order to have sin “blotted out.” Note that the phrase translated by the NKJV as “blotted out” refers to sin being entirely wiped away!

(4) Acts 17:30-31: “Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world

in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.” As Paul had been preaching to idolaters in the city of Athens, he informs them (at the conclusion of his speech) that God commands everyone to repent – in light of the fact that He has appointed a Day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by Jesus Christ.

Clearly, God commands repentance. All of these passages would help us to understand that we cannot be saved without repenting of our sins. This is a necessary step in God’s plan of redemption. Then, in addition to the repentance that is necessary in order to become a Christian, God has also commanded repentance whenever Christians sin.

Acts 8:22 records such a commandment. This instruction is in response to Simon’s sin. In the context, Simon had just become a Christian (in verse 13), but he went back into sin. In order to be forgiven of his sin, Peter told him, “Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.” Other examples of Christians being commanded to repent of their sin can be found in Revelation 2-3.

### **Things Involved In Repentance**

So, we can plainly see that God commands repentance any time there is sin. A failure to repent in any of these circumstances is a failure to please God. But, what exactly is repentance? What things are involved in repenting? Let’s consider.

First, consider a few things repentance is *not*. (1) Repentance is not just being sorry. A person could be sorry for sinning, but fail to make any changes to his/her life. (2) Repentance is not just a changed life. An individual could change his/her life around (even for the better), but fail to make that change for the right reasons or with the right motivation. (3) Repentance is not just recognizing a wrong and asking for forgiveness. A person could recognize a wrong and pray for forgiveness, but not be sincere or truly desire to make any real changes.

*True repentance is produced by godly sorrow.* True godly sorrow is necessary in order for true repentance to occur. Now, godly sorrow is not repentance (of itself), but, it is a necessary prerequisite to repentance.

As Paul had been dealing with sin in the Corinthian church, he writes concerning the repentance that had taken place, in 2 Corinthians 7:9-10: “Now I rejoice, not that you were made sorry, but that your sorrow led to repentance. For you were made sorry in a godly manner, that you might suffer loss from us in nothing. For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.”

A contrast is made in this text between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. Worldly sorrow could be sorrow focused on earthly things. It sorrows because your reputation becomes tarnished, you experience humiliation, or other physical consequences. However, worldly sorrow does not produce true repentance!

Instead, godly sorrow does produce repentance. Godly sorrow is not focused on the physical cost of your sin; but, on the spiritual cost! Godly sorrow results whenever you recognize that you have sinned against God and when you recognize the spiritual consequences of your sin! This is the only kind of sorrow that will bring about true repentance.

*True repentance is a change in mind.* While true repentance is produced by godly sorrow, true repentance is actually a change in mind. The Greek word for repentance means to change one's mind for the better (see *Thayer's Greek Definitions*). It is also to have an abhorrence for the sin that you have been involved in and make a determination to live differently.

So, true repentance involves a change in the way that you view sin. For instance, you may have once believed that it was OK to lie. However, whenever you learn the truth that the Bible condemns the practice of lying (see Revelation 21:8), you experience godly sorrow for your sin against God and determine to put away all lying from your life – determining to only speak the truth in the future. You determine that lying is contrary to God's standard of righteousness and that it will result in your eternal destruction in Hell. So, you make a determination that you will change this practice going forward.

*True repentance produces fruit.* Notice, then, that repentance is this kind of change in your mind toward sin (generally or toward a specific sin). Repentance, itself, is not actually changing your actions. However, true repentance will produce a changed way of living.

For instance, the one who repented of the sin of lying made a change in his/her mind and a determination to stop that sinful action. This was repentance. However, if the repentance is true and sincere, this repentance will produce results that are in accordance with the repentance. So, the next time a situation comes along in which he/she would have chosen to lie previously, he/she now chooses to tell the truth.

This is an example of the “fruit of repentance” the Bible talks about. In Matthew 3:8, John (the Baptist) taught: “Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.” In Acts 26:20, Paul said that he taught individuals that they “should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.” Or, in the language of the NIV, that they “demonstrate their repentance by their deeds.” True repentance will produce this kind of change in action!

### **Examples Of Repentance**

Finally, the Scriptures do not just tell us about the need to repent and help us to understand some things involved in repentance. Instead, the Scriptures also demonstrate true repentance.

Paul is, perhaps, the greatest example of repentance we can find in the Scriptures. In Acts 8:1-4 and Acts 9:1-2, we can see Paul's former work of persecuting Christians. However, after the events of Acts 9:3-18 (regarding his conversion to Christ), Paul lived a significantly different life. He would even write concerning the fact that he had been a sinner; but, that he had now made a

great change to be a proclaimer of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In fact, he would even endure great persecution for the cause of Jesus Christ himself.

Next, consider the example of the Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians 6:9-10, Paul wrote: “Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God.” Then, notice what Paul states in the next verse (vs. 11): “And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.” So, they had been involved in all of these sinful things at some time. However, when they heard God’s word, they believed and were baptized (Acts 18:8). Thus, they turned away from their sins and determined to live their lives for the Lord.

Ephesians 4:17-32 also helps us to understand what repentance is. The passage describes how that we must “put off” the “old man” of sin, be renewed in the spirit of our minds, and “put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (verses 22-24). The passage then continues to demonstrate repentance with examples of sinful activity that is “put off” and godly actions that are “put on” in their places. Take some time to read this passage in Ephesians 4:17-32 to glean a greater understanding of repentance.

## **Conclusion**

If you have sinned, God calls upon you to repent. You cannot be pleasing to God without turning away from your sin and turning to Him. God “now commands all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30)!

### **Discovering God’s Word Bible Study Series**

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