

Text: 2 Corinthians 7:8-16

Title: True Repentance

Truth: Turning away from sin is a central part of the Christian life.

Date/Location: May 9, 2025 at FBC

Introduction

In verses 2 through 7, we learned what it looks like to respond well to correction or criticism. The right response involves three things, of which we looked at the first two:

1. Respond with an open heart toward your “mentor.”
2. Recognize the challenge that correction is to your mentor.
3. React with genuine repentance.

On that last point: The recipient of Christian correction must **react with genuine care toward the person wronged and repentance over the sin** that is at issue. What Paul heard from Titus was that the church had reacted that way, with:

- A. Earnest desire or longing. Without knowing the exact situation, it is difficult to say with 100% certainty the exact nuance of what is going on, but likely a renewed affection for Paul and desire to see him after this episode of trouble between them.
- B. Mourning or sorrow. Under Paul’s influence, they realized that they had been wrong. Their poor behavior, perhaps including disloyalty to Paul and the gospel, temptation to follow some false “gospel peddlers” (2:17), and/or the toleration of sin in the church, required repentance. They mourned over their sin.
- C. Zeal or ardent concern. They were zealous for Paul and would now come to his defense if anyone tried to discredit him. Instead of disowning Paul, they were earnest to get things right.
- D. All of this caused Paul relief and joy. They were now not defensive, offended, arrogantly dismissive, blaming others, or some other kind of proud response.

In the upcoming verses, 8-16, God tells us more about what real repentance looks like.

I. Repentance at the Start of the Christian Life

- A. Some time ago, I expressed the definition repentance this way:
“Biblical repentance is a change of mind regarding the matter of sin generally and sins specifically. True repentance is a change of mind in which a person turns away from sin as a dominating principle in his life and instead turns to God as the dominating principle. The mindset after the change is that instead of allowing sin to reign, God should reign; instead of loving sin, one hates sin and loves God; instead of trusting in self, one trusts in Christ; instead of denying Christ, one receives Him. These are all descriptions of the kind of thought change that one experiences as part of salvation.”¹
- B. One of my theology teachers defined it this way: “Repentance is a change of mind away from sin and toward God. It is not merely a change of opinion. It is a change of view, feeling and purpose respecting God, sin, and the sinner himself. There are two general aspects of the turning/changing in the definition. (1) A change of mind away from sin... (2) A change of mind toward God. Paul recounted to the elders of the church at Ephesus his earlier ministry there by emphasizing that he did not shrink from declaring what was profitable, “solemnly testifying ... of repentance toward (eis) God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21).”²
- C. Another theologian defines it this way: “Repentance is godly sorrow for one’s sin together with a resolution to turn from it.”³
The only lack here is that the definition should mention repentance is *toward God, not merely away from sin*.
- D. Repentance touches the same parts of a person as faith does: the intellect, the emotion or affections, and the will.
1. You know what true right and wrong are and how sin is against God and it dishonors Him. In repentance, you *know for certain* that you have done wrong against God and others.

¹ Matt Postiff, *What Must I Do to be Saved?* p. 8.

² Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity: The Doctrines of Salvation, the Church, and Last Things*, vol. 3 (Allen Park, MI: DBTS, 2010), 63.

³ Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 950.³

2. You will experience contrition, genuine sorrow over the wrongs you have done, a regret for sin. You will sense or “feel” how bad it is. But note that sorrow for sin’s consequences is not repentance. There are many people who have a sense of shame or sorrow at being caught or having hurt someone, but that feeling does not point them toward God. It focuses on the self.
 3. You will desire to seek God’s pardon. You choose that what you loved before, or at least tolerated before, is now intolerable to you because it is intolerable to God and it dishonors God. You want a new heart, a new mind, a new way of thinking.
- E. Repentance is not work and is not separate from faith. When you trust in Christ, you turn from sin. When you understand that you have wronged God and experience contrition and choose to turn away from sin toward Jesus, that is what exercising repentant faith looks like. Repentance is an inner change, not an outer act or reformation. If real, it does *result* in outward change, but that change is not the repentance—rather, the change is a fruit of the repentance.
- F. Repentance is exercised by each person, but at the same time it is a grace gift given by God. In this manner it is similar to faith.

Apply it: At the center of the Christian message is this: “repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). At the root of our Christian lives stands “the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God” (Hebrews 6:1). “The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). In fact, the famous church in Antioch (modern Antakya, southern Turkey) was born when persecuted Christians traveled there “and a great number believed and turned to the Lord” (Acts 11:21).

II. Repentance Throughout the Christian Life

- A. After you start following Jesus, repentance does not differ significantly from what I have just described. It has all the same aspects, except that it is now not new to you. You have experienced it before, but perhaps now you are realizing something else that you have loved more than God. You are

battling against a sin in your mind or behavior that you have fallen to multiple times, or maybe for the first time. So, you once again turn away from the sin. Christian people repent all the time by admitting their wrongs through confession and receiving forgiveness directly from God. This is the normal reaction of a Christian to sinful behavior. If this behavior is not present, it is cause for great alarm.

- B. Paul is speaking about *this*—repentance in the life of Christians in the city of Corinth. They had come to faith in the Lord, and then came under the influence of false teachers, some of them turned away from Paul, and then they became upset when Paul confronted them about falling under the influence of the bad teachers.⁴
- C. True repentance is connected to initially becoming a Christian (v. 10) and then is part of the Christian’s daily life.

Apply it: Be sure that you are growing a healthy practice of repentance in your life, not becoming hard hearted, or ignoring your faults before God.

III. Sorrow that Leads to Repentance, v. 8-10

The interaction between Paul and the Corinthians was a dynamic situation where Paul initially felt very badly about it but later felt much better. Here is the flow of thought:

- A. Paul had to be a bit of a disciplinarian, or a “mentor” as we called him in our previous message. In this role, he had to frankly say some unpleasant things to correct their continuing toleration of a man who was causing trouble. In 2 Corinthians 2:5-11, we see that they had dealt with him appropriately, and now it was time to receive him back into the church. But when Paul sent the letter, he did not know all that, so had a measure of regret. For a while he wished he could undo what he had done. In other words, he had

⁴ In Christian teaching, you often hear about “false teachers.” A false teacher is anyone who teaches something contrary to the plain meaning of Scripture, especially in a matter central to the faith. For example, if someone says you can be saved by works, this is contrary to the often-repeated and easy-to-understand teaching that salvation is not of works (Ephesians 2:8-10, Titus 3:4-5).

second thoughts about writing it. Perhaps they would respond poorly because it was so direct and to the point.

- B. Paul's letter made the recipients sorry—it irritated or offended or distressed them. This was what Paul had feared would lead to a bad outcome.
- C. Later it became evident that their distress was only temporary.
- D. Paul's regret diminished to the point where he could later say he does not regret writing and in fact he rejoices. It was like a surgeon operating on a dear friend ...he has to cut and remove, or fuse, or screw things together and then stitch up. Then he prays the pain in recovery is not too bad, no infection sets in, and so forth. But in the end, when he sees the patient six or eight weeks later and everything is healed, the repair has worked, and the person is feeling much better, then he does not feel so pained in his heart but rather is happy that everything worked out. Initial pain, later gain.
- E. The Corinthians' distress was a godly sort of distress, so that Paul knew that they suffered no ultimate loss from him. He had not ultimately harmed them, so all was well. If you have to correct someone, think through this to make sure you are crafting your instruction with the right balance.
- F. Verse 10 summarizes the matter: sorrow that is focused on God leads to salvation (Acts 11:18, Luke 15:11-32); sorrow that is worldly leads to death. The classic example of the bad kind of sorrow is what we see in Judas the betrayer. After he took money to hand Jesus over to the authorities, he was "seized with remorse," returned the money, realized he had sinned, and then went and hanged himself. He did not turn to Jesus for forgiveness but instead tried to deal with the matter in his own way. His focus was self, not God.

Apply it: You can take a correction in a way where you get upset in a sinful way and do not listen, do not change, get angry at the person, and so forth. But that approach leads down the road to death. That is why you do not want to live a life where you do not repent—it is ultimately deadly. The right way to handle someone

confronting your sin is to recognize that you have wronged God and to turn away from that. This is what life is like on the narrow road that leads to God.

IV. The Fruits of Repentance, v. 11-12

John the Baptist told his audience to “bear fruits worthy of repentance,” and not to think, “we have Abraham as our father” as if they needed no repentance because of their special status with God. Verses 11-12 show us an example of fruitful repentance in the church. They exhibited...

- A. Diligence. They were eager to make amends and pursue what was right. They were not complacent in doing wrong.
- B. Clearing of themselves. They wanted to clear their names of wrongdoing.
- C. Indignation. Either they were upset at their own sin or perhaps they were upset about the guy who led them astray.
- D. Fear. They regained a healthy fear of God or perhaps were alarmed at themselves not noticing how far they had strayed from the right path.
- E. Vehement desire. They longed to restore their relationship with Paul. Their hearts were moving in the right direction, and Paul wanted them to complete that “opening of their hearts” toward him (remember 6:11-13 and 7:2).
- F. Zeal. They had affection for Paul and a wanted to protect him.
- G. Vindication. They wanted justice to be done. Instead of self-protection (lying to cover up) the sinner wants to bring it out in the open and be rid of the guilt. What is necessary they will do to achieve that.
- H. Proof that they were innocent. All the above shows that they were innocent—not of the original infraction but in how they handled it. It was now a non-issue between Paul and them.

Verse 12 explains that Paul wrote for this very reason—to get them to repent. He was not most concerned about the man who had done the wrong, nor the one who had suffered the wrong (probably

Paul). He was most concerned that the relationship between Paul and the whole church would be repaired. They would see he cares for them, and he would know their care for him. In the end, it was a test of their own hearts so that they could see where they 'were' with Paul.

Apply it: True repentance will look like what we have discussed above. It will not look like self-protection and justification and ignoring the issue and the like. You can observe about yourself if you are truly repentant or if you are just sad about sin's consequences.

V. The Joy and Comfort of Repentance, v. 13-16

- A. Paul now writes to finish this section about correcting the church by expressing his joy and comfort. How they responded warmed Paul's heart. It encouraged Timothy. He had been in trepidation that his and Paul's message would not be received well.
- B. Paul had previously told Titus that the Corinthians had demonstrated quite a change from before they began to follow Jesus. For a minute that was called into question, but in the end, Paul did not have to be embarrassed by what he said because they once again showed that they were genuine in their faith.
- C. As Titus reflected back on his experience there, the great fear he had turned into great affection and warmth. They had been kind to him. Things were turning around, though problems remained, as chapters 8 through 13 will demonstrate.
- D. Finally, as Paul thought about it, he could say that he rejoices that his confidence in them is restored. God's work goes on.

Apply it. The Scripture tells us that Jesus said there is joy in heaven over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:7, 10). And, *you* will have joy if you repent of your pride, self-seeking ambition, evil deeds, drunkenness, drugs, illegal activities, etc. Why? Because God designed us to live the best, most productive, most happy lives when we trust and obey Him. Apart from God, life has limited purpose and joy. Its temporary enjoyments run out quickly.

Conclusion

Lord, for anyone who has not yet turned away from their sin and guilt, I pray you will “open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in Me” (Acts 26:18).

For anyone who has followed Christ, would you help us to repent of any hatred in our heart, any selfishness toward our spouse or other family member, or whatever it is that your Spirit will point out to us in these moments. I pray you will “have confidence in us” and we thank you that ultimately that confidence is because of Christ’s life in His people.

When we feel badly about what we have done, may it not be in a way that leads us away from God. Instead, let us be genuinely sorry for sin, to hate it more and more, and to run away from it (Heidelberg Catechism, question 89).

MAP

References

Here are two helpful articles on godly and worldly grief.

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/worldly-grief/> One interesting point: ‘Ironically, if we say “I can’t forgive myself” it’s probably a sign of worldly grief—either unbelief in God’s promises and the sufficiency of Christ’s work on the cross, or regret that is merely focused on my loss and what other people think of me and not on my sin before a holy God.’ And another: ‘So, yes, God wants us to feel guilty when we are guilty...And when we are, he doesn’t want us to wallow in our sin. He wants us to run to the cross, confess it, be cleansed, and enjoy a clean conscience.’

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/godly-grief/> “There is an eternal difference between regret and repentance. Regret feels bad about past sins. Repentance turns away from past sins.” “Here’s one way to distinguish between worldly grief and godly grief: one mobilizes you into action and the other immobilizes you.”