

TRUE AND FALSE REPENTANCE

Charles G. Finney (1792-1875)

Introduction

"Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death. See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter." - 2 Corinthians 7:10-11 (NIV)

True repentance involves changing your mind about the nature of sin, followed by a corresponding change in how you feel about sin. Feelings result from thoughts. When this change of opinion produces a matching change of feeling—if the opinion is correct and the feeling matches—this is true repentance. The godly sorrow that God requires must come from His perspective on sin.

To someone who truly repents, sin looks completely different than it does to someone who hasn't repented. Instead of looking appealing or attractive, it looks disgusting and detestable. They're amazed that they ever could have wanted such a thing. Unrepentant sinners may look at sin and see that it will destroy them because God will punish them for it, but it still appears desirable in itself. They love it. If it could lead to happiness, they would never think of giving up their sin.

But someone who truly repents looks at their own behavior as completely hateful. They look back and say, "How detestable and deserving of hell my sin was."

Sinners don't understand why God threatens sin with such terrible punishment. They love it so much that they can't see why God thinks it deserves eternal judgment. When sinners are strongly convicted, they see sin the same way a Christian does. Then all they need is a corresponding change in feeling to be saved.

Many sinners think about their relationship to God and know they deserve eternal death, but their heart doesn't agree with God's judgment. This is the case with demons and evil spirits in hell. A change of opinion is essential to true repentance and always comes before it. There may be a change of opinion without repentance, but no genuine repentance happens without a change of opinion.

The unsaved sinner thinks it's completely unbelievable that sin deserves eternal death. They may be fully convinced, however, to see that sin hurts themselves and everyone else, and that there's no solution but complete abstinence. Even the devil knows this is true.

The word translated "repentance" implies a change of opinion about what sin justly deserves. The careless sinner has almost no correct ideas about the just punishment of sin. Even if they admit theoretically that sin deserves eternal death, they don't believe it. If they believed it, it would be impossible for them to remain a careless sinner. They're deceived if they think they honestly hold the opinion that sin deserves God's eternal wrath.

The truly awakened and convicted sinner sees clearly that sin deserves everlasting punishment from God. To them, it's simply a fact.

A CHANGE OF HEART

In true repentance, there must be a corresponding change of feeling. This change of feeling concerns sin in its nature, its functions, its tendencies, and its outcome. The person who truly repents not only sees sin as detestable, vile, and worthy of hatred, but actually hates it in their heart. A person may see sin as harmful and disgusting and still love it, desire it, and cling to it. But when they truly repent, they wholeheartedly hate and reject it.

This causes those tears of sorrow that sometimes pour out when Christians see sin in its true nature. When a believer views sin in relation to God, they feel like weeping. Springs of sorrow gush forth, and they want to get down on their face and pour out a flood of tears over their sin.

When a believer views sin in its tendencies, it awakens a burning desire to stop it and save people from their sins. Their heart is set on fire, and they pray with all their strength to pull sinners out of hell and save them from the awful consequences of sin. It's as if they saw everyone taking poison that would destroy them. They lift up their voice and scream, "Watch out!"

They have an intellectual conviction that sin deserves everlasting punishment and are amazed that God can forgive them. Instead of thinking it harsh or unkind that sinners are sent to hell, they're full of wondering praise that they themselves aren't sent to hell. And when they think of such a sinner being saved, they feel gratitude unlike any they've ever known. If your repentance is genuine, you have a conscious change of views and feelings about sin. Can you say this? Do you know that there has been a change in you and that old things have passed away and all things have become new?

When repentance is genuine, the prevailing tendency to sin again is gone. If you have truly repented, you don't love sin now. You don't abstain from it through fear or to avoid

punishment, but because you hate it. Look at the sins you used to practice. How do they appear to you? Do they look pleasant, and would you really love to practice them again if you dared? If you still have the desire to sin, you're only convicted. Your opinions of sin may be changed, but if the love of that sin remains, you're still an unrepentant sinner.

The Scripture says, "Godly sorrow produces repentance." Godly sorrow produces a change in behavior. Otherwise, it's like saying that repentance produces repentance. But repentance must be a change of mind that produces a change of behavior and leads to salvation. Have you abandoned your sins? Or are you still practicing them? If so, you're still a sinner. You may have changed your mind, but if you haven't changed your behavior, it's not godly repentance.

REPENTANCE LEADING TO SALVATION

Genuine repentance leads to confession and making things right. The thief hasn't repented while he keeps the money he stole. He may have conviction but no repentance. If he had truly repented, he would go and give back the money. If you have cheated anyone and don't restore what you've taken, or if you have injured anyone and don't undo the wrong, you haven't truly repented.

True repentance is a permanent change of character and conduct. The text says it's repentance "not to be regretted." True repentance is so deep and fundamental that the person never changes back again. People often quote it as if it read "repentance that doesn't need to be regretted." But it says, "not to be regretted" and is so thorough that there's no going back. The love of sin is totally abandoned. Any person who has truly repented has changed their views and feelings and will not change back to loving sin. The truly repentant sinner exercises feelings they will never regret—"leading to salvation." The very reason it ends in salvation is because it will not be regretted.

False repentance is the sorrow of the world: sorrow for sin arising from worldly considerations and motives connected with this present life. At best, false repentance cares about the person's own happiness in a future world and has no regard for the true nature of sin.

False repentance is not founded on a change of opinion like true repentance. A person may see the evil consequences of sin from a worldly point of view, and it may fill them with anxiety. They may see that it will greatly damage their reputation or endanger their life. If their secrets were discovered, they would be disgraced—this may fill them with fear and distress. People often have this kind of sorrow when some worldly consideration is at the bottom of it.

Selfishness is at the root of false repentance. It may be a strong feeling of regret in the person's mind. They see the evil consequences of their actions, and it makes them miserable or exposes them to God's wrath. Sin may hurt their family, friends, or themselves in time or eternity. All this is pure selfishness.

They may feel remorse of conscience—biting, consuming remorse—and have no true repentance. It may extend to deep and dreadful fear of God's wrath and the pains of hell but be purely selfish. All the while there may be no hatred of sin and no feelings of the heart convicted of the infinite evil of sin.

False repentance leaves the feelings unchanged and the desire to sin in the heart unbroken and uncontrolled. The feelings about the nature of sin are not changed, and the person still feels a desire to sin. They abstain from it not from hatred of it but from dread of its consequences.

The person who has exercised true repentance is willing to admit that they have repented and that they were a sinner. The person who falsely repents resorts to excuses and lies to cover their sins and is ashamed of their repentance. They will cover up their sins with a thousand apologies and excuses, trying to smooth them over and diminish their enormity. If they speak of their past conduct, they always do it in the gentlest and most favorable terms.

REPENTANCE LEADING TO DEATH

False repentance leads to death. It makes people commit one sin to cover up another. Instead of that open-hearted breaking forth of humility and honesty, you see a half-hearted confession that confesses nothing.

Are you ashamed to talk about your sins? If so, then your sorrow is only worldly sorrow. Often sinners avoid conversation about their sins yet call themselves anxious seekers, expecting to become Christians. The same kind of sorrow is found in hell. No doubt all those wretched inhabitants of the pit wish to get away from God's sight. No such sorrow is found among the saints in heaven.

Open, genuine sorrow is consistent with true happiness. The saints are happy, yet have a deep, undisguised remorse for sin. But this worldly sorrow is ashamed of itself and is mean and miserable—its end is death.

The change produced by worldly sorrow extends only to those things about which the person has been strongly convicted. The heart is not changed. You will see them avoid only those obvious sins about which they have been counseled.

Watch a young convert. If they're deceived, you will find only a partial change in their conduct. They're reformed in certain things, but they continue to practice many wrong things. If you become closely acquainted with them, you will find them strict and sharp-eyed about certain things but far from showing a Christian spirit toward all sin.

Usually, the change produced by false repentance is temporary even in those things which are reformed. The person is continually falling back into old sins. The desire to sin is not gone—only checked and restrained by fear. As soon as they have hope, are attending church, and get built up so that their fears are relieved, you will see them gradually returning to their old sins.

This was the difficulty with the house of Israel that made them constantly return to idolatry and other sins. They had only worldly sorrow. You see it everywhere in the Church. People are reformed for a time and are brought into a congregation, but then they fall back into their old sins. They call it "getting cold" or backsliding, but the truth is, they always loved sin.

This is the foundation of all those flashes and starts in religion that you see so much of. People are awakened and convicted, but soon they settle down in false security and away they go. Perhaps they may keep their guard up and won't be kicked out of church, but if the foundations of sin are not broken up, they will return to their old ways.

A true convert's most obsessive sins before conversion are the furthest from them now. They're least likely to fall into their old besetting sin because they hate it most. But if they're deceived and worldly minded, they always tend toward the same sins. The fountain of sin is not broken up. They have not purged wickedness from their heart but have harbored sin in their heart the whole time.

BONDAGE AND LEGALISM

The change produced by false repentance is not only partial and temporary, it's also forced and constrained. The reformation of someone who has true repentance is from the heart. In them the Bible promise is fulfilled. They actually find that wisdom's "ways are pleasant ways, and all her paths are peace" (Proverbs 3:17). They experience that the Savior's yoke is easy and His burden is light. They have felt that God's commandments are not burdensome but joyful. "They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the honeycomb" (Psalm 19:10).

But this fake kind of repentance is very different: it's a legalistic repentance, resulting from fear and not love. Selfish repentance is anything but a free, voluntary change from sin to obedience. If you have this kind of repentance, you will find that you're conscious that you

abstain from sin not because you hate it but for other reasons. You're more motivated by the warnings of conscience or the fear that you will lose your soul, your hope, or your reputation than from hatred of sin or love of God.

Such people always make excuses for sin, avoid duty, and think there's no great harm in doing as they do. They love their sins. If there isn't some scriptural command from God that they dare not resist, they will continue in sin.

This is not so with true repentance. If something seems contrary to the great law of love, the person who has true repentance will hate it and avoid it whether they have a direct command from God for it or not. They see it's contrary to the law of goodness, and they would no more do it than they would blaspheme God, steal, or commit any other terrible sin. The person who has true repentance doesn't need a "thus says the Lord" to keep them from oppressing their fellow human beings.

False repentance leads to self-righteousness. A person may know that Jesus Christ is the only Savior of sinners and may claim to believe in and rely on Him alone for salvation. But they're actually placing ten times more reliance on their reformation than on Jesus Christ for their salvation. And if they would watch their own heart, they would know it. They may say they expect salvation through Christ, but they're really building their own righteousness.

They assume their worldly sorrow to be true repentance, and they trust in it. They take it for granted that Jesus will save them because they have had sorrow about their sins, although they're not conscious that they have never felt any resting in Christ. They felt sorrow, then got relief and felt better. Now they expect to be saved by Christ, when their very consciousness will teach them that they have never relied on Him.

The person who has this kind of sorrow becomes harder in heart in proportion to the number of times they exercise such sorrow. If they have strong emotions of conviction but their heart is not broken, the springs of feeling dry up and their heart becomes more difficult to reach.

A real Christian who has truly repented is different. Every time you bring the truth to them, they become more easily affected, excited, and broken under God's blessed Word. Their heart gets into the habit of going along with the convictions of their understanding, and they become as teachable as a little child.

A HARDENING OF HEART

Churches—or individual members—who have only worldly repentance pass through a revival, get stirred up, and then grow cold again. Let this be repeated, and you will find them

more and more difficult to be roused. Soon they become as hard as stone, and nothing can ever rally them to a revival again.

On the other hand, some churches and individuals experience true repentance. Let them go through successive revivals, and you will find them growing more and more tender. When they hear the trumpet blow for a revival, they will respond instantly and be ready for the work.

The distinction between true and false repentance is as broad as between light and darkness. The principle is illustrated in sinners who, after passing through repeated revivals, will scoff and criticize. Although the heavens hang with clouds of mercy over their heads, they reject it. If they don't have true repentance, every fresh excitement hardens the heart and makes them more difficult to be reached by the truth.

Some people are thrown into distress whenever the truth is flashed upon their minds. They may not have as much conviction as the real Christian, but the real Christian is filled with peace at the very time their tears are flowing from conviction of sin. And each repeated season of conviction makes them more and more watchful, tender, and careful, until their conscience becomes so sensitive that the very appearance of evil will offend it. But the other kind of sorrow, which does not lead to true rejection of sin, leaves the heart harder than before and soon sears the conscience like a hot iron.

False repentance is sure to be regretted. You will soon find these people becoming ashamed of the deep feelings that they had. They don't want to speak of them, and if they do talk of them, it's always lightly and coldly. Perhaps they bustled about during the time of revival and appeared as busy as anybody. Very likely they were among the extremes in everything that was done. But now the revival is over, and you find them opposed to new measures, changing back, and ashamed of their zeal. In fact, they regret their repentance!

After they have joined a church, they will be ashamed of their public repentance. When the height of the revival has passed, they will begin to talk about being "too enthusiastic" and the necessity of being more sober and consistent.

You sometimes find people who claim to be converted in a revival turning against the very measures, means, and doctrines by which they claim to have been converted. Not so with the true Christian. They're never ashamed of their repentance. The last thing they would ever think of being ashamed of is the excitement they felt in a revival.

Many people have mistaken conviction for conversion and the sorrow of the world for that godly sorrow that "brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret." I am convinced, after years of observation, that this is the reason for the present deplorable state of the Church all over the world.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

Many sinners think it's a great trial to give up their ungodly companions and their sins. If they had true repentance, they wouldn't think it any burden to give up their sins. When I first saw young people becoming Christians and joining the Church, I thought it was a good thing because their souls would be saved and they would get to heaven. But at the time, repentance seemed to be a very sorrowful thing. I never dreamed then that these young people could ever be truly happy.

It's very common for people who know that Christianity is good to think they can't be happy in the Church. They don't understand that true repentance leads to hatred of those things that were formerly loved. Sinners don't see that when their young friends become true Christians, sinful amusements are crucified.

People who experience false repentance don't know what it is to enjoy Christianity. They're not cheerful and happy. They're grieved because they have to withdraw from so many things they love or because they have to give so much money. They're in the fire all the time. Instead of rejoicing in every opportunity of self-denial and rejoicing in truth, the plain truth distresses them. Why? Because their hearts don't love to work for God. If they loved to do their duty, every ray of light that broke in upon their minds from heaven would be welcomed and would make them happier.

Perhaps you think I suppose all true Christians are perfect. There is a radical difference between a backslidden Christian and a hypocrite who has returned to the world. The hypocrite loves the world and enjoys sin when they return to it. They may have fear, remorse, and worry about the loss of reputation, but after all, they enjoy sin.

The backslidden Christian is different. They lose their first love, then they fall prey to temptation and enter into sin. But they don't love it. It's always bitter to them, and they feel unhappy and homesick. They have, at the time, no Spirit of God to keep them from sin, but they don't love it. They're unhappy, and they feel like a wretch. They're as different from the hypocrite as can be. They can never again enjoy sin or delight in the pleasures of the world. Never again can they drink wickedness like water. As long as they continue to wander, they're miserable.

Convicted sinners are afraid to pledge themselves to give up their sins. They tell you they can't promise to do it because they're afraid they won't keep the promise. They love sin. The drunk knows that they love strong drink. Although they may be forced to abstain from it, they still crave it. Likewise, the convicted sinner loves sin, and their hold on sin has never been broken—they dare not promise to give it up.

Sinners who have worldly sorrow can now see where the difficulty lies and why they are not converted. Their intellectual views of sin may be such that if their hearts corresponded, they would be Christians. Perhaps they think this is true repentance. If they were truly willing to give up all sin, they would not hesitate to pledge themselves to it and have all the world know that they had done it.

If you are willing to give up sin, you are willing to promise to do it and willing to have it known that you have done it. But if you resist conviction and still love your sins, all your convictions will not help you. They will only sink you deeper in hell for resisting them.

Let us pray that this is the evidence that our repentance is genuine: "See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter" (2 Corinthians 7:11).