

# It Is Written

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## True Repentance

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The story of the last few hours of the life of Jesus is familiar to most of us, and you may remember that when Jesus was taken away to be tried, Peter followed Jesus at a distance, trying to draw no attention to himself and hoping no one would know who he was. It didn't work. Three times, someone asked Peter about him being one of the disciples, or declared plainly that he was; but Peter denied the charge all three times, fulfilling the words of Jesus that Peter would, in fact, deny Him. Luke's account tells us that, after this last denial, "the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter" (Luke 22:60, 61). It was then that Peter remembered what Jesus had said about his denials, and "Peter went out and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:61, 62).

We must not stop with this part of the story of Peter, though, else we miss his demonstration of what true repentance actually is. You see, it was not enough that Peter "wept bitterly" to demonstrate he was truly and actually sorry for his denial of Jesus; he now needed to prove it by what he did after the tears were dried. And Peter did prove himself within just a few days by standing with the other disciples before a multitude of people in Jerusalem and boldly proclaiming Jesus as the Christ and Son of God (Acts 2:11-36). He continued to prove himself by taking the word to the Gentiles (Acts 10) and by encouraging and exhorting disciples all over the world and throughout all time by the letters he wrote. In one of those letters, Peter admonished all disciples to "sanctify the Lord God in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear" (1 Pet. 3:15). It is evident that Peter's repentance was genuine, without a doubt, because he never again considered denying his discipleship, and instead encouraged believers to boldly stand in the face of persecutions.

Peter's example of repentance is one that should teach us some important lessons about what true repentance is, and what we find when we consider his example is that it is something quite different than what we often see today. Many times, we see people who are caught in sin or wrongdoing immediately and repeatedly express their ostensible regrets and we see tears and hear some sobbing to portray their supposed remorse. We are often drawn into the outward show, convinced of their remorse, only to be blindsided later when they express words that reveal their true lack of remorse, and disdain for those foolish enough to have believed them. The reality in such situations is that there is really no regret or remorse for a wrong committed, and thus no true repentance, either.

True repentance, by definition, is in the English language "deep sorrow, compunction, or contrition for a past sin, wrongdoing, or the like" [Random House Dictionary]. The Greek word translated as repentance in the New Testament is [*metanoia*] and means "a change of mind," and its root word necessarily implies an "abhorrence of one's past sins" [Thayer's]. The difference between true repentance and the superficial kind that is seen far too often is that true repentance is sorrow for one's wrongdoing, while superficial, fake repentance is merely sorrow for being caught or exposed.

But the apostle Paul, in praising the brethren at Corinth for their true repentance, distinguished the difference this way: "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death" (2 Cor. 7:10). The "sorrow of the world" is fake and insincere, and the only sorrow is, again, for being caught or exposed — not regret and remorse for the wrong committed. If we have committed sin and have either discovered it ourselves, or were told by someone else, we then must choose which type we will express; let us acknowledge that God will not be fooled, though men may be. Insincere repentance [which is not repentance at all] may ease your conscience, but it won't bring forgiveness.

So, how can we ensure we are responding correctly when we are found guilty of wrongdoing? May I suggest the following from God's word and from experience with my own faults and dealing with the faults of others? Consider:

**Recognition of the Wrong.** True repentance begins with the recognition that we have actually done

something wrong. We make no excuses for it, we don't try to shift blame, and we don't ignore it. One who knows what sin is, if it is discovered that he is guilty of it, will recognize and acknowledge it as such [again, no excuses], but he will also recognize his wrong choice to do it, and why he chose to do it, so that the same choice is not made again. If we put it in words, we might say to self, I chose to go against God's will because I wanted to please myself, and what I did was wrong — sin. This recognition of wrong will naturally lead to the next point:

**Sorrow For The Wrong.** As Paul noted in his letter to the Corinthians, they had “godly sorrow”; that is, they were genuinely sorry they had transgressed the will of God when Paul rebuked them for it. As he noted in the first letter where he rebuked them for their tolerance of sin, he made it clear that they had done so because they had the wrong attitude toward the sin (cf. 1 Cor. 5:1, 2). When they repented of the sin, they expressed sorrow for what they had done, but also demonstrated sorrow over the attitude that led them to tolerate the sin. Along that line, someone has said that true remorse is not sorrow over consequences, but over motive; I would add that it must be sorrow over the act it itself, too, if it is to be complete and proper repentance. One cannot be truly repentant if he is only sorry for the act, but not the reason why it was done.

**A Desire To Make Amends, or To Obtain Forgiveness.** Quite often, those who are exposed as guilty of sin jump straight to this point without acknowledgement of wrongdoing, and without the genuine sorrow that is required. Some "Just want to move on" and "forget it ever happened." What gall! Who has the right to speak to God with such bold-faced arrogance?! We cannot "make it right" without acknowledgement of, and sorrow for, the sin! But, if we have honestly and unhesitatingly acknowledged our wrong, and if we have honestly demonstrated sorrow for the sins and our choice to act on our selfish desires, then we may find a means of relief of the guilt.

For the guilty who have gotten to this point, it is here we must have the attitude of the publican, who Jesus described as one who “would not so much as raise his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me a sinner!’” (Luke 18:13). He knew he was wrong and acknowledged it, and expressed genuine sorrow for it. Only then could he find forgiveness — and he received it (Luke 18:14).

At some point, we have all needed, now need, or will need, to be forgiven. How we respond to our guilt will determine whether or not we will find forgiveness. Don't put on a show for others, for God will not be fooled. Don't express regret that is not real.

As Paul put it: “repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance” (Acts 26:20). No excuses.