

CHANGE OF MIND

The English word “repentance” is from the Latin *poenitere* that means “be sorry.” Webster’s dictionary defines repentance as “to feel such sorrow for sin as leads to amendment of one’s ways; to be penitent.” The Vulgate translated the Greek *metanoeo* (“to change one’s mind, to adopt another view”) with *poenitentiam agite*, meaning “to do penance.” Penance is an example of putting the deed (i.e., an act showing sorrow) for the idea (i.e., feeling sorrow). The addition of the prefix “re-” means “again,” and gives the meaning “feel sorrow again.” This meaning has its roots in Roman Catholic theology and does not represent the exact meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words used in the Bible.

The Greek *metanoeo* means “to think after” (the deed) and by inference “to change one’s mind, to adopt another view, to change one’s feelings, to change one’s resolve or purpose.” It is used in Hebrews 12.17 (cf. Matthew 21.29, 32) where Esau, who sold his birthright to his younger brother Jacob, sought a change of mind in his father. “For you know that later when he wanted to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no opportunity for repentance [a change of mind], although he sought the blessing with tears” (NET). The TNIV translation makes this a little clearer: “Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.” In ordinary Greek language, the word means simply a reversal of thought, without any idea of regret or moral or religious action. In Greek literature, *metanoeo* could mean a change from a good thought or action to a bad one as well as from a bad one to a good one. But for the Greeks, *metanoeo* seldom suggests an alteration in one’s moral attitude or a profound change in a person’s direction in life or a conversion that affects the whole of one’s conduct. In the New

Testament, though, *metanoeo* is linked with life-changing moral or religious actions. In the biblical writings, it signifies a change of mind that results in a change of life.

Why is this change of mind that results in a change of life so important? First, this change of mind and will is one thing that we do as humans that directly affects heaven. Jesus said in Luke 15.7, “Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents [changes his/her mind] than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance [change of mind]” (ESV).

Second, there is considerable misunderstanding about what is needed for this change of life. This makes a proper understanding of “change of mind” very important. The self privation of Roman Catholic confession and penance mistakes the physical for the spiritual. The shouting, tears, and bodily gyrations of Pentecostal experience, often assumed to be the direct operation of the Holy Spirit, also mistakes the physical for the spiritual. At a basic level, the administration of bodily punishment or the demonstration of bodily ecstasy may have little value for saving an individual from the misery of his or her sinful life. What is needed is a commitment to God, a giving over of one’s whole person—body and spirit—to the Creator of all, the One who can make the needed changes in a person’s mind and life in order to bring about salvation.

This change of mind is commanded by God for all of us. Acts 17.30-31 says, “The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent [change their minds], because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead” (ESV). Jesus taught his disciples that the new age of the universal grace and mercy of God, which would be ushered in after his resurrection from the dead, involved the proclamation of this change of mind and life to everyone. Luke 24.44-47 says:

Then [Jesus] said to them, “These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the law of Moses and the prophets and the psalms must be fulfilled.” Then he opened their minds so they could understand the scriptures, and said to them, “Thus it stands written that the Christ would suffer and would rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance [a change of mind] for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem” (NET).

It was in Jerusalem, during the festival of Pentecost, that the apostles told those who had come to the temple to “repent [change your minds], and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2.38; TNIV). Later, Peter and John spoke to those gathered at Solomon’s Colonnade and said, “Repent [change your minds], then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Messiah, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus” (Acts 3.19-20; TNIV). And to the Sanhedrin, Peter and the apostles confessed, “The God of our ancestors raised Jesus from the dead—whom you killed by hanging him on a tree. God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance [a change of mind] and forgive their sins. We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5.30-32; TNIV). In other words, the apostles told the Jewish Council, “God condemned your death sentence on Jesus by raising him from the dead. But God did not exalt him as Judge over you, that is, to pronounce on you an irreversible doom of perdition and ruin for your crime. God exalted Jesus as Prince and Savior in order to grant you an opportunity to change your minds and lives and receive forgiveness of sins and become truly his own chosen people, the seed of Abraham.”

This opportunity was given to the Jews, to Israel, but also to people of all nations, to the Gentiles. After the family and friends of Cornelius, a Roman centurion who lived in Caesarea,

had received the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and had been baptized in the name of Jesus the Messiah, Peter and the other Jewish believers realized that “even to Gentiles God has granted repentance [a change of mind] that leads to life” (Acts 11.18; TNIV). And Paul’s mission, as he described it to Herod Agrippa II, was to declare “first to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles . . . that they should repent [change their minds] and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance [change of mind] by their deeds” (Acts 26.20; TNIV). The mercy of God and the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ extends to all persons. This goodness and love of God is intended to lead us to change our minds about God, about our sinfulness, and about Jesus as Savior. Too many see God as unmerciful, unjust, and even cruel. But God is willing to grant us forgiveness of sins and an inheritance or a heritage among his people. Are we willing? Or do we “show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness is intended to lead [us] to repentance [change our minds and lives] (Romans 2.4; TNIV)?

The universal proclamation of this change of mind and life merits our further attention. Its universality indicates that all have sinned, that the grace of God is for all, and that we are destined for ruin and misery without God’s grace and mercy. If God commanded all people everywhere to repent [change their minds], it follows that all people everywhere need to repent [change their minds]—that is, all people are guilty before God. Our voluntary ignorance of God and his will, our rebellion against his precepts, our violations of his holy laws render each of us guilty before our Righteous Maker. Indeed, the light of eternal life, Jesus the Messiah, has come into the world. But many prefer ignorance, lust, and passion instead of the knowledge of the glory of God that radiates from the face of the Lord Jesus Christ (2 Corinthians 4.4-6). So the often repeated and awful oracle of our Lord rings true, “Unless you repent [change your minds],

you too will all perish” (Luke 13.3, 5; TNIV). But the universality of the precept (i.e., about repentance) not only proves that all the world is guilty before God but that God’s grace and mercy is unto all and upon all who do change their minds and their lives. This is because our Lord “is patient with [us], not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance [a change of mind and life]” (2 Peter 3.9; TNIV).

How real are the provisions of the love of the Almighty! How vast is the benevolence of our God! He rescued us when we were unable to rescue ourselves. God inexpressibly loved us when “he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him” (John 3.16-17; NRSV). But he calls us to change our minds and our lives for him. This is true for sinners (see Acts 2.38), and it also is true for saints. Simon, a sorcerer from Samaria, believed the good news of Jesus brought to the people by Philip. Simon was baptized. But Simon wanted to be able to give others the gift of the Holy Spirit, like Peter and John, by the laying on of hands. He offered to pay money for this power. He still was wrapped up in the sin of magic and trickery. Peter sternly told Simon that his heart was not right before God and warned him, “Repent [change your mind and your life] of this wickedness and pray to the Lord in the hope that he may forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin” (Acts 8.22-23; TNIV).

And the Lord through his seer John, in Revelation 2.5, exhorted the church in Ephesus:

“Consider how far you have fallen! Repent [change your minds and your lives] and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent [change your minds and your lives], I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place” (TNIV).

We too, if we fall back into a sinful way of life, must change our minds and turn back to God in order to be pleasing to him.

What does this change of heart involve? It is helpful to note what a change of mind that results in a change of life is not. This change of life is not the observance of the external formalities of religion (i.e., churchianity). The Jewish people had many religious observances and rituals. Many of these were proscribed by old covenant laws. In the popular mind, these acts of service to the Lord were similar to doing penance, that is, acts of expiation for wrongs committed. But Jesus called the Pharisees of his day “whitewashed tombs” for their empty religious formalities (Matthew 23.27-28), and the Old Testament prophets condemned the hollow observances and rituals of their day (e.g., Isaiah 1.10-20). We too—in our hymns and prayers, in our partaking of the Lord’s supper, in our gifts of benevolence and charity—can be guilty of the outward show of religion without spirit and substance. While these acts of piety certainly are an outgrowth of a change of life, they definitely are not synonymous with it.

This change of life is not mere confession of sin. Confession of sin (to say, “I have sinned”) is a step in the right direction, but it is not identical with change of life. Judas Iscariot felt remorse for betraying Jesus to the Jewish authorities, and he confessed to the chief priests and the elders, “I have sinned by betraying innocent blood” (Matthew 27.4; NRSV). But Judas did not repent [change his life], because he hanged himself.¹ An individual may admit that he or she is a sinner, but of what value is that confession if there is no sincere effort to overcome one’s sinfulness? To “go forward” during “the invitation song” during the public worship of the church is not a substitute for a changed life. This is not to minimize the public confession of sin

¹Matthew 27.3 states, “When Judas, his betrayer, saw that Jesus was condemned, he repented and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders” (NRSV; cf. “changed his mind” in ESV and “was sized with remorse” in TNIV). The word translated “repented” by NRSV is from the Greek *metamelomai* which means “be very concerned about one’s deed or attitude, regret” (Frederick Danker, *The Concise Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, University of Chicago Press, 2009; p. 230).

and the prayers of the church in response to that. But confession of sin is not the same as a change of heart that produces a changed life.

This change of life is not being sorry for wrongdoing. A criminal who is caught may be very sorry—sorry that he or she was caught, sorry that his or her schemes failed, sorry that he or she has become an outcast of society. If the opportunity to commit the same crime presented itself again, the hardened criminal would commit the same offense. “Sorrow” is defined as “remorse or deep distress caused by loss, disappointment, or other misfortune suffered by oneself or others.” Judas Iscariot was sorrowful, but he never changed his life. Regrets surged through his soul. The blood-tainted silver burned his fingers. The heavy guilt of sin burdened his conscience, and confession was made by his tongue. But he hanged himself. Contrast King David who took for himself Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah. Remorse later filled his heart. The death of his child by Bathsheba caused David to prostrate himself in humility before the Lord. The heavy load of sin burdened his conscience, and David also confessed. But David amended his ways and changed his life never to take for himself the wife of another. 2 Corinthians 7.10 says, “For godly sorrow produces repentance [a change of mind] leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death” (NKJV). *The Passion Translation* explains Paul’s comment in this verse in this way: “God designed us to feel remorse over sin in order to produce repentance [a change of mind and life] that leads to victory. This leaves us with no regrets. But the sorrow of the world works death.” Proper sorrow can bring about a change of life, but it is not the same thing.

This change of life is not fear. Fear of the Lord is important (Proverbs 1.7; 9.10), but proper respect of our Creator is not the same as a change of life. We are told in James 2.19, “You believe there is one God. Good! But the demons believe that, too! And they shake with

fear” (NCV). The demons do fear God, but they do not repent. At one of his judicial hearings in Caesarea, when Paul talked about justice, self-control, and the coming judgment, Felix, the Roman procurator of Judea, “became frightened and said, ‘Go away for the present; when I have an opportunity, I will send for you” (Acts 24.25; NRSV). Felix feared the judgment that Paul spoke about, but he did not repent. Two men on a small lake in a fishing boat were caught in a squall. Fearful for their lives, they began to make promises to the Lord. But one of them stopped suddenly and told the other to be careful and not promise too much, because he saw land in sight. They were fearful, but that fear did not produce genuine change in their lives.

This change of life is not reformation. A person can reform without changing his or her life by turning to God. An alcoholic can stop drinking because of medical problems of the liver. A thief can stop stealing and a deceiver can stop cheating due to scrutiny or threat of arrest by officers of the law. An adulterer can stop his or her immorality out of fear of contracting a deadly disease. These cases of a reformed life are not a change of heart and life toward God. Change of life in the biblical sense is a spiritual turning to God and not just turning. Certainly one can reform without turning to God, but one cannot turn to God without reforming. Reformation of life is a fruit of repentance or change of mind and life. Jesus told many of the Pharisees and Sadducees, the Jewish religious leaders, who came to see him in the Judean wilderness near Jericho, “Who warned you to run away from God’s anger that is coming? You must do the things that show that you have really changed your hearts and lives” (Matthew 3.7-8; cf. verse 11; NCV).²

²NRSV in Matthew 3.7-8 reads, “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

Finally, this change of life is not partial. This change of life involves the whole person and not just a single aspect of it. The alcoholic may stop drinking but continue to curse and swear. He has not repented. The shoplifter may stop stealing goods from the local department store but continue to be dishonest in presenting options to customers at the realtor's office where he works. He has not repented. The politician may stop using people to advance his own professional career but continue to take campaign money from organizations that have dubious ethical leanings. He has not repented. If a container has several holes, do you mend just one hole to make it usable again? God says that we are to apply the ax to the root of the tree not just one branch of the tree (see Matthew 3.10; Luke 3.9).

But in this matter of a change of mind that leads to a change of life, we must avoid the temptation to be too strict and too harsh with others. Forgiveness is a key. James expresses this idea of forgiveness like this: "My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins" (James 5.19; NRSV). And in one of his teachings about repentance, Jesus told his disciples:

Occasions for stumbling are bound to come, but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and you were thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble. Be on your guard! If another disciple sins, you must rebuke the offender, and if there is repentance [a change of mind], you must forgive. And if the same person sins against you seven times a day, and turns back to you seven times and say, "I repent [change my mind]," you must forgive (Luke 17.1-4; NRSV).³

To this hard saying of our Lord, the disciples replied, "Increase our faith!" And Jesus told them, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and

³Compare the loving and forgiving reception of the Father in the parable of the wayward son (Luke 15.11ff.).

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planted in the sea,' and it would obey you" (Luke 17.5-6; NRSV). Lord, give us this faith that is the size of the mustard seed. Let it grow and grow in our hearts as we turn to you, our Creator.

We thank you for your gift of repentance, the opportunity to change our hearts and change our lives and follow you. Lord, help us change our minds about all our waywardness. Lord, change our minds and change our lives to honor and serve only you, O Lord of lords and King of kings.

Amen.

ENGLISH BIBLE TRANSLATIONS USED

ESV - English Standard Version (2001).

NCV - The Word: New Century Version, New Testament (1984).

NET - The NET Bible, New English Translation (2019).

NKJV - New King James Version (1982).

NRSV - New Revised Standard Version (1989).

The Passion Translation - New Testament with Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Songs, 2020 Edition (2020).

TNIV - Today's New International Version, New Testament (2002).