

Times of Refreshing

The Power of Repentance and Forgiveness

by Ward Fenley

Acts 3:19 Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord;

When the topics of repentance and forgiveness are examined, there are often comparisons made between our repentance toward God and our repentance toward each other and our forgiveness of each other's trespasses and God's forgiveness of our trespasses. There has been a strong movement of Christians insisting that we should forgive each other regardless of whether there is repentance. However, if we carefully take certain passages into consideration, we will find two things: first, that this view contributes to a distorted and dysfunctional Christian relationship; and second, that practicing repentance coupled with forgiveness brings about health, healing, restored relationships, and times of refreshing from God's presence and each other's presence.

It is clear that God commands us to repent for our initial salvation and in order to receive forgiveness of sins. Several important factors concerning repentance should be understood:

Repentance toward God is commanded to all people, both Jews and Gentiles:

Matthew 3:2 And saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Acts 17:30 And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent:

Repentance is brought about by God's goodness and power:

Romans 2:4 Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?

Jeremiah 31:18-19 I have surely heard Ephraim bemoaning himself thus; Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, as a bullock unaccustomed to the yoke: turn thou me, and I shall be turned; for thou art the LORD my God. (19) Surely after that I was turned, I repented; and after that I was instructed, I smote upon my thigh: I was ashamed, yea, even confounded, because I did bear the reproach of my youth.

2 Timothy 2:25 In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth;

Repentance is the result of true sorrow which resonates with God:

2 Corinthians 7:10 For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.

If there is no repentance, we perish and never experience relationship with God:

Luke 13:2-5 And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffered such things? (3) I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish. (4) Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem? (5) I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.

Repentance gets our sins blotted out and brings the presence of God:

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With those things in mind we can begin to appreciate what repentance accomplishes between man and God. Repentance simply means turning. The problem comes when well-meaning people *assume* that repentance before God is a turning away from smoking, drinking, fornication, homosexuality and (you fill in the blank), never to repeat such things. It is true that if we find ourselves engaging in behavior which hurts other people or ourselves, we need to change to restore health and healthy relationships. But biblically speaking, repentance means turning from self-righteousness. In Isaiah we read:

Isaiah 55:6-9 Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: (7) Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon. (8) For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. (9) For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.

God's ways are the ways of grace. That is, God's ways are salvation solely by His grace and not by works-righteousness. When we turn from our ways of self-righteousness, we turn toward His ways and His righteousness. We trust in Christ's payment to remove sin and bring eternal life rather than trusting in our good deeds to remove sin and bring eternal life. Upon turning, or repentance, God's ways suddenly become our ways. Paul describes this as having the mind of Christ (1 Corinthians 2:16). In other words, once we repent from our own ways of salvation, we become united with Christ and placed in union with Him instead of being separated from Him. Through repentance and reliance upon God, we experience times of refreshing and the presence of the Lord.

Similarly, Jesus commands repentance from man to man. I have often been told by many Christians that we should be willing to forgive regardless of repentance from the offending party. The problem is two-fold: First, it enables the offender to not realize wrongdoing and *turn* from that wrongdoing. Second, it leads to a lack of trust and bitterness on the part of the offended. We may fancy ourselves as martyrs by doing such a wonderful deed as to forgive someone even if they do not repent, but that doesn't change the fact that our view of that person will stick with us. We will

remember (unless we have a lobotomy, or experience some severe mind-altering trauma) what that person did. This is why Jesus said:

Luke 17:3-4 Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. (4) And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him.

When the offender repents, he has come to a place of loving the offended so as to not offend anymore. That is, the offender has experienced humility toward the offended. The offender has become broken and contrite. God says that those who dwell with Him are those of a broken and contrite heart. They are the ones who inhabit eternity with Him. Why? Because humility heals. This is why Paul told us to esteem others as better than ourselves just as Christ humbled Himself in order to bring us to God. We follow the pattern of humility which Christ displayed. In our case, when we are humbled before God and turn from our self-righteousness, we are restored to Him. The relationship is healed. When we think about it, if the offender has not admitted the offense, then the offender remains in self-affirmation, as if he had never committed any offense. That is precisely what self-righteousness is: believing that through good deeds, we should not be held responsible for offense.

Along with this, Jesus said forgive the offender *if* he repents. But why *if*? Jesus understood relationships better than anyone. He understood that through repentance both sides are healed. But if there is no repentance, there is no reconciliation, or at best there is only a façade of reconciliation. In the end bitterness will well up in the offended who is sickened by the fact that the offender views him or herself as having never committed the offense. However, when there is true repentance, we are restored to each other's presence. Nothing could be so refreshing. In fact, I remember a particular circumstance where a man gossiped about me and slandered me publicly for an act of immorality on my part. I had confessed the immorality before our fellowship but he continued to slander me. There was division, bitterness, anger, and resentment between us. Eventually he realized himself to be a mere man and that he too had weakness where he judged others and gossiped about them. This broke him. He called me on the phone and humbly apologized. Few things hurt as deeply as gossip. Yet when I saw his humility and love it relieved me of all my bitterness. I forgave him and we were restored. Times of refreshing occurred from our presence with each other. There have been other times where I was on the offending end and apologized and was brought back into the presence of the one I offended. Again, these times amount to times of refreshing. Just as we were (and continue to be) refreshed by the presence of the Lord, so also we are refreshed by each other's presence.

God knows how hearts work. In fact, I believe that there are many ways where our hearts are patterned after God's heart. And God prescribes these things to bring healing, to recognize our unity in Him, and to give us joy in Him and each other.

However, we must be careful: If a person repents and asks forgiveness, Jesus is explicit concerning those who do not forgive but continue to be unforgiving toward the offender:

Matthew 6:13-15 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen. (14) For if ye forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: (15) But if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

Jesus here curiously uses the preposition *for* after finishing the Lord's prayer. And the last part of the request was "deliver us from evil...for if you forgive....but if you forgive not..." Jesus seems to be equating not forgiving each other with evil. Perhaps we should pray that God would truly grant the early part of this prayer: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us...and keep us from the evil of not forgiving each other." And so the apostle Paul agrees:

Colossians 3:13 Forbearing one another, and forgiving one another, if any man have a quarrel against any: even as Christ forgave you, so also do ye.

Paul tells us to follow the pattern of Christ: He forgave us when we repented, so also we should forgive others when they repent. Christ's forgiveness was once and for all. He had the ability to apply the sacrifice which was made once for all. Unfortunately, we cannot offer up the perfect one time sacrifice for each other, for there is no need. But we can offer up the many sacrifices of forgiveness, repeated forgiveness of each other's trespasses. Christ's sacrifice forgives of all our thoughts, and obviously many unconfessed thoughts, thoughts we might not even remember. Yet His forgiveness is inexhaustible and permeates every facet of our weakness. We, however, as finite and not having omniscience, must forgive based upon what our offenders have revealed in their humility. Of course questions arise: what if the repentance is fake? Recently I observed a man who has incessantly slandered, mocked, and derided other Christians offer the most bizarre apology, for in the apology he continued to slander, mock, and deride, but simply from a different perspective--the context of a feigned apology. This often happens when we feel compelled to apologize but at the same time proceed to justify our reasons for the attack and offense. This type of apology cannot be considered true repentance. When we came to God, we did not say, "God, I trusted in self-righteousness and I turn from that self-righteousness. But You must understand that Your salvation is bizarre and doesn't sit well with me. In fact, Your righteousness shouldn't be counted as worth more than my righteousness. You need to own up to Your arrogance in assuming that Your righteousness is better than mine."

As ludicrous as that sounds in the context of repentance toward God, we sometimes offer up apologies like that to each other. Our apologies must be real and heart-felt, and our forgiveness must be real and heart-felt, so that times of refreshing may occur from our restored presence with each other in following the great eternal pattern of Christ's eternal forgiveness for our seventy-times seven sins. It is the demonstration of kingdom life when we live out and remind one another of our restoration in Christ by extending the restorative mercy to each other which Christ has given us. By *this* love those around us will know we are His disciples.