

“DID I REPENT OR WAS I JUST SORRY?”

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Is godly sorrow repentance? This question can be answered in one word, No!

A segment of our brotherhood has mistakenly accepted “godly sorrow” for repentance. Those who have made this mistake have put themselves in an unfavorable, most unpleasant situation, as well as the local church where they hold membership. For years, we have seen people try to become Christians without meeting the demands of repentance (Luke 13:3). They have been deceived, misinformed, or both by someone. Such people have somehow reached, without credible evidence, the conclusion that sorrow, especially “godly sorrow” is repentance. If sorrow, godly or not, is repentance, then someone could [1] rob the local bank, express sorrow to the authorities for having done so, but keep the money; [2] steal another man’s wife, or another woman’s husband, express sorrow to the offended parties and keep the stolen man or woman. If godly sorrow in these cases is repentance, it would be the ideal way to “get rich quick,” as well change a “marital status” at will. However, there is no need for anyone who is a competent student of the Bible and/or who respects the authority of Jesus Christ to mistake sorrow for repentance.

MEN MUST REPENT

It has been made unmistakably clear by the Holy Spirit that men must repent, and he who does not will bring about his own demise (Luke 13:3). John, the man sent by God (John 1:6), interrupted the quietness of the Judean wilderness with “**Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand**” (Mat. 3:1-2). Jesus also preached the same message (Mat. 4:17). The apostles were told by the Lord to preach repentance and remission of sins beginning at Jerusalem (Luke 24:47). On the day of Pentecost, people were told to “**repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins**” (Acts 2:38). Paul told the Athenians that God “**now commandeth all men everywhere to repent**” (Acts 17:30). It is forever settled. Men must repent.

BIBLICAL USAGE

Without unnecessarily burdening ourselves with the number of times the word *repentance* is used in the Bible, suffice it to say in one form or another, whether explicitly stated or implied, repentance is taught hundreds of times. T.W. Brents (*The Gospel Plan of Salvation*, p. 236), says:

In all the forms in which the word is used it refers to God thirty-seven times, and with reference to man sixty-nine times. It is used to indicate sorrow or regret twenty-eight times, a change of mind or will twenty-five times, and a change of mind resulting in reformation of life fifty-three times...When used in the New Testament as a command to the alien in order to the remission of sins, it always indicates such a change of mind as produces a change or reformation of life

under circumstances warranting the conclusion that sorrow for the past would or had preceded it.

Though I did not take the times to count how many times the word *repentance* is used in all its forms, I shall proceed under the assumption that Brents is correct in his numerical count. Even if he miscounted, it will not change the basic meaning of the word as used in the Bible.

REPENTANCE AND GODLY SORROW

To be sorry for our sins is certainly necessary to effect genuine repentance, but too many times “godly sorrow” is the only thing that occurs, and that without a change in behavior or relationship. Repentance demands the cessation of sins repented of; one cannot continue the sin of which he supposedly repented (Romans 6:1-2). God forbid that this be attempted. Anyone who has access to the original text, whether a Greek New Testament or an Interlinear, can see how Paul makes clear (2 Cor. 7:8-10) the distinction between godly sorrow and repentance.

For though I made you sorry with a letter, I do not repent (*metamelomai*, regret), **though I did repent** (*metemelomen*, regret): **for I perceive that the same epistle hath made you sorry, though it were but for a season. Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance** (*metanoian*, reformation): **for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance** (*metanoian*, reformation) **to salvation not to be repented** (*metameleton*, regretted) **of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death** [the parenthetical additions are mine, NH].

Brents again observes:

Surely, nothing could be more apparent than the difference in the use which Paul makes of these two Greek words, though both rendered repent in the common version. Paul wrote the Corinthians a letter which made them sorry, and he regretted it, but he ceased to regret it when he saw that their sorrow worked in them repentance; i.e., such a change of mind as culminated in their reformation.

The case for repentance unto the remission of sins is clearly established. Godly sorrow is related to repentance and certainly necessary, but genuine repentance requires such a change of character and activity that effects a reformation of life—a reformation that can be clearly seen. John the Baptist put it correctly: **“Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance”** (Mat. 3:8).

REPENTANCE AND RESTITUTION

This is a “problem spot” between many good brethren. Does godly sorrow which works repentance necessitate any kind of restitution? Adam Clark says:

No man should expect mercy at the hand of God, who, having wronged his neighbor, refuses, when he has it in his power, to make restitution. Were he to weep tears of blood, both the justice and mercy of God would shut out his prayers

if he make not his neighbor amends for the injury he has done him [*Commentary on Genesis*].

Added to this is the comment made by Zaccheus available for all to read. **“And Zaccheus stood, and said unto the Lord; Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold”** (Luke 19:8).

CONCLUSION

It is relatively easy to be sorry for our sins, unless we have become completely insensitive to wrong-doing, but if the sorrow is genuine it will culminate in repentance which is “a change of mind that leads to a reformation of life.”

And if restitution is in order let it take place. After all the scriptures say, **“...But the way of the transgressor is hard”** (Pro. 13:15). The work of elders, preachers, and church leaders will be made a lot easier, and their work much more pleasant when real repentance takes place in the lives of the people with whom they have to deal. The work of church leaders will be attended by less grief when people really repent and bring forth the fruits that will, without question, indicate that a change in life and character has taken place. ~