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WHAT IS REPENTANCE?

Repentance is the *sadness* we experience after committing a specific sin as well as the *resolution* we then make not to sin in such a way again. Such sadness is the feeling or awareness in our heart or conscience that we have disobeyed the Law of God (the 10 Commandments: Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 6). Many people hear the Law, but because they do not feel the effect or power of the Law in their hearts, experience no sadness, and so are not truly repentant.

The first part of repentance (sadness) is caused solely by the Law of God. The second part of repentance (the

good resolve not to sin in such a way again) cannot be caused by the Law. The person who becomes terrified when he considers his sin cannot by his own strength alone resolve to do better.

In fact, the exact opposite occurs. When a person is overpowered by his sin and is ashamed of what he has done, he begins to mistrust God and actually to hate Him. Such mistrust and hate of God the Bible calls literally a descent into hell (Psalm 88).

In order to change this situation, the promise of Christ (the Gospel) must be added to the Law. It is the Gospel which lays the terrified conscience to rest and rights it once again so that a person can resolve to do better.

Repentance which is a result of the Law alone is only partial repentance, the beginning of repentance, or a repentance which is not complete. Such a repentance is not complete repentance for it does not include a resolve to do better. Such a repentance is just like the repentance of Cain (Genesis 4:13), Saul (1 Samuel 26:21; 31:4), Judas (Matthew 27:4-5) and all those who doubt and despair of the mercy of God.

Repentance which is a result of the Law alone is only partial repentance

Such a definition of repentance (*regret* for sin along with the resolution to do better) has been taught for centuries but with little understanding. Since the individual parts of the definition (sin, regret, and the resolve to do better) were not understood, repentance itself could not be taught.

What was taught instead was that such regret was really a product of a free will which possessed the ability to hate sin or not to hate sin whenever it wanted. In reality, regret is the sorrow or torment experienced by the conscience (whether it wants to or not!) when properly addressed or confronted by the Law.

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In the past it was also taught that sin was simply an improper action against man-made institutions. Seldom were sins addressed that were committed against the moral law (the 10 Commandments). As far as original sin is concerned, it was taught that after baptism there should be no sin—especially a sin against any of the first three commandments.

The Law itself, described by Jeremiah (23:29) as God’s rock-smashing hammer, crushes such an inaccurate teaching of repentance by enclosing all people in sin. According to such a faulty teaching, a good resolve not to sin is a thought self-chosen by human strength to avoid sin from a given point forward. But according to the Gospel, such good resolve is a movement of the heart awakened by the Holy Spirit.

A good resolve not to sin in a certain way again is the determination to hate sin from that time onward out of love for God—even though sin in the flesh still fights hard against such a determination. Being versed only in the rules and theories of men, and not in the Word of God, those in the past who taught otherwise understood

neither the Law nor the Gospel—and so could not teach rightly about repentance.

In contrast to such a futile teaching of desperation the Gospel teaches that repentance is not despair alone, but hope as well. Such hope is a hate of sin which flows from a love of God. This is truly a good resolve not to sin.



1. Which are the two parts of repentance?
2. What causes the first part, the sorrow, of repentance?
3. What causes the second part of repentance?
4. What happens when a person resolves to do better, solely on the basis of the Law?
5. Who, in the Bible, repented of their sins, but not completely?
6. Why is it a problem to think that repentance is a result of a free human will?
7. What or who moves a Christian to resolve to do better?
8. According to Luther, how does Christian hope relate to sin?