

WHAT IS TRUE REPENTANCE? Is There a False Repentance That Sends to Hell?

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To use the words of the Heidelberg Catechism, godly grief “is to be genuinely sorry for sin, to hate it more and more, and to run away from it” (#89).

To answer the question of what the repentance that sends to hell is, we need to examine the biblical truth concerning marks that **will** accompany true repentance. In other words, a professed repentance without these marks indicating change shows that the repentance is not genuine, real, and lasting. Godly sorrow is an earnest desire. It is a passionate pursuit. It is a zealous pursuit.

2 Corinthians 7:11 For behold what earnestness this very thing, this godly sorrow, has produced in you: what vindication of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what longing, what zeal, what avenging of wrong! In everything you demonstrated yourselves to be innocent in the matter.

Here are some marks of what biblical, godly, real repentance looks like in one’s life.

- 1. Vindication** — The idea of vindication comes from the word meaning to give a defense (ἀπολογία) and here it speaks of the penitent sinner who verbally acknowledges, confesses, and recounts what happens. Rather than denying his sin the repentant person acknowledges, affirms, and confesses his sin verbally. It is an earnest and verbal desire to clear oneself of any fault. It is an eagerness to clear oneself of any fault.
- 2. Indignation** — The word Paul uses here refers to a kind of outlash/vehement assault (ἀγανάκτησις). It is not an outrage at a person but the outlash is directed toward *the sin*. There is a violent indignation with *that particular sin*. The repentant person will abhor, detest, be angry at the sin into which he fell.
- 3. Fear** — This speaks of a fear (φόβος) lest the sin be repeated again. There must be a little trembling lest the evilness of that particular sin be the cause of stumbling yet again. And negatively, there should be a fear lest the sin should not be entirely removed from the penitent person’s life. There should be great fear of falling into sin again. A mark of repentance is the person’s godly fear that he might fall into that sin yet again. Not only this, the fear includes the notion that if the sin would persist, one would be the recipient of God’s Almighty wrath. There is a right, holy, trembling fear that must be present at the acknowledgement of God’s violent hatred of sin — all sins. All impenitent sinners will face the wrath of God.
- 4. Longing** — This speaks of a vehement desire, a longing, a passionate desire. Paul uses the word (ἐπιπόθησις) that can refer to an intense longing, craving of something (the word usually refers to sexual lust/longing). There must be a fervent wish to be made right in God’s eyes. There must be a passionate desire to be made right in the eyes of others. There must be a passionate desire so that the sin does not trap the repentant person again. There must be a passionate pursuit and readiness to do our duty and a willingness to obey the Lord in all things — including doing that

which is hard during the course of repentance. Without a fervent longing and desire to extract the sin from one's life and all its recourses that lead up to the committing of a particular sin, repentance has not occurred.

5. Zeal — This word for zeal speaks of deep concern (ζήλον). There is almost a “jealousy” that takes place here. What passionate ardor and concern is there when the beginning touches of that particular sin begins to show its hellish face again? What zeal is there to kill it? What deep concern is there to assure and ensure that the sin is exterminated quickly and violently? Is there a jealousy for the LORD and for Him alone? Is there a jealousy to be wed to Him and to him alone? One cannot be married to both Christ as Lord and to sin as Lord. These masters are mutually exclusive. Is there a zealous, concerned, jealous pursuit to be rid of the sin and turn to the LORD?

6. Avenging of Wrong — This strong word that Paul uses refers to the idea of vindication, punishment, revenge (ἐκδίκησιν). There must be a ready spirit to see justice done. In other words, there must be a passionate desire *rooted in and stemming from* the heart to do the right thing in the future and slaughter the sin from one's life. The severer we are toward ourselves and the harsher we see our sin, the deeper we shall then look at the grace of God and the mercy of the Lord outpoured upon evildoers.

These marks reveal for us, then, that apathy cannot coexist with repentance. No easy-way out thinking demonstrates true repentance. There must be an earnest, consuming, passionate, humble, God-focused, shamed, grace-embracing desire to “perform deeds appropriate to repentance” (Acts 26:20). Repentance itself is even a *gift* from God (2 Tim 2:25; Acts 5:31). Nevertheless, for the believer in the Lord Jesus Christ who has been washed, justified, saved, regenerated by God's Holy Spirit, he can — and must! — demonstrate true marks of repentance over the sin in his life. No sin is to be taken lightly. Sin slaughtered the Savior! Even one complaint in the history of the world would have demanded an eternity of God's furious wrath because of the vileness of that God-hating sin. Thus, believers should continue to practice the duty of repentance (not to get re-saved) but to put to death the deeds of the flesh in our lives as we grow in Christ.

So, what is that repentance that sends to hell? It is a repentance that does not bear these marks. If there is no change in one's life, in one's conduct, in one's affections, in one's zeal for holiness. If there is no outward change that manifests itself, if there is no humility and fear before the awesomeness of God's holiness, if there is no anger and hatred over that sin and all its manifestations (and steps leading up to that sin), then one can be assured that repentance has not taken place.

Guard against false marks of repentance! May we as Spirit-indwelt, Bible-believing, grace-empowered saints practice the duty of repentance so that we may slay sin by the power of God's Spirit & present all of the members of our body as instruments of righteousness to God. May we be those who genuinely repent, biblically repent, and effectively change by the powerful help and God-given grace of God's Spirit!