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## REPENTANCE

**BIG IDEA**

This lesson deals with repentance. In our culture, this usually sounds like a bad thing—like getting called into the boss’s office on Friday afternoon. Far from being bad or unusual, biblical repentance is the norm for gospel-centered living. Becoming more aware of God’s holiness and our sinfulness leads us to repent and believe the gospel of Jesus. We are constantly turning from our performing and pretending so that we may live as sons and daughters. Biblical repentance frees us from our own devices and makes a way for the power of the gospel to bear fruit in our lives. But sin taints our repentance and robs us of its fruit. So our aim in this lesson is to (1) expose the ways in which we practice counterfeit repentance and (2) move us toward genuine repentance.

**NOTES:**

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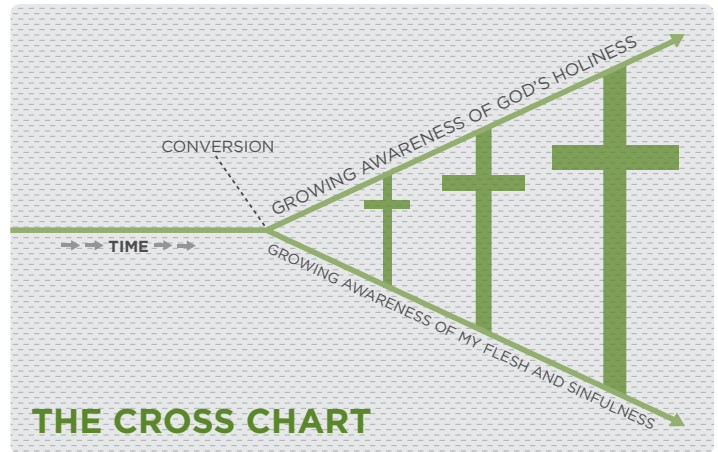
ARTICLE

## LIFESTYLE REPENTANCE

THE GOSPEL-CENTERED LIFE

We have been thinking together about how to consistently live all of life under the influence of the gospel. For the past few weeks, the “Cross Chart” diagram has served as a visual model to help us understand how the gospel works.

As we have seen, the consistent pattern of the Christian life is repentance and faith. We never stop needing to repent and believe. Jesus’ first words in the Gospel of Mark are, “Repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15). In the first of his Ninety-five Theses, Martin Luther observed, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’...He willed the entire *life* of believers to be one of repentance.” In repentance, we confess our tendency to shrink the cross through performance and pretending. We pull our affections away from false saviors and fraudulent sources of righteousness and turn to Jesus as our only hope.



On the surface, repentance seems simple and straightforward, but it’s not. Because our hearts are a “factory of idols” (as John Calvin put it), even our repentance can become a vehicle for sin and selfishness. We are skilled practitioners of **false repentance**. One of our greatest needs in gospel-centered living is to understand repentance accurately and biblically.

For most of us, the word “repentance” has a negative connotation. We only repent when we do something *really* bad. The Roman Catholic idea of penance often bleeds into our thinking about repentance: when we sin, we should feel really sorry about it, beat ourselves up over it, and do something to make up for it. In other words, repentance often becomes more about *us* than about God or the people we’ve sinned against. We want to feel better. We want things to be “back to normal.” We want to know that we’ve done our part, so that our guilt is assuaged and we can move on with life.

Think, for instance, about a relationship in which you’ve spoken hurtful words to someone else. Perhaps your effort at repentance sounded something like this: “I’m sorry I hurt you. I shouldn’t have said that. Will you forgive me?” But is this *really* true repentance? Does our sin consist only in the words we’ve spoken? Didn’t Jesus say, “Out of the overflow of [the] heart [the] mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45)?



Though we may have acknowledged our hurtful words, the other person is often feeling the impact of the deeper resentment, anger, envy, or bitterness that lies in our hearts. Unless we confess those sins as well, our “repentance” is not true repentance at all.

How do we start to identify our tendencies toward false repentance? The answer is to look for patterns of *remorse* and *resolution* in our dealings with sin. Remorse: “I can’t believe I did that!” Resolution: “I promise to do better next time.” Behind this way of living are two great misunderstandings about our hearts. First, we think too highly of ourselves. We do not truly believe the depth of our sin and brokenness (the bottom line of the Cross Chart). This leads us to react in surprise when sin manifests itself: “I can’t believe I just did that!” In other words: “That’s not what I’m *really* like!” Second, we think we have the power to change ourselves. We think that if we make resolutions or try harder next time, we’ll be able to fix the problem.

These patterns of remorse and resolution taint our attitudes toward others as well. Because we think so highly of ourselves, we respond to others’ sin with harshness and disapproval. We are very lenient toward our own sin but we resent theirs! And because we think we can change ourselves, we are frustrated when other people aren’t changing *themselves* faster. We become judgmental, impatient, and critical.

The gospel calls us to (and empowers us for) **true repentance**. According to the Bible, true repentance:

**IS ORIENTED TOWARD GOD, NOT ME.** Psalm 51:4: “Against *you, you only*, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight....”

**IS MOTIVATED BY TRUE GODLY SORROW AND NOT JUST SELFISH REGRET.** 2 Corinthians 7:10: “For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly sorrow produces death.”

**IS CONCERNED WITH THE HEART, NOT JUST WITH EXTERNAL ACTIONS.** Psalm 51:10: “Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me” (ESV).

**LOOKS TO JESUS FOR DELIVERANCE FROM THE PENALTY AND POWER OF SIN.** Acts 3:19–20: “Repent, 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 Christ who has been appointed for you—even Jesus.”

Instead of excusing our sin or falling into patterns of remorse and resolution, true gospel repentance moves us to *realize* and *repent*. Realize: “I *did* do that.” (“That IS what I’m really like!”) Repent: “Lord, forgive me! You are my only hope.” As we learn to live in light of the gospel, this kind of true repentance should become more and more normal for us. We will stop being surprised by our sin, so we will be able to more honestly admit it. And we will stop believing we can fix ourselves, so we will more quickly turn to Jesus for forgiveness and transformation.

Sin is a condition, not just a behavior, so true repentance is a lifestyle, not just an occasional practice. Repentance is not something we do only once (when we are converted), or only periodically (when we feel *really* guilty). Repentance is ongoing, and conviction of sin is a mark of God’s fatherly love for us. “Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest, and repent” (Rev. 3:19).

So: what are you repenting of?



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EXERCISE

## PRACTICING REPENTANCE

We often make excuses for our sin to avoid the hard work of repentance. Below is a list of some common excuses—and (in parentheses) the inner thoughts they reveal. Take a minute to look over the list and then use the questions below to help each other practice genuine repentance.

- » **I was just being honest.** (Can't you handle the truth?)
- » **I'm just saying what I feel.** (There's nothing sinful about my feelings.)
- » **I was only kidding.** (Didn't you get the joke?)
- » **I misunderstood you.** (You're not as crazy as I thought you were!)
- » **You misunderstood me.** (I'm not as bad as you think.)
- » **That's just who I am.** (I'm a sinner, so that excuses my behavior.)
- » **I made a mistake.** (Don't we all?)
- » **I didn't mean to do it.** (I didn't mean to get caught.)
- » **I'm having a bad day.** (I deserve better.)

Which of the excuses listed above can you identify with?

What is a recent example (or a typical situation) when you used one of these excuses instead of truly being broken and repentant over your sin?

As a group, describe what true repentance would look like in these cases, using the steps below.

**STEP 1:** Acknowledge that you have sinned against God.

**STEP 2:** Confess forms of false repentance and selfish regret (remorse, resolution, etc.).

**STEP 3:** Discern and repent of the underlying heart motivations that drive you to this sin.

**STEP 4:** Receive God's forgiveness by faith.

**STEP 5:** Rely upon God's power to turn away from sin.

Repeat this process, working through as many responses as time allows: identify excuses, share examples, and practice true repentance.

