



"The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool."

—William Shakespeare

25-Mar-11

Repentance: The Genuine Article (Part Four)

We would be well-advised to consider the New Testament Greek word for "[repentance](#)," *metanoia*. It conveys the imagery of a person having an afterthought, which can help us understand why the writers of the New Testament used this word to convey the godly idea of repentance. Simply, it is an afterthought because we do not repent *before* we [sin](#), do we? A person cannot repent before he sins; that would be averting sin, not repenting of it.

The popular saying, "Hindsight is 20/20," also comes into play in terms of *metanoia*. When we look back and realize what we have done, we are led to think deeply about our actions, which can lead us into changing our future actions. Our "afterthought" results in changed behavior.

Metanoia complements the Hebrew terms *rä'äh* and *shûb* quite nicely, and in fact, it combines the meanings of these two Hebrew words. A strict dictionary definition of *metanoia* is "a change of mind that results in a change of direction." Note that both actions are contemplated: both a change of mind and a turn away from destructive to improved behavior. A mere change of mind would be useless without corresponding positive conduct.

In [II Peter 3:9](#), the apostle's use of *metanoia* helps us to understand its spiritual connotations: "The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is [longsuffering](#) toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance." Peter explains that [God](#) is patient with us, willing to work with us for a long while to bring us to the point that we leave the path that leads to death. A Christian does not just repent once and that is all that is needed. We must continue repenting throughout our Christian lives because, not only do our bad habits produce the same sins that we sought forgiveness for before, but we are constantly made aware of new sins too. Clearly, repentance is a long-term process, not a one-time decision, and God works closely with us for the duration.

Some have taken God's longsuffering to be slackness on His part—that He lets us linger in our sins over such a long time. However, Peter's argument is that those who think this way are looking at it backwards: It is not slackness but divine mercy! On the one hand, if He punished us for our sins with unyielding justice, we would all be decaying in pine boxes awaiting the judgment. On the other, if He did not require real change in behavior and character—just a quick and instant "repentance"—we would be no better for it. The kind of repentance that lasts for all eternity, the kind that leads to eternal life, is a life-long, deep-down, hard-won, blood-sweat-and-tears change in our way of living. It is an alteration in the course of our lives that we have felt deeply, considered deeply, and maintained rigorously throughout our lives. God's mercy allows us to take the time to do it right.

This kind of repentance takes us off the Satan-inspired path of death and puts us on God's path of life, on which we begin to think like, act and react like, and generally live like God as much as is humanly possible. Because this is the lofty goal of true Christianity, and as human nature is always battling to regain control over us, we must be in a repentant frame of mind at all times.

Not everyone, however, is receptive to repentance. Luke 5 contains the narrative of [Jesus](#) calling the tax collector, Matthew, called Levi by Luke, after which they go to Matthew's house.

Then Levi gave Him a great feast in his own house. And there were a great number of tax collectors and others who sat down with them. And their scribes and the Pharisees complained against His

disciples, saying, "Why do You eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus answered and said to them, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance." ([Luke 5:29-32](#))

The scribes and Pharisees, who lived in constant fear of spiritual defilement, ask Jesus why He spends so much time with sinners. His answer is simple: It was His mission to come to [this world](#) and to change people's minds so that He can change their lives—to bring them to spiritual health. Recall that all have sinned ([Romans 3:23](#)). Every human being—including the scribes and Pharisees—needs the services of the Great Physician. We all need to change our minds so that we experience a positive change of life.

Taken literally, though, [Luke 5:32](#) sounds as if some people need repentance while others do not. However, Jesus never intended His words here to be understood literally. Remember that He is answering the scribes and Pharisees, so what Jesus tells these self-righteous know-it-alls is coated with a heavy layer of sarcasm: "Certainly, you, being so righteous, have no need to repent! I just go where I am most needed!"

The scribes and Pharisees did not consider themselves to be sinners; in fact, they had come nowhere near the point where they could repent. Their hearts were so hard and they were so convinced of their own [goodness](#) that they had closed their minds even to the suggestion that they needed to change in any way. They were blind to their own depravity. However, Jesus went to the ones who knew that they were sinners and needed and wanted His help, people He could work with.

God had to bring even righteous Job to this point as well. He held onto his integrity as if it were a bar of gold, and it took a great deal of effort for God to pry it from him. In [Job 27:1-6](#), Job is speaking with his three friends:

Moreover Job continued his discourse, and said: "As God lives, who has taken away my justice, and the Almighty, who has made my soul bitter, as long as my breath is in me, and the breath of God in my nostrils, my lips will not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit. Far be it from me that I should say you are right; till I

die I will not put away my integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go; my heart shall not reproach me as long as I live."

What a hard heart Job had! When he looked in the mirror, he saw a paragon of virtue, the ultimate in righteousness. In introducing him, God calls him "blameless and upright" ([Job 1:1](#)), but a deeper study into his character shows that, while he may have stuck fastidiously to the letter of the law, he was terribly proud of how righteous he was. He was so *uber*-righteous that he offered sacrifices for his children, just in case they may have sinned ([Job 1:5](#)).

All things considered, Job was indeed a good man, but when God looked at him, He saw something that Job missed. Next time, we will learn how God brought him to repentance.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Justice and Grace](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Some of us may have been disturbed, maybe angered, because our sense of fairness is disrupted by what God did in the past. We have difficulty with this because we do not understand holiness, justice, sin, and grace. All four of these interact, and it is important that we understand the relationship between them. However, one thing is certain. None of us has ever received the slightest injustice from the hand of God. As we grow in understanding and humility, we begin to see that we have received an overwhelming abundance of grace.

From the Archives: Featured Article

Presumption and Divine Justice (Part One)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Over the past few generations, orthodoxy in virtually every aspect of life has been discarded, indicating how perverse human nature is in its determination to rebel against God. Whether it is adding uncommanded holidays to Christian worship or changing the day of rest, men presume to alter God's instructions. John Ritenbaugh uses several real-life examples to illustrate human presumption, a tendency we all share - and one God takes a severe stance against.

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