



CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: LESSON 166

Repentance – Repentance simply means a change of mind which results in a change of life. In the Old Testament the Hebrew verb “nakhem” is used meaning to regret or to be sorry (Job 42:6). Another word used is “shuv” meaning to return or turn back (Psalm 7:12). In the New Testament the Greek verb “metanaeo” is translated “to repent,” and the noun “metanoia” as “repentance.” These are compound words made up of “meta” meaning after or beyond, and “noeo” meaning to understand or perceive. Thus “metanaeo” implies thinking differently afterwards (Matthew 3:2; 4:17; Acts 3:19).

Like faith, repentance also includes the mind, affections, will and heart. A person first has an understanding of sin, especially his own sin and guilt before holy God (Romans 3:20). After this follows sorrow for one’s sins. Genuine repentance also requires a personal and sincere desire and decision of the heart to renounce sin and turn away from it. This is the most important part of repentance (Jeremiah 25:5-6). In repentance we make an inward decision, a commitment, to turn away from the purposes, ways and idols of the old life, and to live a new life in Christ (1 Thessalonians 1:9).

Attrition or contrition – In the Bible we see two kinds of repentance. In 2 Corinthians 7:9-10 Paul distinguishes between worldly and godly grief. Repentance which comes from worldly grief is a change of mind and behavior motivated by the negative consequences of one’s actions. We see this in little children, when they get caught doing something wrong and knowing they are going to be spanked, they start to cry and promise that they will never do it again. It is the same with adults, who when caught in a sin, out of fear of punishment, shame or wounded pride are grieved or remorseful.

In reality they are not sorrowful or broken over the wretchedness or vileness of their sin, and there is no true forsaking of their sin. They repent purely because they want to escape punishment. If they were not caught they would have simply continued on without any remorse. Such repentance is not acceptable to God and in theology is known as the repentance of attrition (Matthew 27:3-4). Paul calls this worldly sorrow, because it is produced by man (Jeremiah 13:23), which does not result in salvation but produces further guilt, shame and fear, and eventually death (Proverbs 28:1; Ezekiel 18:4; Romans 6:23a).

On the other hand, repentance which comes from godly grief is genuine repentance, motivated out of love for God, and a heart broken over the vileness of sin, and how it has offended God. Having understood this, the sinner is genuinely remorseful and grieved, hating his sin and making a decision to renounce his sin and way of life. Such repentance is acceptable to God and in theology is known as the repentance of contrition. Paul calls this godly sorrow, because it is produced by the Holy Spirit, which produces a repentance that leads to salvation (Psalm 51; Joel 2:12-13; Matthew 5:4; WCF 15:2). Genuine repentance will result in salvation for unbelievers, and will manifest itself in a new life turned to God, with changed views, ways and behaviors; and for believers it will manifest itself in continual turning from sin to righteousness in their Christian life, proving their salvation (2 Corinthians 7:11).

Works of repentance – Scripture often talks about the works of repentance (Matthew 3:8; Luke 3:8-9; Acts 26:20). However, we must not confuse the inward desire and decision to turn from sin with the actual change in character and lifestyle. Genuine repentance, like true faith, will inevitably result in a changed character and conduct, but these are the fruits of salvation and not the conditions of salvation.

Gift of God – As stated in the previous study, saving faith is a gracious gift from God and does not find its origin in man. The same is also true with regard to genuine repentance (Zechariah 12:10; Acts 5:30-31; 11:18; 2 Timothy 2:24-26). The Westminster Confession of Faith calls repentance “an evangelical grace” (Chapter 15, Section 1). Saving faith and repentance are fruits of regeneration, produced in the elect by the Holy Spirit, apart from which no one can be saved.