

REPENTANCE, PENANCE, & THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS

Catholic translations of the Bible have often used the words “repentance” and “penance” interchangeably. Compare the Douay-Rheims Version with the New American Catholic Bible at Acts 2:38 and Acts 26:20 and you will see that these words (repentance & penance) are synonymous, *words carrying the same meaning as the another.*

The *Catholic Dictionary* published by “Our Sunday Visitor”, a Catholic publication defines these words in the following ways:

Repentance = *Contrition for sins and the resulting embrace of Christ in conformity to Him.*

Penance or Penitence = *Spiritual change that enables a sinner to turn away from sin. The virtue that enables human beings to acknowledge their sins with true contrition and a firm purpose of amendment.*

If there is any difference of meaning, I would suggest from pondering Greek definitions, that **repentance** (from the New Testament)

focuses on a change of heart, a change of mind and **penance** centers on the works of faith that this change of heart has produced. But both the change of heart and the works of faith go together; they are part of the same package.

The Church has always taught that Christ's death and resurrection brought reconciliation between God and humanity and that "the Lord entrusted the ministry of reconciliation to the Church."¹

The catechism teaches that because sin often wrongs the neighbor, while absolution forgives sin, "it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused,"² therefore the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing works meet for repentance, that is, prove your repentance by what you do. This message was clearly taught to the Apostle Paul by the Lord Jesus Christ Himself:

¹⁹ *And so, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.* ²⁰ *On the contrary, first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem and throughout the whole country of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached the need to repent and turn to God, and to do works giving evidence of repentance.* (Acts 26:19-20) (New American Bible)

What are the acts of the penitent?

They are: a careful *examination of conscience*; *contrition* (or repentance), which is perfect when motivated by love for God; *confession*, which consist in the telling of one's sins to the priest; and *satisfaction* or the carrying out of certain acts of penance which the priest imposes upon the penitent to repair the damage caused by sin (Compendium, Catechism of the Catholic Church, p. 88).

Which sins must be confessed?

All grave sins not yet confessed, which a careful examination of the conscience brings to mind, must be brought to the sacrament of Penance. The confession of serious sins is the the only ordinary way to obtain forgiveness (Ibid., p. 88).

Why can venial sins also be the object of sacramental confession?

The confession of venial sins is recommended by the Church. *Venial sin* is disobedience to God involving light moral matter or done without adequate knowledge, freedom, or without full consent of the will.³

The confession of venial sins is strongly recommended by the Church, even if this is not strictly necessary, because it helps us to form a correct conscience and to fight against evil tendencies. It allows us to be healed by Christ and to progress in the life of the Spirit.⁴

The necessity of going forward in a process of sanctification and holiness.

Follow peace with all men, and holiness: without which no man shall see God. (Heb. 12:14) ^(Rheims)
without holiness no man shall see God.

⁵ *Your stubborn refusal to repent is only storing up retribution for yourself on that Day of retribution when God's just verdicts will be made known.* ⁶ *He will repay everyone as their deeds deserve.* ⁷ *For those who aimed for glory and honour and immortality by persevering in doing good, there will be eternal life.* (Rom. 2:5-7) ^(New Jerusalem Bible)

It is not anyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," who will enter the kingdom of Heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven. (Matt. 7:21) ^(New Jerusalem Bible)

¹⁶ *For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, is not of the Father but is of the world.* ¹⁷ *And the world passes*

away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever. (1 Jn. 2:16-17) ^(RSV)

A Change of Heart The Bible's teaching on Repentance

Without repentance Jesus Himself said that people will perish (see Luke 13:1-5). It is of the utmost importance that we know and understand this subject thoroughly.

Many today preach “only believe,” but that was not the message of Jesus or his apostles. Christ and his apostles preached “repent and believe” (see Mark 1:15; Mark 6:12). Any message that leaves out the call to repentance is misleading people and not representing God. The general edict of God to the human race is “repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus” (see Acts 20:20-21). The apostle Paul declared that all men everywhere must repent (Acts 17:29-31; 2 Peter 3:9). It is a command and not an option. Repentance must always accompany true faith and without it such faith is always an empty profession (see James 2:19-20). According to Jesus words, repentance and remission of sins is a packaged deal (see Luke 24:46-47; Acts 2:38). The New Testament is absolutely clear, repentance is a move that a sinner

must make who wants reconciliation with God (see Acts 3:19).

So, what is repentance? Repentance is an inner change of mind, a change of heart that results in an outward turning around, to face and move in a completely new direction (that direction is towards God). Repentance turns you FROM something, TO something. For the Thessalonian believers it turned them FROM idols TO serve the Living and True God (see 1 Thess. 1:9). The apostle Paul preached repentance FROM darkness TO light and FROM Satan UNTO God. In this turn a gift of grace results in forgiveness granted to those believing (see Acts 26:18). Paul stated that his ministry was to call people to repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds (see Acts 26:19-20).

Many churches today are afraid of the word “works” (not recognizing that there are different kinds of works described in Scripture – 1 Thess. 1:3; Eph. 2:10; Acts 26:20) In so doing they have denied the reality that faith and repentance both require evidence (or fruit) to prove their existence (Acts 26:20; Jas. 2:17-20).

To say that because we are believers, that we do not need to continue in repentance is as silly as saying that we do not need to continue in faith (see Col. 1:21-23), yet this is the attitude of many today. That Jesus emphasized the seriousness of repentance or its lack thereof is truly an understatement (see Luke 13:1-5). Repentance and conversion was the teaching of the early Church (see Acts 3:19). That “repentance” is the first foundational teaching of Christ cannot be denied (see Hebrews 6:1-3).

Scriptural repentance begins with God. Jesus said, *“No man can come to Me, except the Father which hath sent Me draw him ...”* (John 6:44). For this reason the supreme crisis of every human being comes at the moment of the Spirit’s drawing to repentance. When a person says, “Yes” to that drawing it will lead to saving faith. If rejected it will leave a person to continue in his own way. *“As I live, saith the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked; but that the wicked TURN from his way and live”* (Ezek. 33:11).

The early Christian Church continued the call for repentance. This early preaching linked repentance with faith (Acts 20:21), the

demand to be baptized (Acts 2:38), and the promise of the forgiveness of sins (Luke 24:47). “*Repentance*” and “*conversion*” are identical twins (Acts 3:19). The Greek word for “*conversion*” is *epistrepho* and means to turn about, a turning from and a turning to. This corresponds to “*repentance*” and “*faith*.” ‘Divine grace is the efficient cause, human agency the responding effect’ (Vine’s Greek Lexicon).

A Question: Have you turned from darkness to light, from the authority of Satan unto the authority of God? (Acts 26:18; Acts 4:12). **Repentance is not perfection, it is a new direction** – and it is towards God (Acts 20:21). Have you turned to “follow” Christ? (Matt. 8:22; 16:24; Luke 9:23; John 10:27). “*Follow*” means *to come or go after; to accept the guidance or leadership of; to be governed by* (Rom. 10:9-10, 13).

How to go to Confession⁵

- Make the Sign of the Cross: “**Bless me Father, for I have sinned. It has been _____ since my last Confession.**”
- Confess you sins.

- When you have finished, say, “**I am sorry for these and all my sins.**”
- The priest will give you a penance, and he may offer you some spiritual direction.
- Pray an Act of Contrition.
- **Act of Contrition:** O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You. I detest all my sins because of Your just punishments, but most of all because they offend You, my God, who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin. Amen.

Vatican II and scriptural research renewed the idea that our connection with God was based not on law but on covenant – His New Covenant with us given by Jesus. Thus sin is not just a breaking away, but a turning away from the One who loves us, to pursue our own will. The Sacrament of Penance, Reconciliation, or Confession, is an opportunity to return and experience God’s

love. “For the LORD is good; his mercy endures forever” (Jer. 33:11).

We are saved and justified (made right with God) by God’s free gift of grace and our willing response. *I urge you ... by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship* (Roman 12:1).⁵

DISCIPLESHIP QUESTIONS

1. An accepted definition of repentance is: *An inner change of mind, resulting in an outward turning back, or turning around, to face and to move in a completely new direction.* In the Old Testament it could be toward God or away from God. True or False.

Answer: Ezekiel 33:18-19 ¹⁸ *If a righteous man turns from his righteousness and does evil, he will die for it.* ¹⁹ *And if a wicked man turns away from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he will live by doing so.*⁶

2. Throughout the entire New Testament, repentance is a response to the gospel. Nothing can take its place. True repentance accompanies true faith.

Without repentance, faith alone is a mere empty profession. True or False.

Answer: Acts 2:37-38 ³⁷ *Now when they heard this, they were pierced to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brethren, what shall we do?"* ³⁸ *And Peter said to them, "Repent, and each of you be baptized ..."*

James 2:19-20 ¹⁹ *You believe there is one God. Good! But the demons believe that, too, and they tremble with fear.* ²⁰ *You foolish person! Must you be shown that faith that does nothing is worth nothing?*

3. Anyone who is leaving out the call to repentance is misleading sinners and misrepresenting God. True or False.

Answer: Luke 13:3 ³ *I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.*

2 Peter 3:9 ⁹ *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.*

4. A person's sins can be blotted out by:
a. paying your bills on time. b. driving the speed limit. c. repentance and confession.

Answer: Acts 3:19 ¹⁹ *Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...*

1 John 1:9 ⁹ *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all iniquity.*

5. According to Jesus words, the preaching of repentance and forgiveness of sins is a necessity. True or False.

Answer: Luke 24:46-47 ⁴⁶ *This is what is written: the Messiah must suffer and must rise from death three days later,* ⁴⁷ *and in his name the message about repentance and the forgiveness of sins must be preached to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem.*

6. A person that returns to God will receive: a. forgiveness. b. chastisement. c. scolding.

Answer: Isaiah 55:7 ⁷ *Let the wicked abandon their way of life and the evil their way of thinking. Let them come back to God, who is merciful, come back to our God, who is lavish with forgiveness.*

7. As Christians we are to continue in repentance? True or False.

Answer: Acts 26:20 ²⁰ *But shewed first unto them of Damascus, and at Jerusalem, and throughout all the coasts of Judaea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent [present tense:*

and continue in repentance] and turn [present tense: and continue to turn] to God, and do [present tense: and continue to do works or deeds that prove their repentance] works meet for repentance.

Acts 8:13, 18-22. ¹³ *Even Simon himself believed, and after being baptized he continued with Philip. And seeing signs and great miracles performed, he was amazed.* ¹⁸ *Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was given through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,* ¹⁹ *saying, "Give me also this power, that any one on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."* ²⁰ *But Peter said to him, "Your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!"* ²¹ *You have neither part nor lot in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.* ²² *Repent therefore of this wickedness of yours, and pray to the Lord that, if possible, the intent of your heart may be forgiven you.*

Revelation 3:19 ¹⁹ *Those whom I [dearly and tenderly] love, I tell their faults and convict and convince and reprove and chasten [I discipline and instruct them]. So be enthusiastic and in earnest and burning with zeal and repent [changing your mind and attitude]. [Prov 3:12.]*

8. Repentance turns FROM something, TO something. True or False.

Answer: Acts 26:18 ⁸ *to open their eyes so that they may turn away from darkness to the light, away from the power of Satan and to God. Then their sins can be forgiven, and they can have a place with*

those people who have been made holy by believing in me.

9. Scriptural repentance begins with God. If rejected it will leave a person to continue in his own way. True or False.

Answer: Hebrews 3:7,8,13. ⁷ *Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, To day if ye will hear his voice,* ⁸ *Harden not your hearts...* ¹³ *But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.*

Revelation 2:21 ²¹ *I gave her time to repent, but she has no desire to repent of her immorality [symbolic of idolatry] and refuses to do so.*

James 5:19-20 ¹⁹ *My brothers and sisters, if one of you wanders away from the truth, and someone helps that person come back,* ²⁰ *remember this: Anyone who brings a sinner back from the wrong way will save that sinner's soul from death and will cause many sins to be forgiven.*

10. Jesus and the apostles preached: a. come to church on Sunday. b. ask Jesus into your heart. c. that you should repeat this prayer after me. d. that men should repent and believe the gospel, proving their repentance by what they do.

Answer: Mark 1:15 ¹⁵ *"The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the gospel."*

Mark 6:12 ¹² *And they went out, and preached that men should repent.*

Luke 24:46-47 ⁴⁶ *"Thus it stands written that the Christ would suffer and would rise from the dead on the third day, ⁴⁷ and repentance for the forgiveness of sins would be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."*

Acts 26:19-20 ¹⁹ *"And so, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.*

²⁰ *On the contrary, first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem and throughout the whole country of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached the need to repent and turn to God, and to do works giving evidence of repentance.*

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