

Real Repentance

Dr. Steve Schell | Acts 26:19-20 | Week 2 Essential Doctrines

It's easy to confuse the terms "works of the Law" with "works worthy of repentance." We can take the truth that we are saved by faith and not by works to mean that our works don't matter; in fact some people consider any attempt to produce good works to be dangerous because it might lead to self-righteousness. The result of this kind of thinking has been believers who are nearly devoid of good works. Some sincere, but confused, believers are careful not to do anything that might resemble a good work and even scold others when they step out to do something for God. The result is a very low level of discipleship and a very poor reputation in the community.

Today, as we listen to Paul explain his faith to King Agrippa, we hear him say something that might surprise us, especially coming from the apostle who taught fervently against works. Listen again to what he told Agrippa: "So, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly sight, but first [went] to [the Jews] in Damascus and Jerusalem and all the countryside of Judea, and [then] to the nations, [and] I announced to [them that they must] repent and turn [and call] upon God, practicing works worthy of repentance" (my translation). Paul assured the king that he had not disobeyed the commands Jesus gave him; in fact it was his obedience to those commands that got him in trouble. He said he first went to the Jews and preached the Gospel to them whether they lived in Damascus (Ac 9:19-25), Jerusalem (Ac 9:26-30; 22:17-21; Gal 1:18), or even out in the rural countryside of Judea. Then he went to the Gentiles (nations). And everywhere he went his message was the same: He told people to repent and turn to God "doing works worthy of repentance."

Works of repentance

The term, "works worthy of repentance" points to the changes in attitudes and behaviors that always take place when a person truly repents and turns to God. Paul strongly rejected the idea that anyone could earn their salvation by doing "works of the Law." Listen to what he said to believers in Rome,

"Now we know that whatever the Law [of Moses] says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God; because by the works of the Law no flesh will be justified in His sight: for through the Law comes the knowledge of sin. But now apart from the Law, the righteousness of God has been manifested (revealed), being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe, for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus..." (Ro 3:19-24).

Yet, in his statement to King Agrippa, Paul makes it clear that he expected believers to produce good works, because good works are the natural fruit of a transformed heart. When a person changes inside, the way they live outwardly changes. Listen to the way Jesus explains this same

truth: "...every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit" (Mt 7:17-18).

He's saying there is a direct relationship between who we are inside and how we think and act. He's certainly not arguing that people who are good never do bad things. Only a few moments before He made this statement, He taught His followers to repent daily (Mt 6:12). But if a person truly repents, he or she will produce the fruit of repentance. A good tree produces good fruit and so will we. So, what is it that changes us from being a "bad tree" into a "good tree"? Jesus would go on to say it's those who call Him "Lord" and mean it; it's those who hear His words and do them (Mt 7:22, 24). Paul said the same thing this way: it's those who "repent and turn [and call] upon God, practicing works worthy of repentance" (Ac 26:20).

What is repentance?

As humans we tend to think of repentance as being sorry for doing bad things. But actually, in God's thinking, the bad things we do are merely the fruit of the real problem, which is a wrong relationship with Him. So the life-changing repentance that Jesus and Paul are talking about takes place when how we think about God changes, and as a result of that, how we think about ourselves and others changes. Before such repentance can take place, God must reveal to us our need for it (conviction), and then enabled by the power of His Spirit, we must respond to what He has shown us by exercising our will, by choosing to receive His correction and submit to Him. And this process of repentance is not something we participate in only once. Of course, it starts with a first choice, but then, as we go through life, we must repent over and over again, and at deeper and deeper levels, each time God shows us our need.

Confusion about repentance

But there is an obstacle to repentance which we all face as members of this culture. There are sizeable portions of the church in our country which teach that repentance is not necessary to salvation, only faith. In fact there are some portions of the church that say it is impossible for an unbeliever to repent because, in their thinking, being "dead in sin" doesn't mean being "separated from God" or "under condemnation for our sins," it means completely dead, like a corpse, so making a choice to obey God is impossible. I bring this up, not to be controversial, but to help us understand why some of us might find Paul's words here confusing. We may have been taught that repentance isn't necessary (or even possible), yet it appears that Paul (and Jesus) preached that people must repent, and that this repentance must be sincere, and if it is, then the way they live will change.

What must change?

Paul speaks of "sins" as the bad things we do, but he also speaks of "Sin" and says it's the root problem in our heart. What is Sin? Ultimately, it's what I must repent of, but what is it? As I reflect on numerous statements in the Bible, I would say that Sin, at its deepest level, is a combination of pride, selfishness and unbelief.

The deadliest form of pride is thinking that I don't need God:

1) I don't need His wisdom. I can decide what's right and wrong for myself (Ge 3:5).

- 2) I don't need His help. I can handle life on my own. I can fix my own problems.
- 3) I don't need His mercy. I'm essentially a good person. I deserve to go to heaven, if there is one.
- 4) I don't even need Him to exist. I'm the highest form of life in the universe. There's no spiritual being above me.

And selfishness is the absence of love for others. I make decisions based on what is best for me. My goal in life is my own pleasure, safety and success. Basically, in my mind, my needs are more important than everyone else's. And a third element of Sin is unbelief. I may philosophically toy with the idea that God exists, but I make no sincere effort to discover the truth. I live as though there is no God and try to ignore the worries about what will happen when I die. Suggestions that someone will hold me accountable for my actions just make me angry.

Real repentance

So real repentance is not sorrow for the bad things I've done. It is a deliberate decision to reject these poisonous attitudes, and to embrace new attitudes. The person who repents recognizes that God exists and they need Him. They submit to His wisdom as it's revealed in His Word and by His Spirit. They let Him decide what's right and what's wrong. They realize they are weak and unable to cope with the powerful negative forces around them and in their own flesh. They know how much they need Him. They love God and become lonely for Him and long for His presence. They become painfully aware of their sin and the damage they've done to themselves and others, so they humbly call on God asking Him to be merciful to them and forgive their sins. They really believe God sent His Son Jesus to save us, and out of thankfulness they choose to focus their life on bringing others to know Him, which means they stop living for themselves.

Works of repentance

When the tree changes, the fruit changes. A repentant person begins to think and act differently. Pride gives way to humility. Selfishness gives way to selfless service. And unbelief gives way to faith. The person who once lied a lot begins to tell the truth even when it's embarrassing or costs them something. The person who was always talking about themselves starts talking kindly about others. The person who always yielded to the temptations of their flesh begins to earnestly look for ways to stop. The person who often exploded in rage or vile language learns to calm down and control their tongue. The person who was bitterly jealous of others begins to rejoice when others succeed. The person who never prayed begins to pray. The person who was so easily offended learns to sit down and discuss things face to face, and to forgive and forget. The person who usually coped with pressure by using alcohol and drugs learns to release their burdens to God in worship and prayer. The person who used to spend all their time and money on themselves begins to take time to serve others and gladly gives tithes and offerings so others can hear about Jesus Christ.

These, along with a thousand other subtle changes, are what Paul means by "works worthy of repentance," and what Jesus means by "good fruit." No one who makes these changes is trying to earn anything. The works are produced because the relationship with God is different. Repentant people love Him, and because they love Him, they want to please Him and become

like Him. They have new goals, they make different choices, they draw on a new source of wisdom and strength... and the result is that people around them can see a change. They may watch a while, and even test to see if the change is real, but once they discover that it is, this type of change in the human heart is so miraculous, so unusual, no one can deny it. It's something so wonderful that only God could have done it.

Application

The person who really repents really changes. And the person who doesn't change hasn't repented, no matter what they say with their mouth. Remember: a good tree always produces good fruit. So everywhere Paul went he told people they must repent and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (Ac 20:21). And he knew if they really did these things, they would naturally perform "works worthy of repentance." The question each of us must ask ourselves after listening to Paul's words is this: "Do I see in my own life the kind of change that real repentance produces?" Of course, none of us is without our struggles, but am I different since I came to Jesus? Has anyone else seen this change? If not, the answer is not for me to try to do more good works; the answer is to ask God to show me my heart and reveal where I need to repent. Then the "good fruit" will take care of itself.

Questions

- 1) When you first heard the gospel, did anyone explain to you about repentance, or did they simply tell you to acknowledge that you were a sinner? If not, when did you discover there were attitudes in you that you needed to repent of?
- 2) Have you ever seen someone become a Christian and then change dramatically? What changes did you see? How long did it take? What effect did this have on others, or you?