

Practical Repentance

by Joe Dallas

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Did sin ever yield real pleasure?

If so, go back to your old drudgery, and wear the chain again, if it delights you.

But inasmuch as sin did never give you what it promised to bestow,

but deluded you with lies, be free.

—Charles Spurgeon

When you're angry enough, scared enough, or frustrated enough, you take action. So it is with sexual sin. If you're ready to repent of it, you're probably angry ("I've had it!") scared, ("God be merciful to me a sinner!"), or feeling the futility of it all. ("There's no future in this for me!"). All three roads lead to repentance.

To repent is to turn. That's what distinguishes repentance from confession, which is a simple acknowledgment of sin as opposed to actively turning from it. It is through confession, according to John 1:9, that we are forgiven of sin:

"If we confess our sins,

He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins

and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." -I John 1:9

But confession doesn't necessarily change us, important as it is. God not only calls us to acknowledge our sin; He also commands us to put it away.

Now "repent" is a word we associate with dour men in sackcloth warning us about the coming doom. That's too bad, because repentance is a valuable concept. It means "to think differently, reconsider, turn around." No real changes are made without it. Repentance is the willful act of discontinuing a thing which is destructive, followed by an earnest effort to do what is constructive and right. In short, without confession nothing is forgiven, but without repentance nothing is changed.

To repent, or turn, you need to first identify what you're repenting of, then determine the most effective way to do it. Exactly what do you need to repent of?

Of course, you can't repent of having sexual impulses. You can't rip them out and abandon them, and you can't just will them away. Repentance applies to acts of the conscious will, whether they are outward actions or inward indulgences. So you are not trying to repent of sexuality per se but of conscious sexual sins. These would of course include sexual contact apart from marriage, and the use of pornography. These are direct forms of immoral behavior, easy to detect and obviously immoral.

**“We can’t keep the birds from flying over our heads,
but we can keep them from building a nest in our hair.”
-Martin Luther**

Sexual fantasies are similar. They, like sexual lust, are conscious acts of the imagination. And they too need to be distinguished from fleeting sexual thoughts. Martin Luther, speaking of impure thoughts, said that we can’t keep the birds from flying over our heads, but we can keep them from building a nest in our hair. That’s pretty well put. Wayward sexual thoughts come to everyone, I suppose, but when we indulge those thoughts by orchestrating sexual fantasies, then we’re not just having fleeting thoughts; we’re creating mental pornographic home movies.

But repentance shouldn’t stop there. You should also consider any activities that contribute to them or encourage them. Here you need to be very honest with yourself. Are there parts of your lifestyle—habits, places you like to go, forms of recreation—that encourage sexual immorality? That’s a question every Christian has to ask himself; it’s a question that’s doubly pertinent to you. So often, men can go on kidding themselves, then wonder why they’re not making any progress. They claim to want freedom, and seem willing to give up overt sexual sin, but show an unwillingness to give up the very things that lead them back into that activity.

In all matters, the question should never be “Is going to such and such a place an overt sin?” but rather “Do I have the liberty to go to this place without setting myself up to stumble? Will it encourage me toward my goals, or will it encourage me toward a setback?”

If you’re serious about repentance, bring every part of your life under scrutiny. Remember, you’re trying to emerge from the mindset of a child to that of an athlete, putting aside anything that interferes with your ultimate goal. That, in the truest sense, is repentance.

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