



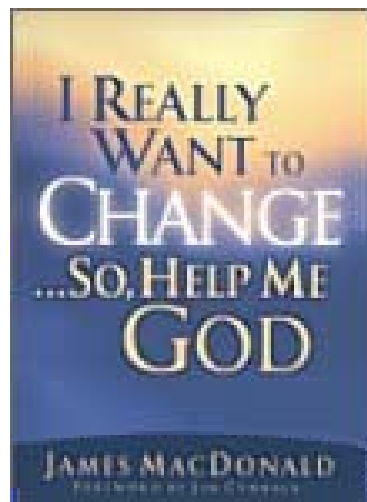
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THAT FIRST STEP WON'T KILL YOU...OR WILL IT?
["CHANGE HAS TO BEGIN WITH REPENTANCE"]

WEEKLY SUNDAY SCHOOL LESSON

JANUARY 21, 2007

FROM THE *MASTER WORKS* SERIES STUDY OF:



THAT FIRST STEP WON'T KILL YOU...OR WILL IT?

[“CHANGE HAS TO BEGIN WITH REPENTANCE”]

There was a cartoon I saw several years ago in which little George Washington is standing with an axe in his hand. Before him lying on the ground is the famous cherry tree. He has already made his smug admission that he did it – after all, he “cannot tell a lie.” But his father is standing there exasperated saying, “All right, so you admit it! You always admit it! The question is, when are you going to stop doing it.”

As we begin our fourth week in our Bible study from James MacDonald’s book, *I Really Want to Change...So, Help Me God*, think back with me a moment when you had to write a paper in school or were helping a child write one. What was the hardest part to write? Why is the first step of a project often the most difficult to take? Over the past three weeks we’ve seen that we are our worst enemy. It you and I that are problem and only God can transform or change us. Remember, last week we got down to specifics and I handed out a checklist that had a page full of devastating character weaknesses that believers possess. You were to review the list and pick one or two to work on this week. In other words, you were to take that first step of change! And we call that **repentance**. Repentance is a word that we don’t hear used very much in our society anymore. Why? What do we usually think about people who urge us to repent? Why?

In our study this week, Dr. MacDonald echoes what we have just been saying. Our one sentence lesson quote this week is printed in the margin on Day One on page 93 and reads: *“True repentance is the first step in all change, but it is not easy.” A school teacher asked her students what “repentance” meant. One young boy quickly raised his hand and said, “It means being sorry for your sins.” After hearing that response, another student in the classroom raised her hand and corrected the young boy. She added, “Repentance doesn’t just mean that you are sorry for your sins. It means that you are sorry enough to quit.”*

So, what's the big deal with *repentance*? What does it really mean? (TURN. CHANGE DIRECTION. CHANGE YOUR MIND. TURN FROM SIN AND SELF AND TRUST CHRIST ONLY) Let's start with some scripture. Turn to **REV 3: 19-20 (NKJV)**: *¹⁹As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent. ²⁰Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and dine with him, and he with Me.*

Did you see what Jesus said in those verses and what he did **not** say? Not, "As many as I love, I ...pamper." Or, not, "As many as I love, I...answer their prayers quickly and accurately." Or, not even, "As many as I love, I ...leave alone and let them enjoy life as they are." No, what? "I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent." See, God is always working to change us, and the first thin He asks of us is to repent.

People today tend to have the attitude that they will try to better themselves. How are you doing with those new year resolutions? You see, under their own effort, people try to cut back on smoking, drinking, overeating, and so on. And we're all in favor of cutting back on things like that, but there is an underlying problem and that is that people tend to think that everything is just a matter of trying to improve by human effort. Let's look at it another way.

Let's say there's a man who's been embezzling money from his employer to the tune of \$200,000 per year. Suddenly it begins to bother his conscience. He wants to repent and so, he decides that THIS year, he will only embezzle \$100,000 and next year, he will try to only embezzle \$50,000 and the year after, only 25,000 until he has gradually reduced it to zero. Let's say his boss catches him. He can just tell his boss, "Hey, I became a Christian. I repented of my sin and before you know it, I won't be stealing anything from you.

Sounds pretty ridiculous, doesn't it? Funny thing is though, people will actually think things like that. I know you truly want to change—like me—yet sometime we may feel trapped in a

specific sin. You know, a vicious cycle: sin, then confess, try again, sin-confess, sin-confess, try again, always promising God to change but seldom really experiencing it. The problem may be that you have not truly repented on that sin.

Now that you are a Christian, are you any different than you were before your life changing experience? Beverly and I watched *The Golden Globe* awards show this past week and as a result we went to see two movies yesterday. Helen Mirren won best actress for *The Queen* and the movie *Babel* won best picture. Now we should have known something was odd when we realize that these awards are given out by the Hollywood Foreign Press Corps. Did you catch that? Foreign? Their ways are not our ways and so on. Well, *The Queen* was actually good—slow, but good. But, the so-called best movie—*Babel*—was...not! Now, what does this have to do with repentance? Well, if you'd seen what Beverly and I saw, you'd know. We should have left—several times. We talked about it but stayed. See repentance is a change on the inside, a change in the way I think about sin. Repentance is when you detect and destroy the rationalization that lead to your sin. It's changing your mind about those lies. We were deceived just like Dr. MacDonald said this week in our study.

Turn to **ACTS 19:17-19 (NKJV)** and listen to what happens when the Holy Spirit convicts a person of their sin and the resulting change that occurs: *¹⁷This became known both to all Jews and Greeks dwelling in Ephesus; and fear fell on them all, and the name of the Lord Jesus was magnified. ¹⁸And many who had believed came confessing and telling their deeds. ¹⁹Also, many of those who had practiced magic brought their books together and burned them in the sight of all. And they counted up the value of them, and it totaled fifty thousand pieces of silver.*

I hope you carefully reviewed the five deceptions that were part of Day Two's study this week. I've found myself using all of those excuses when dealing with sin in my own life. But, as we know, we have to change or repent. But how do you know, really know, if you have repented? For the first evidence, turn to **1 John 1:9**

(NIV), a great memory verse: *⁹If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* So, the first way is what? **CONFESS**. Do you think it's true repentance to confess your sin to God, receive forgiveness, and then to repeatedly commit that sin again only to confess it again? Why? The only way to do this is to allow your confession to be a commitment to allow God to change that sinful way. You've got to hate the sin!

The second evidence is that genuine repentance results in restitution. Remember the story of Zacchaeus? What did this thieving tax collector tell Jesus he would do about all he'd stolen? Listen to these words from **Luke 19:8 (NIV)**: *⁸... Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.*" When we are truly right with God, we want to be right with others.

We've already said genuine repentance is not easy. That's the big problem, according to our writer, in this day and age. Repentance is the key that unlocks the door to all that God has for us. See, when genuine repentance happens, all of God's blessings are poured out on us. The Greek word for repentance is *metanoia*. *Meta* means "to change or shift" and *noia* means "perspective." It literally means a change in the way one views things. Repentance means not only saying you're sorry, it means you are going to genuinely change and mend your ways.

Not too many years ago newspapers carried the story of Al Johnson, a Kansas man who came to faith in Jesus Christ. What made his story remarkable was not his conversion, but the fact that as a result of his newfound faith in Christ, he confessed to a bank robbery he had participated in when he was nineteen years old. Because the statute of limitations on the case had run out, Johnson could not be prosecuted for the offense. Still, he believed his relationship with Christ demanded a confession. And he even voluntarily repaid his share of the stolen money!

So, repentance simply means to change form. In Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch interpretation of the Bible, he uses the illustration of the caterpillar-butterfly image to clarify the real meaning of repentance.

"The ugly caterpillar crawls along, in the dirt with the warm sun shining upon him. Then he climbs by instinct out onto a limb of a tree and weaves a cocoon all around himself. The sun continues to bathe him with warmth and when the time is right something wonderful happens to him. The protective shell begins to crack and break open with new life. He emerges changed, changed into a new form to face a whole new world.

Jordan continues, " The happiest, most joyful thing you'll ever do is to metonoia. Would you say to the caterpillar, "Well, little fellow, you know I sure feel sorry for you--you're fixin' to become a butterfly? It's terrible man! " And the little fellow weeps and moans and groans because he's fixing to be a butterfly.

No! His birthday is here. He's about to enter into a new order that God Almighty has prepared for him. The happiest thing a little caterpillar can do is to metamorphose. And the happiest thing for a person is for the light of God to shine on him for him to be taken out of his darkness and put in a new order of things."

True repentance starts with **godly sorrow** for our sin. We know what sorrow means, we're just not used to experiencing it in regard to our own sin. Did you know the word **sorrow** literally means *pain, internal hurting, soul anguish*? This is not just saying you're sorry now, like worldly sorrow. You know, "Sorry, I feel so bad" or "Sorry I got caught." Turn to **2 COR 7:8-11 (NIV)** and look at what Paul says about this godly sorrow we're talking about: *⁸Even if I caused you sorrow by my letter, I do not regret it. Though I did regret it—I see that my letter hurt you, but only for a little while—⁹yet now I am happy, not because you were made sorry, but because your sorrow led you to repentance. For you became sorrowful as God intended and so were not harmed in any way by us. ¹⁰Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to*

*salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.
¹See what this godly sorrow has produced in you: what earnestness, what eagerness to clear yourselves, what indignation, what alarm, what longing, what concern, what readiness to see justice done. At every point you have proved yourselves to be innocent in this matter.*

The word used here in verses 8-10 is "to cause pain." Paul was afraid that his letter was too harsh – but since it was received with a particular kind of sorrow – Paul was glad he sent it after all. There are times when I've got to say things to people that they don't want to hear – that they can't just believe anything they want and go to heaven – or that activities or attitudes they are having are sinful. How they react determines whether the sorrow I cause leads one of two ways: to death or to salvation. Paul describes it as "godly" sorrow as opposed to "worldly" sorrow. In a way it is the difference between discipline and condemnation.

To finish off today I want to turn out attention to another section of the Word that deals with repentance – of King David after Nathan the prophet called him on the carpet for having sex with Bathsheba, then having her husband murdered. This is the Psalm David wrote after he repented. Turn to **Psalm 51** (FOR THE DIRECTOR OF MUSIC. A PSALM OF DAVID. WHEN THE PROPHET NATHAN CAME TO HIM AFTER DAVID HAD COMMITTED ADULTERY WITH BATHSHEBA)

¹Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. ²Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. ³For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. ⁴Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge. ⁵Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. ⁶Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in the inmost place.

⁷Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow. ⁸Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones you have crushed rejoice. ⁹Hide your face from my sins and blot out all my iniquity. ¹⁰Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me. ¹¹Do not cast me from your presence or take your Holy Spirit from me. ¹²Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

¹³Then I will teach transgressors your ways, and sinners will turn back to you. ¹⁴Save me from bloodguilt, O God, the God who saves me, and my tongue will sing of your righteousness. ¹⁵O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise. ¹⁶You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. ¹⁷The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.

¹⁸In your good pleasure make Zion prosper; build up the walls of Jerusalem. ¹⁹Then there will be righteous sacrifices, whole burnt offerings to delight you; then bulls will be offered on your altar.

The Qualities of the Repentant Heart (from Psalm 51)

- ¹ Throw yourself on the mercy of the court (don't make excuses) v1
- ² Be honest about your sin – and be sorry (it was an "affair") v 3
- ³ Realize who the sin really hurt ("why did you despise my Word") v4
- ⁴ Know that it is the sin nature that must be dealt with (no isolated sin) v5
- ⁵ Open up your entire life to God's cleansing (no "off limits") v 6
- ⁶ Embrace the Lord's way of cleansing through Jesus ("I am the Way ...") v 7
- ⁷ Pray for a new heart and a new joy (v 10-12)
- ⁸ Look for changes in your attitude and your words (v 13-15)
- ⁹ Know that you can't earn God's forgiveness – all He wants is your broken heart (v 16-17)
- ¹⁰ Turn – Confess – Receive – Change – Build – Worship (v 18-19)

Isaiah 30:15-16 ¹⁵*"In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it. ¹⁶You said, 'No, we will flee on horses.' Therefore you will flee!*

Don't flee from God – turn towards Him and repent. Remember the story of the prodigal son a few weeks back. When the son finally came to his senses. Repentance, as seen from that parable, involves your MIND first, coming to the place where you look at the thing that used to be attractive and say the opposite. You find it repulsive. We come to our senses.

Next, when we come to our senses, we have strong EMOTIONS, deep feelings of grief over the sin, a deep sense of shame for your sin and failure before a Holy God. Remember the reaction of the son when he returned and hugged his father? *"I am no longer worthy to be called your son."* He saw the sin and felt the deep pain and hurt.

Finally, repentance involves the WILL. When the prodigal son realized his situation, remember what he said? *"I will arise and [will] go to my father. I will say to him...* Notice that HE WAS CHOOSING, he was exercising his will to effect a solution to his sin.

The reason so many people don't experience the cleansing and lasting change of repentance is that they don't do the hard work. With the MIND, the EMOTIONS, and the WILL. Bottom line for you to remember is what Paul says to Timothy in **2 TIMOTHY 2:25**: God grants repentance. It is a gift from God. He wants all of us to have it. But it takes work. Are you willing?

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