

# Forgiveness and Repentance



## *Sabbath Afternoon*

**MEMORY TEXT:** “Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Romans 2:4).

**T**HE BUMPER STICKER had only one word written across it: “Repent!” That is all it took, one word, not even exclusively a Christian word (it is used in other contexts and even in other faiths), and the faith of the owner was clearly identified. That is because the concept of repentance is tied so intricately to Christianity. In fact, not only did the word reveal the faith of the owner, but that word, as expressed, was also a form of witnessing.

Thus, with one word, the owner of the car revealed his faith; he was able to witness for it, as well.

This week we will look at that word, not so much in the verb form (“repent”) but as a noun, “repentance,” even if, at its core, repentance is nothing if not a verb; that is, something a Christian does.

**THE WEEK AT A GLANCE:** How important is the concept of repentance in Christian theology? How does repentance help us understand what it means to be forgiven? How does our understanding of the Cross help us come to repentance? What is true repentance? Why must repentance involve more than just sorrow for the consequences of sin? What danger is there of making repentance an attempt at salvation by works?

\*Please study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, April 19.

**TO COME TO REPENTANCE.**

“The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to usward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance” (2 Pet. 3:9).

**R**ead the chapter in which this verse appears, focusing particularly on the texts leading up to verse 9. The context is that of the last days, before the Second Coming, when this world as we know it ends. Peter is talking also about scoffers, about those who deride the notion of Christ’s return—a time that will ultimately lead to the “destruction of ungodly men” (2 Pet. 3:7, NASB). It is in the midst of these thoughts that Peter expresses the wonderful truths, in verse 9, that God’s promises are not delayed and that He will fulfill His purposes among us.

**Though the immediate context of the chapter is one of “gloom and doom,” of mockers, of delay, and of destruction, what does Peter say in verse 9 that should give followers of Christ hope and security? What does the text itself also imply about God’s love, even for those who, even now, might be mocking the notion of His return?**

Though God does not want anyone to perish, some clearly will (Dan. 12:2; Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:14, 15); it is obvious, then, that whatever God’s desire might be for all human beings, He respects our freedom of choice and free will—even if those choices can lead to the death of beings for whom Christ died (something He does not want to happen). This text, among other things, presents a powerful testimony to the sanctity of free will and free choice.

Notice the crucial word in verse 9 that, in a sense, separates the “dead” from the “living”: *repentance*. God does not want any to perish; that is why He wants all to “come to repentance.” The clear implication being, of course, that those who repent will not perish, while those who don’t repent will. Whatever, then, repentance means, it obviously has consequences of eternal importance.

**Write down somewhere your understanding of what it means to “come to repentance.” When this week’s lesson ends, write down your thoughts on the same topic, comparing what you learned with what you wrote for today’s study. Share the differences with your class on Sabbath.**

**Key Text: Romans 2:4.**

**Teachers Aim:**

1. To understand what it means to repent and to be forgiven.
2. To show that only God can bring us to true repentance.
3. To focus on how repentance is a gift from God.

**Lesson Outline:**

**I. God Extends to All the Call to Repent (Matt. 28:19).**

- A. God respects our freedom to choose.
- B. God’s desire is for all to be saved.

**II. The Cross Assures Forgiveness (Rom. 5:8).**

- A. We must learn to let God forgive us by learning to repent.
- B. At the Cross, Jesus paid the legal penalty for our sins.
- C. Jesus wants us to experience the “godly sorrow” for sin that leads to repentance.
- D. Understanding what sin means to God leads to this “godly sorrow.”

**III. Repentance Does Not Earn Pardon (2 Chron. 7:14).**

- A. Repentance is crucial to forgiveness, but it does not earn God’s pardon.
- B. Repentance is a divine gift made possible by Jesus’ death on the cross.
- C. Only God can give us “a change of mind,” or true repentance.

**Summary:** “The prayer of David after his fall, illustrates the nature of true sorrow for sin. His repentance was sincere and deep. . . .

“A repentance such as this [Psalm 51:1-14], is beyond the reach of our own power to accomplish; it is obtained only from Christ, who ascended up on high and has given gifts unto men.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, pp. 24, 25.

**Commentary.**

**Forgiveness and Repentance.**

As fallen humans, we can be thankful God loves us so much that He gives us every opportunity to recognize our condition and return to Him. Doing so is our only hope.

**“TO BE FORGIVEN.”**

**“But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9:13).**

The first task of Christians, for the most part, is not to learn to forgive but *to be forgiven*. “To be forgiven” is, in many ways, the foundational principle of Christianity. Without it, our actions become mere outward religious forms, and our profession of faith becomes nothing but cold dogmas, things containing no more value before God than the idols Israel made and worshiped while still professing faith in the same God we profess to worship, as well.

How, then, do we learn “to be forgiven”?

We learn when we acknowledge our inability to do anything of ourselves to earn or to merit God’s grace. We learn when we realize just how bad our moral situation is and why we must fall before God with nothing to plead but our own great need of His mercy. We learn when we experience true sorrow for our sins themselves and not merely for the immediate consequences of those sins. We learn “to be forgiven” when we, indeed, learn to repent.

**Look at the text for today in the context of the whole chapter (see also Mark 2:17; Luke 5:32). What did Jesus mean when He said the righteous do not need repentance but only sinners? Are we not all sinners? (Rom. 3:23).**

Jesus called sinners to repentance because the righteous *had already repented*. They had to, because that is the only way they could be deemed “righteous.” The “righteous” are those who have acknowledged their sin, who have accepted God’s forgiveness for their sin and thus have Christ’s righteousness credited to them as their own. They have, under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, confessed their sins, put away their sins, and surrendered themselves to God, grasping by faith alone the promise of forgiveness and righteousness made available through Christ’s sacrifice. The righteous have already come to repentance; they have, in short, learned “to be forgiven.”

**Dwell more on this idea of learning “to be forgiven.” Why is this idea so basic and crucial to the Christian life? Ask yourself this crucial question: Have I learned to be forgiven? If so, how could you explain what that means to someone who is struggling with this question but who hasn’t learned it? How does repentance teach us what it means “to be forgiven”?**

**TEACHERS COMMENTS**

The Bible repeatedly refers to God’s longsuffering nature: “The Lord, The Lord God, merciful and gracious, longsuffering, and abundant in goodness and truth, keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin” (Exod. 34:6, 7; also see Num. 14:18; Ps. 86:15; Jer. 15:15; Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 1 Tim. 1:16; 1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 3:15). Were it not for that patient nature, we would have no chance at all. A merciless God would give no opportunities to turn from our wicked ways; but the true God recognizes that we are sinful, and He so lovingly provides us with opportunities to repent and accept His forgiveness.

There is the danger, however, that we might interpret God’s forbearance as a signal that He tolerates sin. The Christian Jews, whom Paul addresses in Romans 2:4, believed that sin merited immediate punishment. See Luke 13:1-5; John 9:2. “[They] were accustomed to using the argument that since God was still blessing them, He therefore did not regard them as sinners.”—*The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 485. We must be careful not to be lured into believing the same fallacy. As God graciously continues to grant us time to prepare for His return, we must never presume on His mercy and patience by remaining in known sin. We must not fail to recognize the reason for His patience.

Far from condoning sin, God patiently stays the hand of judgment to enable sinners to come to Him. “Any apparent delay in the Lord’s coming is due to God’s unwillingness to close the door of salvation while there is hope of any sinner’s repentance.”—Volume 7, p. 615.

“God is long-suffering, not willing that any should perish; but His forbearance has a limit, and when the boundary is past, there is no second probation. His wrath will go forth and He will destroy without remedy.”—Ellen G. White Comments, p. 946.

The results of that wrath are eternal. “Their being cast into the lake of fire represents an end of death and of the abode of the dead. Never will they have part in the new earth; they are mortal phenomena that belong only to this world.”—Page 883.

Those who would avoid feeling God’s wrath must take advantage of the opportunities He gives them to repent. There is a fundamental difference between human repentance and godly repentance. Human repentance involves feeling deep sorrow for one’s actions, coupled with a resolve to discontinue those actions (see “repentance” in *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, Philip Babcock Gove, editor in chief (Springfield, Mass.: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1993). As sinful beings, such a resolve is impossible to maintain.

Godly repentance is a more complex procedure. The *SDA Bible Dictionary* defines it as “the act of forsaking sin, accepting God’s gracious gift of salvation, and entering into fellowship with God. True repentance implies a radical change in attitude toward sin and God. . . . Repentance is preceded by the conviction of the Holy Spirit, who impresses upon the sinner’s heart God’s infinite righteousness

**THE GOODNESS OF GOD.**

**“Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4).**

The human condition boils down to one simple point: Because of Adam’s sin, we, as a race, have been alienated from the Creator, a situation that, if left unremedied, would lead to our eternal demise (Rom. 5:12). The good news is that Jesus, at the Cross, resolved that situation (5:8-10). How? Because there, in human flesh, Jesus died for the sins of the world (Gal. 3:13).

But do we really know what it means? What it means is that, at the Cross, your sins—whatever they were, and no matter how much damage they might have caused—have already been punished (Isaiah 53). It means that the legal penalty—before God—for every foul thing you have ever done or could ever do has been paid, in full, now and forever (Rom. 3:25). It means if you stole, the divine penalty for that sin has been taken care of; it means if you murdered, God’s justice regarding that horrible act has already been satisfied; it means if you lied, if you cheated, or if you seduced your best friend’s spouse (or daughter)—God’s just anger at those sins has been met through Jesus’ death (1 Pet. 2:24). It means that although you still have to deal with the immediate legal, moral, social, and relational *consequences* of those sins (which can be devastating), if you have surrendered in faith and obedience to the Lord, you will still never have to face God’s wrath for those sins.

This means that your lies, your deceit, your foul thoughts have already been condemned at the Cross (John 12:31); your lusts, your greed, your perversions have already been condemned at the Cross; your hatred, your envy, your violence have already been punished at the Cross. If they were not, you would have to face that judgment, that condemnation, and that punishment yourself; and if you did, you would be judged *guilty*, you would be condemned, and you would be punished severely (Rev. 21:8). Fortunately, this judgment, condemnation, and punishment have already happened—at the Cross.

This is the provision that God, through His love (John 3:16), has provided as the only means to forgive us for our sins (2 Cor. 5:19).

**Does what you have learned today cause you to want to continue in sin? Or does it cause you to hate your sin, to want to be forgiven, and to want to be purged and cleansed of your sin so thoroughly that you never do it again? If it’s the latter, you are beginning to understand what the Bible means when it says that “the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance.”**

**TEACHERS COMMENTS**

and the sinner’s own lost state (cf. Is. 6:5; Acts 2:37). Conviction is followed by contrition, and by an inner acknowledgment of one’s need of divine grace, coupled with a spirit of willingness that God shall work out His righteous will in one’s life (cf. Pss. 34:18; 51:17; Is 57:15; 66:2).”—*SDA Bible Dictionary*, p. 933.

True repentance makes a transformed life possible, because Christ lives in the person through the Holy Spirit (Ezek. 36:25-27; Galatians 5). This indwelling is a prerequisite for living a Christian life. Thus, repentance plays a vital, necessary role in the Christian experience. “Repentance for sin is the first fruits of the working of the Holy Spirit in the life. It is the only process by which infinite purity reflects the image of Christ in His redeemed subjects.”—Ellen G. White Comments, *The SDA Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, p. 1068.

**INDUCTIVE BIBLE STUDY**

**Texts for Discovery: Matthew 9:9-13; Romans 5:6-11; 2 Peter 3.**

1. A simple, modern analogy of repentance is making a U-turn. A driver, realizing that he or she is going the wrong way, turns around and goes the right way. Repentance is the process in which a person goes from being rebellious against God to being one of His followers. God uses an infinite number of ways to capture our attention and lets us know we’re going the wrong way. Ask your class to mention some biblical examples of the means God used to let people know they were going the wrong way. Perhaps some members would be willing to share briefly some of the circumstances that led them to change from being rebellious to being loyal.
2. “I am not come to call the righteous,” said Jesus, “but sinners to repentance” (Matt. 9:13). Does this mean believers are off the hook when it comes to repentance? Or are there things we need to repent of also? If so, what does that mean in terms of our assurance of salvation?
3. In 1 Corinthians 7 Paul speaks about a “godly sorrow,” which has been described as a sorrow for doing wrong, as opposed to a “worldly sorrow,” a sorrow for being caught. Perhaps the best examples for these two types of sorrow are contained in the stories of Peter and Judas and their roles in the betrayal of Jesus just prior to His crucifixion. How do we know that Peter’s repentance was genuine and Judas’s was not?



“GODLY SORROW.”

Please read 2 Corinthians 7:9, 10.

The context of these words quickly can be summarized: Paul receives some terrible reports about the situation at the church in Corinth (1 Cor. 5:1; 6:1-8; 11:20-30), a church he himself had founded (Acts 18:1-11). He writes them a stern rebuke that, apparently, is accepted in the right spirit. Second Corinthians 7 contains his words of rejoicing over their positive response.

**Paul, in 2 Corinthians 7:9, 10, contrasts two kinds of sorrow: godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. One leads to salvation, the other to death. Obviously, there is a big difference between the two. Keeping 2 Peter 3:9 in mind (Sunday’s section), what do you think that difference is?**

Perhaps the best way to understand “godly sorrow,” the kind that “worketh repentance to salvation,” is first to understand the real problem with sin, which can be understood only in the light of the Cross. Christ’s death on the cross wasn’t to save us from the immediate consequences of sin (obviously not, because we still suffer those consequences). Instead, Christ’s death struck at the heart of sin, at the principle of sin as sin. Ultimately, He came to destroy sin itself.

Thus, “godly sorrow,” the kind that leads to repentance, is sorrow for sin itself, for the principle behind it, as opposed to the immediate consequences. Almost anyone can sorrow over wrong deeds that lead to punishment or to embarrassment or to some unfortunate consequences. But that’s not the real problem with sin, which is a rupture in the moral fabric of God’s universe. Christ didn’t die in order to spare the child of an adulterer the trauma of divorce; He didn’t die to spare a thief time in jail, because the issue of sin goes so much deeper than the immediate and earthly, physical consequences of sin.

“Godly sorrow,” though it can include the consequences of sin, must go deeper, to the principle of sin itself and to what sin means to God and to His creation. Only then, when we understand just how bad sin is (apart from immediate consequences), will we be sorry enough (“godly sorrow”) to want it eradicated from our lives.

**If we are sorry only for the consequences of sin, as opposed to the sin itself, then, if we could avoid the consequences, we would be less inclined to avoid the sin. How does this concept help us understand the true nature of repentance?**

TEACHERS COMMENTS

“Repentance is a necessary prelude to forgiveness. Forgiveness is a joint gift from the Father and the Son. . . . A righteous and just God cannot accept a sinner into His presence except as the sinner by faith knows Jesus Christ as the sin bearer . . . and accepts Him as his personal Saviour.”—Page 184.

“Repentance is as much the gift of Christ as is forgiveness, and it cannot be found in the heart where Jesus has not been at work. We can no more repent without the Spirit of Christ to awaken the conscience than we can be pardoned without Christ. Christ draws the sinner by the exhibition of His love upon the cross, and this softens the heart, impresses the mind, and inspires contrition and repentance in the soul.”—Ellen G. White Comments, p. 1056.

WITNESSING

The driver moved steadily along, watching the signs that revealed the street names. As he continued, it became evident that he was going in the wrong direction. He immediately put on his left turn signal and moved to the inner lane. At the very next intersection, he came to a stop. When he was sure the way was clear, he quickly made a U-turn. Once again he moved along, looking very carefully at the street signs. He now felt confident that he was going the right way.

Like that driver, we all have made U-turns, big changes in spiritual direction. This is what true repentance is: A change, a big one, in fact. Where there is sorrow for sin, there also is a desire to cease from sinning. Without repentance there can be no victory. God of-

fers His forgiveness even before we ask. But, as long as we cherish the sin, we cannot be saved. There must be a change. We must let go of the sin. The Bible says, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy” (Prov. 28:13, emphasis supplied).

Jesus once told the story of a man who had two sons. The man said to the first, “Son, go work today in my vineyard.” The son answered and said, “I will not,” but he later repented and went. “And he came to the second, and said likewise. And he answered and said, I go, sir: and went not” (Matt. 21:28-30). As God’s witnesses, we must tell others that it is essential not only to confess our sins, but to forsake them. We must repent.

**WHAT REPENTANCE DOES NOT DO** (see Acts 5:31; 2 Tim. 2:25, 26).

In the course of this week’s study on repentance and forgiveness, it should be clear how crucial repentance is to forgiveness. In fact, it would seem that without repentance, there can be no personal forgiveness of sin. The provision the Lord made for the human race (see Romans 5) becomes individually efficacious only as the individual accepts what was done; repentance is the process of this acceptance.

**Look at Acts 5:31 and 2 Timothy 2:25, 26. Where do they say repentance comes from?**

The point that Christians need to remember is that repentance, no matter how crucial to the process of forgiveness, is *not* the means of forgiveness. It is not some work that we do that earns us pardon. There’s no merit in repentance in the sense that the act itself is something that can make us acceptable in God’s sight or that it helps atone for our sins. Forgiveness comes only through what Christ did for us on the cross, an act that is external to us (Heb. 9:12). Repentance, like faith (see Eph. 2:8, 9), is a divinely endowed gift that allows us to appropriate in our own lives the promise of forgiveness.

In other words, we must not make the doctrine of repentance into a subtle form of salvation by works, which is easy to do (for our natural tendency is to try to work our way to heaven). Sorrow for sin and a desire to turn away from it, though key elements of repentance, are simply not sufficient to solve the problem of sin and forgiveness.

**The Greek word for true repentance, *metanoia*, means literally “a change of mind.” How does that concept help us understand what repentance involves?**

**Though repentance is a gift from God, as any gift it has to be accepted. And yet not everyone will accept the gift. Many times people will resist the Spirit’s attempts to bring the soul to repentance. Why is that? Keeping in mind the idea that repentance involves sorrow for our sin, the need to turn away from our sin, the recognition of our sin, and our utter helplessness to do anything ourselves about our sin, what are some of the reasons why people might be resistant to accepting the gift of repentance? Look at your own life: Can you see, in yourself, any resistance? If so, how can Romans 2:4 help?**

**LIFE-A PPLICATION APPROACH**

**Icebreaker:** Dan Shultz, Christian psychologist, “tries to help people realize they can forgive and maintain their integrity.” In order “to follow through with genuine forgiveness, . . . people must be able to identify with the perpetrator on a human level. They, too, respond out of their own problems, pain and fears. . . .” —*Forgiveness: A Key to Better Health, Vibrant Life Magazine*, (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald® Pub. Assoc., 2000), vol. 17, no. 1, p. 5. What enables us to empathize with people whose experience is very different than our own?

**Thought Questions:**

1. Because Christ was a man “tempted in all points,” He could understand the problem, pain, and fear with which Satan pummels men and women. What comfort can we draw, knowing that no matter the offense done against us, worse was done to Christ, who is willing to forgive all? How can we, by studying Christ’s life, learn to forgive others?
2. What role does surrender of our will to Christ play in accepting forgiveness? In forgiving?
3. What impact does one’s own repentance, or lack of it, have on the forgiving-being-forgiven process?

4. Contrast the philosophies of doing visible penance for sin with producing visible results of your sorrow for sin. Is godly sorrow always mournful? Give Bible examples to support your answer.

**Application Questions:**

1. Morris Venden ties acknowledging we can do nothing to save ourselves to Revelation 14:7, “Fear God, and give glory to him.”—*Nothing to Fear: Devotions for the End Time* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press® Publishing Association, 1999), p. 43. Why would we find it impossible to sincerely give glory to God (acknowledge His supremacy) without submitting to the processes of forgiveness and repentance through Jesus?
2. Both forgiving and repenting involve surrender of the will. In *Not Good If Detached*, Corrie ten Boom expresses the need to take the focus from ourselves: “It is not try, but trust. It is not do, but done. Our God has planned for us Great victory through His Son.”—(Grand Rapids, Mich.: Fleming H. Revell, 1966), p. 102.  
  
On what Bible texts could she have based her poem?

**FURTHER STUDY:** Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, “A Knowledge of God,” pp. 85–91.

**A**s you see the enormity of sin, as you see yourself as you really are, openly do not give up to despair. It was sinners that Christ came to save. We have not to reconcile God to us, but—O wondrous love!—God in Christ is ‘reconciling the world unto Himself.’ 2 Corinthians 5:19. He is wooing by His tender love the hearts of His erring children. No earthly parent could be as patient with the faults and mistakes of his children, as is God with those He seeks to save.”—Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ*, p. 35.

“Paul had ever exalted the divine law. He had shown that in the law there is no power to save men from the penalty of disobedience. Wrongdoers must repent of their sins and humble themselves before God, whose just wrath they have incurred by breaking His law, and they must also exercise faith in the blood of Christ as their only means of pardon. The Son of God had died as their sacrifice and had ascended to heaven to stand before the Father as their advocate. By repentance and faith they might be freed from the condemnation of sin and through the grace of Christ be enabled henceforth to render obedience to the law of God.”—Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles*, p. 393.

“There are many who fail to understand the true nature of repentance. Multitudes sorrow that they have sinned, and even make an outward reformation, because they fear that their wrongdoing will bring suffering upon themselves. But this is not repentance in the Bible sense. They lament the suffering, rather than the sin. Such was the grief of Esau when he saw that the birthright was lost to him forever.”—Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 63.

#### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- 1. Paul rejoiced that the Corinthians sorrowed to repentance. Why can there never be repentance without sorrow? At the same time, in what ways can Satan tempt us to take our sorrow too far, and why would he even try to do that?**
- 2. There’s a fine line between guilt, the kind that Christians should no longer bear, and repentance, which in a very real sense involves a kind of “guilt.” How can we draw the distinction between the two?**
- 3. In light of this week’s lesson, what do you think the phrase “works meet for repentance” means? (Acts 26:20; see also Matt. 3:8).**