

The Power of the Gospel

8

The Power of Repentance

In the last few lessons, we've been focusing on the revelation of the finished work of the Cross – the fact that not only was the *judgment* of sin resolved at the Cross, but that also the *power* of sin was broken at the Cross.

The beautiful hymn by Charles Wesley echoes this wonderful truth:

“He breaks the power of cancelled sin and sets the prisoner free!”

We also saw in **Romans 6:17-18** how Paul declared:

“But thanks be to God that, though you *used to be* slaves to sin, you *wholeheartedly obeyed the form of teaching to which you were entrusted*. You have been *set free from sin* and have *become slaves to righteousness*.”

In this lesson, we will be looking at the practical application of this life-transforming truth. How does it work in real life? How do I *experience* the truth of being “set free from sin” and becoming a “slave to righteousness”?

Experiencing the Truth

Read Romans 6:14

The most important thing to understand about how the Gospel works is that it is based on God's grace. As Christians, we generally have a basic understanding of this. We know, of course, that it is “by grace you have been saved, through faith...not by works, so that no one may boast” (**Ephesians 2:8-9**). But it often takes a while to sink in that the whole Christian life has been designed by God to work on this principle. It is also by grace that you *live* the Christian life, through faith, not by works, so that no one may boast!

In **Romans 6:14**, Paul provides the key understanding of how the Christian is set free from slavery to sin. It is, he says, because we are no longer under law but *under grace*. We will be examining the subject of grace in depth later in our studies, but for now we'll repeat the definition of grace that we've already given:

Grace is God doing what you cannot do yourself.

Grace and law are diametrically opposite ways of living. Law in its essence means reliance on self. Grace in its essence means reliance on God. If you try to struggle to free yourself from sin, the Bible calls this being “under law.” If you are under law, sin will continue to be your master.*

The Bible states clearly that the reason why “sin shall not be your master” is because the whole dynamic of your life has changed from self-effort to reliance on God. You are now under grace.

What we will be learning in this lesson is how this grace dynamic works. As a reminder, we will repeat what we outlined in the Course Handbook. The way truth becomes a reality in your life involves a three-step process:

- **Revelation** – the *enlightening* of God’s Word by the Holy Spirit.
- **Repentance** – the *aligning* of your thinking and behavior with God’s Word.
- **Reality** – the *empowering* by the Holy Spirit to live in line with God’s Word.

Each of the three steps involves God’s grace:

- **Revelation** – the grace of *understanding* the truth of God’s Word.
- **Repentance** – the grace of *realigning* your life to the truth of God’s Word.
- **Reality** – the grace of *living out* the truth of God’s Word.

The last few lessons have been focused on the revelation of the finished work of the Cross. But in order for this *revelation* to be translated into day-to-day *reality*, there is an important middle step. *Repentance* is needed.

Understanding Repentance

Repentance is the pivot-point of the Gospel. Many people have the impression that repentance is a negative thing. But it is the most positive decision a person can make. Repentance is the doorway into all the blessings that God has prepared for you.

Read Acts 3:19

Now it’s important to understand exactly what repentance means. It does not mean saying “sorry” to God. It does not even mean asking for God’s forgiveness. The forgiveness of God is a wonderful attribute of the Gospel, but it is part of the *first* quarter of the Gospel.

When a person comes to the Lord, there is often a genuine cry for forgiveness for sins they have committed – and God does forgive and cleanse – but this is not repentance in the sense that the Bible uses this word. Repentance has to do with a revelation of the *second* quarter of the Gospel. It is based on a revelation of two things:

- That the power of sin was broken at the Cross
- That God requires you to switch allegiance from sin to Him

Without a realization of these two truths, there can be no repentance. Unless we understand that the power of sin was broken at the Cross, we will be caught up in an endless cycle of self-effort – trying to break the power of sin ourselves. Self-effort is not repentance.

And unless we understand that God requires you to switch allegiance from sin to himself, we will never see the need for repentance in the first place. Because of a lack of understanding in these two areas, many Christians have never truly experienced the liberating power of repentance.

So what exactly is repentance? Let's briefly define what the Bible means by the word "repentance":

Repentance is a change of direction. It involves a realigning of your life to God's will.

Think of it this way. You have been facing the world's ways, with your back toward God. You may have turned your head occasionally toward the Lord to speak with him. You may have told him: "Lord, I want to follow you." But your eyes are still on the world.

Repentance involves a total change of direction. When you repent, you don't just say nice things to God. You don't just make promises that you'll do better. You actually turn around. The whole orientation of your life turns away from sin toward the Lord.

The Orientation of Your Life

The Gospel is not man-centered, but God-centered. But because it is God-centered, it meets every human need. This is because your life works properly only when it is centered on the Lord. The Gospel returns you to a God-center. This is the basis of the power of the Gospel.

Read Romans 11:33-36

Paul closes this passage with a doxology – a closing hymn of praise to the God who designed such a powerful Gospel. At the end of the doxology, he exclaims:

"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen."

This verse describes in a nutshell the orientation God has designed for your life. Everything in your life has been designed to be *from* God, *through* God and *to* God in its orientation. As *The Message* renders this verse:

"Everything comes from him; Everything happens through him; Everything ends up in him..."

This is what God purposed for mankind, but this is not the way it is now. When we look at the world, we do not see this essential nature of God being expressed.

Not everything is from God. Not everything is through God. And not everything is to God.

To understand why, let's return to the Garden of Eden for a moment and see exactly what happened when man rebelled against God.

When Adam was created, he had an inbuilt orientation toward God. Everything for Adam was *from* God, *through* God and *to* God. But the moment Adam sinned, this orientation shifted. God was still in the picture, but the basis of man's interaction with God had completely changed. Now everything in Adam's life was *from me*, *through me* and *to me*.

This self-centered orientation – from *me*, through *me* and to *me* – lies at the core of the old self and is the cause of it being “corrupted by its deceitful desires” (**Ephesians 4:22**). Just as a compass needle always points north, so the compass needle of the old self points inward – *to me*.

Likewise, a God-centered orientation – from *God*, through *God* and to *God* – lies at the core of the new self, which has been “created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (**Ephesians 4:24**). Repentance involves a change in this basic orientation – from a self-centered orientation to a God-centered orientation. The compass needle of your life is changed from a “to me” setting to a “to God” setting.

Let's take a look at each of the three elements of a God-centered orientation:

From God

Read 2 Corinthians 5:17-18

The *New Living Translation* renders **verse 18** in this way:

“All this newness of life is *from God*, who brought us back to himself through what Christ did.”

The basic premise of the Gospel is that the whole of your salvation – from first to last – comes from God. Our righteousness is *totally* from him.

Read Romans 3:21

This is the first and most important revelation of the Gospel. Without this revelation there can be no salvation. Unless we recognize that righteousness, and thus salvation, comes from God and not from us, we cannot receive God's free gift of eternal life (note again **Ephesians 2:8** – “you have been saved...not from yourselves”).

What a life-changing revelation this is. Because of the fact that salvation is “from God,” I now have eternal life! Yet for many Christians, this is as far as their repentance goes. The orientation of their lives is now:

- From God
- Through *me*

➡ To me

Through God

Read 1 John 4:7

Everything in the Christian life has been designed to operate *through* the power of God.

Read Philippians 4:13

Here Paul was able to declare that he had “learned the secret” to life. He was able to be content no matter what the circumstances because: “I can do everything *through Christ* who gives me strength.”

Read 1 Corinthians 8:6

Your life is not just *from* God; it is also *through* God. You live by his power and you are changed by his power. Again, what an awesome revelation this is! I suddenly realize that victory over sin is not dependent upon the flexing of my own spiritual muscles, but upon the strength of God’s hand in my life. The dynamic of *his* power has been released into my life to change me and conform me to the likeness of his Son.

But for some Christians, this is as far as they have gone. They understand that salvation is only from God. They know that victory over sin is through the power of the Holy Spirit. But their orientation is still not completely God-centered. For them, the orientation of their lives is:

- ➡ From God
- ➡ Through God
- ➡ To me

To God

Read again Romans 6:10-11

God created us for his purpose. The Christian life is not just *from* God and *through* God. It is also *to* God. Repentance involves much more than just a turning *from sin*. It involves a turning *to God*.

It is only when your orientation is completely from God, through God and to God that your Christian life works as God intended it to. This applies to every area of your life.

Let’s take giving as an example. Most Christians know that we should give. But unless we have had a revelation of a God-centered life, our giving is little more than pandering to old self motives. Now we know from God’s Word that when we give, God gives back “pressed down, shaken together, and running over.” But if we reduce our giving to the worldly concept of an “investment” – if the expectation of a pressed-down-shaken-together-and-running-over return becomes the motive of our giving – then we have a faulty orientation.

Why do we give? We give because everything is from him, through him and to him. We recognize that the money we have is because God has blessed us. We realize that our lives are lived through him, not through the power of the dollar. And we declare that all things in our life return back to him, including our finances. We are giving to God, *not* to ourselves! The fact that he continues to bless us is simply an outworking of who he is. We are not giving to God so that he will have to repay us (note **Romans 11:35**). No, we are giving to God because that is the orientation of our lives. And when God does give back (as he always does) that is because it is *from him* all over again. The cycle of our giving *continues* to be from God, through God and to God.

This is simply the ABCs of the Gospel. This is the *foundation* of what it means to be a Christian. But upon this God-oriented foundation, the Lord builds a strong and robust Christian life, prepared as a vessel for his presence and glory.

The wonder of this new orientation of life is described eloquently in the *New Living Translation* of **Romans 11:36**:

“For everything comes *from him*; everything exists *by his power* and is *intended for his glory*. To him be glory evermore. Amen.”

Revelation and Repentance

Revelation and repentance are complementary aspects of the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. We cannot have one without the other. Let’s take a look at an example in Scripture to see how revelation and repentance work hand in hand:

Read Acts 2:36-41

When Peter preached the Gospel on the day of Pentecost, the response of the people to his message was to repent – they turned away from the world and they turned to God. But repentance was a response to something. Something had happened in their hearts *before* they were capable of repenting.

Notice that Peter did not preach repentance. At no point in the body of his main message does he actually tell the people to repent. Instead, he preached Jesus. The Bible says that his hearers had such a revelation that Jesus was both Lord and Christ (**verse 36**) that they were “cut to the heart” and asked: “...what must we do?” (**verse 37**). It was then that Peter told them: “Repent!”

This is the way repentance works:

- ➡ First comes revelation
- ➡ Then comes repentance

Without a revelation of God, there can be no repentance. For before you can genuinely repent, the Holy Spirit must first bring a revelation of what it is that you are turning *from* and what it is that you are turning *to*.

Note that even in this process of repentance and revelation, the direction is *from*

God and not from me. Repentance does not have its roots in self-effort but in response to a revelation that comes from God. As someone once said:

“Self-effort is God responding to *my* initiative. Grace is me responding to *God’s* initiative.”

Repentance was the response of Peter’s audience to the Holy Spirit’s conviction in their hearts. It was when they had received a revelation of Jesus as “both Lord and Christ” and the fact that they had crucified this same Jesus that they cried out: “What must we do to be saved?” Their repentance was not based on any idea of them trying to better themselves; it was in response to a revelation of their own depravity before God, together with a revelation of God’s plan of salvation through Christ.

Repentance and the Old Self

We trust you’ve been touched by a revelation of the finished work of the Cross as you’ve studied the last few lessons. But a revelation is not enough. The only way you can genuinely respond to a revelation from God is to repent. Like those first converts on the day of Pentecost, your response should be, “What must I do?”

Read Romans 6:6-13

In this passage we progress from revelation to action. In **verse 6**, Paul establishes the fact that your old self was crucified with Christ. But in **verse 11**, he responds to your question, “On the basis of this revelation, what must I do?”

Verses 11-13 shows the two elements of your response to a revelation that your old self was crucified in Christ:

- Count yourself dead to sin and alive to God
- Offer yourselves to God

Count yourself dead to sin and alive to God

Verse 11 is the first step of repentance. Paul says, “Count, reckon, consider yourself to be dead to sin but alive to God.” Before this, you were dead to God but alive to sin. Your back was to God because you were facing sin’s pull. But now, as you repent, you turn away from sin and turn to God. Your back is now toward sin and your face is toward God. You are now dead to sin and alive to God.

Offer yourselves to God

But repentance is more than just aligning your orientation toward God. It is also actively giving yourself to God. You are now facing God, with your back to sin. Now begin living with him and for him.

The Gospel is perfectly balanced between negative action – “Do not do this!” – and positive action – “Do this!” **Verse 13** tells you:

“Do not offer the parts of your bodies to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God...”

Throughout the Gospel, there are three terms – faith, obedience and repentance – which are used interchangeably. True faith equals obedience which equals repentance which equals faith. When we are talking about repentance or obedience, we are talking about faith, since without faith it is impossible to please God (**Hebrews 11:6**). And when we are talking about faith, we are talking about obedience and repentance, since faith without works is dead (**James 2:17**). Repentance is faith in action.

In **Romans 12:1**, after describing the wonder of the Gospel in such depth, Paul says:

“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices...to God...”

In response to a revelation of God’s mercy, as revealed in the Gospel, how can we not offer ourselves completely to him? God gave himself in totality to us; how can we not respond likewise?

It is in this forward movement of obedience to God that the Christian life works as God intended. As long as we are responsive to the Spirit of God, as long as we are pressing into him, we experience the full power of the Cross in our lives (see **Romans 8:2**). It is out of a realigned life, together with an offering of ourselves to the Lord in positive action, that we experience the reality that we are indeed dead to sin and alive to God.

Repentance in Action

Read Ephesians 4:22

The Amplified Bible translates Ephesians 4:22 in this way:

“Strip yourselves of your former nature - put off and discard your old unrenewed self - which characterized your previous manner of life and becomes corrupt through lusts and desires that spring from delusion.” (Italics added).

The meaning of Paul’s expression “put off” has the meaning of “to remove as one puts off clothes.”¹

Read Isaiah 64:6-7

In this passage, God describes the old self from his perspective. It is called “unclean,” causing God to hide his face from us. Even the best it has to offer is described as “filthy rags.” The *New Living Translation* renders **Isaiah 64:5-7** in this way:

“...But we are not godly. We are constant sinners, so your anger is heavy on us. How can people like us be saved? We are all infected and impure with sin.

When we proudly display our righteous deeds, we find they are but filthy rags. Like autumn leaves, we wither and fall. And our sins, like the wind, sweep us away. Yet no one calls on your name or pleads with you for mercy. Therefore, you have turned away from us and turned us over to our sins.”

What a description of the old self! This is what Paul tells you to put off!

Now imagine you had come home in the dark and had tripped and fallen. Upon entering your house, you chance to glance in a mirror and see immediately that your clothes are filthy and torn, smeared in mud and something that on closer inspection proves to smell rather nasty. What would you do? You would, of course, get changed. You would put on clothes that were clean.

We are told to deal with the old self as it really is – unclean. The Gospel does not tell you to deal with your old self directly. You are not required to try and fix it up. You are told to *put it off*.

But the Bible doesn't just tell you to *put off* the old self. It also tells you to put something else *on*.

Read Ephesians 4:24

In Christ, we have been given new clothes to wear – clean, new and freshly pressed (read **Isaiah 61:10**; **Revelation 19:8**). This new self is the subject of future lessons in this module, but suffice it to say right now that the new self is everything God has planned for us to be.

When we realize that God dealt with our “old unrenewed self” on the Cross, we are now told to “reckon” ourselves dead to that old life. We do this by turning our back to it and turning toward the Lord. Our back is now to the old self and our face is toward God. We have put off the old self and put on the new self, which has been created to walk with God. This is the secret of the Gospel's power to free you from slavery to sin. You change direction, you change orientation, you change who you offer yourself to.

Read 2 Corinthians 5:15

This verse summarizes what God has planned for your life. This is the life typified in the new self: a life geared toward pleasing God. Two things open up this new life to you: revelation and repentance. When you receive a revelation of the finished work of the Cross, you then have the capacity to repent – you turn your back on the old self and its lifestyle and turn toward the Lord.

¹ Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1980), p.533.