



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

## A Systematic Study of Bible Teachings (Dogmatics) Lesson 7.3.2 – The Doctrine of the Way of Salvation (Soteriology)

### Repentance

The words “repentance” and “repent” are sometimes used in the Bible in a broad sense, sometimes in a narrow sense. In the narrow sense repentance refers to sorrow and regret over former sins. This is also called contrition. When God appeared to Job after those many days of intense suffering in which Job had frequently complained of how God had treated him, Job expressed regret over what he had said. **“Behold, I am vile,”** he said, **“What shall I answer You”** (Job 40:4). **“I have uttered what I did not understand... I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes”** (Job 42:3, 6).

In His ministry Jesus Himself repeated the message of John the Baptist, saying to the people: **“Repent, and believe in the gospel”** (Mark 1:15). Before the gospel would be good news for them, the people needed to acknowledge and confess their sins. After Jesus completed His work of atoning for the sins of the world and rose from the dead in victory, He instructed His disciples **“that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name to all nations”** (Luke 24:47). Notice that in all these references repentance *precedes* the preaching of the Gospel of Christ’s forgiveness.

When Simon, the sorcerer, thought he could buy the skill or art of imparting the Holy Spirit, the apostle Peter said to him: **“Your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore of this your wickedness”** (Acts 8:21-22). The apostle Paul was fearful lest, when he came to Corinth, his opponents would not have **“repented of the uncleanness, fornication, and lewdness which they have practiced”** (2 Corinthians 12:21).

Thus repentance (in this narrow sense, also called contrition) is a feeling of terror or fright that arises in a person when they realize that they have done something against the will of a holy God who threatens to punish them for their sin. This feeling is generally created by the preaching of God’s stern law that denounces all sin.

When the words “repent” and “repentance” are used in the broad sense, they include not only the contrition for sin, but also a trust in Jesus and His work for the forgiveness of sins. In this sense repentance is a synonym for conversion. For example, when Jesus was discussing two tragedies that had occurred, He said: **“Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish”** (Luke 13:2-5). It is clear from the context that repentance in this case includes both the terror on account of sin and trust in Jesus’ forgiveness. For no one is saved simply by being contrite without trusting in Jesus. Judas Iscariot regretted what he had done in betraying Jesus, but he did not trust that Jesus could forgive him. In despair he took his own life (Matthew 27:3-5).

The word “repent” must be understood in the broad sense in Jesus’ statement: **“There is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents”** (Luke 15:10). Certainly the angels would not be happy to see a sinner come only to recognize his sins, but not find the remedy for his sins. So, in this case, the repentance includes trust in Jesus for salvation. Repentance thus involves a complete turn-around – a total change in heart and mind. A person is heading in one direction, away from God through sin and unbelief, and in repentance he turns and is heading in the opposite direction, trusting in Christ and living under grace and traveling towards heaven.

Repentance in the broad sense therefore has two parts: contrition and faith. The Bible also speaks of the fruits of repentance, which are the fruits of faith in Christ. John the Baptist called for such fruits from the Pharisees and Sadducees, whom he called a **“brood of vipers.”** He told them: **“Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance”** (Matthew 3:7-8). Compare also Luke 3:8-14, where various fruits of repentance are spelled out. The apostle Paul explained his work to King Agrippa in these words: **“I...declared...that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance”** (Acts 26:19-20).

God is the One who works repentance in a sinner. For this purpose, He uses both His law and His Gospel: He uses the law to bring about contrition and He uses the Gospel to create faith in Christ. When Jesus told His disciples that He would send the Holy Spirit to them, He pointed out one of the things the Spirit would do: **“When He has come, He will convict the world of sin”** (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit in the apostle Paul preached the law to Governor Felix, and we read: **“Now as he reasoned about righteousness, self-control, and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid”** (Acts 24:25).

After introducing the theme of his letter to the Christians in Rome, the apostle Paul launched into a prolonged discussion of the law of God, showing that the purpose of the law is to show sinners of all types their sin, in order to bring about contrition. **“The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men”** (Romans 1:18). He concluded his presentation with a blanket condemnation: **“Both Jews and Greeks...are all under sin”** (Romans 3:9). The purpose of the law’s condemnation is **“that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God... By the law is the knowledge of sin... All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”** (Romans 3:19-20, 23).

But this law preaching can do no more than create terrors of conscience and feelings of contrition. The Holy Spirit’s work of convincing sinners of their sin is only preliminary to His main work of bringing about faith in Christ through the Good News of Christ and what He has done.

The repentance of a sinner is the work of God, which He carries out through the preliminary preaching of the law and the proclaiming of the Gospel. The law by itself cannot create faith in Christ. The law is not a means of grace. When Peter and the other apostles were brought before the Jewish council, they said: **“The God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you murdered by hanging on a tree. Him God has exalted to His right hand to be Prince and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins”** (Acts 5:30-31). When the Gospel preached by Paul was successful in bringing Gentiles to faith in Christ, the early Christians **“glorified God, saying, ‘Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life’”** (Acts 11:18).

There is no way for Christians and Christian evangelists to lead others to repentance other than to use the tools God has provided: the Law to expose sin and the Gospel to extend the forgiveness won by Jesus to troubled sinners. The apostle Paul reminded the elders of Ephesus how he had worked among them for three years: **“I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Acts 20:20-21).

The true teaching of repentance was gradually lost in the Roman church, until it degenerated into the sacrament of penance, which requires three human works for it to be effective: contrition, confession, and satisfaction<sup>1</sup>. The proclamation of forgiveness in Christ and the need for faith in Christ were minimized, and they emphasized human action.

In contrast, our Lutheran fathers adopted Article XIII of the *Augsburg Confession*, which declares: *“True repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror, on account of sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the Gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace. Then improvement should also*

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<sup>1</sup> Satisfaction is an act that the sinner is told to do to make up for their sin.

*follow, and a person should refrain from sins. For these should be the fruits of repentance” (Book of Concord, Kolb-Wengert Edition, p. 44).*

### **Questions**

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1. What is the difference between repentance in the narrow sense and repentance in the broad sense?
2. Why is the preaching of God’s law important in the teaching of repentance?
3. Why is the law by itself unable to bring about faith in Christ?
4. What, then, is the main purpose of the law?
5. What are the two parts of repentance in the broad sense?
6. What is meant by the fruits of repentance?
7. How did the apostle Paul carry out his mission work in Ephesus?
8. What is the difference between the Roman teaching of repentance and the Lutheran teaching of repentance?
9. What is meant by the term “means of grace”?