

# How to Discern True Repentance When Serious Sin Has Occurred



by DARBY STRICKLAND

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The Christian life is to be one of repentance. Jesus begins his preaching ministry with these words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). His words call us to turn away from our sin and toward him. He wants our hearts and minds transformed so that we can reside with him in a new kingdom. Indeed, repentance is so essential to our spiritual lives that Martin Luther made it the first of his 95 Theses in 1517. He wrote, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”<sup>1</sup> He rightly saw it as critical to our faith that we understand repentance and make it a regular part of our lives. It is vital for our relationship with the Lord and others that we turn from sin, not just at the moment of our salvation, but repeatedly as we grow in awareness of it and our continued need of a savior.

While God calls all of us to have hearts that are characterized by repentance, some of us are tasked with assessing the repentance of

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1. Martin Luther, “The 95 Theses,” <https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>.

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others. Pastors, elder boards, and counselors are often brought into situations where they need to make a determination as to whether a sinner is grieved by his or her transgressions and is committed to change. This can feel overwhelming. How can we assess another person's fallen heart when we are so aware of our own? The difficulty of the task is like navigating a minefield, and it's always easier to promote peace than to confront. Whatever propels it, I have seen too many instances of God's people not demonstrating the required vigilance we need to discern the repentance of people under our care. Consider how you or others in your Christian community have conceptualized repentance when there has been a grievous sin committed or pattern of sin exposed. Have you been fooled by incomplete apologies and then shocked to find the offender returning to his or her sin? I have, and it is why I wrote this article.

Accurately assessing repentance is a way to love both the offender and the offended.

When we are fooled, there can be dire consequences. If an abusive husband repents—but isn't sincere—what's at stake? The safety of his wife and children. If leaders and counselors encourage quick forgiveness and the family reunites, what can happen? The husband's abuses against his wife escalate as a punishment for exposing his sin, and now she also fears speaking up.

Or imagine if someone who is financially deceitful feigns repentance—what's at stake? A spouse might become saddled with credit card debt, a drained savings account, and delinquency letters from the IRS.

Or think about a Bible study leader who creates division among the women in the church through gossip and playing favorites—what's at stake? The unity of the church body. Friendships dissolve and women stop attending. Spiritual confusion ensues: How could this happen among God's people?

In any of these examples, we can be certain that Jesus longs for wayward children to be restored to him, and he graciously gives them the Holy Spirit so they can grow into his image. But Jesus also requires that they acknowledge their wrongdoing and commit to the process of change. This is where our assessments come in, and we need God's wisdom.

I have witnessed complex counseling cases where those involved long for an offender to be restored so much that it distorts their judgment. We see what we hope to see instead of what is actually occurring. If pastors, elders, and counselors accept a standard of repentance different from the Lord's, the implications for both the offender and the offended are vast and devastating.

In this article, I will focus on how to discern repentance with those who commit serious and damaging sins against another person, such as adultery, addiction, abuse, or misuse of power. I will describe how to approach the assessment of repentance with a robust framework that cares for both the offended and the offender. We will look at why accurately assessing repentance is a way to love both the offender and the offended, and then how to determine if a person's repentance is sincere or if it is counterfeit. Finally, we will consider the components that should be present when robust repentance occurs.

### **Why Assess for Repentance?**

In ministry we frequently care for those who have been harmed by another person's serious sin. Often, the offended person is tempted to accept confessions, apologies, or excuses from an offender and then feels obligated to offer blind forgiveness. The focus of the counseling then becomes how the offended person can forgive and work to restore the relationship with the offender. But starting restoration work before there is robust repentance harms both parties. If a harmed person tries to rebuild a relationship with a person who continues in the same sin, he or she remains vulnerable. Further, each new infraction erodes the repair attempts. Over time this can lead to a layering of betrayal that can culminate in hopelessness. As for offenders, if they continue in sin, they are not only in spiritual danger but will be tempted to look away from their own hearts and focus on their frustration over not being forgiven.

Here is an example. A wife discovers that her husband has been texting with another woman. He insists it is "no big deal." When confronted, he says it is nothing, they are just old friends who text from time to time. After brief counsel with their pastor, he apologizes for contacting the woman in "a momentary lapse in judgment." He did not know that marriage changed "the rules." The pastor tells the wife, "Forgive

him; it is not loving to keep a record of his wrongs. And stop bringing it up because reminding him of his mistake hurts him.”

What is wrong with this story? If we dissect his apology, we see that it did not address her hurt, or admit that his secrecy and contact with this woman could leave his marriage vulnerable. Moreover, he failed to acknowledge that his wife is right to be jealous for their marriage, and his words did not reassure her that he is committed to protecting it. So his wife lives with a nagging sense that something is still off, but feels confused and guilty for struggling to forgive him. Two months later, she finds more texts, but this time they are of a sexual nature.

We do a disservice when we accept an offender’s words without careful attunement to what those words indicate. When serious breaches in relationships occur, we must go deeper. In cases when an offense is minor, or when smaller offenses happen in a less significant relationship, I believe we can and should be charitable, often choosing to overlook an offense. However, when the sin is more severe and the relationship between the parties is a significant one (like a marriage) or contains a power imbalance (pastor/congregant; supervisor/employee), it is necessary to evaluate for true repentance.

You might be uncomfortable with the idea of judging someone else’s repentance, especially if the offender seems to say the right thing. Isn’t that enough? Isn’t doubting the person unloving? No. I would argue the offender should be pronouncing the loudest judgment upon him or herself. When people truly are broken by their sin, it should be clear from the many ways they are grieved and seeking to change. Their voice should offer the loudest cry that they did something terribly wrong that hurt someone else. If this is not the case, repentance is suspect and the most loving next step is to assess it further. Here are three compelling reasons for us to engage in an earnest assessment.

1. *We assess to show love for the offender.* When we encounter serious sin, we should be concerned with the heart of the one who perpetrates it. Scripture tells us that unless sin is dealt with, it will harden our hearts. Listen to this warning.

Take care, brothers, lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart, leading you to fall away from the living God. But exhort one another every day, as long as

it is called “today,” that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. For we have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end. (Heb 3:12–14)

Our hearts are either hardening against God or growing softer toward him. God’s desire is for those who do not heed his Word to turn back to him, and he asks us to exhort one another toward that end. He calls us to confront the evil we see in believers’ hearts out of concern for *them* (Gal 6:1; James 5:19–20). Further, it is often the case that the offended

Trust does not just reappear after the offender makes an apology.

person loves the offender and desires what is best for him or her. The offended may wrestle with the breach in the relationship and desire the offender to be right with the Lord.

We know that a heart that is not honest and repentant before the Lord suffers for it. Listen to the words of Psalm 32, “For when I kept silent, my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy upon me; my strength was dried up as by the heat of summer” (v.3–4). There cannot be peace for an unrepentant person, nor can he or she have peace with God. If we want to minister well to offenders, we need to help them see that when they sin against another, they also sin against God, which has serious implications for their spiritual condition. We want to make sure they know how to restore their relationships with others—and also with the Lord.

Consider how the Apostle Paul recounts his plea to the Corinthian church. He wants them to see their sin, so he expresses his heart for them,

So even though I wrote to you, it was neither on account of the one who did the wrong nor on account of the injured party, but rather that *before God* you could see for yourselves how devoted to us you are. By all this we are encouraged. (2 Cor 7:12–13)

His focus is on the Corinthians’ restoration with the Lord, and their sorrowful repentance brings him joy. Let this instruct us.

Further, by loving offenders in this way, we limit their ability to sin against others in the future. If and when they do repent, they will be

grateful to you for restraining their sin and the harm that they would have perpetrated.

2. *We assess in order to equip the offended person with the information needed for wise decision making.* Figuring out the next steps after a betrayal or other relational infractions can be challenging. Trust does not just reappear after the offender makes an apology. It has to be rebuilt. Think of a teenager who is caught stealing from his parents to pay for drugs. An apology is not enough to establish that the teen is now reformed and won't steal from them again. Wise parents will lock up any jewelry or valuables and monitor their child more closely. Assessing for concrete signs of repentance in a situation like this is one way we can help the teen's parents navigate what steps to take next. This need is even greater when the violations are interpersonal. If your spouse betrays you, he or she will need to work to reestablish trust. Until there is evidential repentance, the relationship might have to change, or limits might have to be placed upon it.

Realize, too, that offended people often face an impossible choice: Should they extend mercy to their offenders and thereby subject themselves to ongoing suffering? To extend mercy is to postpone justice. When justice is postponed, more harm will likely come to those already hurt by active offenders. When we are advising offended persons how to respond to being sinned against, or how long they should wait on repentance, we must have this tension in mind. If the offender has not repented, perhaps that means the victim needs to consider how the relationship should change to ensure safety while waiting to see what God will do.

Sometimes our role is to help offended people wait well. As they wait, we weep and lament with them. Other times, our role is to encourage them to seek justice or implement consequences for what has occurred.<sup>2</sup> Frequently, I have seen this overlooked in my work with abused women. A church asks a spouse to postpone moving out to see if her husband will repent of his brutality. But if she is not protected during this time, it is likely that she will continue to be abused. Whatever route our counsel takes, we need to have the cost to the sufferer in full view.

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2. I am not suggesting that we should ever postpone seeking criminal justice. For instance, we always report child abuse. I am referring here to the broader concept of justice.

3. *We assess to protect the offended person's relationship with God.* Like the illustration I offered earlier, my counselees will often express guilt because even after hearing an apology from their abuser, they continue to struggle with hurt. They believe that after an apology, it is their responsibility to forgive and move on. When they cannot do so, they feel guilt and often think God is displeased with them. When we fail to address what an offender's repentance should look like, we can unknowingly burden victims' consciences in this way. I have seen this time and time again affect how offended people relate to the Lord, cutting them off from his care when they need it the most.

Consider this example. A wife discovers pornography on her husband's computer. She confronts him, and he apologizes for a "moment of weakness." She is left with a host of questions. As she reads articles about husbands who use pornography, it leads her to think about other patterns she has experienced in their marriage that might be connected to porn use. If she brings up his porn use, her husband says all he can do now is apologize. He claims he does not have a "serious" problem, so it is up to her to stop bringing it up and making it an issue between them. The wife's understanding of Scripture is limited, and even though her husband will not even engage in a conversation with her about her fears, she assumes that it is her act of forgiveness that is necessary for the relationship to heal. She places the blame for having doubtful thoughts on her inability to forgive, instead of where it belongs—on her husband's sin. Over time she struggles with many questions and, eventually, her desire for intimacy with her husband fades, and he blames her for making him vulnerable to pornography. In time she wonders if God is mad at her because of her inability to forgive. Her guilt blossoms to the point where she feels she cannot talk even to God about her hurt.

So, we assess for repentance to prevent the victim from being burdened with false guilt and the negative impact it has on his or her relationship with God.

Deep relational infractions like those discussed in this section are an opportunity for us to show God's heart toward sin, the offender, and the offended. We often fall for the lie that it is always good to think charitably or believe the best about someone; however, that is the opposite of extending grace. When serious sins occur, all parties need the true grace

Jesus offers—his invitation to repent and be forgiven. Therefore, to be loving is to provide counsel that leans into the exposed sin, cultivating both discernment and repentance while always having their relationship with the Lord as the focal point of our work toward restoration.

Now that we have established the reasons we should assess for repentance, we will now learn how to identify the characteristics of true repentance. Let's begin, though, by identifying behaviors that might look like repentance but actually fall short of it.

### **What Repentance Is *Not***

What does incomplete or false repentance look like? How can we tell? Some manifestations are subtle and thus easy for us to miss. Others are more sinister distortions that confuse us and the offended. It's important to be attuned to these so your assessment is accurate.

Let's begin by revisiting a Scripture passage we looked at earlier. Paul's heart was heavy for the people of Corinth because they had fallen into sin. He attempted a visit to help them along in their faith, but that seemed only to make things worse. He considered that visit a failure (2 Cor 2:1–4), and he had Titus bring them a letter in which he strongly rebuked them. Paul was unsure of how his message would be received. He longed for them to turn to Jesus, but he feared it would get an angry reception. Paul is just like many of us; he did not enjoy the thought of a confrontation with these dearly-loved people. He likely feared his rebuke might lead to their rejection of the Lord. We can hear his relief when Titus came back with good news of the Corinthians' longing, sorrow, and concern for him (2 Cor 7:7). Then Paul writes, "Even 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" (2 Cor 7:8). The sorrow of the Corinthians was short-lived and it brought about earnest repentance, the best of all outcomes.

In his elation, Paul expounds upon the difference between *godly sorrow* and *worldly sorrow*. Understanding this difference is central to discerning repentance. Here are Paul's words:

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



harméd in any way by us. *Godly sorrow* brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but *worldly sorrow* brings death. See 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. (2 Cor 7:9–11)

Real repentance will feature godly sorrow. It will be evident as a change in both the offender's mind and actions. Godly sorrow is directed by and toward God and produces outward and inward changes that lead to true repentance. But Paul also points out that we can be sorry for our sin without repenting of our sin. This is worldly sorrow and it is directed towards ourselves. We regret our actions for the effect they have upon us and the consequences we face, but it produces no godly change. It is easy to regret being exposed as a sinner, but offenders should also be expressing sorrow for the damage that they have done to another and the sin they have committed against the Lord.

The problem is that worldly sorrow is often falsely labeled as true repentance. This is not just dangerous for an offender whose heart remains unrepentant. It also creates particular vulnerabilities for the one who was harmed. What follows are five characteristics that we often mistake for genuine repentance. Keeping these in mind when assessing someone's repentance will help guard against poor decisions and the damage that can result.

First, *repentance is not a mere apology*. There are some acts an apology is suited for, such as stepping on someone's toe or inadvertently hurting a friend's feelings. But when we consider larger and repetitive sins, an apology is not enough to repair the damage that the offender has done.<sup>3</sup> A repentant person will want to address the damage and commit to a new way of behaving.

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3. Not all sins do the same amount of damage. The Westminster Confession of Faith, in Questions 150 and 151 of the Larger Catechism, outline why some sins are more grievous than others. I have found its teaching has greatly guided my thinking when I am caring for someone who is suffering a more grievous sin at the hand of another. I encourage you to consider the many categories and Scripture references it provides.

Just think about how apologies are often framed: “I am sorry for doing X.” This type of apology states what was wrong but often fails to include an acknowledgment of the harm done to the other person. This could be because the offender has not yet realized the damage, or it could be because the offender hopes an apology is all that is needed for resolution. Jeremiah 9:8 cautions further that sometimes people will pretend to reconcile: “Their tongue is a deadly arrow; it speaks deceitfully; with his mouth each speaks peace to his neighbor, but in his heart he plans an ambush for him.” People are capable of deceiving us with their lips. That is why we need to be attuned to the words that the offender offers. Are the words specific and are they spoken by a person who is judging his or her sin as serious?

Worldly sorrow is often falsely labeled as true repentance.

Second, *repentance is not the fear of consequences*. When we have done wrong, we often fear the consequences more than we desire being right with the Lord. We may show remorse, but we do not pursue repentance and the restoration of relationships. Instead, we only seek to skirt the consequences of our sin. As discussed earlier, this is called worldly sorrow. In our pride, we regret making a fool of ourselves, but this remorse is self-centered or even self-preserving. I have heard many confessions of sin, and even have offered a few myself, where the focus is not upon the harm done to the other person but rather on trying to limit the looming consequences. These confessions are usually incomplete and fail to address the impact that the sin has on others and the Lord.

We need to be on guard against this self-centered type of sorrow. I have seen believers deceived by it, especially when the stakes are high for the offender. Many perpetrators of violence against their wives can utter tear-filled apologies, begging a pastor or victim not to call the police so that he will not lose his job or go to jail. He weeps more for himself than for what he has done, or the person he hurt. We do such people no favors when we believe them. They are in a perilous spiritual position, and we place victims at risk of further harm.

Even damage on a smaller scale can have devastating effects. Consider the friend who has a history of lying. When confronted, she focuses on her failings and insecurities, and you feel sorry for her. All the while,

she fails to acknowledge the pain you are in because she has broken your trust. Or think of a mother-in-law who is confronted for being harsh and cruel to her favorite son's wife. She does everything she can to maintain her relationship with her son but does not deal directly with her daughter-in-law. In both instances, a genuinely repentant person will not have herself as the top concern, but rather the one she hurt.

In short, when you listen to offenders offer apologies, discern if the apology is crafted in a way that is trying to limit the consequences they face.

Third, *repentance is not a promise to do better*. Promises not to repeat sinful behavior in the future can be encouraging—but they are not enough. Heart change does not happen by merely proclaiming, “I will not do *that* anymore!” If our hearts remain positioned to live for ourselves and not for the Lord, then sin patterns will continue. Time and time again, we will harm our neighbor to satisfy ourselves. Deuteronomy 23:21 reminds us of the danger of making oaths we do not fulfill: “If you make a vow to the LORD your God, you shall not delay fulfilling it, for the LORD your God will surely require it of you, and you will be guilty of sin.” Upon hearing such promises, we should slow people down and use the opportunity to help them commit to the work of heart-level change.

Think again of a husband who abuses pornography. I am sure he wishes his words were enough to curb his addiction. His wife, no doubt, longs for reassurance. However, until he develops a distaste for his sin, understands why he turns there for escape, identifies his triggers, and articulates the damage it does to his relationships with God and his wife, he remains vulnerable to sinning again. Real repentance is not offered as a redo or a reset button. It acknowledges the pain of the past and engages in changes needed to fight sin patterns.

Often, when victims hear the person who hurt them make promises to reform, they are either falsely reassured or so uncomfortable voicing doubts about the validity of the statement that no more is said. It is, therefore, wise for us to help them consider if the promises are adequate, or if other steps should be considered. Historically in our churches, forgiveness is stressed without the needed careful explanations offered about reconciliation. We need to think differently about this. As we care for offended people, we should be honest about the depth of the sin

involved and invite them to think about and interact honestly with the words they are hearing from the offender.

Fourth, *repentance is not partial*. It must address the full problem. I see this regularly in marriage counseling. For example, say a wife is caught lying about how she spends money. She has repeatedly done so because she disagrees with the parameters of the budget she and her husband set up. She repents for lying and expresses remorse for being deceitful but does not confess her rebellion as it relates to living under a budget. Instead of dealing with the root of the problem, she only dealt with it in part, and soon is back to deceiving her husband and finding ways around the budget.

Sometimes incomplete repentance might initially be due to the fact that offenders do not always see the depths of their sin. As Scripture warns all of us, we do not know our hearts (Jer 17:9–10). So we should try to help these offenders to see the extent of their sin against God and others. However, after they are reproached, we still have to ask: Is an offender only willing to own and talk about certain aspects of sin, or is he or she ready to address it in its entirety? In David's confession in Psalm 51, he offered his whole heart to the Lord. He asked God to search him and cleanse him. He knew his sins were vile and did not try to limit which ones he would deal with.

Fifth, *repentance does not avoid taking responsibility or taking action*. When offenders agree their behavior has upset someone but won't take ownership or admit their behavior was wrong, that is not repentance. Some people are willing to say, "I did something that *you are labeling as wrong* only because *you are failing to understand* what I actually did." Here are some examples, "Sure I used that racial slur, but if you heard the context you would see that I meant no harm." Or "I was harsh with the worship leader, but he should have known I was joking." Perhaps they admit to what they did because they want to appear righteous or are worried about their image. But if they are not willing to do anything to address the situation (ask forgiveness and make appropriate amends), that is not true repentance.

We see a similar stance with the rich young ruler in Mark 10. He asked Jesus how to earn eternal life. But just as the young ruler declared he knew and kept all the commandments, people who fail to repent also

believe they are blameless. Jesus was tender with his spiritual blindness and challenged him to showcase his true commitments.

And Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, “You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me. Disheartened by the saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Mark 10:21–22)

But the rich young ruler would not accept responsibility for his sin and was unwilling to make the changes Jesus required of him. Likewise, as we assess for repentance, we must listen for a confession that accepts blame and identifies what actions will be taken to demonstrate a change of heart.

Having considered these different types of false repentance, we see why Paul warns that “worldly sorrow produces death” (2 Cor 7:10). If offenders never move beyond grief for the consequences they face, they will not see how they have offended God and remain in a perilous spiritual position. They might regret the past or bemoan their present circumstances, but if they fail to deal with their spiritual condition then they are likely to repeat their sins. This also leaves those injured by their sin in a vulnerable position, one that we must recognize in order to love them well and protect them from further harm.

Let’s now turn our attention to the characteristics of true repentance.

### **What Does Real Repentance Look Like?**

Though worldly sorrow is a spiritual dead end, godly sorrow is the pathway to repentance. It stands in great contrast to worldly sorrow, for it encapsulates both a change in thinking and a desire to act. Consider Zacchaeus, the crooked tax collector. After his encounter with Jesus, he repented and vowed to give back the money he took and to also return what he stole four-fold. And he decided to give half of his possessions to the poor (Luke 19:8)! True repentance goes beyond the expression of regret or streams of tears. It produces something. We can see it and observe it. When a person truly turns toward God and away from the things the Lord hates, we will not miss it.

While godly sorrow does not feel good, it produces good fruit. Scripture knows this and urges us not to regret bringing about true

repentance in an offender (2 Cor 7:8–9). Yes, there is pain involved, such as the pain in pruning the branches that Jesus speaks of. But it is necessary for growth and renewal (John 15:2–6).

What does real repentance entail? What should we be listening for? What should we be able to see? Though no two people will repent in the same way, and circumstances are different, all expressions of true repentance should exhibit these eight characteristics.

1. *The offender recognizes that the offense is against God.* Sin is more than an infraction of our human relationships. It creates an actual violation of our relationship with God. In Psalm 51, David states his sin of adultery was against the Lord “Against you, *you only*, have I sinned and done what is evil in your sight” (v.4). No doubt that his adultery was also a sin against many people, but David drives the point home that his sin is first against the Lord. This type of confession is a critical aspect of true repentance.

2. *The offender agrees with Scripture’s indictment of his or her sin.* So often I hear apologies that are lacking. I have offered some myself. Here is what they sound like,

- “Sorry if you found my words offensive.”
- “I am sorry I hurt your feelings.”
- “I am sad that you thought that I was ignoring you.”

These words acknowledge the hurt, but they do not go far enough. When we have sinned and use Scripture as our measuring stick, we are more precise with the indictment of our sin, and our confessions and apologies will sound different,

- “My words were harsh and tore you down. I failed since I am called to build you up.” (1 Cor 14:26)
- “I am sorry I was not gentle when you approached me. I failed to listen to you and was not open to reason.” (James 3:17)
- “You are right. I verbally attacked you when you reached out to me. I failed to love you as God calls me to do.” (Matt 25:39–40)

God’s Word should not just frame the injustice, but the confession of a penitent person should capture its concepts.

3. *The offender’s confession offers specifics.* The more grievous the sin, the more critical it is for the offender’s confession to include specific infractions. Listen to Paul’s specificity when he talks about his sin. In

Acts 26, he stands trial before King Agrippa. This is not an ideal time for him to be honest about his past, yet Paul recounts his days as a Pharisee and offers concrete details.

“On the authority of the chief priests I put many of the Lord’s people in prison, and when they were put to death, I cast my vote against them. Many a time I went from one synagogue to another to have them punished, and I tried to force them to blaspheme. I was so obsessed with persecuting them that I even hunted them down in foreign cities.” (Acts 26:10–11)

Serious offenders often gloss over their failings. Imagine if Paul only said something like,

- “Before I knew better, I made some mistakes,”
- “At that time, I did what I thought was right,” or
- “I persecuted Christians and regret it.”

He would never have been able to rebuild trust with the disciples or be seen as a credible witness to Jesus. Specificity matters because it says to the offended, and to the Lord, that you know exactly what was wrong with what you did.

Here is an example of a confession that offers specifics: “I now recognize I often interrupt you and talk over you. That must make you feel devalued and dismissed. I do not want you to think that your thoughts don’t matter to me. I have been foolish to think I always know what is best. I am going to try not to interrupt you because I believe your opinions and counsel are valuable. If I do it again, please tell me because I need and want to hear what you have to say.”

4. *The offender recognizes that God’s grace allows us to turn from our sins.* It is a gift to offenders when they know that they cannot turn from sin in their own strength. An offender who understands this should be able to express a humble dependence upon the Lord for his forgiveness, mercy, and power. When an offender moves away from self-reliance, we will witness a turning toward God, and a growing interest in the Word, prayer, and other people (1 Thess 1:9).

5. *The offender possesses a strong desire to dismantle the old, sinful self.* A repentant person actively puts to death all that is evil, or that inches him or her toward it. At the same time, a repentant person

will cultivate new desires to replace fallen ones. The truly repentant are committed to a process. They do not think of repentance as an event but as a new way to live. They are persistent in the pursuit of holiness. We see the opposite with the Pharisees, who wanted position and righteousness without taking up their crosses and perpetually dying to self (Luke 9:23–25; 18:9–14). Paul, on the other hand, continually confessed his sin while regularly forsaking his desires (Acts 22:4, 1 Cor 15:9, Gal 1:13, 1 Tim 1:13). To root out sin, the offender seeks to abandon self-righteousness and self-deception.

Repentant offenders do not expect or demand to be received back into a relationship without doing the work of restoration.

6. *The fear of the Lord is increasing in an offender's heart.* A repentant offender is not just growing in distaste of his or her sin, but will also be growing in love and fear of the Lord (Ps 97:10). While rejoicing in God's mercy and grace, an offender fears, takes comfort in, and reveres God's justice, holiness, and sovereignty. Recognizing the Lord's true place and character helps dethrone self-centeredness and draws us to a right relationship with him. This radical new worship orientation is pivotal to the process of change in the offender's heart.

7. *The offender wholly acknowledges the specific effects of his or her sin on all the lives it touched.* Repentant offenders have the people they harmed at the forefront of their minds. They do what is needed to help heal those they wounded. They are broken over what they have done and the damage that remains. They do not expect or demand to be received back into a relationship without doing the work of restoration. Their concern shifts away from themselves and is focused on those who have been harmed by them, even if that means accepting that they have damaged the relationship beyond repair.

8. *The offender is patient while others verify his or her repentance.* Repentant offenders will not express frustration with the time it takes to rebuild trust. As they wait, they demonstrate fruit of the Spirit—patience, kindness, grace, and self-control (Gal 5:22–23). They will readily acknowledge that it is right for others to verify that his or her changes are deep and long-lasting. For instance, when Jacob repented



before Esau, he did not expect to receive compassion and mercy (Gen 32). He expected and thought it reasonable for Esau to act in a self-protective manner.

When someone is genuinely repentant, these eight characteristics are present in increasing measure.

Finally, I have written a series of questions that succinctly capture what we've covered. Use them to help assess someone's repentance. Pick and choose among them based on the situation. Some questions can be converted to ask the offender directly. Others are for the offender's pastor, counselor, or others familiar with the situation.

- Does the offender name personal sin without blame-shifting or minimizing?
- When wrestling with old sin patterns, does the offender confess before being caught?
- When caught, does the person confess immediately (or soon after) and thoroughly?
- Does the truth flow from the offender or does it need to be pulled out?
- Does the offender use scriptural categories for his or her failures?
- Is the confession specific and detailed?
- Is the offender grieved for how he or she has sinned against God?
- Is the offender willing to abandon self-deception?
- Has the offender stopped justifying their sin?
- Is the offender growing in fear of the Lord?
- Is the offender relying on grace or personal performance for deliverance from sin?
- Does the offender have a willingness and eagerness to make amends?
- Does the offender understand it is essential to demonstrate change before a relationship can be restored?
- Is the offender patient with the person harmed and not using pressure or guilt to broker forgiveness?
- Does the offender confess sin even when serious consequences would result?
- Does the offender accept the consequences?

- Do you see the offender seeking help and embracing accountability, pastoral rebuke, or church discipline?
- Do you observe that the offender is humble and teachable, and seeking to learn from God, his Word, and people?

To summarize, being familiar with the characteristics of true repentance and having appropriate questions to ask are ways to push the process past simple assertions of guilt and thin commitments to change.

### **Offer Godly Help with Godly Wisdom**

This article has centered on how to discern the presence of true repentance in someone who has committed a serious sin. This is an important part of our job as helpers, but it is not always the only job. It may be that we have the blessed opportunity to help cultivate an offender's repentance, especially if it is present in budding form. When you see a few good signs of change, look for ways to foster more of them while gently pursuing areas where blindness, self-reliance, or pride remain. I intend for this article to not merely equip you to pronounce that offenders have failed to reach the bar, but for you to attempt to help them reach it. We must seek to do more than reveal sin to the people we minister to. We must also proclaim to them the gospel of hope and change. Remind them that, "God shows his love for us in that while we were *still sinners*, Christ died for us." (Rom 5:8). We all begin at the same place, at the foot of the cross. It is there God forgives and embraces us.

But you must also temper mercy with wisdom. There might come a time when you realize an offender's commitment to sin, deception, and self-protection is more significant than the desire to change and love the Lord. Recognize that you cannot help those whose hearts are hardened and do not see their need for Jesus. Pray for wisdom for how long you should keep attempting to impact such blindness, and realize that without repentance reconciliation may not be possible. Though God highly values renewed marriages, intact families, and united churches, he also calls us to protect the vulnerable. May God give us great wisdom so we can offer well-informed counsel to both the offended and the offender.

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