

Change the Way You Think and Act
A Teaching By Pauline Dillard
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In the NIV translation of the Bible the Word “repent” occurs 36 times. “Renewing,” as in “renewing your mind” occurs in Romans 12:2 in the NIV. Do we truly understand what repentance, or renewing your mind, really means?

Repent. I had heard the word bandied about by Christians for over fifteen years. Yes, we should all repent, ask forgiveness and not sin again. Too often we say, “I repent for that,” yet we find ourselves again caught in the trap of our own sin. Perhaps it is gluttony (yes, overeating is a sin!), or perhaps lust, or perhaps it is gossip. Every time we find ourselves trapped by our own sin we “repent” again. And again. And again. Always wondering why the sin comes back, or perhaps just accepting that each time we repent God will forgive. Is this really how God wants us to follow Him? Sinning, repenting, asking forgiveness, sinning again, repenting again, asking forgiveness again, and on an on, ad infinitum.

The question then becomes, what does it mean to repent? I don’t think I fully understood until I was reading a modern English translation of the Bible called *God’s Word*. When I took the 36 times NIV translates “repent”, plus Romans 12:2’s “renewing” and laid them side-by-side with *God’s Word* I saw repentance in a whole new light.

In *God’s Word* Romans 12:2 and 24 of the “repent” occurrences are actually translated, “*change the way you think and act.*” When I first saw this I was immediately struck by what “repent” actually means. It doesn’t mean “I know that I did wrong. Please forgive me. I’ll try not to do it again. And if I fail I’ll just come and ask for forgiveness again.” No, it means that you actually change your mind—you think in an entirely new way. It also means you then change the way you act.

The flip side is we shouldn’t just change our actions without also changing the way we think. I have a friend who has had abortions. She knows that what she did was wrong and that she personally would never do it again. However she still struggles with her thinking that it is an individual choice. She said to me one day that she didn’t think God would ever use her apportioned experience to minister to others. I then asked her how would she counsel her fifteen-year-old daughter if she were pregnant. She didn’t know. You see she hadn’t fully changed the way she thought. Thus she had not fully repented. Therefore God could not use her in that area.

True repentance is not an easy process. Our old ways like to pop up when least expected and least wanted. But, would God tell us to change the way we think and act if it wasn’t important? Would He tell us this without also telling us what changing the way we think and act looks like?

The answer to both of those questions is no! First of all we know repentance and change is important to God. Second of all He does help us, through His Word, to understand what changing our thinking and behavior looks like. Remember how I said there were 36 places where NIV translates the word “repent”, but only 24 of those carry over to *God’s Word*? That leaves 12 verses that were not translated “change the way you think and act.” If we take time to look at how those 12 are translated you’ll begin to see how we change the way we think and act.

1. 2 Chronicles 6:37-38a, 39b

“If they come to their senses, are sorry for what they’ve done, and plead with you in the land where they are captives, saying, ‘We have sinned. We have done wrong. We have been wicked,’ if they change their attitude toward you in the land where they are captives, if they pray to you...Do what is right for them. Forgive your people who have sinned against you.

Interesting. In this chapter Solomon is praying in the new temple—the one that his father, David, was not allowed to build because of his sin. Solomon is praying in front of the entire assembly—for them. For most of the prayer he is commending God for who He is and beseeching Him to fulfill the promises He made to David. He also asks God to honor the prayers of all those who would come from all over the world to pray at this temple. Then he asks God to forgive those who sin against Him, but only if they come to their senses, are sorry for what they have done, and plead with God saying, “We have sinned. We have done wrong. We have been wicked,” and then change their attitude towards God.

For better clarification let’s look at a few basic definitions of words used in this passage.

Sin is defined in the dictionary as the willful breaking of religious or moral law, and any offense or fault. So when we say to God, “I have sinned,” we are saying I have offended, I am at fault—no one else, and especially not God. We fully acknowledge the nature of our responsibility.

Wrong has several definitions: 1) Not in accordance with justice, law, morality, and established standard, etc. 2) Not suitable or appropriate. 3) Contrary to fact, etc., incorrect. 4) Not functioning properly. 5) Not meant to be seen. When we say to God, “I have done wrong,” we are saying we have not done what is just, lawful or moral by His established standards. I have not been suitable or appropriate. I have been contrary to the facts and incorrect in how I have lived out Your Word. I have not functioned properly and done that which should never have been done or seen.

Wicked. To get a proper definition of wicked I went back to the Webster’s 1828 dictionary and found several definitions. 1) Morally bad; evil. 2) Generally bad, unpleasant, etc. 3) Mischievous. 4) [slang] showing great skill. In addition Webster’s 1828 explains wicked as being evil in principle or practice; deviating from the divine law. Addicted to vice; sinful: immoral. This is a word of comprehensive significance, extending to everything that is contrary to moral law, and both to persons and actions. When we say to God, “I have been wicked,” we acknowledge that we have been morally and generally bad, evil, unpleasant, and acted contrary to moral law both to persons and in our actions. And if we include the slang we have been very skilled at it!

When we take into full account the definitions of what it truly means to say to God that we are wicked, evil, and have sinned, done wrong, and been wicked, we need to understand the full impact of what we are admitting to God, and then admit to ourselves that we truly are guilty of being that vile.

2. Job 34:33

“Should God reward you on your own terms since you have rejected his? You must choose...”

When considering Job 34:33, we see that repentance involves choice. How often have I looked for a reward from God for some “good” thing I have done while I had a wrong attitude about it? Too numerous to count! Whenever I perform an act, or a works, with the wrong attitude I am expecting God to reward me for doing something on my own terms, and when I do that I am rejecting His terms. I must choose. And I must ask forgiveness, admit I was sinful, wrong and wicked, and that I chose to be that way.

When we look at the definition of the word *choice* it means to decide or prefer, and it means the best part. So when I choose my way I am choosing to be sinful, wrong and wicked, and I am choosing to miss out on God’s best part.

3. Job 36:10

“He makes them listen to his warning and orders them to turn away from wrong.”

Turning away from wrong involves conscious choice. Choosing the best part. It involves saying no to your own desires and the devil. Lust is a big sin for a lot of people. Former president Jimmy Carter may have said he sinned when he lusted in his mind—and that may have been true for him because he was dwelling on the thought, but here’s where that choice from number two above comes in. When I am confronted with sin behavior, sin thought, or wickedness of any kind I must *choose* to turn away from wrong. I must choose to not be sinful, wrong and wicked.

4. Job 42:6

“That is why I take back what I said, and I sit in dust ashes to show that I am sorry.”

Although the previous two passages were spoken about Job’s buddies, whom God wasn’t very pleased with, they still help us to understand what the word “repent” means. Here, Job himself tells us what it means to him. First he recognizes that what he said wasn’t what God wanted him to say...he takes it back! Then he sits on an ash heap to show how sorry he is.

Have you ever had to sit on an ash heap of life? I have and it isn’t any fun. Yet, it was time to reflect on what I had said, or done, that was not pleasing to God; to take it back, and to plead with him for forgiveness. It was a time of showing him how truly sorry I was for doing things my own way and choosing to reject His best part.

5. Isaiah 59:20

“Then a Savior will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who turn from rebellion,” declares the Lord.

There it is. The savior for those who change the way they think and act. How do we do that? We turn from rebellion against God. Turning away is a physical act. It requires choice. It takes actually getting up out of our condition and making the decision to go in a different direction. It is not something that is just dropped on us. We must decide to do it. In this case: choosing God’s way, choosing Jesus—God’s best part. Taking this physical action may not be easy at first. Like starting a new workout routine your muscles might ache and your mind might scream that it hurts too much. However, the more often you do it, the easier it will become as you develop your “turning” muscles.

(Are you beginning to see how these all fit together like the pieces to a puzzle?)

6. Jeremiah 5:3

“Lord, your eyes look for the truth. You strike these people, but they don’t feel it. You crush them, but they refuse to be corrected. They are more stubborn than rocks. They refuse to turn back.”

Now, in Isaiah we are told to turn away. Away from what? Sin. Here we are told to turn back. Back to what? God. So we can start on the right path, and then again choose to turn and go the wrong way. At that point we must again perform the physical act of turning back to God. It reminds me of a Paul Smith song that says, “I must turn back to who I am.” Who are you? You are a child of God. Turn back!

7. Matthew 21:32

John came to you and showed you the way that God wants you to live, but you didn’t believe him. The tax collectors and prostitutes believed him. But even after you had seen that, you didn’t change your minds and believe him.”

How often has the evidence of someone else’s changed life been right before you, and you refuse to believe that it is for you also. I once had a friend say to me, “I see God healing all these people around me, but it is difficult for me to believe that He would do that for me as well.”

The other “excuse” I hear is: “God hasn’t shown me that yet.” But all around you are changed lives because people gave up an area of sin in their lives. They changed the way they think, act, and *believe*.

Now before anyone thinks I’m being too harsh on them, I am just as guilty. I see other people’s lives full and peaceful because they believed that God wanted them to do, say—stop watching R rated movies. Yet, I didn’t want to stop going to R rated movies. I liked them. So for years I convinced myself that God just hadn’t shown that to me personally. What was I waiting for, an engraved invitation? Basically, yes. Well it finally came. But how much time did I waste wading around in the garbage waiting for it? How long did I refuse to take the physical action of choosing to turn away from less than God’s best in order to placate my flesh? It reminded me of the sludge at the bottom of the garbage hold on *Star Wars*, and I was sloshing around in it for years because I didn’t want to change the way I think and *believe* that it was good for me. Can you imagine how I must have smelled?

p.s. I’m sure there are other areas I’m still being stubborn about. Time will certainly bear them out.

8. Luke 17:4

“Even if he wrongs you seven times in one day and comes back to you seven times and says that he is sorry, forgive him.”

So, actually saying you’re sorry is part of repentance. Some people say they’re sorry all the time and it means nothing. Others never say they’re sorry and don’t realize that true repentance does involve the saying of the words. I have a son who cannot stand to admit he’s wrong. If he had hurt one of his brothers (either accidentally or on purpose) he would almost rather cut out his tongue than say he was sorry. When we had “forced” him to say it, it always came out like a dirty word. It was begrudging and it was not real.

A true, heartfelt, sorry that recognizes the action we did and how it hurt the other person, is important.

Like my son, it has taken me years to learn that being wrong doesn't mean I'm stupid, or bad. I may have just made a simple mistake. Or... I may have chosen to be sinful, wrong, and wicked. Either way, it is always better to say I was wrong then to pretend that nothing has happened. And I have learned that the burden I carry around with me on a daily basis is much lighter now that I've learned to admit when I was wrong, ask for forgiveness, and go on with a changed thought, *and* a changed action.

9. Acts 8:22

“So change your wicked thoughts, and ask the Lord if he will forgive you for thinking like this.”

Oooh. Ask God *if* He will forgive us for thinking wicked thoughts. This Scripture makes it very clear that God can choose *not* to forgive us if He wants. It also shows us that it is not just what we do, but what we think that is important to God.

This was a tough one for me for years. Taking my thoughts captive was not an easy process. And the ole' devil just loved to accuse me on this one, which made it all the more difficult. I could not even begin to count the number of times I have had wicked thoughts about another of God's children. For awhile there Revenge Incorporated had taken up permanent residency in my mind. Fortunately I didn't act on these thoughts. If I had, I literally would be rotting away in some jail cell somewhere.

But, that's not even the point. The point is that the thoughts themselves are wicked, morally bad, and as I grew in my ability to confront my thought life and take it captive, I had to ask God to forgive me for having lived in that place. So now, do I not only believe He has chosen to forgive me, I live like I believe He has chosen to forgive me.

10. Revelation 2:22

Watch Me! I'm going to throw her into a sickbed. Those who commit sexual sins with her will also suffer a lot, unless they turn away from what she is doing.”

So now we're up to Revelation. Isn't Revelation a fun book? I mean it. I love reading this book. It is full of power and glory and the wonderful life we will have when Jesus comes for us. Yet, it is also a warning, and it gives us strong warnings about what will happen if we don't repent. In 10, 11, and 12 we will discuss three.

Revelation 2:22 shows us that God is good. He gives us the chance to understand that what we are doing is wrong. He then tells us to turn away from it. This is, again, the physical act we've been learning about throughout this teaching. Here we learn the consequences of *not* turning away from our own desires. We will suffer—a lot. I don't know about you, but I don't like to suffer even a little, much less a lot. Think about it. Our human ability to even grasp the concept of what “a lot” means to God is very limited. I think that even the most horrible torture our minds can conceive of doesn't even come close to God's “suffer a lot.”

11. Revelation 9:21

“They did not turn away from committing murder, practicing witchcraft, sinning sexually, or stealing.”

Who is the Lord talking about? Up in verse 20 He says it is those who *did not* change the way they think and act. And He tells us that they are suffering plagues. Why? Because they did not engage the physical act of turning away from their sin.

12. Revelation 16:11

...However, they would not stop what they were doing.”

The fifth angel has just poured out his bowl. The kingdom has turned dark, and the people continue to gnaw their tongues and curse God. How ridiculous can we get? Pretty ridiculous. How often has my life turned dark and all I did was sit and stew and not stop what I was doing? Sometimes I am a slow learner, but eventually when I get it—whatever *it* is, and stop it, my suffering ends and lights come back on.

Now we come to the conclusion of the teaching. Can you see how all the concepts and definitions of repentance fit together? So now the question is: do you change the way you *think* and *act*, or do you choose to continue to suffer?