

Repentance: According to 2 Corinthians 7:11

by John Calvin

Repentance is a turning away from sin and a turning towards God, involving a change of heart and a desire to live a holy life.

Scripture: John 20:31, Acts 6:3, 1 Corinthians 15:58, Hebrews 11:1, 1 John 5:9

Topics: "Faith And Witness", "Christian Testimony"

Description

F F Bruce discusses the concept of 'martureo' which refers to being a witness, testifying, giving evidence, and bearing record of facts. The divine commendation received by men and women of faith in Hebrews 11:1 serves as an example for future generations. The word 'martureo' is used in various contexts to affirm something based on personal knowledge or belief and to testify favorably. Believers are encouraged to stand firm in their faith, knowing that their witness for Jesus will have the intended effect, even if the world opposes them.

Transcript

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15. REPENTANCE ACCORDING TO 2 CORINTHIANS 7:11 a. It is for a very good reason that the apostle enumerates seven causes, effects, or parts in his description of repentance. They are earnestness or carefulness, excuse, indignation, fear, longing, zeal, and avenging [2 Corinthians 7:11]. It should not seem absurd that I dare not determine whether they ought to be accounted causes or effects, for either is debatable. And they can also be called inclinations joined with repentance. But because, leaving out those questions, we can understand what Paul means, we shall be content with a simple exposition.

Therefore, he says that from "sorrow...according to God" [2 Corinthians 7:10] carefulness arises. For he who is touched with a lively feeling of dissatisfaction with self because he has sinned against his God is at the same time aroused to diligence and attention, that he may escape from the devil's snares, that he may better take precaution against his wiles, and that he may not afterward fall away from the governance of the Holy Spirit, nor be lulled into a sense of security.

Next is "excuse," which in this passage does not signify a defense whereby the sinner, in order to escape God's judgment, either denies that he has offended or extenuates his fault; but rather purification, which

relies more on asking pardon than on confidence in one's own cause. Just as children who are not forward, while they recognize and confess their errors, plead for pardon, and to obtain it, testify in whatever way they can that they have not at all abandoned that reverence which they owe their parents. In short, they so excuse themselves not to prove themselves righteous and innocent, but only to obtain pardon. There follows indignation, when the sinner moans inwardly with himself, finds fault with himself, and is angry with himself, while recognizing his own perversity and his own ungratefulness toward God.

By the word "fear" Paul means that trembling which is produced in our minds as often as we consider both what we deserve and how dreadful is the severity of God's wrath toward sinners. We must then be troubled with an extraordinary disquiet, which both teaches us humility and renders us more cautious thereafter. But if that carefulness of which we have previously spoken arises from fear, we see the bond by which these two are joined together.

It seems to me that he has used the word "longing" to express that diligence in doing our duty and that readiness to obey to which recognition of our sins ought especially to summon us. To this also pertains the "zeal" that he joins directly to it, for it signifies an ardor by which we are aroused when those spurs are applied to us. What have I done? Whither had I plunged if God's mercy had not succored me?

Lastly, there is "avenging." For the more severe we are toward ourselves, and the more sharply we examine our own sins, the more we ought to hope that God is favorable and merciful toward us. And truly, it could not happen otherwise than that the soul itself, stricken by dread of divine judgment, should act the part of an avenger in carrying out its own punishment. Those who are really religious experience what sort of punishments are shame, confusion, groaning, displeasure with self, and other emotions that arise out of a lively recognition of sin. Yet we must remember to exercise restraint, lest sorrow engulf us. For nothing more readily happens to fearful consciences than falling into despair. And also by this stratagem, whomever Satan sees overwhelmed by the fear of God he more and more submerges in that deep whirlpool of sorrow that they may never rise again. That fear cannot, indeed, be too great which ends in humility, and does not depart from the hope of pardon. Nevertheless, in accordance with the apostle's injunction the sinner ought always to beware lest, while he worries himself into dissatisfaction weighed down by excessive fear, he become faint [Hebrews 12:3]. For in this way we flee from God, who calls us to himself through repentance. On this matter Bernard's admonition is also useful: "Sorrow for sins is necessary if it be not unremitting. I beg you to turn your steps back sometimes from troubled and anxious remembering of your ways, and to go forth to the tableland of serene remembrance of God's benefits. Let us mingle honey with wormwood that its wholesome bitterness may bring health when it is drunk tempered with sweetness. If you take thought upon yourselves in your humility, take thought likewise upon the Lord in his goodness." F112 (The fruits of repentance: holiness of life, confession and remission of sins; repentance is lifelong, 16-20)

16. OUTWARD AND INWARD REPENTANCE b Now we can understand the nature of the fruits of repentance: c the duties of piety toward God, of charity toward men, and in the whole of life, holiness and purity. c Briefly, the more earnestly any man measures his life by the standard of God's law, the surer are the signs of repentance that he shows. Therefore, the Spirit, while he urges us to repentance, often recalls us now to the individual precepts of the law, now to the duties of the Second Table. Yet in other passages the Spirit has first condemned uncleanness in the very wellspring of the heart, and then proceeded to the external evidences that mark sincere repentance. I will soon set before my readers' eyes a table of this matter in a description of the life of the Christian. I will not gather evidences from the prophets, wherein they sometimes scorn the follies of those who strive to appease God with ceremonies and show them to

be mere laughingstocks, and at other times teach that outward uprightness of life is not the chief point of repentance, for God looks into men's hearts. Whoever is moderately versed in Scripture will understand by himself, without the admonition of another, that when we have to deal with God F114 nothing is achieved unless we begin from the inner disposition of the heart. And the passage from Joel will contribute no little to the understanding of the rest: "Rend your hearts and not your garments" [Joel 2:13]. Both of these exhortations also are briefly expressed in these words of James, "Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind" [James 4:8], where there is indeed an addition in the first clause; yet the source and origin is then shown: namely, that men must cleanse away secret filth in order that an altar may be erected to God in the heart itself.

c Besides, there are certain outward exercises that we use privately as remedies, either to humble ourselves or to tame our flesh, but publicly as testimony of repentance [2 Corinthians 7:11]. Moreover, they arise from that "avenging" of which Paul speaks [2 Corinthians 7:11]. For these are the characteristics of an afflicted mind: to be in squalor, groaning, and tears; to flee splendor and any sort of trappings; to depart from all delights. Then he who feels what a great evil rebellion of the flesh is seeks every remedy to restrain it. Moreover, he who well considers how serious it is to have run counter to God's justice cannot rest until, in his humility, he has given glory to God.

The old writers often mention exercises of this sort when they discuss the fruits of repentance. F115 But although they do not place the force of repentance in them - my readers will pardon me if I say what I think - it seems to me that they depend too much upon such exercises. And if any man will wisely weigh this matter, he will agree with me, I trust, that they have in two respects gone beyond measure. For when they urged so much and commended with such immoderate praises that bodily discipline, they succeeded in making the people embrace it with greater zeal; but they somewhat obscured what ought to have been of far greater importance. Secondly, in inflicting punishments they were somewhat more rigid than the gentleness of the church would call for, as we shall have occasion to show in another place.

17. THE OUTWARD PRACTICE OF PENANCE MUST NOT BECOME THE CHIEF THING b Some persons, when they hear weeping, fasting, and ashes spoken of in various passages, and especially in Joel [Joel 2:12], consider that repentance consists chiefly of fasting and weeping. This delusion of theirs must be removed. What is there said concerning the conversion of the entire heart to the Lord, and concerning the rending not of garments but of the heart, belongs properly to repentance. But weeping and fasting are not subjoined as perpetual or necessary effects of this, but have their special occasion. Because he had prophesied that the Jews were threatened with a very great disaster, he counseled them to forestall the wrath of God; not only by repenting, but also by manifesting their sorrow. For just as an accused man is wont to present himself as a suppliant with long beard, uncombed hair, and mourner's clothing to move the judge to mercy; so it behooved them when arraigned before the judgment seat of God to beg, in their miserable condition, that his severity be averted. But although perhaps sackcloth and ashes better fitted those times, it is certain that there will be a very suitable use among us for weeping and fasting whenever the Lord seems to threaten us with any ruin or calamity. When he causes some danger to appear, he announces that he is ready and, after a manner, armed for revenge. Therefore, the prophet does well to exhort his people to weeping and fasting - that is, to the sorrow of accused persons, for he had just stated that their evil deeds were brought to trial. In like manner, the pastors of the church would not be doing ill today if, when they see ruin hanging over the necks of their people, they were to cry out to them to hasten to fasting and weeping; provided - and this is the principal point - they always urge with greater and more intent care and effort that "they should rend their hearts and not their garments" [Joel

2:13]. There is no doubt whatsoever that fasting is not always closely connected with repentance, but is especially intended for times of calamity. Accordingly, Christ links it with mourning when he releases the apostles from need of it, until, deprived of his presence, they should be overwhelmed with grief [Matthew 9:15]. I am speaking concerning a public fast, for the life of the godly ought to be tempered with frugality and sobriety that throughout its course a sort of perpetual fasting may appear. c But because that whole matter is to be investigated again where we discuss the discipline of the church, I now touch upon it rather sparingly.

18. CONFESSION OF SIN BEFORE GOD AND BEFORE MEN e Nevertheless, I shall insert this point here: when the term "repentance" is applied to this external profession, it is improperly diverted from its true meaning, which I have set forth. For it is not so much a turning to God as a confession of guilt, together with a beseeching of God to avert punishment and accusation.' Thus, to "repent in sackcloth and ashes" [Matthew 11:21; Luke 10:13] is only to evidence our self-displeasure when God is angry with us because of our grave offenses. Public, indeed, is this kind of confession, by which we, condemning ourselves before the angels and the world, anticipate the judgment of God. For Paul, rebuking the slothfulness of those who are indulgent toward their own sins, says: "If we judged ourselves...we should not be judged" by God [1 Corinthians 11:31]. Now, while it is not always necessary to make men open and conscious witnesses of our repentance, yet to confess to God privately is a part of true repentance that cannot be omitted. For there is nothing less reasonable than that God should forgive those sins in which we flatter ourselves, and which we hypocritically disguise lest he bring them to light.

Not only is it fitting to confess those sins which we commit daily, but graver offenses ought to draw us further and recall to our minds those which seem long since buried. David teaches us this by his example. For, touched with shame for his recent crime, he examines himself even to the time when he was in his mother's womb, and acknowledges that even then he was corrupted and infected with the filthiness of the flesh [Psalm 51:3-5]. And he does not do this to extenuate his guilt, as many hide themselves in a crowd and seek to go unpunished by involving others with them. David does far otherwise. He openly magnifies his guilt, confessing that, corrupted from his very infancy, he has not ceased to heap misdeeds upon misdeeds. Also, in another passage, he undertakes such an investigation of his past life as to implore God's mercy for the sins of his youth [Psalm 15:7]. Surely then, at last, we shall prove that our drowsiness has been shaken from us, if we seek from God a release by groaning under our burden, by bemoaning our evil deeds.

Moreover, we ought to note that the repentance which we are enjoined constantly to practice differs from that repentance which, as it were, arouses from death those who have either shamefully fallen or with unbridled vices cast themselves into sinning, or have thrown off God's yoke by some sort of rebellion. For often Scripture, in exhorting to repentance, means by it a kind of passage and resurrection from death to life. And in referring to a people as having "repented," it means that they have been converted from idol worship and other gross offenses. For this reason, Paul declares that he will mourn for those sinners who "have not repented of lewdness, fornication, and licentiousness" [2 Corinthians 12:21 p.]. We ought carefully to observe this distinction, lest when we hear that few are called to repentance we become careless, as if mortification of the flesh no longer concerned us. For the base desires that always pester us, and the vices that repeatedly sprout in us, do not allow us to slacken our concern for mortification. Therefore, the special repentance that is required only of certain ones whom the devil has wrenched from fear of God and entangled in deadly snares does not do away with the ordinary repentance to which corruption of nature compels us to give attention throughout our lives.

19. REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS ARE INTERRELATED b Now if it is true - a fact abundantly clear - b(a) that the whole of the gospel is contained under these two headings, repentance and forgiveness of sins, do we not see that the Lord freely justifies his own in order that he may at the same time restore them to true righteousness by sanctification of his Spirit? a John, a messenger sent before the face of Christ to prepare his ways [Matthew 11:10], proclaimed: "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven has come near" [Matthew 3:2; 4:17, Vg.]. By inviting them to repentance, he admonished them to recognize that they were sinners, and their all was condemned before the Lord, that they might with all their hearts desire the mortification of their flesh, and a new rebirth in the Spirit. By proclaiming the Kingdom of God, he was calling them to faith, for by the Kingdom of God, which he taught was at hand, he meant the forgiveness of sins, salvation, life, and utterly everything that we obtain in Christ. Hence we read in the other Evangelists: "John came preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" [Mark 1:4; Luke 3:3]. What else is this than that they, weighed down and wearied by the burden of sins, should turn to the Lord and conceive a hope of forgiveness and salvation? So, also, Christ entered upon his preaching: "The Kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the gospel" [Mark 1:15 p.]. First he declares that the treasures of God's mercy have been opened in himself; then he requires repentance; finally, trust in God's promises. Therefore, when he meant to summarize the whole gospel in brief, he said that he "should suffer rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name" [Luke 24:26, 46-47]. And after his resurrection the apostles preached this: "God raised Jesus...to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins" [Acts 5:30-31]. Repentance is preached in the name of Christ when, through the teaching of the gospel, men hear that all their thoughts, all their inclinations, all their efforts, are corrupt and vicious. Accordingly, they must be reborn if they would enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Forgiveness of sins is preached when men are taught that for them Christ became redemption, righteousness, b(a) salvation, and life [1 Corinthians 1:30], by whose name they are freely accounted righteous and innocent in God's sight. b Since both kinds of grace are received by faith, as I have elsewhere proved, still, because the proper object of faith is God's goodness, by which sins are forgiven, it was expedient that it should be carefully distinguished from repentance.

20. IN WHAT SENSE IS REPENTANCE THE PRIOR CONDITION OF FORGIVENESS? a Now the hatred of sin, which is the beginning of repentance, first gives us access to the knowledge of Christ, who reveals himself to none but poor and afflicted sinners, who groan, toil, are heavy-laden, hunger, thirst, and pine away with sorrow and misery b(a) [Isaiah 61:1-3; Matthew 11:5, 28; Luke 4:18]. Accordingly, we must strive toward repentance itself, devote ourselves to it throughout life, and pursue it to the very end if we would abide in Christ. b For he came to call sinners, but it was to repentance [cf. Matthew 9:13]. He was sent to bless the unworthy, but in order that every one may turn from his wickedness [Acts 3:26; cf. Acts 5:31]. Scripture is full of such testimonies. For this reason, when God offers forgiveness of sins, he usually requires repentance of us in turn, implying that his mercy ought to be a cause for men to repent. He says, "Do judgment and righteousness, for salvation has come near." [Isaiah 56:1 p.] Again, "A redeemer will come to Zion, and to those in Jacob who repent of their sins." [Isaiah 59:20.] Again, "Seek the Lord while he can be found, call upon him while he is near; let the wicked man forsake his way and the unrighteousness of his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him." [Isaiah 55:6-7 p.] Likewise, "Turn again, and repent, that your sins may be blotted out." [Acts 3:19.] Yet we must note that this condition is not so laid down as if our repentance were the basis of our deserving pardon, but rather, because the Lord has determined to have pity on men to the end that they may repent, he indicates in what direction men should proceed if they wish to obtain grace. Accordingly, so long as we dwell in the prison house of our body we must continually contend with the defects of our corrupt nature, indeed with our own natural soul. a Plato sometimes says that the life of a philosopher is a meditation

upon death; but we may more truly say that the life of a Christian man is a continual effort and exercise in the mortification of the flesh, till it is utterly slain, and God's Spirit reigns in us. Therefore, I think he has profited greatly who has learned to be very much displeased with himself, not so as to stick fast in this mire and progress no farther, but rather to hasten to God and yearn for him in order that, having been engrafted into the life and death of Christ, he may give attention to continual repentance. b Truly, they who are held by a real loathing of sin cannot do otherwise. For no one ever hates sin unless he has previously been seized with a love of righteousness. a This thought, as it was the simplest of all, so has it seemed to me to agree best with the truth of Scripture. (Sins for which there is no repentance or pardon, 21-25)

21. REPENTANCE AS GOD'S FREE GIFT e Further, that repentance is a singular gift of God I believe to be so clear from the above teaching that there is no need of a long discourse to explain it. Accordingly, the church praises God's benefit, and marvels that he "granted repentance to the Gentiles unto salvation" [Acts 11:18, cf. 2 Corinthians 7:10]. And Paul bids Timothy be forbearing and gentle toward unbelievers: If at any time, he says, God may give them repentance to recover from the snares of the devil [2 Timothy 2:25- 26]. Indeed, God declares that he wills the conversion of all, and he directs exhortations to all in common. Yet the efficacy of this depends upon the Spirit of regeneration. For it would be easier for us to create men than for us of our own power to put on a more excellent nature. Accordingly, in the whole course of regeneration, we are with good reason called "God's handiwork, created... for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" [Ephesians 2:10, cf. Vg.]. Whomsoever God wills to snatch from death, he quickens by the Spirit of regeneration. Not that repentance, properly speaking, is the cause of salvation, but because it is already seen to be inseparable from faith and from God's mercy, when, as Isaiah testifies, "a redeemer will come to Zion, and to those in Jacob who turn back from iniquity" [Isaiah 59:20].

This fact indeed stands firm: wherever the fear of God flourishes, the Spirit has worked toward the salvation of man. Therefore, believers, according to Isaiah, while they complain and grieve that they have been forsaken by God, set this as a sort of sign of reprobation, that their hearts have been hardened by him [Isaiah 63:17]. The apostle, also wishing to exclude apostates from the hope of salvation, gives the reason that "it is impossible to restore them to repentance" [Hebrews 6:4- 6 p.]. For obviously God, renewing those he wills not to perish, shows the sign of his fatherly favor and, so to speak, draws them to himself with the rays of his calm and joyous countenance. On the other hand, he hardens and he thunders against the reprobate, whose impiety is unforgivable. With this sort of vengeance the apostle threatens willful apostates who, while they fall away from faith in the gospel, mock God, scornfully despise his grace, profane and trample Christ's blood [Hebrews 10:29], yea, as much as it lies in their power, crucify him again [Hebrews 6:6]. For Paul does not, as certain austere folk would preposterously have it, cut off hope of pardon from all voluntary sins. But he teaches that apostasy deserves no excuse, so that it is no wonder God avenges such sacrilegious contempt of himself with inexorable rigor. b" For," he teaches, "it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, if they fall away, since they crucify the Son of God on their own account and hold him up to contempt." [Hebrews 6:4-6.] Another passage: "If we sin willfully," he says, "after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there remains no longer a sacrifice for sins, but a certain dreadful expectation of judgment," etc. [Hebrews 10:26].

These are, also, the passages from the wrong understanding of which the Novatianists long ago found occasion for their ravings. Offended by the harshness in these passages, certain good men believed this

to be a spurious letter, even though in every part it breathes an apostolic spirit. But since we are contending only against those who accept this letter, it is easy to show how these statements do not at all support their error. First, it is necessary for the apostle to agree with his Master, who declares that "every sin and blasphemy shall be forgiven...but the sin against the Holy Spirit," which is forgiven "neither in this age nor in the age to come" [Matthew 12:31-32; Mark 3:28-29; Luke 12:10]. It is certain, I say, that the apostle was content with this exception, unless we would make him an opponent of the grace of Christ. From this it follows e(c) that pardon is not denied to any individual sins except one, which, arising out of desperate madness, cannot be ascribed to weakness, and clearly demonstrates that a man is possessed by the devil.

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