

www.ShepherdServe.org

You are welcome to distribute printed copies of this document, or copy and paste this document to distribute via email, as long as the document is unaltered and kept in its *entirety* (including copyright notices), and is not sold for profit. However, if you wish to post this material on your website or anywhere else online, you must first contact us to get permission. ©2007 by David Servant

Forgive Me for Waiting so Long to Tell You This
by David Servant

SEVEN

Opening the Door

Are you ready to respond to what God, through His Son Jesus, has done for you-now that you understand why He had to die on the cross?

Perhaps you're wondering, "What could I ever do to make myself worthy to possess the benefits made available by Jesus' suffering? Should I climb some high mountain on my bare knees? Would living a life of solitary confinement as a monk make me worthy? What if I promise to go to church every day? Would that be enough?"

The answer to those questions may surprise you: There is absolutely *nothing* you can do to make yourself worthy to receive God's forgiveness.

This is the message of Jesus' cross: Sinful people don't have a shadow of a chance of obtaining right standing with God by their own merit.

The only hope we have of being saved from our due punishment is if somehow God pardons us. Jesus' sacrificial death provides the means whereby God can justly forgive our sins. *Salvation is the work of God-not man.*

We can have our sins forgiven only because of His mercy. To think that we can even partially merit what God has freely offered us is a prideful assault against the necessity of Jesus' terrible suffering and God's undeserved mercy upon us.

What Must We Do?

How do we receive the benefit of what God has made available to us through Jesus Christ?

In the Bible, there are two requirements listed: repentance and faith. Neither of these can make us worthy, but together they open the door for God's salvation to become effective in our lives.

Let's first examine repentance.

Most of us, when we hear the word "repent," think of some wild-eyed, back-woods preacher who self-righteously rides into town to condemn the sins of the townsfolk. His message is never well received because he only preaches about how evil they are and the

coming judgment. His hearers are left with the impression that if they can just straighten out their lives they'll earn their place in glory.

That kind of message falls immeasurably short of portraying the true picture of God's plan for humanity. Telling sinners to clean up their lives without mentioning Jesus' death on the cross ought to be a crime.

Still, the Bible makes it clear that repentance is absolutely necessary for salvation. A person can never hope to experience forgiveness from God unless he repents. On the other hand, repentance in itself could never save anyone. Repentance must be joined with faith.

Because the necessity of repentance for salvation has been played down in some theological circles, I'm going to take a few pages to prove that you can't be saved from God's wrath without repenting. Then I'll discuss exactly what it means to repent.

Preachers of Repentance

John the Baptist, Jesus' forerunner, preached a very simple message:

"Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand" (Matthew 3:2; emphasis added).

The Bible says that from the time Jesus first began preaching, His message was the same as John the Baptist's:

From that time Jesus began to preach and say, *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Matthew 4:17; emphasis added).

You probably remember the scripture I quoted in the previous chapter concerning Jesus' comments about two contemporary tragedies. Referring to the men who had died, Jesus twice told His listeners:

"I tell you...unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3, 5; emphasis added).

When Jesus sent out His twelve disciples to preach in various cities, what was the message they preached? The Bible says,

And they went out and preached that men should *repent* (Mark 6:12; emphasis added).

What was the message Jesus told the twelve to take with them after His resurrection?

And He said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and rise again from the dead the third day; and that *repentance* for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Lk. 24:46-47; emphasis added).

The apostles obeyed Jesus' instructions. When the apostle Peter was preaching on the day of Pentecost, his convicted listeners, after realizing the truth about the Man whom

they had recently crucified, asked Peter what they should do. His response was that they, first of all, should repent (see Acts 2:38).

Peter's second public sermon at Solomon's portico contained the identical message:

"Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away..." (Acts 3:19a; emphasis added).

Did the apostle Paul preach repentance? Decidedly yes. In Athens we hear him proclaim:

"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31; emphasis added).

In his farewell sermon to the Ephesian elders, Paul stated:

"...I did not shrink from...solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:20a, 21; emphasis added).

In his defense before King Agrippa, Paul said:

"Consequently, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance" (Acts 26:19-20; emphasis added).

The writer of the book of Hebrews said that "repentance from dead works" is the most fundamental doctrine of Christ (see Heb. 6:1).

Hopefully, that list of scriptural proofs is enough to convince anyone that a relationship with God begins with repentance. *There is no forgiveness of sins without it.*

What Does Repentance Mean?

If repentance is necessary for salvation, it is of utmost importance that we understand what it means to repent. Actually, once we understand that sin is what separates us from God-and once we realize that sin stems from selfishness-then the definition of repentance becomes obvious. *To repent means to turn from all known sin and selfishness. It means to start obeying God. It means to take ourselves off the throne of our lives and put Jesus on it. It means to make Jesus Lord and become His slave. It means that we stop living for ourselves and begin living for God and others.*

If the reason we were formerly separated *from* God was because of our rebellious acts of sin, then naturally repentance would be required if we plan to begin a relationship *with* Him.

Repentance requires more than just a change of mind on our part. It necessitates a change in our actions.

John the Baptist, whose message was one that called people to repentance, couldn't have made it more clear that repentance requires *action*. Listen to what he preached:

“Therefore *bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance*, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham for our father,’ for I say to you that God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. And also the axe is already laid at the root of the trees; *every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire*” (Luke 3:8-9; emphasis added).

True repentance will bring forth fruit, or actions. Notice also that John the Baptist declared that people who don't repent go to hell. Let's continue:

And the multitudes were questioning him, saying, “Then what shall we do?” And he would answer and say to them, “Let the man who has two tunics share with him who has none; and let him who has food do likewise” (Luke 3:10-11).

Remember that repentance involves turning away from selfishness. If a person truly repents, it affects what he does with his possessions and makes him compassionate toward the less fortunate. If Jesus is truly our Lord, our possessions are His.

John continued:

And some tax-gatherers also came to be baptized, and they said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than what you have been ordered to” (Luke 3:12-13).

If a person truly repents, it affects his honesty with his employer and clients. John concluded:

And some soldiers were questioning him, saying, “And what about us, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not take money from anyone by force, or accuse anyone falsely, and be content with your wages” (Luke 3:14).

If a person truly repents, he stops stealing, he becomes considerate of others, and he turns from greed.

Can you see that repentance requires a change of attitudes *and* actions? And did you notice that everything John told his inquirers to do could be summed up in the words, “Stop being selfish”?

If true repentance takes place, we will no longer be motivated by selfish ambition but by love. *The identifying mark of the Christian is supreme love for God and unselfish love for others.*

The Little Man Who Truly Repented

There's a story in the Bible of a short man named Zaccheus who was a tax-gatherer. To understand his story, you must first understand that in Israel in Jesus' day, the words *tax-gatherer* and *swindler* were synonymous terms. The Roman government sold the

right to collect taxes to the highest bidder, and the more money the tax-gatherer collected, the more money he could keep for himself. Human nature being what it is (selfish), tax-collectors normally defrauded a lot of tax-paying people.

Zaccheus was a normal tax-gatherer: dishonest and wealthy. Let's read his story:

And He [Jesus] entered and was passing through Jericho. And behold, there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; and he was a chief tax-gatherer, and he was rich. And he was trying to see who Jesus was, and he was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. And he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way.

And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." And he hurried and came down, and received Him gladly.

And when they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." [Of course, none of those grumblers ever acted in their own self-interest, did they?] And Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much."

And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:1-10).

We know that Zaccheus repented. His actions made it evident. Jesus must have been convinced because He said that salvation had come to the tax-collector's house that day-the day he repented.

If we truly repent, we must stop taking selfish advantage of other people. It's one thing to make money by charging reasonable fees for quality goods and services but another thing to make money by ripping people off.

So if you want to meet the first requirement to be saved from God's wrath, then *repent*. Any and all acts of selfishness of which you are conscious should immediately be stopped. Pray and ask God's forgiveness for a life of selfishness. And if tears come, let them come.

Repentance doesn't make you worthy-it doesn't earn your salvation-only Jesus' sacrificial death saves us. More than anything else, repentance proves that you are also meeting the second requirement, and that is to believe the gospel.

Repentance and faith go hand-in-hand. You really can't have one without the other. Just as Jesus Himself said, "*Repent*, and *believe* in the gospel" (Mark 1:15; emphasis added).

What is the Gospel?

The word "gospel" means "good news." That is what we must believe.

What is the good news? That Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, has died on the cross, suffered as payment for our sins, averted the wrath of God that we deserved, and has risen from the dead to live forever.

If you have repented and truly believed that good news, you are saved. *You will not go to hell.* You are guaranteed a place in heaven, forever! Now that's something to get excited about! (Incidentally, the angels in heaven do get excited about it; see Luke 15:1-10).

Let's look at a few scriptures that tell us that faith in the gospel is an absolute requirement for salvation. First, let's read probably the most well-known verse in the entire Bible, John 3:16:

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever *believes in Him* should not perish, but have eternal life” (emphasis added).

This, of course, means more than just believing that Jesus was a historical person who walked on the earth 2,000 years ago. To believe in Him means to believe everything that God has revealed about Him. We must believe in who He is and what He has accomplished.

Fundamentally and first, we *must* believe that Jesus is the Son of God. If Jesus isn't God's Son, then He was sin-stained like everyone else and, therefore, wasn't qualified to be our substitute. A man on death-row could never offer his life to pay the penalty for another inmate on death-row because he owes his *own* life. Only One who is sinless could be our rightful substitute.

In the book of Acts, Philip the evangelist wouldn't baptize an Ethiopian eunuch until he confessed his faith that Jesus Christ was the Son of God:

And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this Scripture he preached Jesus to him. And as they went along the road they came to some water; and the eunuch said, “Look! Water! What prevents me from being baptized?” And Philip said, “If you believe with all your heart, you may.” And he answered and said, “*I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.*” And he ordered the chariot to stop; and they both went down into the water...and he baptized him (Acts 8:35-38; emphasis added).

Of course, it's one thing to *say* you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, and another thing to actually believe it. Many people have said that they believe Jesus is the Son of God, but it's obvious that they really don't because they don't act like it.

If I really believe that Jesus is the Son of God, then I will be interested in learning what Jesus has said. I will realize that He has a right to tell me how to live my life, and I will want to obey Him.

Once a person truly believes that Jesus is the Son of God, he'll repent. As I've already stated, repentance and faith go hand-in-hand. If you truly believe, you will repent. Your actions will prove your faith.

Not only must we believe that Jesus is the Son of God, but we must also believe that He died for our sins. It was His death that makes our salvation possible. As the apostle Paul stated:

Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved....For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that *Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures...* (1 Corinthians 15:1-3; emphasis added).

Again, if we believe that Jesus died in our place, we will naturally *want* to repent of our selfishness. We won't desire to live for ourselves any longer; we'll want to live for Jesus:

He died for all, *that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf* (2 Corinthians 5:14-15; emphasis added).

Finally, as the above scripture also states, we must believe that *Jesus rose from the dead*. Jesus' resurrection is the ultimate proof that the penalty for our sins has been paid in full and that God's wrath has been turned away for all those who will believe in Jesus.

Furthermore, Jesus' resurrection proves that we, too, will live after we've died. Those who truly believe in Jesus are joined together as one with Him through the working of God. We're *in Christ*. Now that Jesus is alive, we will live forever, too:

He who was delivered up because of our transgressions [sins], *and was raised because of our justification* [our sentence has been paid in full-now we have right-standing before God](Romans 4:25; emphasis added).

And if Christ has *not* been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ [those Christians who have died] have perished [in hell]....But now Christ *has* been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep (1 Corinthians 15:17-20; emphasis added).

Do you truly believe that Jesus is the Son of God and that He died for your sins? Do you believe that Jesus' death fully averted the wrath of God that you deserved? Do you believe that Jesus Christ was raised from the dead?

Good! Your sins have all been forgiven; your guilt is wiped away; and you don't have to worry about facing the wrath of God you deserve! And you have a wonderful future to look forward to!

Can I be Certain I Will Go to Heaven?

So many people have never realized that it *is* possible to *know* for certain, while here on earth, that they will go to heaven when they die. When we repent and believe the gospel, we immediately have that assurance, as the apostle John expressed:

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may *know* that you have eternal life (1 John 5:13; emphasis added).

The reason so many people don't think it's possible to have the assurance of eternal life is because they think their good deeds save them. Too many people are just hoping that they've done enough good things and not too many bad things, so they won't go to hell but to heaven.

The truth is, *no one* is good enough to get into heaven-it's impossible to earn that privilege, as I'm sure you've come to realize after reading the first six chapters of this book.

The Bible is crystal clear on this fact: *good works can't save us*. Only our *faith* can guarantee salvation. Our salvation is a free gift from God because of His love, grace and mercy. Here are a few of the many scriptures that prove this point:

For by grace [undeserved favor] *you have been saved through faith*; and that not of yourselves, *it is the gift of God; not as a result of [good] works*, that no one should boast (Ephesians 2:8-9; emphasis added).

He saved us, *not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness*, but according to His mercy... (Titus 3:5a; emphasis added).

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified [made righteous before God] *as a gift by His grace* through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith (Romans 3:23-25; emphasis added).

If it were possible for us to be saved by our own good works, then there was no need for Jesus to have died. As the apostle Paul said, His death would have been a waste of time:

I do not nullify the grace of God; for if righteousness [right standing with God] comes through [keeping] the Law, then Christ died needlessly (Galatians 2:21).

Religious or Righteous?

Possibly you've heard the story that Jesus told about the Pharisee and the publican. The Pharisees in Jesus' day were super-religious, and they lived by a strict code of man-made laws. The word *publican* is another word for *tax-gatherer*, which hopefully you remember was synonymous with the word *swindler* in Jesus' day.

The story of the Pharisee and the publican perfectly illustrates that those who trust in their own good works will not be saved. But those who admit their sinfulness and come to God in faith, trusting in Jesus, *will* be saved:

And He also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his

eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, the sinner!’

“I tell you, this man went down to his house justified [made righteous with God] rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted” (Luke 18:9-14).

Notice the tax-gatherer prayed, “Lord, be *merciful* to me, the sinner!” Literally, the original Greek translation says, “Lord, be *propitious* to me...!” Do you remember what *propitiate* means? It means “to avert anger” or “to turn away wrath.”

God’s wrath cannot be withheld if He is to remain perfectly loving and perfectly just. So God’s wrath wasn’t withheld-but it was redirected *at Jesus*, our willing substitute. And that is how we escaped getting what we deserved. Our salvation is free to us but not to Jesus-it cost Him unimaginable suffering.

When a person attempts to save himself by his own good deeds, he is pridefully declaring that he doesn’t need Jesus because he can be his own savior. Furthermore, he is unconsciously voicing his opinion that Jesus was a fool since He endured such suffering for no good reason. Such a person also thinks the Creator must have been confused when He planned the culminating event of all history-the death of His only begotten Son on Calvary.

Without overstatement, the idea that we can save ourselves by our good deeds is the most damnable heresy ever invented, and stands in direct opposition to everything the Bible teaches, everything that true Christianity represents, and everything that the all-wise and all-loving God has planned for humanity.

A Sinner’s Prayer for Salvation

It would be best if you prayed to God from your own heart, using your own words, as you repent and declare your faith in Jesus. But if you are having a difficult time talking to God, here is a prayer you could use, as long as you pray it from your heart. Pray aloud:

Oh God, I admit that I am a guilty sinner who deserves to receive your just punishment. Thank you for warning me of the ultimate consequences of my sin so that I can avoid spending an eternity in hell. I’ve been selfish, but today I repent, and my change of actions will prove it. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, that He died on the cross for my sins, that He has averted the wrath of God that I deserve, and that He rose again from the grave. He is Lord, and from now on He is my Lord, whom I will obey. I do not trust that any of my own good deeds will save me but that my salvation stems solely from what Jesus has done on the cross. From this day on, He is my Savior. Thank you for saving me! In Jesus’ name, Amen.