

# REPENTANCE AND THE CONSCIENCE

THE GOOD CONSCIENCE 8



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A REVISION STUDY FROM  
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

*Repentance and the Conscience*

Strong Souls 25  
Repentance and the Conscience  
The Good Conscience 8  
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## Welcome to *Repentance and the Conscience*

One primary function of the conscience is to convict us of sin, or, to put it more accurately, to hear the convicting word of the Spirit of God, and to alert the rest of the soul that action is required.

The action required when sin has been identified is confession and repentance. Confession of sin by itself is not sufficient to help us move on from sin to sanctification. Repentance is required for that.

The conscience plays a large role in helping us to repent of our sins, as we shall see in the study that follows.

*ReVision* studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore  
Principal

## 1 The Imperative of Repentance

*“Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision, but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.”* Acts 26.19, 20

### *Something more?*

Many Christians today believe that saving faith consists in hearing the Good News of Jesus Christ and believing in Him for the forgiveness of sins and the gift of eternal life.

All we need to do, is present Jesus and the Gospel in a way that scratches some itch in our neighbors’ lives – whatever that might be – and they’ll come to Jesus and (hopefully) our church and find a home in our midst. The Gospel, in such a scenario, is all about making Jesus *appealing*, so that anyone looking for something more in life might find in Him the satisfaction of their deepest needs. Do they need a true and reliable friend? Jesus is the Friend Who sticks closer than a brother. Do they need reassurance and a feeling of self-worth? Jesus can jack up their self-image by coming alongside them throughout the day. Are they afraid? Confused? Desperate to be accepted somewhere? Jesus is up to all these challenges and more.

Jesus, we say to our neighbors, is just what you need.

But what if people don’t know what their deepest need is? Or what if their deepest need is something they refuse to consider? Or don’t even understand? What if their deepest need is just the kind of thing that churches today seem increasingly reluctant to talk about? What if their deepest need has to do with *sin*?

And what if what’s true of our unsaved neighbors is true of us as well?

Many people today carry around a burden of guilt and shame because they *know* there are things in their lives that aren’t right, and yet they can’t – or won’t – desist from them. It’s easier just to feel bad about them. Their *conscience* indicts them, and they spend a good bit of their waking moments trying to ignore their conscience and just get through the day. All people have the works of the Law written on their hearts. Some work hard to bury the memory of that Law, but because they are the image-bearers of God, their conscience won’t quite cut all ties with the truth (cf. Rom. 1.18-21; 2.14, 15).

The conscience of every person knows what is needed when sin has established a presence in the soul. Repentance.

### *The heart of the Gospel*

Deliverance from sin – its power, shame, guilt, and self-deception – is the heart of the Gospel of the Kingdom. And deliverance from sin begins in repentance. Jesus routinely began His sermons with the word, “Repent!” All the apostles also understood that the starting point for saving faith is not in identifying any merely superficial needs we may imagine Jesus will satisfy. The starting point for saving faith is in facing up to, admitting, confessing, and turning away from our sins. The starting point for saving faith, in short, is repentance. When presented with the Gospel, if the soul is quickened, people will ask, “What shall I do?” Our answer must be: “Repent and believe the Good News” (cf. Acts 2.36-38).

Repentance is that voice in the conscience which speaks up when we have strayed from the holy and righteous and good Law of God, which He writes on the heart of all people (Rom. 2.14, 15) and which He is daily renewing on the hearts of those to whom He has sent His Spirit (Ezek. 36.26, 27). Repentance demands a change of *thinking* and *feeling* and *attitude* about some practice or practices. What we formerly accepted as normal – agreeable, if not entirely right – we now come to see, in the light of God’s truth, as shameful,

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wrong, and even despicable. Our purified conscience bears witness against us, and its call for repentance demands to be heard. In the face of Jesus' holiness, we realize we could never be acceptable to Him so long as these practices continue unchecked. And in the light of His sacrificial suffering and death – occasioned by our wicked practices – repentance demands that we be done with these disgusting and disgraceful ways and find a new path for our lives.

When our conscience is functioning for repentance as an indispensable priority and value, we will begin thinking and feeling differently about our lives, and how we ought to live them to be most pleasing to God. The call for repentance heeded, our soul grows stronger and we increase, if ever so slightly, into the likeness of Jesus.

#### *Faith and repentance*

There is no saving faith without repentance. Saving faith, as Paul indicates in our text, arises from repentance, and leads to good works of righteousness which are in keeping with repentance. But if there is no repentance, how can there be any good works in keeping with repentance? And if there are no good works, then, as James explains, our "faith" is dead, being unaccompanied by good works in keeping with repentance (Jms. 2.14-26).

Repentance is not much discussed, let alone practiced, among Christians these days. And the lack of teaching about repentance is a major hindrance to achieving a good conscience, one purified from dead works (Heb. 9.14). The failure to take repentance seriously also helps to explain why our good works, such as they are, have not been sufficient to stem the tide of immorality that threatens to inundate all aspects of our society.

Without repentance, there can be no faith, and without faith, there can be no good works in keeping with repentance.

Until we as Christians recover the importance of practicing repentance, there may not be much real saving faith in the churches of the land. We will always need to practice repentance from sin, because we will never be without sin in this life (1 Jn. 2.8-10). Only as we purify our conscience in all the ways we have thus far discussed, will repentance play the powerful and restorative role God intends.

#### *For reflection*

1. Explain the relationship between faith and repentance in the Christian life.
2. How would you explain repentance and why it is necessary to a new believer?
3. Why does it make sense to relate the work of repentance to the conscience?

*Next steps – Preparation: Pay attention to your walk with the Lord today. How often are you called to repent of some sin? Is this typical?*

## 2 Conditions for Repentance

*“I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”* Luke 13.5

### *An evangelical grace*

Perhaps the best definition of repentance comes from *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, that great 17<sup>th</sup>-century document which sets forth the essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

Chapter XV of *The Confession* deals with repentance, calling it “an evangelical grace” which should be preached along with faith in Christ by every minister of the Gospel. Those pastors and theologians who composed *The Confession* understood the importance of this discipline for the life of faith.

*The Confession* declares of repentance, “By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.”

Here we can see that, as repentance is working, the conscience is directing both the mind and the heart in thoughts and affections appropriate to turning *away* from sin and *toward* Jesus Christ. The purpose of repentance is to set us in good stead with God and His Word, according to His holy purpose for our lives.

Repentance only comes into practice when certain conditions are met. Let’s observe the following conditions for repentance as they are set out in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

### *Conditions*

First, to repent we must *acknowledge that we are sinners*, that is, that there are in our lives things which offend against the holy character of God and the requirement of loving our neighbors as ourselves. Repentance is thus the *starting-point* of saving faith, as we have seen, and the *touchstone* of saving faith, as we grow increasingly into Jesus. Repenting is what sinners do, and we’re all sinners. Certainly, we’re not going to make much headway in this evangelical grace until we identify, confess, and begin to have a changed mind about the sin in our lives.

Second, we recognize, as Jesus indicated, that the presence of sin in our lives *puts us in danger of the judgment of God*. God hates sin so much that He moves to eradicate and destroy it; if we happen to be harboring sin in our lives, therefore, it’s quite possible that we may find ourselves in the divine crosshairs unless we repent. Repentance, in other words, has a fear motive back of it – fear of the judgment of God, or, if we are believers and therefore delivered from judgment, of the discipline He may bring against us for our sin (Heb. 12.3-11).

Next, to acknowledge our sin we will need to see it as such, and thus *be specific before the Lord* in our repentance. This requires exposure to the Law of God, for anything that is contrary to the Law of God is sin, and the Law of God helps us see the sin we have ignored, rationalized, or otherwise harbored in our lives (Rom. 7.7-9). Where there is no Law, the apostle explains, there is no guilt for sin. But once we begin to bring the Law of God into our daily lives, sin will become evident all around. Then we can acknowledge and be done with it.

Third, we will not repent until we *apprehend the mercy of God*, shown to us in the suffering and death of our Lord Jesus Christ. When we see ourselves as *responsible* for His suffering, we will grieve that our sin could do this to Him, and we will begin to hate sin as God says we must (Ps. 97.10). Until we destroy the love of sinning in our hearts, we will not be ready to repent of anything before the holy God.

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Finally, real repentance *seeks another path to walk*, one that follows “all the ways of His commandments.”

Admit you are a sinner, specify the sin you need to repent of before the Lord, call upon His mercy to forgive and revive you, hate the sin you have identified in your life, and determine and resolve to walk on the path marked out by God’s Word instead (Ps. 119.59, 60). We will not repent of our sins until all these conditions are met. And, as often as they are met, we will repent, and thus discover again the starting-point of saving faith.

*No salvation without repentance*

Repentance does not earn salvation; however, there is no salvation without it.

Moreover, as *The Confession* goes on to say, “As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.” Repentance is thus an avenue for great hope, relief, and joy, and a new beginning each day for knowing the salvation of the Lord.

And so, *The Confession* continues, “Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man’s duty to endeavour to repent of his particular sins, particularly.”

When, out of a good conscience, we practice repentance like this, then the salvation we have in Jesus Christ will flourish more and more.

*For reflection*

1. Why is repentance necessary both for unbelievers and believers?
2. How can we prepare our *minds* for repentance?
3. How can we prepare our *hearts* for repentance?

*For reflection – Transformation: Repentance requires a change of course in life. Are you aware of any areas of life where you need to repent and change your course? Wait on the Lord in prayer as you contemplate that question.*



### 3 A Work of God's Spirit

*"And when He has come, He will convict the world of sin..."* John 16.8

#### *Our work, and God's*

As we have seen, repentance is a work of *grace*. It begins in our conscience, with the conviction that something isn't right, that our life is not in line with God's will, and that we need to take steps to amend our ways. We must repent of our sins to *enter* the salvation of the Lord, and we must repent to *work out that salvation* unto greater levels of fruitfulness.

But we are not sufficient in and of ourselves to accomplish this work.

Repentance is at all times a work of grace. It begins with God, is accomplished by God, and bears the fruit God intends. Repenting from sin is something *we* must do, but the grace repentance requires is a work of God, more specifically, of the Holy Spirit. We are *commanded* to repent, and to *practice* repentance from our sins every day of our lives. But we cannot do this apart from the work of God's Spirit. Unless God brings us to conviction, guides us into His path, and empowers us for change, we will not repent.

Thus, we must be willing to repent, must seek the grace of God for repentance, and must learn to follow the Spirit's leading as He guides and empowers us for repentance. How does this work?

#### *The work of the Spirit*

First, as we have said so many times in this series on the nature and nurture of the soul, we must present ourselves in the school of the Spirit, where He *teaches us the Law of God* (Ezek. 36.26, 27). Unless the Spirit opens our heart and mind to the truth of God's Law, we'll never appreciate or embrace the standards of holiness and justice God has declared for us. And without the Law in our heart and mind, the conscience will flounder in seeking a standard to right our souls before the Lord. The more we turn to the Law of God, meditating on it day by day (Ps. 1), the more we will know the Spirit using the Law to reveal some previously unacknowledged sin in our lives. For the Spirit to do His work of teaching us the Law of God, we must position ourselves before it regularly, making reading and meditating in the Law of God – and all His Word – an important part of our spiritual disciplines (Ps. 119.9-11).

Second, the Spirit, having *shown* us the Law of God, *convicts* us of any situations, sentiments, thoughts, or practices in our lives that are contrary to the holiness of the Law of God. We will know that we have been convicted of something when, like a defendant hearing the judge read the jury's verdict, we are suddenly hot with shame, embarrassment, fear, and dread. We've been discovered. The facts of our rebellion are known, if only to God, and we are found wanting before Him. The feeling of conviction is unpleasant and unmistakable, and the Spirit of God has been given precisely to bring us to this point.

Immediately, however, the Spirit takes up another work in us. He begins to make us *willing to do what God wants*, to live as He desires, to make ourselves pleasing to Him Who loved us so much that He gave His Son for our redemption (Phil. 2.13). We cannot *will* ourselves to desire God's way; only the Spirit can do that in us, and He will only do it when, having convicted us of our sins, He sees that, in the depths of our souls, we are grieving and ready to follow a different path, ready to be filled with Him and to know His transforming power at work in our soul.

Next, the Spirit of God *enables us to declare our repentance* to God. This involves, first, *confessing* our sin – agreeing, as it were, with the Spirit concerning what He has made known to us about our transgressions of God's Law. With confession, then must come a *declaration of repentance*: "I repent of this sin, and I desire to follow a different path." Confession and repentance are acts of obedient faith, wrought within us by the Spirit of God.

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As often as sin is discovered within us, confession and repentance are in order.

Finally, the Spirit points us in the way of righteousness, and reminds us of God's power to discipline His children (Jn. 16.8-11). The Spirit directs our steps to the path of obedience, so that, turning from our sin, we return to the way of the Lord. And He reminds us that God our Father loves us so much, that He stands ready to bring us under discipline until we truly repent. Thus, we must not delay to turn back to the path of righteousness with haste.

#### *Repentance unto life!*

Without repentance, there is no saving faith; in a believer, where there is no repentance, there will be no growth in the good works that characterize true repentance. And without that growth – in holiness and good works – we may not expect to see the Lord, to know the righteousness, peace, and joy of His Kingdom, or to be a blessing to others as God intends.

Repentance is a work of grace, a work of God's Spirit. We must make sure we understand repentance, accept and submit to the conditions in which repentance can occur, and seek the Spirit of God to fill us and to work within us that conviction, grief, hatred of sin, willingness to obey, and resolve to return that lead us through repentance into the fuller enjoyment of our walk with Jesus Christ.

Repentance is the starting-point and touchstone for faith – for faith that issues in salvation, and for faith that grows in salvation day by day. Seek the Spirit, and plead with Him to bring the grace of repentance more consistently and more powerfully into your life.

#### *For reflection*

1. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit (cf. Eph. 5.18-21)? How may we realize this filling?
2. What affections – feelings and attitudes – do you associate with conviction of sin? When you feel these, is it a sign you need to seek the filling of the Spirit (cf. Ps. 139.23, 24)?
3. Instead of the way of sin, what characteristics or attributes line the path the Spirit wants us to follow?

*Next steps – Transformation: Meditate on Ephesians 3.20. In what ways should you expect the Spirit to do “exceedingly abundantly more” in your walk with the Lord?*

## 4 Knowing Where to Turn

*I thought about my ways,  
And turned my feet to Your testimonies.  
I made haste, and did not delay  
To keep Your commandments.* Psalm 119:59, 60

### *Be prepared*

The need for repentance arises as the Holy Spirit works in the soul to convict us of sin, righteousness, and judgment (Jn. 16:8-11). He convicts us of sin by signaling that something is amiss, something in our life is not in line with the Law and Word of God. We become aware, by one means or another, that sin has dropped anchor in our soul and is preparing to go ashore. The Spirit does not want that to happen, so He will signal us in a way that alerts us to the need to take action.

At the same time, He convicts us of righteousness. Drawing from the Word of God, He will show us what *ought* to be in place in our lives rather than this sinful thought, affection, or act. He points us to that which is more in line with the character of Christ, so we not only send sin packing out to sea, but fill the berth in our soul with sin's righteous opposite. Or, as the old monastics used to say, "Contraries are by contraries cured."

Finally, and simultaneous to the above, the Spirit will convict us of judgment, reminding us, as the Word of God makes plain, that God takes us seriously, and that He wants us to walk the path of righteousness, learning Jesus and leaving sin in all its forms behind. So strongly does He desire this, that He is willing to bring unpleasant discipline into our lives to help restore us to a proper path (Heb. 12:3-11). If we're mindful of this, we may be more inclined to seek the way of escape through temptation or to repent from whatever sin the Spirit has revealed to be harboring in us.

So when the Spirit convicts us of sin, of the need for repentance, we must know how to respond, where to turn, and what to do next.

### *Seeking relief*

Repentance, we recall, is an act of grace, in which the Spirit of God brings us to recognize, acknowledge, hate, grieve for, and turn away from our sins, and to walk the path of righteousness with Jesus more consistently.

Repentance can be painful. It may require us to seek forgiveness for some transgression. It should signal us to review how we got into this situation, so that we can avoid it in the future (Prov. 1:17). Repentance should involve a measure of sorrow for our sins, of grief and sadness for having rebelled against our Father, and of an urgency to get things back into proper order as soon as possible.

But it is precisely by these means that God moves us to seek resolution to this situation. When we are convicted of sin, we want relief, we want out from under the feeling of guilt or shame, we want to be back into the favor of the Lord and our neighbor as soon as we can. It would be a good idea, since evidently conviction is something God intends to visit upon us from time to time, that, when it comes, we know right away where to turn for relief. And since the Spirit convicts us at all levels from the Word of God, it stands to reason that the next steps for our repentance are going to come from that Word as well.

### *Where to turn*

The psalmist knew where to turn: to the testimonies and commandments of God. Whenever he found that he had strayed into an unrighteous path, the solution was simple: find the good path again.

But what if you're not familiar with the Law of God? Or if you barely know your way around the Scriptures?

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Then you're either going to lurch around in panic until you somehow stumble back to the right path, or you'll become hardened to the presence of sin, so that, over time, it won't bother you quite as much.

We need to know the Word of God according to the mind of the Spirit, so that when He begins to convict us, we can follow Him into the balm of Scripture and find the redress and guidance we need.

Repentance issues in the good works that are appropriate to it, as both John the Baptist and the apostle Paul explained (Matt. 3.8; Acts 26.20). Those good works, the "fruit worthy of repentance" – as John referred to it – are all spelled out for us in the Word of God (2 Tim. 3.15-17). We have an easy-to-understand, readily-available Handbook for righteousness to guide us back into the ways of the Lord. But it will be of little use to us unless we know and can follow its teaching.

So before guilt, shame, and finger-pointing begin accusing you in your soul, and before your conscience becomes uneasy about the uneasy way sin has settled into your life, why not redouble your efforts to read, understand, and follow the directions for living in His Kingdom that God has provided? The more we read, study, and meditate on the Word of God – including the Law of God as part of our regimen of study – the readier we will be the next time conviction sets off the alarm in our soul.

The Spirit of God is writing the Law of God on the hearts of His people (Ezek. 36.26, 27). The conscience "reads" that Law both to affirm that we are walking the path of righteousness and to alert us when we stray from it (Rom. 2.14, 15). The deeper our roots go down into the Word of God, and the more we delight and take joy in reading, meditating, and studying Scripture, the better able we will be to keep sin from building a nest in our hair and weakening our soul.

#### *For reflection*

1. How would you expect to know when the Spirit was convicting you of the need for repentance?
2. Suggest some ways to incorporate regular reading and meditation on God's Law as part of your spiritual life (cf. Ps. 119.9-11; Rom. 7.7, 12).
3. How can Christians help one another to be more consistent in reading and studying the Word of God?

*Next steps – Preparation: What will you do to bring more reading and meditation on God's Law into your spiritual life?*

## 5 Chart a Course

*Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.* Romans 12:21

### *Penance*

Over the years, those Christians who have yielded the most fruit for the Kingdom of God have waged a ferocious and unrelenting battle against sin and unrighteousness.

Consider, for example, the Christians of the Celtic period (ca 430-800 AD). Beginning in Ireland, with the ministry of Patrick, and spreading from there to Wales, Scotland, and most of Europe, a revival of large proportions brought renewal and awakening to people and cultures, pagan and Christian alike. Celtic Christians were fiercely evangelistic, devoted to community and service, and skilled in the creation of supportive communities and glorious cultural artifacts.

Underlying all their fervor and fruitfulness was a compelling vision of Jesus Christ exalted in glory, and a powerful devotion to a deeply spiritual way of life, including an unwavering earnestness about holiness and repentance.

Celtic Christians understood that it is not in the interest of the believing community or the Kingdom of God to allow sin to continue unchecked among the brethren. Especially in Ireland, Celtic communities were built around monasteries, and the disciplined lives of the men and women in monastic orders spilled out into the surrounding communities as well.

One feature of that way of life was the loving use of the discipline of penance to chart a course for righteousness for those who fell into sin.

### *How it works*

For Celtic Christians, penance was not a sacrament, but a discipline. One had to learn it, and then practice it faithfully as needed. Penance was called for as the last step of repentance for recovering the lost path of righteousness.

Once the Spirit of God, working through the conscience, brought a sense of conviction to one who was found to be in sin, and after confessing his sin and repenting sincerely, he would present himself to the local pastor, soul friend in tow, to be prescribed some remedy for the sinful condition. Going to one's pastor to receive a penitential prescription is frequently equated, in the literature of that period, to going to one's physician to cure some physical ailment. The idea was that behavior *contrary* to the Law of God and the best interests of the believer and the community, was corrected by a regimen of disciplines that would, over time, restore the fallen sinner to the path of righteousness.

As several of the existing penitential handbooks from this period summarized the practice, "contraries are cured by contraries." To overcome sin and evil in one's life, one had to take up a *contrary* pattern of spiritual and righteous behavior. This typically consisted of two elements. We must not be overcome by evil, but we must overcome evil with good.

What did this involve?

### *Restoring righteousness*

First, following the Law of God, some restorative behavior was prescribed. So, for example, a person with a sharp or lying tongue might be required to recite certain psalms every day for a specified period, or to join a soul friend in singing psalms and prayers for a portion of every day. Thus, his conscience bound by the

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Spirit's leading in righteousness, the repentant sinner would train his mind and heart to realign with the holy and righteous and good purposes of God.

One who had become lazy and irresponsible would be given a regimen of work to do at some place in the community. At the same time, a fast might also be prescribed – not a total abstinence from food, but a selective fast, to be kept for a specified time, often exceeding that of the restorative behavior, to remind the penitent of his discipline and to reinforce his ability to subdue his body for spiritual purposes.

Thus, those ways that were seen to be contrary to the teaching of God's Word, would be overcome by exercises and practices *contrary* to sin, and thus more in line with the grace and truth of Jesus Christ.

### *A discipline, not a sacrament*

Penance, as thus practiced, was not a sacrament, and it had nothing to do with earning salvation. Rather, it was a spiritual discipline that came into play whenever wrong behavior needed to be corrected in a member of the community. Contrary behaviors were cured by contrary prescriptions of righteous conduct; Celtic Christians thus worked to overcome the evil in their lives with good conduct, based on the Word of God.

Manuals of penance – like counselor's handbooks – survive from every century of this period, showing just how serious Celtic Christians were about getting their faith right. The blessing of God that accompanied their efforts – and that, as Thomas Cahill put it, saved civilization – should say to us that there's something to this practice that could benefit us in our own pursuit of holiness as well.

Practicing restorative behavior like penance will reinforce the conscience and the values and priorities of which it is guardian and caretaker. And a good conscience, bearing faithful witness to the Law of God written on our heart (Rom. 2.14, 15), is crucial for a strong soul.

### *For reflection*

1. What do you understand by penance? Is this a practice among Christians you know?
2. What role do one's fellow believers have in helping him through a time of penance?
3. How does performing *outward behaviors* help in renewing and retooling the mind, heart, and conscience?

*Next steps – Demonstration: Is there some sin you've been struggling to overcome? Chart a course of action for overcoming that evil with good. Commit your course to the Lord, and trust His Spirit to empower you to grow in the Lord.*

## 6 Prepare for Temptation

*Surely, in vain the net is spread  
In the sight of any bird...* Proverbs 1.17

### *Preventive penance*

I want to make one more comment about the Celtic Christian practice of penance.

During the period of [the Celtic revival](#) (ca. 400-800 AD), this spiritual discipline was used not only as a *curative* for contrary behavior, but also as a way of *preparing oneself* against sin. We read about this idea in a penitential written by Columbanus, an early 7<sup>th</sup>-century missionary/monk, and the greatest of the Irish missionaries to Europe. Here's how Columbanus put it: "True penance is to refrain from committing deeds for which penance is to be done but when such are committed, to bewail them."

In other words, if we know in advance what constitutes wrong conduct, we can envision what it will look like when it confronts us along our way in life. So we should make ready in our heart, mind, and conscience to recognize and avoid such conduct, which, if we actually committed it, would require repentance.

This is what Solomon had in mind in his proverb: If the bird recognizes the net or the snare, and understands the consequences of straying into it, you can be sure he's going to stay away.

I suppose we might think of this as a kind of "preventive penance," a way of disciplining ourselves *before* we fall into sin so that, when temptation rears its head, we'll be able to recognize and endure through it.

It's a way of setting a guard for our conscience so that it might operate for a strong soul.

### *Know what you're looking for*

Crucial to this being a successful component in our walk with the Lord is the ability to recognize temptation and to see through temptation to the consequences of obedience or disobedience. We recall that theologian Helmut Thielicke described temptation as finding ourselves in the place of thinking about breaking away from God. Temptation itself does not constitute disloyalty, but it invites it. Is this the way we think about temptation? If it is, we can be sure we will regard every temptation with wary eyes.

As we've seen, every day will have its temptations, and we need to be ready, focused on seeking the Kingdom and glory of God, to deal with those temptations when they arise (Matt. 6.33, 34). By anticipating the dangers ahead in our daily journey with the Lord, knowing what we might have to contend with in each situation, we can set our mind, heart, and conscience to *resist mode*, and be ready for whatever the enemy of our soul might launch at us.

Surely this is a form of "numbering our days for a heart of wisdom" concerning which Moses prayed in Psalm 90.12. Look ahead. Anticipate. Prepare. That way, when temptations arise we won't be fooled by them, but will flee their nets and snares and continue in our walk with the Lord.

### *Recognizing temptation*

But how do we recognize temptation? Paul says we will be tempted in many ways, but though we are tempted, we need not fall into sin. As we have seen, the "way of escape" through temptation is there for us to find (1 Cor. 10.13; Ps. 73). We simply need to know where to look.

Temptation can take many forms, but underlying them all is the tempter's subtle question to Eve, "Did God really say...?" Temptation is anything that challenges the Word, wisdom, character, or authority of God. The

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better we know that Word and the more consistently we yield to it, walking in God's wisdom, the easier it will be for us to recognize the temptations that come our way. Once we identify something as a temptation we need to think through to its consequences. Asaph explained that sin is a slippery slope and can lead to real disaster (Ps. 73.18, 19). On the other side of temptation lies the path of rebellion, shame, and even death.

By studying the way of righteousness, and praying and thinking about the day ahead, we can anticipate people, situations, and circumstances that might conceal a snare of sin. Then, in our mind, we can walk through the steps that will enable us to resist the temptation, avoid the trap, and grow through the temptation into greater Christlikeness.

We resist temptation by seeking a way of escape through prayer and the Word of God. We will be more likely to succeed at this if we prepare well, beginning each day, and moving into each new situation, with some sense of where the net might be spread that can snare and entrap us. Then, when the temptation arises, we'll be prepared in our soul – mind, heart, and conscience – to resist it and to find the way of escape. If we will do this, we'll find our relationship with God strengthened and our walk with Him filled with renewed peace and joy (cf. Ps. 73.23-28; Jms. 1.2-4).

Make up your mind, each day, that you're going to resist temptation with prayer, preparation, and resting in the Word of God. Let the Spirit Who brings conviction and repentance be at work within you *before* you come upon the nets and snares of temptation, and you'll be in a much better position to overcome the evil that threatens to engulf you, with the good choices and conduct that please the Lord and honor Him.

#### *For reflection*

1. What are some of the most common temptations you face each day. How might you prepare for these in prayer?
2. When temptation arises, what steps should you take? Is it a good idea to rehearse these steps each day, in your time of prayer and meditation? Why?
3. How would you explain the idea of *preventive penance* to a new believer?

*Next steps – Transformation: Identify one way to begin practicing preventive penance in your own walk with the Lord.*



## 7 It Takes a Friend

*Let the righteous strike me;  
It shall be a kindness.  
And let him rebuke me;  
It shall be as excellent oil;  
Let my head not refuse it.* Psalm 141.5

### *One big obstacle*

We've been talking about the importance of repentance, which is a gift of God's grace, accomplished in us by His Spirit, as He convicts us of sin and leads us along the path of restoration to righteousness. Repentance is essential for faith to flourish, so we need to keep this discipline primed and ready, and to practice it whenever the Spirit alerts us through our conscience that something is not quite right in our lives. Repentance originates in the conscience which, grounded in God's Law (Rom. 2.14, 15), piques the heart (affections) and mind (thoughts) to seek a path more in line with the righteousness of Christ.

Because temptations confront us daily, and we are still affected by the law of sin within us, we'll need to master the practice of repentance as an ongoing practice in our walk with the Lord. If we will do so, we can be certain that the Lord will bring growth in grace and in making us more like Jesus.

But repentance begins with acknowledging our sins and desiring to turn from them. And just here a real obstacle to a life of repentance can arise.

It's simply this: we are inclined to sin.

We like to indulge in wickedness and evil, and this is because we're not yet wholly sanctified. The Law of sin continues active within us, and we must be ever vigilant to keep it in check. The Christian life is described as warfare, a struggle, a distance race, even a boxing match. There's a struggle for our souls, and, more than we might like to admit, we're sometimes fighting on the wrong side.

### *Soul friends*

How can we overcome this reluctance to give up the practice of sin? This can be particularly difficult if the sin we indulge is something known only to us – and, of course, to the Lord. God sets our secret sins before His eyes (Ps. 90.8); but because others don't see them, we may continue to indulge that which can throttle our prayer life (Ps. 66.18; 1 Pet. 3.7), sear our conscience (1 Tim. 4.2), trip up our feet, and send us hurtling uncontrollably into more and more sin (Ps. 73.18, 19).

How can we prevent this?

One way is by having friends in your life with whom you feel comfortable, because of their love, to share your innermost struggles – soul friends. If you're married, your spouse is the place to begin. By sharing together and nurturing one another in your walk with the Lord, you'll not only further the work of sanctification in each of your lives, but you'll grow closer to one another as well.

Another place to turn for a soul friend is to someone of the same sex with whom you are willing to share your plans, fears, challenges, and struggles, and with whom you can enjoy a relationship of mutual accountability and edification.

Think of Jesus and His disciples. He loved them fervently, spent time with them, talked about the Kingdom of God and their role in it, and encouraged them to develop a big vision for the life of faith. But He also

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confronted them in their sins – as Peter had to learn the hard way. Jesus warned Peter that he would betray Him. When he did, Jesus cast a withering glance at him, and Peter collapsed in tears. Then, after the resurrection, Jesus came to Peter and restored him to his place as a follower of the Lord and keeper of His sheep. This is what soul friends can do for one another in helping repentance realize its full flowering in our lives.

### *Having a soul friend*

You'll need to spend time with your soul friend, and to share from your time with the Lord – what He's teaching you, the temptations you confront each day, how you prepare for them, how you meet them, how the Lord is helping you to grow, and so forth.

Encourage one another through prayer and by ministering the Word of God. Challenge one another to identify specific areas where repentance might bear good fruit in your lives, then hold one another accountable for specific areas of growth or ministry (Heb. 10.24). And be ready to deal with lapses into sin whenever they become evident, not in a judgmental and condemning manner, but with the kind of grace Jesus showed to Peter on the shores of Galilee.

Soul friends should be free to challenge one another regarding attitudes or behaviors that don't quite fit the profile of a Kingdom citizen. And they should accept one another's challenges and rebukes before the Lord together in prayer.

A soul friend can bolster your efforts to achieve a good conscience and a strong soul. Find a soul friend to help you in making repentance a way of life. You'll both benefit from such a caring and edifying relationship.

### *For reflection*

1. Why is having a soul friend such a good idea?
2. How can husbands and wives become better soul friends for one another?
3. How should soul friends conduct their friendship, to gain the most benefit through this commitment?

*Next steps – Transformation: If you do not have a soul friend, don't let another week go by without identifying at least one person who will help you watch over your soul for repentance, growth, and fruitfulness in the Lord.*

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*Questions for reflection or discussion*

1. What is repentance? Why is repentance an essential part of faith?
2. Why do believers need to practice repentance? How should they do so?
3. What is the place of penance in repentance? What is preventive penance?
4. How can Christians help one another to be more consistent and fruitful in the practice of repentance?
5. What's the most important lesson you've learned about repentance from this study?

*For prayer:*

## The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Thank you.