

The Marks of True Repentance

By Brian Arnold

Anyone who has been a Christian for any length of time knows that repentance over sin can be an elusive thing to pursue. Oftentimes, we can be discouraged by the plaguing sins in our life and even confused when sin we thought we had defeated creeps back into our life. The Bible promises us victory over sin, but how can we know if we have truly attained it? And how can we troubleshoot the problems in our heart if we haven't? This worksheet is meant to arm you with the biblical definition of true repentance so that you can spot the real thing in your life, pursue that which will truly lead to victory, and not be deceived by any cheap substitutes.

What true repentance is not—The following list is a sampling of characteristics that do not, in and of themselves, prove the presence of true repentance. Any of the things on this list may accompany true repentance, but they may also be present in those still enslaved to their sin.

- *The recognition of your actions as sinful*—In Numbers 14:40 Israel acknowledges their sin, but then they respond with more sin.
- *A sorrow over your sin*—In Hebrews 12:17 Esau wept over his sin, but it never led to genuine repentance.
- *The seeking of forgiveness for your sin*—In 1 Samuel 24:16–19; 26:2 Saul seeks forgiveness from David for trying to kill him and yet, soon after, continued in the same pursuit. (See also Exod 10:17.)
- *Feeling a weight of guilt on your conscience*—In Matthew 27:3–5 Judas returns the silver that he was paid for betraying Christ but then proceeds to hang himself.
- *Making commitments to not sin in the future*—In Matthew 26:35 Peter says he would rather die than deny Christ, but of course before the rooster had crowed he had denied him three times.
- *A short season of victory over sin*—In 2 Peter 2:20–22 Peter warns of the reality of a person turning from their sin for a season only to return to it like “a dog returns to its own vomit.”

What true repentance is—True repentance under a biblical definition can be summarized under two characteristics of the heart. *First*, true repentance is an abandonment of all self-righteousness, all self-deception, and all self-reliance in regards to the sin. *Second*, true repentance is a humbling of yourself to accept the biblical indictment of your sin, the biblical responsibility for your sin, and the biblical pathway to victory over your sin. This may seem like an over-simplified definition, but these are the essential characteristics described by the apostle Paul in the fullest biblical description of true repentance in 2 Corinthians 7:10–11.

What are the marks of true repentance—All the principles below are taken from Paul's description in 2 Corinthians 7:10–11 of the genuine repentance, which he observed in the church at Corinth. We will see from Paul's explanation in these verses that repentance is something that begins in the heart with a change of mind, but is always accompanied by observable change in one's life (Luke 3:8; Acts 26:20). So, what are the fruits of true repentance? How can you know if you've truly attained it? What should you be striving for in order to pursue it? Here is Paul's answer:

- True repentance is “*Without regret*” (v. 10)—The idea is this, you have no regrets with regard to what was necessary to produce the repentance in your life. You look at the circumstances it took for you to see your sin rightly and finally turn from them, and you see them as great blessings from God because they resulted in freeing your soul from its bondage to sin. Based on this definition, you're not truly repentant if you're picking apart the process by which sin was exposed, railing against the consequences of sin being exposed, or self-pitying in the fallout from sin being exposed.
- True repentance produces “*earnestness*” (v. 11)—This word that means severe mental or emotional distress. It's often used to communicate someone who has great eagerness and enthusiasm to carry out a task. What Paul saw in the church in Corinth was an active pursuit of righteousness in the area of life where sin was exposed. If your battle is against anger, then earnestness would look like striving hard for patience and compassion in relationships. If your battle is against fear, then earnestness would look like striving hard for faith in times when you're tempted toward anxiety. If your battle is against pride, then earnestness would look like proactively seeking out ways to serve that will be humbling and avoiding all opportunities to self-promote. If your battle is against sexual sin, then earnestness would like proactively seeking to eliminate all the freedoms in your life that allow you to pursue it.

- True repentance produces “*vindication*” (v. 11)—This means a vigor or passion to clear your name, not from past sins but from your current association with it. This does not mean that you try to cover up or rationalize past sins. It’s not saying that you are trying to vindicate yourself from what you’ve already done, but rather that you are working hard to vindicate yourself from any current association with it. This is quite simply a demonstration that you are no longer enslaved to this sin which once had such a grip on your life. So often we love to speak as if we’ve changed, but still like to hang around our old sin. If you’re not willing to take drastic steps to cut this sin out of your life, then you’re not truly repentant.
- True repentance produces “*indignation*” (v. 11)—This is a hatred or animosity for your sin. The principle is really quite simple: you will not turn from a sin that you do not hate! If you want to learn to hate your sin then you must begin to see it the way God sees it. A person with indignation toward their sin is a person who understands the wickedness of the sin, the offense it is to God, the evil heart motivations that led to it, and the devastating consequences it would have to their life and lives of those around them. If you’re still making excuses for the sin, if you’re still convincing yourself that it’s not a big deal, if you’re still thinking you can get away with it, if you’re still leaving avenues open to pursue the sin, then you don’t hate it!
- True repentance produces “*fear*” (v. 11)—This just means being terrified of the sin continuing in your life. It’s recognizing and truly believing the biblical and practical consequences of this sin. It’s seeing how enslaved you are, that you don’t have control of it, and that you cannot stop it no matter how risky it is. If your understanding of this sin doesn’t bring about a sobriety in your life, if you find yourself thinking that you will be able to get away with it, if the potential consequences of this sin aren’t enough to deter you from pursuing it, if you’re not terrified by the thought of remaining enslaved to the sin, then you are not truly repentant!
- True repentance produces “*Longing*” (v. 11)—This is having a true and authentic desire for victory. You are tired of the burden of your sin, the guilt it produces, the constant fear of having it exposed, the hypocrisy and lies required to cover it, and your inability to control it. You have come to the place where you aren’t just desiring to not get caught or avoid the consequences, but you truly yearn for freedom from its enslavement. Here is a good question to ask yourself if you want to know whether you truly long for victory: *Is there anything that could help you gain victory over this sin that you haven’t been willing to do?* Whatever it is, no matter how extreme or inconvenient, if it could help you turn from the sin, and you’re unwilling to do it, then you’re not longing for victory.
- True repentance produces “*zeal*” (v. 11)—This is an intense devotion to do whatever it takes to get this sin out of your life. Someone with a zeal against a particular sin in their life will be leading the charge in doing everything within their power to kill it. If you find yourself struggling to be humble and teachable in regards to the sin, requiring others to light a fire under your desire to battle the sin, struggling to devote much time to renewing your mind in this area of sin, unwilling to eliminate unnecessary temptations, confessing failures only when caught, getting frustrated by the long-term nature of the battle and ongoing costs associated with true victory, then you aren’t truly repentant!
- True repentance produces an “*avenging of wrong*” (v. 11)—This is a desire to see justice done. In other words, you are no longer running from or trying to avoid the consequences, but rather owning them. You recognize that all the ramifications no matter how severe or how long are your fault. Therefore, you are willing to accept them in faith and see them as a grace from God to help you hate this sin and turn from it. If there is evidence of frustration in your heart over lost freedoms or privileges, discontentment over how long it takes to earn trust back, impatience in waiting for the consequences to pass, complaining about the consequences of your sin, becoming embittered toward those through whom the consequences come, cultivating a heart that believes your consequences are unfair, getting angry when others don’t get the same consequences for similar sins, seeking an easy way out of the consequences rather than enduring through them, then you are not yet repentant!
- True repentance yields the result that “*In everything you have demonstrated yourself to be innocent*” (v. 11)—This is not an innocence from past sins, but an innocence from current and future enslavement. By your actions you have proven yourself to have gained the victory. This is truly just the summary statement of everything Paul has said in the last two verses. He’s saying if *all* of the above descriptions are true in your life then they prove you to be one who is no longer enslaved to that sin, one who has gained the victory, one who has been given true repentance!