

How to Discern True Repentance When Serious Sin Has Occurred



by DARBY STRICKLAND

The Christian life is to be one of repentance. Jesus begins his preaching ministry with these words, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt 4:17). His words call us to turn away from our sin and toward him. He wants our hearts and minds transformed so that we can reside with him in a new kingdom. Indeed, repentance is so essential to our spiritual lives that Martin Luther made it the first of his 95 Theses in 1517. He wrote, “When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Matt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”¹ He rightly saw it as critical to our faith that we understand repentance and make it a regular part of our lives. It is vital for our relationship with the Lord and others that we turn from sin, not just at the moment of our salvation, but repeatedly as we grow in awareness of it and our continued need of a savior.

While God calls all of us to have hearts that are characterized by repentance, some of us are tasked with assessing the repentance of

1. Martin Luther, “The 95 Theses,” <https://www.luther.de/en/95thesen.html>.

*Darby Strickland (M.Div.) counsels and teaches at CCEF. She is the author of the book *Is It Abuse? A Biblical Guide to Identifying Domestic Abuse and Helping Victims*.*

others. Pastors, elder boards, and counselors are often brought into situations where they need to make a determination as to whether a sinner is grieved by his or her transgressions and is committed to change. This can feel overwhelming. How can we assess another person's fallen heart when we are so aware of our own? The difficulty of the task is like navigating a minefield, and it's always easier to promote peace than to confront. Whatever propels it, I have seen too many instances of God's people not demonstrating the required vigilance we need to discern the repentance of people under our care. Consider how you or others in your Christian community have conceptualized repentance when there has been a grievous sin committed or pattern of sin exposed. Have you been fooled by incomplete apologies and then shocked to find the offender returning to his or her sin? I have, and it is why I wrote this article.

Accurately assessing repentance is a way to love both the offender and the offended.

When we are fooled, there can be dire consequences. If an abusive husband repents—but isn't sincere—what's at stake? The safety of his wife and children. If leaders and counselors encourage quick forgiveness and the family reunites, what can happen? The husband's abuses against his wife escalate as a punishment for exposing his sin, and now she also fears speaking up.

Or imagine if someone who is financially deceitful feigns repentance—what's at stake? A spouse might become saddled with credit card debt, a drained savings account, and delinquency letters from the IRS.

Or think about a Bible study leader who creates division among the women in the church through gossip and playing favorites—what's at stake? The unity of the church body. Friendships dissolve and women stop attending. Spiritual confusion ensues: How could this happen among God's people?

In any of these examples, we can be certain that Jesus longs for wayward children to be restored to him, and he graciously gives them the Holy Spirit so they can grow into his image. But Jesus also requires that they acknowledge their wrongdoing and commit to the process of change. This is where our assessments come in, and we need God's wisdom.

I have witnessed complex counseling cases where those involved long for an offender to be restored so much that it distorts their judgment. We see what we hope to see instead of what is actually occurring. If pastors, elders, and counselors accept a standard of repentance different from the Lord's, the implications for both the offender and the offended are vast and devastating.

In this article, I will focus on how to discern repentance with those who commit serious and damaging sins against another person, such as adultery, addiction, abuse, or misuse of power. I will describe how to approach the assessment of repentance with a robust framework that cares for both the offended and the offender. We will look at why accurately assessing repentance is a way to love both the offender and the offended, and then how to determine if a person's repentance is sincere or if it is counterfeit. Finally, we will consider the components that should be present when robust repentance occurs.

Why Assess for Repentance?

In ministry we frequently care for those who have been harmed by another person's serious sin. Often, the offended person is tempted to accept confessions, apologies, or excuses from an offender and then feels obligated to offer blind forgiveness. The focus of the counseling then becomes how the offended person can forgive and work to restore the relationship with the offender. But starting restoration work before there is robust repentance harms both parties. If a harmed person tries to rebuild a relationship with a person who continues in the same sin, he or she remains vulnerable. Further, each new infraction erodes the repair attempts. Over time this can lead to a layering of betrayal that can culminate in hopelessness. As for offenders, if they continue in sin, they are not only in spiritual danger but will be tempted to look away from their own hearts and focus on their frustration over not being forgiven.

Here is an example. A wife discovers that her husband has been texting with another woman. He insists it is "no big deal." When confronted, he says it is nothing, they are just old friends who text from time to time. After brief counsel with their pastor, he apologizes for contacting the woman in "a momentary lapse in judgment." He did not know that marriage changed "the rules." The pastor tells the wife, "Forgive

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