REPENTANCE:

Turning Toward Christ



Repentance is a new way of life for the Christian disciple.

The New Testament is a book about disciples, by disciples, and for disciples of Jesus Christ… All of the assurances and benefits offered to humankind in the gospel evidently presuppose such a life and do not make realistic sense apart from it. The disciple of Jesus is not the deluxe or heavy-duty model of the Christian… He or she stands on the pages of the New Testament as the first level of basic transportation in the Kingdom of God.[1] – Dallas Willard



Discipleship is clearly central to our understanding of biblical Christianity. If Dallas Willard is correct, it is in the context of discipleship that we experience the kingdom of God, salvation, and eternal life. This is a massive claim that has radical consequences for our understanding of life and faith.

Repentance lies at the heart of this life of discipleship. It means turning away from sin and from anything else that keeps us from following Jesus, and turning toward Him so that we are conformed to His image. Following Christ means not only believing in Him but continually responding to His call to change and grow.

It might be helpful to begin our discussion in this chapter by considering your current understanding and experience of discipleship.

- How would you define discipleship? What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus?
- How does discipleship connect with other central biblical concepts, such as faith, grace, righteousness, salvation, and repentance?
- What has been your personal experience with discipleship? Would you consider yourself a disciple of Jesus? Why or why not?

LOOK IN THE BIBLE: MATTHEW 4:12–25

12 Now when he heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew into Galilee. 13 And leaving Nazareth he went and lived in Capernaum by the sea, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, 14 so that what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled: 15 "The land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles— 16 the people dwelling in darkness have seen a great light, and for those dwelling in the region and shadow of death, on them a light

has dawned.” 17 From that time Jesus began to preach, saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” 18 While walking by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon (who is called Peter) and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea, for they were fishermen. 19 And he said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.” 20 Immediately they left their nets and followed him. 21 And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, mending their nets, and he called them. 22 Immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him. 23 And he went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom and healing every disease and every affliction among the people. 24 So his fame spread throughout all Syria, and they brought him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains, those oppressed by demons, those having seizures, and paralytics, and he healed them. 25 And great crowds followed him from Galilee and the Decapolis, and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan.

Begin by praying for your time of study and for your heart as you approach God's word. Then read "Appendix 2: Inductive Bible Study" again and follow the steps in the "Stages of Study." Take time to mark your observations, impressions, and questions in the space provided above. Then reflect on the following questions:

- Matthew quotes Isaiah 9:1–2 so that his original readers (predominantly Jewish Christians[2]) would recognize the connection between Isaiah's prophecy and the work of Jesus. Read Isaiah 9:1–7. What is the message of this passage, and how does it connect to the work of Jesus?
- Jesus proclaims that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Why is this good news?
- What are the immediate effects of God's kingdom coming in this passage?
- Jesus calls people to repent because the kingdom of heaven is at hand. What is repentance? What about the coming of God's kingdom should lead people to repent?
- The theme of following is central in this passage. What do you notice about those who followed Jesus? What might have compelled them to follow Him?
- When did you decide to follow Jesus? What about Jesus and His kingdom drew you to follow Him? What immediate changes did that bring in your life?

- Summarize the main point of this passage in one or two sentences. What is God's personal word for you from this text, and how will you respond?

REPENTANCE: TURNING TOWARD CHRIST

Mark the statements in the following section that impress you, that you have questions about, or that you want to discuss further.

WHEN ROYALTY VISITS

A few years back I had the wonderful opportunity to visit Ireland. During my stay there, I toured Muckross House. This beautiful Victorian mansion in Killarney, in the southwest of Ireland, was built in the 1840s and includes one of the most stunning gardens that I have ever seen. Though it once was a private home, it is now one of Ireland's national heritage sites.

While I was taking a tour of the grounds, I heard a story I will never forget. In 1861, Queen Victoria visited the house and its residents, the Herbert family. The queen's plans were made years in advance in order to give the family ample time to make the necessary preparations for her two-night visit. This was obviously a great honor for their family. From the time of the announcement until the day of her arrival, the family spent much of their time and wealth in preparations so everything would be fitting for the queen. They worked tirelessly because, though it was a great honor to have the queen as their guest, if she was not pleased with her stay and spoke poorly of her visit, it would be an even greater disgrace and bring them much shame.

Tapestries, mirrors, carpets, silverware, musical instruments, linen, china, and servants' uniforms were specially made for Queen Victoria's visit to Muckross. The gardens were completely redesigned and prepared for her daytime walks. New servants were hired and trained to cater specifically to her needs. An entire section of the house was dedicated and sectioned off for the queen. This required many renovations, including building a new fire escape outside her room. Everything had to be fit for a queen.

All these expensive changes and painstaking preparations were made for Queen Victoria in order that she might enjoy two nights in their home. She gave them no money or honors for her stay other than the privilege of saying they had hosted the queen. We were told that she and her family were delighted with their stay and praised the family for their hospitality.

I have often thought about the incredible lengths this family went to in order to prepare for a short visit from the queen. I wonder what my reaction would be and how I would prepare if I learned that a king or queen (or any other head of state or celebrity) wanted to stay in my home.

More importantly, I am forced to consider how you and I would react to the news that the King of the Universe was coming to us – not for two nights, but to reign forever. Would we be as dedicated as the Herbert family in making preparations for the coming of our

heavenly King, who is infinitely greater than any earthly king and whose coming has eternal consequences? Would we spend our time and energy with the single focus of preparing our hearts and lives for His coming? Or instead, would we be put to shame by our lack of readiness and our empty excuses about how we chose instead to use the time given us?

THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN HAS COME!

The King indeed has come, and He has brought with Him the kingdom of heaven. This is the good news Jesus preached wherever He went.

However, this is only good news when we are fully aware of the real condition of the kingdoms and systems of the world. Matthew, quoting Isaiah, uses two striking images to describe the state of the world in which we live. First, he says that the people are dwelling in darkness. People in darkness cannot see where they are going, and so they stumble, fall, and lose their way. Without light, they are unable to find the right way; they might not even be aware that a right way exists. It is a picture of a people living in total chaos, who do not know where they are or where they are going.

Second, and even more frightening, we are told that they are dwelling in the region and shadow of death. If we supposed the darkness was innocent and benign, we are shown how wrong we are through the death of its inhabitants. As the world moves deeper and deeper into darkness, its citizens are swallowed and destroyed. These are the pictures the Bible paints of the world's kingdoms.

No kingdom, no country, no political party or system, no philosophy, no educational program, no celebrity or spokesman, or anything else people put their hope in is able to bring true life to its followers. Living in darkness and death themselves, all of these things are incapable of leading others to life and peace.

As it was true in the time of Isaiah and in the time of Matthew, so it is for us today. We see the reality of this darkness every day as we read the news or scroll through the headlines on our phones. The world is full of bloodshed, hatred, corruption, deceit, and every kind of evil and injustice. And the darkness is not only out there in the world. It is in our families, our relationships, and our own hearts. We live in a land of darkness and in the shadow of death.

This is why Jesus' news is so wonderful. He comes to announce a new way, a new life, a new kingdom. His message is that God is establishing a kingdom marked by the absence of hatred and evil and filled with love, mercy, and justice. It is a kingdom that gives abundant life and everlasting hope and whose King is the Wonderful Counselor and Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). This King, unlike the kings of the world, reigns with perfect justice and righteousness. His people experience lasting peace. This peace is more than the absence of war and conflict. It is, rather, the presence of spiritual, physical, and social wholeness so that we experience life the way it is truly intended to be lived.

The good news is that the God of the Universe has not given up on our fallen, broken, and rebellious world. He has come to restore all that was lost, to banish evil, and to offer life to those dwelling in the shadow of death. Where there was once only darkness, a great light has dawned to show a new and superior way. In order to demonstrate that this was true, and not simply false hope or empty promises, Jesus displayed the power of this kingdom as He healed "every disease and every affliction" and set free those oppressed by demons (vv. 23–24). The kingdom of Jesus truly brought life!

REPENTANCE: CHANGING KINGDOMS AND DIRECTIONS

In response to this good news, Jesus calls us to repent. It is clear that He believes repentance to be the one proper response to the message of God's coming kingdom. For this reason, to those who truly believe that God's kingdom is good news, Jesus calls out, "Repent!" It is a call to leave behind every allegiance that competes with the kingdom of God.

It is no coincidence that right after this, Matthew tells the story of the fishermen who follow Jesus. Christ approaches them and invites them to come and follow Him with a promise: "I will make you fishers of men." He offers them a new identity and purpose. Surprisingly, they follow Him immediately. They leave everything: their business, their family, their lifestyle, their security, and all that they know. They leave it all to follow Jesus! It was a most radical decision to leave everything behind in order to be with the One who was ushering in a new kingdom and a new way of life.

Often when we think about repentance, we think of feeling sorry and guilty. We think about emotions of shame and regret. While this is not excluded, I think these first disciples display a much richer understanding of repentance. Repentance is more about a change in kingdom and direction than about any feeling of contrition or a simple acknowledgement of wrong. Repentance is an action. It is a leaving behind of the old kingdoms of darkness and their ways in order to enter and become citizens of the kingdom of God. It is realizing that our old habits and activities were not leading us where we hoped, and turning toward the One who can truly lead us to life.

Perhaps an illustration will help. Imagine with me that you were driving your car from Greece to France, but that somehow you found yourself in Istanbul. Somewhere along the way you clearly made a wrong turn. So what would you do? Possibly, you would check a map or ask someone for directions. You might turn your car around and begin driving in the opposite direction. But, better still, you would find someone who knows the way to France and follow them.

This is the picture of repentance that the Bible presents. Jesus is the One who knows the way, and He is leading us toward life and love in the kingdom of God. We are being called to turn away from our old habits and old ways, to fix our eyes on Him, and daily follow in His footsteps. We are being invited to learn to walk as He does. This begins as we acknowledge we are heading in the wrong direction, but it is not complete until we turn toward new life. In particular, it means no longer following the kingdoms of this world

and their ways, but following Jesus and adopting His way of life so that He might be our leader and Lord.

Obviously, this kind of fundamental change will not happen, cannot happen, unless we truly believe that Jesus' way and the kingdom of God are infinitely better than anything else the world has to offer. Jesus was calling those four fishermen to leave their old way of life and to make a new life under His leadership, believing He could lead them in an infinitely better way.

This is why the fishermen's example is particularly striking. There was nothing inherently wrong with being a fisherman; there is nothing wrong with nets or boats. Yet they chose to leave behind anything and everything that would hinder them from being with Jesus and following Him. Repentance certainly will mean leaving behind the practices of this world that are not appropriate in the kingdom of Jesus – things like lying, hatred, greed, and pride – because they lead to death. But it does not stop there. It also includes leaving behind anything that keeps us from making the kingdom of God our new home and Jesus our Lord.

Which way are we headed? Are we pursuing Jesus and His kingdom? Or are we moving further and further away from Him and His kingdom? There is no middle ground. We cannot follow both Jesus and the ways of the world. Every day, with every choice, we are moving in some direction; the real question is which direction we will choose. God's kindness is meant to lead us to repentance (Romans 2:4), turning us toward the kingdom of God and true life.

Two Student Examples of Repentance

Victor cheated on one of his university exams. Although he received the grade he desired with less work and although "everyone else was doing it," Victor realized Jesus wanted better for him. As one of God's children, he was called to do his best and strive for excellence in his work and study (Colossians 3:23). Victor knew he was heading in the wrong direction and not living in a way that was leading to life.

Ultimately, he realized he was living as though he did not believe Jesus' way was the best for him when it came to his studies. Jesus led Victor to repentance, which meant turning from cheating to studying well and honestly taking his exams. The good news is that Jesus' mercy and grace were enough to forgive him and to lead him to life. His repentance also gave him the freedom to live honestly, in the light, without hiding.

Yana moved from one relationship to the next. Almost immediately after breaking up with one boyfriend, she was in a relationship with someone else. During a time of Scripture study, Yana realized that she was looking for men to do what only Jesus could do: fill her with a true sense of worth and take away her loneliness. She knew Jesus was calling her to repent and believe that He, and He alone, could give her the desires of her heart.

Repentance for Yana meant no longer looking for men to fill the needs in her life, and seeking fulfillment in Jesus instead. To help her in this repentance, she decided not to

date anyone for a year and to concentrate on her identity in Jesus. There were times when this was very difficult, but as she purposefully left her old way of life and trusted Jesus to meet her needs, she found new and real joy.

MEMORY VERSE: PSALM 139:23–24

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!

- How does this prayer relate to repentance and belief? How does David's request, "lead me in the way everlasting," connect with the picture of repentance as changing direction?
- How might this prayer serve as a model for you and help you as you seek to follow Jesus?
- Spend time asking God to search your heart and show you any way in your life that leads away from Him. How might He be calling you to repent and believe today, so that you are able to continue on your journey of knowing and being known by Him?

A WAY OF LIFE

Salvation and grace are found in the wonderful kingdom of God. It is only under God's rule and leadership that we experience life the way it was meant to be lived, in right relationship with Him and the world around us. No other way will give us the abundant life that we so desire. For this reason, we are all invited to make the kingdom of God our new and permanent dwelling place and Jesus our Lord.

When a person moves from one country to another, they must learn the laws, customs, and language of the country to which they are moving. It is no longer appropriate for them to continue to live as they once did. As citizens of a new country, they must abide by the laws and seek to know the ways of the people there.

I experienced this when I moved from America to Bulgaria. Beyond learning the language, I had to learn a new way of living. In America, my schedule was filled with work, and I measured my days by how productive I had been. In Bulgaria, I found a way of life where relationships came first and things happened more slowly. This was hard to learn. There were days when I felt I was getting nothing done and wondered whether my move was making any difference at all.

My old way of life kept me busy, but it was focused on the wrong thing. I was building my identity and worth on how much I accomplished, and on the days when I was not busy, I did not feel important. But over time I began to see real transformation in people's lives through those relationships – slower than I would have liked, but real. Today I believe this is the better way.

Something similar happens as we follow Jesus. When we choose to make our home in the kingdom of God, we must learn new ways of life and new customs. The ways we once lived are no longer appropriate or attractive in Christ's kingdom, since His ways are radically different from the ways of this world. We need His direction and His Spirit to show us the new way of life and to help us desire this change.

Repentance is not just something that we do once, but rather is a new way of life. It is a daily offering up of our lives to Jesus; it means being honest about who we are and the ways we are accustomed to living. Repentance is allowing Jesus to speak to us and to show us the way of life in His kingdom. It means forsaking our harmful and sinful habits, which lead us off the path of discipleship. It means allowing Jesus to call us in new and more beautiful directions. The key to all of this is keeping our hearts soft to Jesus and making a practice of listening and responding to His call. When we allow Jesus to lead us in this way and when we make repentance a way of life, we prepare ourselves for the work of the kingdom of God in our hearts.

Thinking back to the Herbert family, I am reminded of what a great King we have. Whereas they had to prepare by themselves for the queen's visit, and all the work of getting the house ready rested on them, our King comes with grace and power. He does not wait until we have made ourselves worthy of Him; He knows our situation, our sin, and our struggles. He comes to us while our house is still in disorder. And His grace does not stop at the door. We do not do the construction work by ourselves. Jesus comes in, and day by day, as we listen and respond to Him, His Spirit brings about the change we long for but could never make on our own. This is the good news that Jesus preached and demonstrated wherever He went!

- Summarize in your own words the message of this chapter. What is the connection between repentance and Christian discipleship? How will you personally respond?
- This chapter suggests that repentance should be a way of life. What small, practical steps can you take to make it a daily practice?

RESPONDING TO THE WORD

ATTITUDE OF THE HEART

Sin is "attractive" only because it promises us a shortcut to the things we really desire. Otherwise, we would never want to sin. The author of Hebrews speaks of "the deceitfulness of sin" for this very reason (Hebrews 3:13). For example, we all desire and were created for intimacy. Sin promises that through lustful thoughts and pornography we can gratify this craving quickly and without risk of being hurt. Likewise, we desire people to think well of us. Sin promises that we can achieve this more easily through deceit. Each and every sin is deceptive in its promise to give us something we truly desire quickly and easily.

Yet, as we have seen, true life is found only in the way of Jesus. Jesus' instructions are not given to take away life but because He alone knows the best way to live. To take the

examples above, the kind of sexual intimacy we truly desire cannot be found outside of marriage between a man and a woman, and true friendship is only born out of honesty and sincerity. Repentance, then, is choosing to listen to and believe Jesus and leave behind the sinful patterns of our lives.

When we find ourselves struggling with a particular sin, it is often helpful to identify the lie sin tells us and compare it with the trustworthy promises of Jesus. This takes the power out of the sin and shows it to be what it truly is. It also allows us to hold on to Jesus' truth when we feel tempted to believe sin's lie.

Below is a list of some of the most common patterns of sin in our lives. As discipleship partners, think about the two or three sins with which you most often struggle. For each one, ask:

- What does sin promise in this area?
- What is the actual result of this sin?
- What does Jesus promise and instruct instead?
- What will repentance mean for you?

Write your thoughts in the space provided and share your reflections with one another.

Attitude of the Heart[3]	Sin's deception: What does sin promise? Why is it attractive?	Sin's result: What is the result of this sin in your life?	Faith's antidote: What does Jesus promise and instruct us instead?
Bitterness/resentment:			
Impatience:			
Despondency/despair:			
Anxiety:			
Shame/regret:			
Jealousy/covetousness:			
Critical spirit/pride:			
Apathy:			

Drivenness/workaholism:			
Sloth/laziness:			
Individualism and self-protection:			
Divisiveness:			
Deceit:			
Lust/sexual immorality:			
Other:			

I recommend making a practice of regularly looking through this list and praying the words of Psalm 139:23–24, asking God to search your heart and lead you in the way everlasting. It is also helpful to make a habit of sharing these with your discipleship partners on a regular basis in order to receive prayer, help, and accountability as you seek to live a lifestyle of repentance. As we bring these struggles into the light, sin loses much of its power over us. Pray for one another and proclaim God's forgiveness over each other. (See James 5:14–16 and John 20:21–23.)

Prayer of Examen

St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491–1556) began a practice of prayer, called the Prayer of Examen, that many in the church throughout the centuries have found very meaningful and helpful. It is an exercise that we can do regularly to help us live a lifestyle of repentance. The Prayer of Examen helps us to prayerfully review the past twenty-four hours. Find a quiet space where you can sit for fifteen minutes and not be distracted by anything else. There are four simple steps:[4]

1. Recall that you are in the presence of God.

Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there! (Psalm 139:7–8)

Take a moment to remember the simple fact that God is with you at this moment and that He loves you. You are not examining your day alone.

2. Look at your day with gratitude.

I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; my soul knows it very well. (Psalm 139:14)

Spend time remembering where you have seen God's good work in your life in the last day. How did He provide for you, protect you, or encourage you? Thank Him for His kindness in your life.

3. Ask for help from the Holy Spirit to review your day.

Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! (Psalm 139:23)

Invite the Holy Spirit to speak to your heart, and ask Him to help you be open to His leading. In God's loving and merciful presence, review your activities, attitudes, and beliefs. Where did you respond well to God's work in your life? How did you live like a citizen of God's kingdom? Where did you reject God's lead? Where did you fail to live like a citizen of God's kingdom?

4. Reconcile and resolve.

And see if there be any grievous way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting! (Psalm 139:24)

Thank God for the areas of victory you have experienced in your life. Ask for God's forgiveness for the areas where you have responded in opposition to Him, knowing that He is faithful to forgive (1 John 1:9). If there is something you need to do in response to what God is bringing to mind, prayerfully make plans to do it. (For example, God might lead you to ask someone for forgiveness or to extend forgiveness to someone.)

I suggest practicing this prayer every evening as a way of making repentance a way of life. You could commit with your discipleship partners to diligently practice this prayer throughout the next week. Share with each other your experience at your next meeting.

PRAYING FOR ONE ANOTHER

Share honestly with one another about the areas in which God is calling you to repent and believe. Share, also, if there are other concerns and situations in your life that you would like prayer for in the days to come. After sharing with one another, pray for each other. Pray that God would help you make repentance a way of life and lead you "in the way everlasting." Continue your plan to pray for each other regularly until your next meeting.

Heavenly Father, we thank You that You chose to rescue us from darkness and death. Please forgive us for so often choosing to listen to the deceitfulness of sin rather than to You. Would You now, once again, search and know our hearts and our thoughts? Please reveal to us the ways that we are living that lead to death, and give us the grace to choose to follow You into everlasting life. We pray that You would continue Your wonderful work of transformation in our lives. In the name of Jesus, we pray. AMEN.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

To look deeper into the subject of repentance, study the following passages:

- Luke 19:1–10: Zacchaeus's encounter with Jesus and a repentance that changed how he used his money.
- 2 Samuel 11–12 and Psalm 51: David's sin with Bathsheba, Nathan's confrontation, and David's prayer of repentance.
- 1 John 1:5–2:6: God's forgiveness for those who confess their sins, and the call to walk as Jesus walked.

---

[1] Dallas Willard, *The Great Omission: Reclaiming Jesus's Essential Teachings on Discipleship* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 3.
[2] Craig S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 1993), 44.
[3] Adapted from Rich Lamb, "Attitudes of the Heart," in *Images of Leadership* (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Leading Edge, 2003), 66–67.
[4] Adapted from April Diaz, "Ignatian Examen," Fuller Youth Institute, August 2, 2010, https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/ignatian-examen.