

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

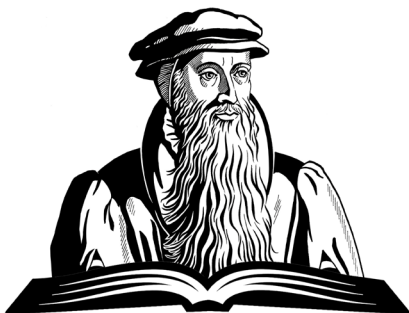
Module 5:

SOTERIOLOGY—

THE DOCTRINE OF SALVATION

Lecture 5

THE DOCTRINE OF REPENTANCE



The John Knox Institute
of Higher Education

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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 5 ~ Lecture 5

The Doctrine of Repentance

Have you ever been on a trip, only to discover at some point that you are lost? You may have been traveling by car, or bicycle, or public transport, or even walking. You were heading blissfully down the road, thinking all was well. You felt certain that you were moving toward your desired destination. Then you began to pass landmarks that indicated something was wrong. You may have felt disoriented or alarmed. Finally, you saw a sign with the correct destination, but it was pointed in the exact opposite direction from where you were headed. Well, what did you do? First, at your earliest opportunity, you stopped moving in the route you were traveling. Then you turned around—you did a 180° turn, and began moving in the opposite direction—this time toward the right destination, not the wrong one.

Well, this provides a simple illustration of the nature of repentance. Unconverted men travel down the road of life, following their own sinful ways, while feeling certain that all is well. They believe that the route they have chosen will lead them to a desirable destination. But they could not be more wrong. They are lost, not following the map provided in God’s word. They walk in the ways of sin, and the eternal misery of hell lies at the end of their journey. The preaching of the gospel exposes their misdirection. It alerts them to their grave mistake. The gospel serves as a bold sign pointing them in the opposite direction. Repentance includes turning from the sinful course we were on, and turning toward the Lord. It is therefore a change of spiritual direction, beginning in the heart and mind, and leading to a person’s actions. It senses the alarm of their error, and flees from that path, and turns toward the Lord.

The series of lectures in this fifth module on Systematic Theology is devoted to the study of the doctrine of Salvation. The purpose is for us to explore what the Bible teaches about how the Spirit applies the redemption of Christ to the individual soul of the believer. In the previous lecture, we considered the doctrine of Faith. In this present lecture, we’ll consider the doctrine of Repentance. We will begin, as we have in all of these lectures, by considering a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of Repentance.

We read in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 3, verses 1 and 2, these words: “In those days came John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” In the opening of the New Testament, the first word in the call of the gospel was not “love” or something else—the first word was “repent.” John the Baptist served as a hinge between the Old Testament and the New Testament—the last of the prophets before Christ, and the first person sent from God in the New Testament. And the dominant theme of his preaching ministry was repentance. God told his father, Zacharias, that John would turn many to the Lord,

and that he would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord.” We see that in Luke 1, verses 16 and 17. So in our text, Matthew 3, in verse 3, he quotes Isaiah, saying, “Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”

Well, as you know, the shortest distance between two places is a straight line. Repentance clears the way, and makes the path straight between God and the repentant person. It is turning into that path. So John came preaching, as Mark 1, verse 4 says, a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Note that repentance is connected to forgiveness. And so we read, in verses 5 and 6, of Matthew 3, that many of the common people came confessing their sins. So confession of sin is another element of repentance. But John also confronted boldly the Pharisees and Sadducees who resisted his message. In verses 7 and 8, he said, “O generation of vipers, who hath warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance.” So we learn that true repentance always bears fruit and comes with evidence.

But repentance was not a unique message confined to John the Baptist’s ministry. When Jesus appeared for the first time in his public ministry, the first word in his message was “repent.” In the next chapter, Matthew 4, verse 17, it says, “From that time Jesus began to preach, and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” Like John, he makes clear that there are two kingdoms, and sinners must turn from the kingdom of darkness and of Satan and of the world, and turn to the kingdom of God and heaven. We also note in Mark 1, verse 15, that Christ says, “Repent, and believe the gospel.” So he links repentance together with faith. These are the two parts of conversion that we saw in the last lecture. When Jesus prepared and then sent out the twelve disciples, what did they do? Mark 6:12 says, “And they went out, and preached that men should repent.”

And this continued through the New Testament. At Pentecost, in Acts 2, verse 38, we read: “Then Peter said unto them, Repent.” He said the same thing in the next chapter, Acts 3, verse 19; Acts 8, verses 20 to 23. Even in his epistles, like 2 Peter 3, verse 9, and so on. And the same is true of Paul’s ministry. For example, in Acts 17, verses 30–31; or chapter 20, verses 18 to 21; chapter 26, verses 14 to 20; we could go on and on. This is true to the end of the Bible. You come to the last book, in Revelation, and in chapter 2, verses 4 and 5, Jesus calls the church at Ephesus to repent. And then, as you read his words to the other churches in Asia, in chapter 2 and 3, he frequently repeats that call to repentance.

And so the place of repentance, we can see, is indispensable to the doctrine of Salvation. Well, this introduces us to the importance of the doctrine of Repentance. In the remainder of this lecture, we’ll explore what the Bible teaches us about the nature of repentance and it’s place within the doctrines of Salvation.

And so, secondly, we’ll consider a doctrinal exposition of this truth regarding repentance. And we’ll begin, first of all, with a definition of the nature of repentance. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 15, paragraphs 1 and 2, says this: “Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ...By it,”—that is, by repentance—“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.” So there you have the full sweep of what the word “repentance” means. Repentance is turning. It is a change of direction. On one hand, it sees, and senses, and grieves over the evil of personal sin, and on the other hand, it sees the mercy in Christ, and it turns from sin to God, walking in his ways. And this is not limited then to just the knowledge

of sin. It must include an apprehension of the mercy that is to be found in Christ. Why? Because no one will turn toward something that they think will destroy them. They're not going to turn from sin toward something they think will destroy them. There is both a warning and a wooing, or drawing, of the sinner. Romans 2, verse 4, says, "Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" The sight of God's goodness leads to repentance. Well, repentance is not just something experienced at the beginning of the Christian life, when the soul is converted. Repentance characterizes the whole of the Christian life, from beginning to end. The believer continues, day by day, to turn from sin, to God, throughout their days.

Secondly, repentance affects all the faculties of the soul. So you think of the mind. In repentance, there is conscious knowledge of the nature and consequences of sin. This includes the recognition of personal guilt, and helplessness, and utter defilement. It also affects the will, where there is a disposition to flee from sin, and to seek pardon and cleansing. Without this change of purpose, there's no Biblical repentance. And it even affects the affections. There is a felt sorrow for sin and revulsion to it. You see that in Isaiah's experience, in Isaiah 6, verse 5: "Woe is me! . . . I am a man of unclean lips" from a "people of unclean lips."

Thirdly, man's act of repentance does not, in itself, save him. So repentance is not a work or a contribution that earns anything before God. Repentance is a grace—a gift given by God, just like we saw with faith. As Acts 11, verse 18, says, "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." And so, we're taught to pray in the language of Lamentations, chapter 5, verse 21, "Turn thou us unto thee, O LORD, and we shall be turned; renew our days as of old." So repentance doesn't actually merit salvation, but it is absolutely necessary for salvation. Jesus said, in Luke 13:5, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." We either repent or perish. Just as with faith, salvation is not possible without repentance. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 15, paragraph 3, says, "Although repentance be not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ; yet is it of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it."

So fourthly, let's think about some of the details, some of the components of gospel repentance. It includes, first of all, a sight of sin. Do you remember the prodigal son? He goes off, in Luke 15, and he turns in to wicked ways and following evil courses. And we're told that at the turning point, what happens? "He came to himself," the passage says. He came to himself, before he came to the Lord. When he came to himself, he saw, "I have sinned"—sinned against God, and against my father, and so forth. He had a sight of sin, which was part of what brought about the turn, the change of direction, in returning to his father's house. And so, repentance means recognizing the plague of your own heart. We sing of this in Psalm 38, verse 4, "as a heavy burden they are too heavy for me,"—speaking of sin. We feel them as a great weight. John Bunyan pictures this beautifully in his book, *The Pilgrim's Progress*. And there is Christian coming out of the City of Destruction with this heavy burden upon his back.

Secondly, not only the sight of sin, it's also sorrow for sin. In Psalm 38, verse 18, it says, "I will be sorry for my sin." And the Hebrew word there signifies agony—something excruciating. Zechariah 12, verse 10, says, "They shall look upon me whom they have pierced, and they shall mourn." So there's sorrow—there's grief over it. And the bread of sorrow actually strengthens the heart—Psalm 104, verse 15. We're told that "They who sow in tears reap in joy"—Psalm 126, verse 5. Well, why would that be the case? Why would tears bring joy? Why is it that sorrow strengthens? The answer is, because it makes Christ precious. This sight and sorrow for sin elevates and

magnifies how invaluable, and beautiful, and sufficient, and satisfying the Lord Jesus Christ is.

A third component is the confession of sin—1 John 1, verse 9, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness,”—if we confess our sins. So confession—what is that? To confess something is to say the same as another. So when we confess our sins, we’re saying about our sins the same thing that God says about them. We’re viewing them, defining them, speaking of them, in terms of what God sees of them. And that’s, of course, revealed to us in the Holy Scripture. That confession of sin leads us to charging ourself, and clearing God. Confession is also specific—confessing specific sins. We read in the book of Proverbs, “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” So not hiding them or covering them, but uncovering them and forsaking them. This is something that gives great glory to God, when we’re charging ourselves and clearing the Lord, we’re glorifying him in our confession of sin. When Joshua confronted Achan, in Joshua 7, verse 19, he began what he said, with these words, “My son, give, I pray thee, glory to the LORD God of Israel, and make confession unto him.”

Fourthly, there is shame for sin. Ezekiel 43, verse 10, “That they may be ashamed of their iniquities.” So this involves seeing the guilt of sin against God and against his law; seeing the treason of sin, of engaging in rebellion against the Lord. It’s shame for our ingratitude. Here is God who’s created us, and given us all things, and heaped bounty upon us, and yet we have turned against him, rather than turning to him. We’ve been utterly ungrateful, and it’s shameful to think about it, to think about the dishonor that we’ve brought to his name. Sin should cause us to blush. In fact, when people are unable to blush, that’s a serious problem, isn’t it, in the consideration of their sin.

A fifth component is hatred of sin. Ezekiel 36, verse 31, says, “Ye...shall lothe yourselves... for your iniquities.” We’re to hate all sin, in all of its forms, and in all of its expressions. Why? Because we see sin as the antithesis—the opposite of God. It is what is utterly opposed to all that is to be found in God and in his nature. So there’s a hatred for it. The believer also hates it because they see what it cost the Lord Jesus Christ. There he is crucified, the Lord of Glory, the Lamb of God. And why? He’s dying for sin. Sin—the sins of God’s elect people have brought about this horrific event. So you either love God and hate sin, or you love sin and hate God. The Bible doesn’t give us middle ground there. For that reason, the believer should constantly say, “It is better to suffer than to sin.” Certainly, that was the thinking of the martyrs, who wouldn’t deny the Lord Jesus Christ. It’s better to suffer than to sin.

A sixth component is that repentance is God-centered. Remember Psalm 51. David has committed adultery, and he’s committed murder. And yet, in the opening verses of Psalm 51, he says, “Against thee...have I sinned...and thee only...and done this evil in thy sight.” Yes, he’s sinned against Bathsheba, and Uriah, and his family, and the nation of Israel, and so on, but what was all absorbing to him? The fact that his sin was against God. God is the One who looms large before the repentant sinner. It is God-centered.

Seventhly, repentance includes turning from sin to God. In Joel 2, verse 12, we read, “Therefore also now, saith the LORD, turn ye even to me with all your heart.” That Hebrew word for “turn” is the most frequently-used word for “repentance” in the Old Testament. The idea of turning from sin, and turning to the Lord. Hosea 14, verse 8—really, Hosea 14 as a whole is a beautiful chapter, if you want to understand repentance, you read it from beginning to end. It has all the various components. But here, in terms of turning away from sin, verse 8 says, “Ephraim shall say, What have I to do any more with idols?” So it’s turning with the heart, in all of our life, in all of our actions, unto God, out of love for him, and out of dependence upon his mercy. Well, those are

a few of the components that belong to repentance.

Next, we can think also about what the Bible teaches regarding counterfeit repentance. So in 2 Corinthians 7, verses 8 to 11—this is an important passage—we see that there’s a difference between worldly sorrow for sin, and godly sorrow for sin that leads to repentance. There’s a difference—worldly sorrow versus godly sorrow. And in that passage, we’re given a number of descriptions of what godly sorrow that does lead to repentance looks like. You should study that carefully on your own. But you’ll recognize the fact that a person can have some sorrow for sin without ever turning from it to the Lord. Now this is true, of course, of unbelievers. It’s true in degrees, even within the life of the believer—we’ll be watchful against it.

There can also be a terror for sin, maybe a legal terror for sin, without a change of heart. And so, the conscience, when exposed to the law of God, can feel fearful and afraid. But that’s not the same as repentance. Very interesting, the words, “I have sinned”—who used those words in the Bible? Well, it includes Pharaoh, he said, “I have sinned;” King Saul said, “I have sinned;” even Judas Iscariot, who betrayed the Lord, said, “I have sinned.” There was all of that, without a change of heart, without repentance. Sometimes even, people can rely on resolutions against sin, without repentance. So they’re determined, you know, “I’m going to stop doing these things, and I’m going to walk in the way of God’s law,” and so on. And they can do that without being converted. In Jeremiah 2, verse 20, the Lord says, “Thou saidst, I will not transgress”—but then it goes on and speaks of them in these terms, “every green tree thou wanderest, playing the harlot.” And so they’re making resolutions without repentance. And sometimes this is motivated by self-love. These resolutions are motivated by self-love. That is certainly the case with King Ahab. It was love for himself that he walked softly. There is also a counterfeit in terms of partial repentance, leaving only some sinful ways. And the way in which this expresses itself is often by exchanging one set of sins for another set of sins, maybe the old sins for new sins. And so, a person may stop their drunkenness, but then they replace it with another sin of habitual lying, or something else. That’s not repentance—it’s only partial repentance.

You’ll note that worldly sorrow can include lots of other things. There can be temporary repentance. That was Herod—he loved to hear the preaching of John the Baptist, but whatever experience we observe there, it didn’t lead to actual repentance. Or it can be seen in blame-shifting. So we’ve sinned, but we blame our sin on someone else. You see that at the beginning of the Bible, where Adam blames Eve, and Eve blames the serpent, and so on. Or it can be a reaction only to the consequences of sin, and not the guilt of sin. So we’re sad about what this sin has done, but not the sin itself. That was true of Cain; it was also true of King Saul. It can be external, without coming from the heart. Jesus warns of the Pharisees, that they disfigure their faces—there’s this kind of outward humility, and so on, without true repentance. And it can also be self-centered. You see this with Simon the Sorcerer, in Acts, chapter 8. So these are warnings about counterfeit repentance.

Thirdly, we can consider this doctrine polemically, very briefly. And the first thing that we need to recognize is, in our own day, the utter neglect of the call to repentance. Within the broader church, you will hear people speaking about the need to be renewed, and the need to be refreshed, and the need for this and that. But you’ll be listening in vain, in many cases, for the need of repentance. And yet, as we noted from the beginning of this lecture, this is an emphasis within the Bible, and the preaching ministry of John the Baptist, Christ, the apostles, and so on. And so, this needs to be a feature. As we saw in the Westminster Confession, every minister is required to preach the necessity of repentance—to call men to turn from their sins unto the Lord.

Secondly, there can be an underestimating of repentance. This would be the opposite error—

underestimating repentance. Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 15, paragraph 4, says, “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.” This is a message of hope, where the Lord says, for those who come penitently, and who come repentant, with gospel repentance, unto the Lord, no matter how great their sins are—it can be like the Apostle Paul, who was attacking Christ and persecuting his people, and seeking to destroy the church—that despite all of the weight of his own sin, which was a weight that would crush a world under its weight and grind it to powder, he received mercy, in coming by faith and repentance to the Lord Jesus Christ. And that hope must be held out in the heralding of the gospel.

Thirdly, we need to reject the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Sacrament of Penance. So they’ll take the word “repentance,” the Biblical notion of repentance, and they twist and distort it, and they’ve transformed it into what they call the Sacrament of Penance. And penance, rather than being gospel evangelical repentance, is something entirely different—the idea of physically afflicting yourself, as a way of trying to make yourself feel something about the sorrow of sin. That’s external. That’s not from the heart. But furthermore, they view penance as something that contributes to their earning or meriting salvation from the Lord. They think that this penance will somehow earn favor with God. And that, of course, undermines the complete work of the Lord Jesus Christ, which alone is able to save, and which is received by grace in the Lord. They turn it into a works-oriented righteousness. And so we have to be alert to that, and opposing that from the Scriptures.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical applications from this doctrine for ourselves. First of all, we should seek to repent for specific sins. Westminster Confession of Faith, paragraph 5 has some really helpful words. It says, “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”—repent of his particular sins particularly. So this is a call to be specific. In our repentance before the Lord, as we’re searching our hearts under the light of God’s word, it’s not this vague notion of “Well, I am generally a sinful person,” and acknowledging that before the Lord. But under the preaching of his word, and the reading of his word, as the Lord is bringing specific sins to light, we’re to take those specific sins to the Lord, and we are to confess them, and we are to repent and turn from them to the Lord, in apprehension of his mercy. So it’s specific sin. It’s not to say that every sin that we’ve ever committed has to be repented of—well, that’s human impossibility. We have sins of ignorance even, that we’re unaware of. But as the Lord gives light to us, we are to repent of the sins that he brings to light. That’s true in terms of our relationship to other people as well. We can be tempted to neglect owning our sin. So, you’ve sinned against a brother, and you go to them and say something like, “I’m sorry.” Well, all that’s really communicating is that you feel badly about what’s happened. It would be more appropriate for you to go and actually own the sin—to say, “Look, when I said this,” or, “When I did this, I was wrong. I sinned against you, and I sinned against the Lord, in a specific way, and I’m coming to ask you to forgive me.” So you can see how, in the relationship with the Lord, that flows over even into the expressions of repentance in our relationship to fellow men.

Secondly, there is a place for public repentance. You can read about this in Westminster Confession, chapter 15, paragraph 6. I won’t read it to you here—it’s rather lengthy—but you can refer to it on your own time—the place of public repentance. So just as men have private sins that they seek the Lord’s pardon for, when the church as a whole, for example, is engaged in sin, or when a specific individual is engaged in a sin that is publically known to others, he should be prepared to express that repentance publically. So private sins repented of privately, public sins repented

of publically. When there's a person who's committed perhaps a scandalous and serious sin that's known broadly within the community or church, they ought to be prepared to confess and repent of that before those who know it.

Thirdly, there's corporate repentance. By corporate repentance, it can refer to the family, it can refer to the church, it can refer to a nation. In Joel 2, and verse 15 and following, it says, "Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children"—it goes on later to say, "Let the priests, the minister of the LORD, weep between the porch and the altar, and let them say, Spare thy people, O LORD." So there's place for the people of God as a whole confessing their sins. During times of spiritual declension, and the church may hold a fast day. And people apart are doing work on their own soul in their homes, and they come together in the public assembly, in public worship, and there's preaching on the topic, and there's corporate prayer, where their corporate sins are being acknowledged before the Lord. This has been true through the history of the world, and often associated with times of revival.

Fourthly, and lastly, in Luke 15, verse 10, Jesus said, "Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth." And you think about this for a second. There, perhaps the church is gathered, a very small group of people, maybe in a remote location that's unseen and unknown by men. And there in the quietness of the congregation, the minister is preaching, and God works by his Spirit in the soul of one sitting in the pew. And by the Spirit, they're brought to faith, and they're brought to repentance, and they repent before the Lord, in the quietness of that assembly within the cry of their own heart. You know what? That's not going to be reported the next day in the newspapers. It's not going to be broadcast on the internet, or in the news. It will go unnoticed by the world. And Jesus says in this passage, that this enumerable throng of overwhelmingly powerful beings—the angels in heaven, that even over the repentance of a single sinner, the whole of heaven breaks open, as it were, in thunderous and joyous shouts in praise to God. So that the heavens are lit up with expressions of praise over the repentance of a single sinner.

Well, Jesus providing us with that window should influence us. It should influence how we view the repentance of a single sinner. That may be true for ourselves—the joy that comes in being brought to repentance before God. It should be true when we see it anywhere and everywhere in another person. This is what is truly significant in the world. This is what is truly exciting. This is something that is truly invigorating, for the people of God, to see men and women, boys and girls, being brought to repentance.

Well, in conclusion, we've noted that saving conversion consists of faith and repentance. In this lecture, we've considered an introduction to what the Bible teaches about the second component, namely, Repentance. And now we're going to move on. So in the next lecture, we will consider, with the Lord's help, the doctrine of Justification.