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**CATECHISM**

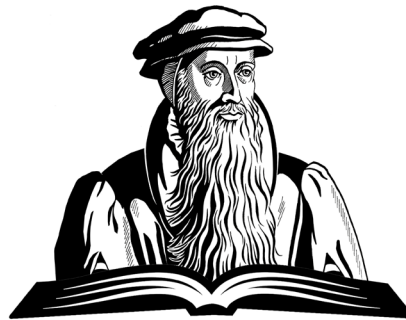
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

Lecture #45

**Escaping God's Wrath and  
Curse: Repentance unto Life**

*Catechism Question 87*



**The John Knox Institute**  
of Higher Education

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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

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*by Rev. Jonathan Mattull*

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# *The Shorter CATECHISM*

## VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

by Rev. Jonathan Mattull

### Lecture #45

## Escaping God's Wrath and Curse: Repentance unto Life

**Question 87:** *What is repentance unto life?*

**Answer:** *Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.*

We continue our attention on the way of escape God has provided to us as sinners. We have considered what saving faith is. Now we come to repentance, which the *Catechism* refers to as “repentance unto life,” which borrows from the Scripture itself. Now, we’ve noted earlier that these are two aspects of the grace that God gives to a sinner unto salvation. In other words, where there is saving faith in Jesus Christ, there will also be repentance unto life. And where there is repentance unto life, there will be saving faith in Christ. Now we should be clear: these aren’t the same thing. Faith is not repentance, and repentance is not faith. However, they are inseparable, because they are given together, when God renews, or regenerates, a sinner to bring them unto salvation.

So we take now Question #87 from the *Shorter Catechism*. It asks, “What is repentance unto life?” And the answer, “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.”

Now, we’ll look at this answer more fully throughout our lesson. But we want to make sure that one of these words is rightly understood from the beginning. You’ll notice the expression, “apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ.” Today, many times the word “apprehension” means “fear” or “concern.” However, here it has its original idea of “understanding” or “grasping,” “holding onto.” So the apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ means, the understanding or the grasp of the mercy of God in Christ. It not only acknowledges that there is mercy of God in Christ, but it lays hold of it.

So with this, we’ll enter into our lesson by looking at three main points: firstly, *The Nature of True Repentance*—what is the main meaning of repentance? Secondly, *The Motives for True Repentance*—what does God use to motivate and lead one to repentance? And third, *The Continuance of True Repentance*—what is the duration of repentance? Does it only begin and stop

there, or does it continue the whole life of the believer?

So first, *The Nature of True Repentance*. What is the main meaning of repentance? Well, the basic meaning of the biblical term, “repentance” or “repent,” is to change or turn one’s mind or orientation. So you can think of it, if one is facing one direction, they turn and face the opposite direction. Now, it is more significant than the little ways we might change our minds throughout the day. One day we might wake up and think, “Well, I’d like to go to the park.” And something changes, and we’d say, “No, I’d like to go to my friend’s house.” Those are changes of mind, we could say.

But when the Bible speaks of repentance, it’s about something far more significant. Indeed, it’s about the greatest change that takes place. So when we think of “conversion,” it’s a turning of us unto God, and essentially, that’s what repentance is. You’ll remember that since the fall, man’s whole nature, body and soul, including the mind and the desires of the soul, all of this is corrupt and it’s committed to sin. We see this stated clearly in Genesis 6, verse 5: “And GOD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.” We’re told the same in a simple way, in Jeremiah 17, and verse 9: “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?” This is what explains every sin, every rebellion of man against God. It may be that even the sinner is sometimes surprised at the depth of sin, but we shouldn’t be surprised, because man is throughout corrupt. Man is committed to sin.

This is what explains us apart from God’s grace. Our very core, the very essence of our being is corrupted by our sin, and thus, we stand opposed to God. This is why, in Romans 8, verse 7, Paul says, “The carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.” It’s not just man, in his fall, is influenced by his sin, and it’s not just that every once in a while a sinner falls into sin. Apart from God’s grace, man only sins, because he despises God and his holiness.

Now, certainly, as we saw in a previous lesson, there are different degrees of heinousness, so some sins are less heinous, and others are more heinous. So it doesn’t mean that man only commits the most heinous sins. But it does mean that, though he be well-refined and presentable to other men, and may even be engaged in seemingly religious activity, that his heart is unclean, and he stands opposed to God. This means man is against God. Remember when Adam and Eve sinned against God, what happened when God drew near to them. What did they do? Well, they ran away and hid from God. This is a picture of what all men do since the fall—they run away from God.

Well, repentance is the display of a real change within man. Remember, we talked about effectual calling and regeneration, well, saving faith and repentance are the fruit of that effectual calling. When God effectually calls and regenerates one, he gives them faith and repentance. He causes the change. And what change is displayed?—it’s repentance. Notice the *Catechism*: “a sinner...doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God.” The sinner who once loved his sin and would nourish, and harbor, and protect his sin now despises his sin. And the God against whom he stood opposed is now the God to whom he runs. When one repents, that person is brought to grieve and despise their sin, and turn to God.

Notice Isaiah 55, verse 7: “Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.” The sinner is not only to forsake his way, this thoughts, he is then to turn to the Lord. And these are related. In turning from his sin, he’s turning at the same time unto God. So true repentance turns from self and sin to God in Christ. This repentance is the fruit

of saving grace. It's not natural to man, as fallen. Fallen man, left to himself, will only continue to sin. The types of sin may change. The depth and degree of sin may change.

That doesn't mean, of course, that sinners don't feel grief or shame over their sin. It does mean that they do not truly hate or repent from it apart from God's grace. Take, as an example, Judas Iscariot. You can read a key part of his sin and rebellion in Matthew, chapter 26, through the first part of chapter 27. These two chapters, among other things, include his betrayals: his agreement to betray, his betrayal of Christ, and then his shame, remorse, and what he does in light of his sin. If you read those verses, you'll see he agrees to betray the Lord Jesus Christ, which is a most wicked sin. And after he betrayed Christ, Judas became convicted. He actually takes the money that was paid to him and brings it back and returns it. He's ashamed of his wickedness.

So what did he do? Well, though it is that he had a turning of mind, it's not a true repentance. Notice Matthew 27, verse 3: "Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders." Well notice that the passage says he repented himself. However, it's not saying that he truly repented. There was a turning, in one sense; he had the money, and now he saw the money was not right to have. What's being said is that he regretted what he had done. And now he was ashamed of what he had done. But to what did this lead him? Did it lead him to God? Did it lead him to confess his sin, to turn to God and ask God to forgive him? Did it lead him to go to God and say, "Forgive me, and change me"? No, it led him again to himself. So from one sin, this regret, that can be common to all men, leads him to another sin—it led him to take his own life in despair.

Now let us say something. This is the natural end of all sin. It leads us to despair. It may lead us to regret. It may lead us to be shamed, and embarrassed, and convicted. But apart from God's grace, it will only lead us to continual sin, and ultimately to despair. This helps us see that, in their sin, sinners may experience remorse, and conviction, and sadness, and shame. This is one reason—though we should indeed affirm that it's right for sinners to feel remorse, and conviction, and sadness, and shame—it's a reason we don't say, "Therefore, you're converted," because Judas felt remorse, conviction, sadness, and shame, but he wasn't converted.

True repentance, or as the Bible and our *Catechism* says, repentance unto life is not the turning merely unto remorse; it is the turning unto God. When Peter reported to the church gathered in Jerusalem the mighty work of God among the Gentiles, he told them how they turned to God. And the church in Jerusalem acknowledged this very truth—Acts 11, verse 18: "When they heard these things, they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life." Notice, not repentance unto remorse—repentance unto life.

Notice two things. First, this repentance was a repentance unto life. Why so?—because from their rebellion against God in their sin, they turned unto God. Well second, notice that they repented by God's grace: "Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted"—that is, he gave them this grace. It was not something they attained by their own works. It was not something that they earned. It was not something they worked up. It was given freely by his grace. Remember, saving faith and repentance unto life, these are the fruit of God's saving work giving that regeneration by which now they are not changed from within. Repentance is a saving grace, just as saving faith is a saving grace. These are gifts freely bestowed in God's grace unto salvation.

Well second, *The Motives for True Repentance*. What it is that God uses to motivate this repentance? Well, as we think of these things, we see the *Catechism* affirms that "a sinner, out of true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God." What this means is that when God gives a sinner repentance,



he's working these two key understandings within him. He's using these things within his mind, and thoughts, and soul.

First, notice that they are given a true sense of their sin. It's not merely that they see sin is wrong; they respond to the true sense of it. What is this true sense?—well, it consists in understanding what sin is, that it is rebellion against God. But it also includes these two aspects of sin. It understands that sin violates the law, and so firstly, this makes man guilty in God's sight. Guilt in God's sight makes the sinner worthy of judgment. And when one has a true sense of this, that one loses all complaints and excuse before God. No longer will that sinner think, "Well, my sins are little and small, and others' are big and large." They acknowledge, as David acknowledged, "Against thee and thee only have I sinned," and as he goes on, "that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest" (Psalm 51:4). What's David saying?—I sinned, I'm guilty, you are right to judge me. The sinner with a true sense of his sin realizes, and acknowledges, and owns that from God, he deserves condemnation. He does not minimize his sin nor his guilt, because he has a true understanding of his sin and his guilt. He sees it and senses it for what it is.

Well, the sinner who repents also sees that, as it is a violation of God's law, and as that dwells within him, he comes to see the corruption, or the depravity of his sin. He sees its ugliness, and he detests it. He's brought to hate it. Now of course, it's not that the sinner will ever hate his sin as much as he should throughout this life, however, the sinner does come to see sin as repulsive, in and of itself; not only for the effects, that it brings forth damnation and hell—surely the sinner sees that. But the sinner is brought to see the sin itself as wicked, corrupt, and abhorrent. He sees it as godless, godlessness, rebellion, corruption.

You'll notice that this true sense is not just of sin in general, but of the sinner's personal sin, his sin. He would join with Isaiah, and say, "Woe is me! for I am undone...I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). He would join with Paul, and say, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh,) dwelleth no good thing" (Romans 7:18). He sees it in himself. And so, he will not turn to himself. Repentance is not, as sometimes you'll hear it, merely the turning over of a new leaf, as some would say, which phrase is meant to say, "I'm going to do something different in my own strength." He doesn't turn to himself; that's not repentance. He turns, rather, to God, in Christ, for grace. So there's a true sense of sin, which then leads him out of himself, away from himself.

But second, one who repents is given a true understanding, or, as the *Catechism* says, "apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ." Without this, there would be no true repentance. There may be the attempt to turn from one form of sin to a more refined form, a better form perhaps they might think. But it would not be a true turning to God. And why is that? Because in order to turn to God truly, there must be some understanding, some persuasion that God is willing to receive and be merciful to the one who comes to him. There must be an apprehension that God is willing to receive, forgive, and save the sinner.

Well in this, God's Word is clear in affirming. Remember Isaiah 55, verse 7: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return to the LORD." Well, this is repentance. He's turning from his thoughts to the Lord. But notice, the verse continues: "And he"—that is, the Lord—"will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he"—that is, our God—"will abundantly pardon." Why should I repent? Well, look, because your sins are wicked, but also because God is merciful.

Similarly, notice Jeremiah 3, verse 12 and verse 13: "Go and proclaim these words toward the north, and say, Return, thou backsliding Israel, saith the LORD; and I will not cause mine anger to fall upon you: for I am merciful, saith the LORD, and I will not keep anger for ever.

Only acknowledge thine iniquity, that thou hast transgressed against the LORD thy God, and hast scattered thy ways to the strangers under every green tree, and ye have not obeyed my voice, saith the LORD.” Well, again, this clearly encourages repentance, not only by their wickedness, and true sight and sense of sin, as Jeremiah makes plain, but also by the assurance that God is merciful and gracious. If we are to turn to God truly, we must be assured that God will graciously receive us as he has promised to do so in his Word. The Scripture makes this very clear. He is willing to receive us for Christ’s sake.

This is stated in Peter’s appeal to sinners who heard him preach, in Acts 2. Notice verse 38: “then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.” True repentance is encouraged and helped by a firm understanding that God is gracious and that he is a gracious God who will receive sinners to himself to save them.

Well third, notice *The Continuance of True Repentance*. Sometimes we hear people speak of repentance as of a one-time act: “Well, I repented long ago,” or, “You need to repent,” and so on. All of that’s true, but it’s more than just a one-time act. There is an initial turning from sin, our initial or first-time repentance, but true repentance continues all the life of the one who is given grace. The sinner turns from his sin, as the *Catechism* says, “with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.” In other words, there’s a real change in the heart and life of a sinner so that he is not at war with his sin and in pursuit of true obedience only for the moment, but for the rest of his life.

We’ll look at this a bit more. Notice the words “new obedience.” This is an important expression. By the word “new,” the *Catechism* is helping us see that it comes from a new source and a new supply. It is not an obedience that comes from within us, and the old man. Rather, it’s that the one who repents is given a new source. So this new obedience is no longer from a source of pride, “I’m going to take care of it myself.” That form will never bring forth truth obedience to God out of love to God. Oh, such a one may, with certain words and certain actions, appear to obey God, but these are from a corrupt source, selfish principles, not motivated by God’s love. New obedience comes from a new source and seeks a new end. It comes from God’s grace, and from a sense of his love. It also pursues a loving goal—to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Well, notice, the sinner who repents turns “with full purpose of, and endeavour after, new obedience.” By God’s grace, the sinner is given a new purpose—to obey God truly, in love, by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. This is a comprehensive change. It’s full, and contrary to partial. So true repentance will lead the sinner to a concern for full obedience. Of course, that perfection is never attained in this life, however, the Christian is now pressing on with a new heart to pursue that goal. As Paul says, “Forgetting those things which are behind,” but pressing forward, as he says, “I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13–14). So the one who truly repents is one who seeks the Lord and desires his glory and fellowship above all else.

He then endeavors after it, that is, he pursues it. It’s not only his goal, he actually orders his life to pursue it. How does he do it?—not in the old way of self reliance. But rather, in the gospel, by the way of Christ’s work, he now depends upon Christ to do it. I encourage you to read 2 Peter chapter 1, and you’ll see how clearly all of repentance, all true holiness is by God’s grace through the knowledge of Jesus Christ, with firm reliance upon his promises. God’s grace in Christ enables and strengthens us unto this new obedience. Without a true sense of sin, without an apprehension of God’s mercy in Christ, we’ll never repent. But where there is a true sense of sin and apprehension

of the mercy of God in Christ, the one who initially repented will continue to repent each day of his life, until the glorious day when Christ returns.

Well, we must close, and as we do, notice that if it's true that sinners repent by God's grace, then the only way of repentance is by God's grace. This does not excuse sinners for not repenting, but it does show us how wicked and hardened sinners are in their sins. They may come to see with Judas how abhorrent their sins are, and yet, if God is not gracious to them, they will only despair. So what is our great need? Well, it's the same as with saving faith and all of salvation. We have need that God would be gracious to us. Well, we ought to pray then for that, both for ourselves, and for others. Oh, God, give me this repentance unto life. Oh, God, give my friends, my family, even my enemies this great gift.

But second, consider for a moment, have you repented? Have you turned to God? Not merely, have you laid aside one form of sin and taken up a different form of sin. Not merely, have you seen the shame and the conviction of your sin, and you sought to attack that one. But have you, by God's grace, turned to him, and cast all of your hope upon him, imploring him for this grace, that he would give you the grace needed to forsake your sins, and to hold fast to Jesus Christ.

I would say, third, if you have repented, then you have reason to praise God. He did not leave you in your sin; he did not leave you in your shame; he did not leave you to yourself. He gave you grace. And to help you in your initial or your ongoing repentance, search out two things. Perhaps take a notebook and make a list of that which discovers the reality of sin, and secondly what discovers the mercy of God in Christ. And as you do, you'll have two great reasons, by God's grace, to turn from your sin, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.