

# ***TEN PRESCRIPTIONS***

*for a somewhat sick church*

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## ***DISEASE ONE: DYSFUNCTIONAL CONSCIENCE***

**Symptom:** *Life is no different from anyone else's*

**The Prescription:** *Follow Christ's first instructions*

Kerry was late for the men's breakfast meeting he normally attended every Tuesday morning at the local Denny's. He had simply overslept and felt embarrassed, driving as fast as he dared to make up the time. Joe, Dick and Larry had already ordered and were tucking into their breakfasts when Kerry burst into the restaurant, completely out of breath.

"Overslept?" asked Joe with a big smile. "No, no," responded Kerry, "there was a horrible accident on the way and I just sat in traffic for almost half an hour."

Kerry ordered and tried to join in the conversation that obviously had started long before he arrived. Larry leaned forward to Kerry and brought him up to speed. "We have been discussing honesty," he commented, "and we have just come to the conclusion that all of us are pretty good liars. Somehow it doesn't seem to matter much anymore. Everyone seems to lie and cover up. Some of us watch pornography, and we would never tell our wives; some of us have cheated on our taxes, and look upon it as normal; we are dishonest at work, some of us have even stolen stuff at work – and it doesn't seem to bother us."

Larry paused and looked at all the others. "We are supposed to be believers. We attend the same church, hear the same messages, and it is expected of us that we live a different kind of life. But look at us: we are no different from anyone else. When I was younger, I heard more of this kind of stuff, but now it never seems to be mentioned. Now and then, just for a flickering moment, it is like the Holy Spirit is trying to get through to me about these things, but I simply ignore him...and continue to live just like everyone else. Why do you think that is, Kerry?"

Kerry blushed as he responded. "Well, it seems I did exactly what you are talking about this morning. I did oversleep! Lying about it was the perfect cover up. It's like it comes naturally to me these days. I have done all those things you mentioned, and I don't even feel guilty about it. When I was a kid, we used to hear so much about sin in our church that I stopped going. I felt guilty all the time! And now we are never reminded about sin in church. There are few times I even feel guilty when I do things that I know, deep down, are wrong. Now and then it's like God's Spirit tugs at me, but I ignore it. I don't even react anymore."

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Most churches are keen to point out that they reflect the message of Jesus. However, it has been a long time since many congregations have heard a message on the very first instructions Jesus gave when he began to preach. In Matthew chapter 4, verse 17, the beginning of Jesus' ministry is described. I turned to a man in his fifties, and asked him

point blank, “When did you last hear a message on repentance in your church?” He looked at me thoughtfully and responded: “Probably not since I was a teenager.”

Why is it so important to follow the first instructions Jesus ever gave? He must have deemed it important. He mentioned repentance in the very first sentence recorded in his public ministry!

The first message Jesus gave in Galilee is crucial for our faith. If I don’t understand the importance of repentance, I may not even understand that all humans, including me, have missed the mark. That is why Jesus died at the cross. If I never show any remorse over my life and underestimate my need for repentance, why do I need Christ to save me? And if I don’t really need him in such a way, why should he have to die for me? The cross becomes simply a nice necklace gift; a symbol for Christianity that I wear around my neck – rather than the horrific place where Christ shed his blood for me so that my life would be completely transformed for now and for eternity.

### *Repentance 101*

I’d like to stop for a minute and teach a brief course called *Repentance 101*. For some people, repentance is the hardest command to obey. Believing in him may not be so hard, and being baptized as a result of that belief is not impossible to go through, but repentance – where do you start? Many think the word repent means “to get your act together” or to “get religion” or to “walk the straight line” as if we ever could. Repentance requires accepting a whole new point of view – *looking at life God’s way*. God simply asks us to *turn*. When we do, certain outcomes are promised. If we don’t, alternate outcomes are promised.

When the New Testament talks about repentance, it uses two verbs and one noun. The first verb, in the Greek, is *menanoeo* which really means ‘to perceive afterwards.’ The next verb is *metamelomai*, signifying ‘to regret, to repent oneself.’ The noun *metanoia* means ‘an afterthought, change of mind, repentance’ and is used to describe repentance from sin or evil.

There are many portions of the Bible that talk about repentance as the first step to living a new life. Here are some direct instructions Jesus gave us: *Produce fruit in keeping with repentance* (Matt 3:8).

*Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham* (Luke 3:8).

As Paul was giving his farewell speech to the elders in Ephesus he focused in on this subject. *I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus* (Acts 20:21). Paul keeps on telling his listeners what it means to be followers of Jesus. It was and is the mission of the Church! *First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and demonstrate their repentance by their deeds* (Acts 26:20).

The New Testament continues to tell us about repentance in the Book of Acts and in the letters to the early churches:

*God exalted him to his own right hand as Prince and Savior that he might bring Israel to repentance and forgive their sins (Acts 5:31). When they heard this, they had no further objections and praised God, saying, 'So then, even to Gentiles God has granted repentance that leads to life' (Acts 11:18).*

*Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, forbearance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness is intended to lead you to repentance? (Rom 2:4).*

*Opponents must be gently instructed, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to knowledge of the truth (2 Tim 2:25).*

### *What does it mean to follow his instructions?*

There are many references to repentance in the Old Testament. In his *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, W.E.Vine states that "the call of Jesus to repentance in Matthew 4:17 is not addressed to the nations as in the Old Testament, but to the individual." It has to do with you and me!

Jesus tells the story of the prodigal son who prayed the worst prayer in the best place. While living at home he prayed: "Give me, give me, give me!" Then, after years of misusing his inheritance, he ended up looking after pigs, but was not even allowed to eat their food. In the pig pen he prayed the best prayer in the worst place, saying "I am not worthy." That was a true prayer of repentance, and his repentance was met by a father who welcomed him, just as our heavenly Father welcomes us when we repent.

The Greek word *metánoia* is used both in a narrower and a wider sense. Together with faith, *repent and believe* means personal sorrow and brokenness over sin. When it is used alone it includes both sorrow over sin and belief in the forgiveness of sins, as in the parable of the prodigal son and the lost coin.

*I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent (Luke 15:7). In the same way, I tell you, there is rejoicing in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents (Luke 15:10).*

When we are broken and sad over our own lives, when we see and acknowledge that we have lived against what God wants for us, we will experience deep sorrow over our own sin. A God-inspired sorrow and brokenness brings repentance, which leads to salvation. *Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death (2 Cor 7:10).*

Worldly sorrow is because of the law and is the result of our fear of God's wrath and punishment. Such a sorrow we find in people before conversion. This kind of sorrow we find only among believers. It is part of daily repentance and the journey toward

sanctification and holiness. It is not founded in the fear of punishment but out of love for God. God's children are broken over having acted against God; sorry to have displeased him with their sins. They are saddened that their sins have violated God. They do not want to sadden their Savior, who has given his own life as atonement for them, as 1 Tim 2:6 states: *... who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time.*

No one can live a life with and for God without repentance. *Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent (Acts 17: 29-30).*

God does not want anyone to spend eternity without him. That is why he has such patience with us! *The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Pet 3: 9).*

Repentance is not just a matter of changing sinful behavior. If you stop lying or cheating or stealing while you still *want* to lie, cheat and steal, nothing has really changed. Neither is it just being saddened by your wrong actions in those areas. Repentance is not something we can do by ourselves. If we try to become acceptable to God by lifting ourselves up by our bootstraps, we will inevitably fail.

It is God's spirit who convicts us of sin, righteousness and the coming judgment. In response to his nudging, we realize our need for godly sorrow and repentance. We cannot do it, but he can! The result is a change or a reformation of life as expressed in the story Jesus told of a father's two sons, who he had asked to work for him. *'I will not,' one of the sons answered, but later the son changed his mind and went (Matt 21:29).*

### *How do we get to the place of repentance?*

Sonia picked up the letters on her doormat as she opened the door to her apartment. Tired from a hard day's work, she casually tossed the fundraising letters in her wastebasket and placed the advertisements with coupons on her kitchen table. Then one letter caught her attention. She did not recognize the handwriting. There was no return address.

She took out a knife to open the letter and sat down at the kitchen table. As she slit the envelope open a check for \$1,500 fell out, along with a handwritten note. Amazed, she began to read:

"Dear Sonia, You have not heard from me for 9 years. In those days we knew each other well, and I know you were sure I was going to ask you the big question and we would marry soon after that."

Sonia began to cry. She remembered those days 9 years ago. Peter had been so kind. He brought her flowers. He said all the right things. They were so in love. She knew they would

be a couple. And then he was gone! Sonia never heard from him again. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months, and months into years. She had hoped, cried, and struggled against bitterness. She continued to read,

“I have a long overdue confession to make. I never loved you. I used you. Every time we were together and you went to another room or to the ladies room, I raided both your apartment and your wallet. Over the months we were together I stole \$750 from you. I did this to five other ladies as well. Last month I was confronted with my past. Not by anyone – except God. Someone gave me a New Testament and shared about Jesus Christ with me. As I committed my life to him, his Spirit began speaking to me. I knew I had to turn around or I could not even stand to live. I have been searching for the locations of the six ladies – including you – to first of all ask for forgiveness for all the hurt I caused you. I cannot make up for taking your happiness. But I can make good on everything I stole. I have doubled the amount – the check is enclosed. I am a changed man and I know that the Lord has forgiven me. My prayer is that you will be able to do the same – through the same power that transformed my life.”

*The word of God and the power of his spirit are the tools that God uses to bring us to repentance*

*But each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. Don't be deceived, my dear brothers and sisters. Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows (Jas 1: 14-17).*

Ephesians 5:10 encourages us to *find out what pleases the Lord*. Later on, Paul writes again to the Ephesians, *Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is (Eph 5:15-17).*

Nothing is more important than finding the way to repentance. But first we need to realize that we have not experienced repentance. This is fundamental because ever since the fall of humanity there is nothing in our history that has been more lacking.

It is incredible that we weep so easily over the difficulties in our lives, over things that have been done to us: our sorrows, grief, and disappointments. We always seem to think we are right, and we miss the point that we need to cry over our own lives.

Left to ourselves we are both self-centered and self-righteous. We prefer blaming others rather than ourselves. There are even times when we blame God, simply because we cannot understand his ways.

First, we need to accept that as a church, we have become generally unrepentant. Secondly, we should recognize that we cannot produce repentance ourselves. Thirdly, we need to turn to the Holy Spirit and ask him to produce repentance within us. He is the spirit of the