

## **CHAPTER 14**

### **STEP ONE IN DETAIL - REPENT**

*"...God...commands all people everywhere to repent.*

*Acts 17:30 (NIV)*

<sup>30</sup> *"Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, says the Lord God. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. <sup>31</sup> Cast away from you all the transgressions which you have committed against me, and get yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? <sup>32</sup> For I have no pleasure in the death of any one, says the Lord God; so turn, and live."*

*Ezekiel 18:30-32 (RSV)*

<sup>20</sup> *Then he began to upbraid the cities where most of his mighty works had been done, because they did not repent. <sup>21</sup> "Woe to you, Chora'zin! woe to you, Beth-sa'ida! for if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes.*

<sup>22</sup> *But I tell you, it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you.*

<sup>23</sup> *And you, Caper'na-um, will you be exalted to Heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades. For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day.*

<sup>24</sup> *But I tell you that it shall be more tolerable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom than for you."*

*Matthew 11:20-24 (RSV)*

<sup>12</sup> *"Even now," declares the LORD, "return to me with all your heart, with fasting and weeping and mourning."*

<sup>13</sup> *Rend your heart*

*and not your garments.*

*Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity.*

*Joel 2:12-13 (NIV)*

<sup>5</sup>*Then I said,*

*"Woe is me, for I am ruined!*

*Because I am a man of unclean lips,*

*And I live among a people of unclean lips;*

*For my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts."*

*Isaiah 6:5 (NASB)*

*There were some present at that very time who told him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered thus? <sup>3</sup> I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen upon whom the tower in Silo'am fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> I tell you, No; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish."*

*Luke 13:1-5 (RSV)*

<sup>46</sup>*He told them, "This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, <sup>47</sup>and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem.*

*Luke 24:46-47 (NIV)*

<sup>10</sup>*Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death.*

*2 Corinthians 7:10 (NIV)*

When a person makes a bad start in the Christian life, or if they fail to become a Christian at all, the most common reason, amongst those I have dealt with, is lack of genuine repentance. Repentance

about your sin is the foundation upon which the whole of your Christian life has to be built. It must come first and it must be solid, or else a person may fail to be genuinely born again.

Alternatively, even if they are somehow saved and they do become a Christian, inadequate repentance will mean that they will experience ongoing weakness and problems. They will fail to grow properly as a Christian because their foundation is inadequate. It would be like trying to build a three storey building on top soil without a foundation. Even if it could be built, it would not last.

The word *'repent'* literally means to change your mind. But, it must always involve a change in your actions as well. So, if a car is travelling along the A1 trunk road in a northbound direction then the driver can *"repent of driving north"* by coming off the road, turning round and driving back along the A1 southbound.

You cannot repent simply in your mind. That would be like deciding to go south, but instead carrying on driving north. That would be meaningless. Repentance must involve changed *conduct*, otherwise whatever you were thinking in your mind can't have been sincere. You must turn away from any idols that you may have set up, whatever they may be. You must also give up any behaviour which is an abomination to God, or indeed anything which grieves Him or is contrary to His commands:

***"Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God: Repent and turn away from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations. Ezekiel 14:6 (RSV)***

Repentance has a number of ingredients and all need to be present for repentance to be genuine. It must involve recognising that you truly are a sinner, and that you are wrong. You must see yourself as being at fault. For many people, this is a real stumbling block. They simply do not see themselves as blameworthy or sinful. They don't *want* to see it and *won't admit it*, even to themselves.

***<sup>12</sup>There is a kind who is pure in his own eyes,  
Yet is not washed from his filthiness.  
Proverbs 30:12 (NASB)***

Some of us even take the view that it is God who is wrong and that our own conduct, views and attitudes are correct. If we think that way we are profoundly mistaken and need to change:

***<sup>29</sup>"But the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not right.' Are My ways not right, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not right? <sup>30</sup>"Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct," declares the Lord GOD. "Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you.  
Ezekiel 18:29-30 (NASB)***

Some other people can just about manage to see themselves as sinful, but only to a slight degree. They will make all sorts of excuses to justify themselves and minimise their own guilt. They may even reluctantly acknowledge that they are a sinner. However, in their own private thoughts, they see themselves as not very sinful compared to other people. If so, that person will struggle to become a Christian. It reveals that they have no true understanding of what their own sin is or how appalling it is in God's eyes.

It isn't how we compare to other people that matters, but how we compare to Jesus. If we measure ourselves alongside Him, we will get the point and realise why God says we are sinful. But if we only compare ourselves to other people we can miss the point completely and imagine ourselves to be doing very well.

There are no such things as “*small sins*” or “*unimportant sins*”. All sin is terrible and is seen by God as a deadly poison which He cannot tolerate. For example, look at God’s view of sin in the book of Proverbs. Note the strength of God’s feelings on the subject:

*<sup>16</sup> There are six things the LORD hates,  
seven that are detestable to him:  
<sup>17</sup> haughty eyes,  
a lying tongue,  
hands that shed innocent blood,  
<sup>18</sup> a heart that devises wicked schemes,  
feet that are quick to rush into evil,  
<sup>19</sup> a false witness who pours out lies  
and a man who stirs up dissension among brothers.  
Proverbs 6:16-19 (NIV)*

*The LORD detests all the proud of heart.  
Be sure of this: They will not go unpunished  
Proverbs 16:5(NIV)*

We need to face this issue and work out whether we are really sinners or not. If you cannot grasp this you will not be able to get started in the Christian life. Or, if you do start then you will go forward in a crippled condition, unable to develop properly. You have got to abandon all ideas of self-righteousness. You are not righteous. Neither is anybody else.

You, like everybody else, are a deeply sinful person. We all have a heart that is rotten and corrupt. You and I are completely unworthy to be in God’s presence. Look how the Bible describes us:

*The heart is deceitful above all things  
and beyond cure  
Who can understand it?  
Jeremiah 17:9 (NIV)*

*<sup>2</sup> But your iniquities have separated  
you from your God;  
your sins have hidden his face from you,  
so that he will not hear.  
Isaiah 59:2 (NIV)*

It is therefore futile for you to compare yourself favourably with others and to feel reassured by that. Being better than others is not enough, even if you are ten times better than them. We are all like passengers on the Titanic without a place in the life boats. We are all going down, even if you are better than the rest of us. In that context it is irrelevant for any of us to argue that we are better than other people. Maybe you are better. Who knows? However, the chances are that you are not.

But if we are all on the Titanic as it is sinking, it would not matter anyway. Our situations are all identical. We all face God’s judgment and are all unacceptable to Him, whatever levels of merit or virtue we each have in ourselves. Perhaps it would help to convince you if you look at what the prophet Isaiah says about his own righteousness:

*All of us have become like one who is unclean,  
and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;  
we all shrivel up like a leaf,  
and like the wind our sins sweep us away.  
Isaiah 64:6 (NIV)*

Then remember what apostle Paul says about himself:

*Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners—of whom I am the worst.  
1 Timothy 1:15 (NIV)*

However, Paul’s statement that he was such a bad sinner was not because he never did anything good. It was because he realised that no matter how many good things he did, it could never make him righteous in God’s eyes. Look what he said about his own *good* deeds, not his bad deeds:

*<sup>4</sup>though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If anyone else thinks he has reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup>circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup>as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. <sup>7</sup>But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup>What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ.*

*Philippians 3:4-8 (NIV)*

Apostle Paul is describing what his own righteousness (not his bad behaviour) looks like in God's eyes. Even his best qualities and behaviour are described as being "loss", meaning of no value. In the King James translation Paul's meaning is expressed more clearly. It translates it as Paul saying that his own good works are 'dung'. The Greek word he uses actually means *human excrement*. Paul used very strong language to get the message across. The NIV tones it down, presumably to avoid giving offence.

This is apostle Paul talking about our best works, i.e. our best deeds, best behaviour and best thoughts. Even they, let alone our usual or worst standards, are insufficient. They are just excrement in comparison to God's holiness. That means that even at our best, on one of our best days, when we think we are acting at our best standard, we are still inadequate and unimpressive. In short, we have no righteousness at all in ourselves.

Think further about how God considers your sin. If it was true that God looks upon your sin or mine as being trivial, then why was Jesus Christ prepared to go to the cross and die to be punished for it? Your sin was sufficiently serious in the eyes of God the Father, the Son of God and the Holy Spirit, for them all to consider it necessary for Jesus, to go to the cross and die because of it. Therefore, how can it possibly be insignificant?

Jesus did not only die for people who do extraordinary sins on a large scale, like Adolf Hitler. He also died for the likes of you and me. We may not be famous or spectacular in our sinfulness. But we are equally unacceptable and lost from God's perspective. You, and I and Adolf Hitler are all going down together on the same Titanic, unless and until we repent.

Therefore, we must begin by taking a frank and realistic look at ourselves as we truly are. Decide now to abandon all delusions about yourself being righteous or being better than some other people. Consider the blunt way that Jesus spoke to people who were self-righteous. He had no time at all for self-righteousness.

Note also which group of people is most prone to self-righteousness, i.e. thinking more highly of themselves than they should. It is mainly those who are actively involved in *organised religion*. Thus it was the Scribes, Sadducees, Pharisees and Rabbis that Jesus usually criticised most sharply, not the ordinary people. Consider this story that Jesus told:

*<sup>9</sup> To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: <sup>10</sup> "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. <sup>11</sup> The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. <sup>12</sup> I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*

*<sup>13</sup> "But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to Heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' <sup>14</sup> "I tell you that this man, rather than the*

***other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."*** ***Luke 18:9-14 (NIV)***

The Pharisees belonged to the more conservative wing of Judaism, which believed most fully in the Old Testament. Their views were the closest to the truth. This man therefore had a good knowledge of the Bible. His beliefs and doctrines were more accurate than most people's. However, he also had an inflated view of his own righteousness.

So, when he went into the temple to pray he demonstrated that he had no idea how sinful he was. He mistakenly imagined himself to be better than the other man, merely because of what he knew and because of the prestige of the group he belonged to.

The tax collector's job involved dishonesty, corruption and collaboration with the Roman occupying forces. All of that made him despicable in the eyes of people around him. He therefore had no illusions about himself being good or superior. He clearly saw himself as a sinner. He knew that he had no righteousness to offer and could only rely on God's mercy. Jesus therefore said of him that he went home "justified" and forgiven, whereas the Pharisee did not.

Therefore, take on board the point of the story. Jesus told it so that you and I should copy the tax collector's attitude, not the Pharisee's. We are to regard this tax collector as our model when it comes to repentance. (though not when it comes to his previous life, prior to his repentance).

Even today, it is still true that it is 'religious' people who find it hardest to repent and be saved. I find it hard to talk about sin to people in churches. They tend to resent it and feel that it is not relevant to them because they go to church. But they are very mistaken. There is great sinfulness in all our hearts, even if we have been going to church all our lives, and even if we are church leaders:

***"Both prophet and priest are godless;  
even in my temple I find their wickedness,"  
declares the LORD.***

***Jeremiah 23:11 (NIV)***

***The Lord says:  
"These people come near to me with their mouth  
and honour me with their lips,  
but their hearts are far from me.  
Their worship of me  
is made up only of rules taught by men.***

***Isaiah 29:13 (NIV)***

### **Respectability is not the same as righteousness**

Criminals, prostitutes, drug addicts and people who have obviously failed or fallen in a very noticeable way often find it much easier to repent. They have fewer illusions about themselves. If you are, on the face of it, a more "respectable" person, then beware. You may be in real danger of not being able to see your own sinfulness. You may mistake your own respectability for righteousness.

They are not the same thing. No matter how respectable you seem to be, even if you are a doctor or a vicar or a Prime Minister, there is absolutely no righteousness in you at all. You will never find salvation until you realise that:

*<sup>8</sup>If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. <sup>9</sup>If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. <sup>10</sup>If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.*  
*1 John 1:8-10 (NIV)*

*<sup>40</sup> Let us examine our ways and test them,  
and let us return to the LORD.  
Lamentations 3:40 (NIV)*

We have to get the message that we are sinful and that our own sin, not just other people's sin, is serious. Then our repentance must involve a genuine sorrow for that sin and a real apology to God for it. We cannot simply acknowledge it casually as if we had bumped into someone's trolley in a supermarket where we instinctively say a quick and cheerful "Sorry". Our sorrow and repentance towards God needs to be deep, heartfelt and real.

It should be like that of a man who, through his own negligence or drunken driving, has killed a couple's only child on the road and the Court tells him to go and apologise personally to the parents of that child. Picture that scene, and imagine how you would feel if it was you making that apology, in the parents' living room, surrounded by framed photographs of their dead child. Think about how you would speak to those parents and how you would phrase your apology.

What would be the tone in which you would ask for their forgiveness? Can you even contemplate doing it glibly or light-heartedly? Imagine saying something like this: "Yes, it's a shame I killed your son, but these things happen. I do generally tend to drive more safely than other people most of the time." It would be totally inappropriate. The apology would need to be deep and genuine or it would be only an insult.

That depth of remorse and grief is what we ought to express towards God for what we have done to Him and to our fellow men, whom He created. Even more relevantly, it is partly your sin and mine which caused God's own Son to have to be crucified. That is an awesome responsibility bearing down on your shoulders.

You, like me, are partly to blame for Jesus needing to die. Therefore the illustration I used above about the parents of the child you had killed is, to some extent, an appropriate analogy for how we need to speak to God the Father about our sin. It brought about the death of His only begotten Son. So, when you repent towards God the Father for your sins, remember what your sin did to His Son. Try to hold that in your mind, and reflect on it. It will help you to guard against glibness.

Look at the tone and depth of King David's repentance which he wrote about in Psalm 51:

*<sup>1</sup> Have mercy on me, O God,  
according to your unfailing love;  
according to your great compassion  
blot out my transgressions.*

*<sup>2</sup> Wash away all my iniquity  
and cleanse me from my sin*

*<sup>3</sup> For I know my transgressions,  
and my sin is always before me.*

*<sup>4</sup> Against you, you only, have I sinned  
and done what is evil in your sight;  
so you are right in your verdict  
and justified when you judge.*

*<sup>5</sup> Surely I was sinful at birth,*

*sinful from the time my mother conceived me.*  
<sup>6</sup> *Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;*  
*you taught me wisdom in that secret place.*  
<sup>7</sup> *Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;*  
*wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.*  
<sup>8</sup> *Let me hear joy and gladness;*  
*let the bones you have crushed rejoice.*  
<sup>9</sup> *Hide your face from my sins*  
*and blot out all my iniquity.*  
<sup>10</sup> *Create in me a pure heart, O God,*  
*and renew a steadfast spirit within me.*  
*Psalm 51:1-10 (NIV)*

Look also at the prophet Isaiah's attitude towards his own sinfulness:

*"Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."*  
*Isaiah 6:5 (NIV)*

Consider also the attitude of the group to whom apostle Peter preached for the first time in Acts Chapter 2. Peter tells them straight-forwardly who Jesus really is and how wrongly they had acted in crucifying Him. Here are some excerpts from his speech. Note how direct he is and also the effect it has on them in bringing them to a place of godly sorrow and conviction:

<sup>22</sup> *"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. <sup>23</sup>This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. <sup>24</sup>But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.*  
*Acts 2:22-24 (NIV)*

Peter then went on to say:

<sup>36</sup> *"Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ." <sup>37</sup>When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup>Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. <sup>39</sup>The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call." <sup>40</sup>With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."*  
*Acts 2:36-40 (NIV)*

Peter's straight talking touched their hearts and convicted them in their consciences so that 3000 people were moved to repent and believe in Jesus on that day. They were cut to the heart by the gravity of their own sin, and by the directness of Peter's preaching.

But contrast that attitude with what Jeremiah says is the heart attitude of most human beings, i.e. shameless, brazen, indifference to God, with no repentance for sin:

*Are they ashamed of their loathsome conduct?*  
*No, they have no shame at all;*  
*they do not even know how to blush.*  
*So they will fall among the fallen;*  
*they will be brought down when I punish them,"*  
*says the LORD.*  
*Jeremiah 6:15 (NIV)*

## Repentance involves turning around and changing

However, repentance is even more than just acknowledging our sin, feeling sorry about it and genuinely apologising to God. It also involves a definite decision to *turn away* from our sin. That does not mean that we must never sin again, or that if we do ever sin again then we have not genuinely repented.

Nobody can manage not to sin ever again. The fact is that we will carry on sinning until the day we die, even if we do genuinely repent. What is meant is that at the point of your repentance you must genuinely resolve to yourself that you will reject sin and *aim* to turn away from it and to change your life, with God's help.

Salvation is by God's grace, through faith. However, real faith and real repentance always produce a changed life and changed conduct. Thus, although we are not saved by our good deeds or our changed life, a truly saved person will always go on to change in their attitudes and conduct and to "bear fruit". That is why Jesus said "you will know them by their fruit".

Look at how James explains it. This passage from James is relevant to both repentance and faith. For each of these, God will judge the genuineness of it by what we *do*, not what we *say*:

*<sup>14</sup>What good is it, my brothers, if a man claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save him? <sup>15</sup>Suppose a brother or sister is without clothes and daily food. <sup>16</sup>If one of you says to him, "Go, I wish you well; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about his physical needs, what good is it? <sup>17</sup>In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead. <sup>18</sup>But someone will say, "You have faith; I have deeds." Show me your faith without deeds, and I will show you my faith by what I do. <sup>19</sup>You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder.*  
*James 2:14-19 (NIV)*

See also what the prophet Ezekiel says. In this passage he is speaking directly on God's behalf, i.e. voicing God's words to Israel and to us. Again, it is made clear that the genuineness of our repentance will be shown by what we *do* and by what we *get rid of* in our lives:

*<sup>30</sup>"Therefore, O house of Israel, I will judge you, each one according to his ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. <sup>31</sup>Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? <sup>32</sup> For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!"*  
*Ezekiel 18:30-32 (NIV)*

God wants us to actually change, in our actions and in our heart attitudes. The responsibility is on us to *want* that change and to *seek to do what God wants* instead of what we have been doing previously. Repentance needs to be seen much more as something we do, rather than just something we say. Look how John the Baptist expressed this point. He didn't mince his words:

*<sup>7</sup>But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? <sup>8</sup>Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. <sup>9</sup>And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. <sup>10</sup>The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.*

*Matthew 3:7-10 (NIV)*

The key phrase John the Baptist used was that we must "bear fruit". That is that our repentance must be evidenced by a changed life. That means that we stop doing certain things and start doing other

things, in such a way and to such an extent, that it is apparent to others. If your repentance does not produce any “fruit” then John the Baptist would not view it as valid or real.

### **Don’t be “stiff necked” or stubborn about repenting**

*Do not be stiff-necked, as your fathers were; submit to the LORD. Come to the sanctuary, which he has consecrated forever. Serve the LORD your God, so that his fierce anger will turn away from you.* 2 Chronicles 30:8 (NIV)

Often, the greatest obstacle to repentance, besides pride, is stubbornness. We can know that we are wrong or sinful but refuse to admit it. Don’t be like that. When you know something is true about yourself, just admit it to God and repent of it. If you are willing to humble yourself and repent in that way, then God will hear you and respond to you graciously:

*Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before God when you heard what he spoke against this place and its people, and because you humbled yourself before me and tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD 2 Chronicles 34:27 (NIV)*

Also, we need to remember that God wants us to change not only in our actions, but in our *reactions*. We are answerable for how we react to the things others do and to sins committed against us. Even then, in fact especially then, God expects us to show restraint and self-control, not to lash out in rage and fury.

So, look at that in yourself and ask whether, when under pressure, or facing provocation, you lash out and lose your self-control. Or, do you keep your temper and respond in a reasonable way? It is a good litmus test. Remember that just because someone has wronged you, it doesn't mean you are free to react in any way you wish. You are always responsible, both for your actions and your reactions.

### **Practical repentance – steps we need to take**

In practical terms, you need to take real steps to do things differently and to change your lifestyle and behaviour. If you have any occult or pornographic books or DVDs then burn them. If you are engaged in sexual activity with your boyfriend or girlfriend or with someone else’s husband or wife, then stop immediately. If you are living together with someone you are not married to, then move out. Or ask them to do so, if it is your house.

NB. It would not be a good idea to solve such a problem by getting married to a non-Christian person you may be living with. It may mean you would no longer be having sex outside of marriage, but it would also mean that you would be marrying a non-Christian. We must never do that as it is a recipe for disaster:

*Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness?* 2 Corinthians 6:14 (NIV)

If however you are already married to an unbeliever then apostle Paul says you should stay with them (if they will let you do so) and seek to share the good news of Jesus with them too:

*<sup>12</sup>To the rest I say this (I, not the Lord): If any brother has a wife who is not a believer and she is willing to live with him, he must not divorce her. <sup>13</sup>And if a woman has a husband who is not a believer and he is willing to live with her, she must not divorce him. <sup>14</sup>For the unbelieving husband has been sanctified through his wife, and the unbelieving wife has been sanctified through her*

*believing husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. <sup>15</sup>But if the unbeliever leaves, let him do so. A believing man or woman is not bound in such circumstances; God has called us to live in peace.* *1 Corinthians 7:12-15 (NIV)*

If you have been stealing then you need to stop and you need to return the goods that you have stolen, or pay for them. If you have been gossiping then you need to stop and put right the damage that you have caused, by telling the truth where you have falsely slandered people. Your sins might also mean that you need to go and personally apologise to some of the people that you have wronged.

This will not always be possible, because you will have wronged so many people in your life that you cannot possibly find them all and speak to each one. It would take years, so don't apologise to everyone. Plus, don't go and apologise to someone if it will only cause them pain and stir up more trouble or bitterness, for example, if something is firmly in the past. Ask God to help you to know which people need you to go to them and which don't.

For a very practical example of what real repentance is like, look at Zaccheus, the corrupt tax collector, whom Jesus met in Jericho. Jesus had dinner at his home and he was so convicted that he made a dramatic and decisive repentance and he showed it by his actions:

*<sup>1</sup>He entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup>And there was a man called by the name of Zaccheus; he was a chief tax collector and he was rich. <sup>3</sup>Zaccheus was trying to see who Jesus was, and was unable because of the crowd, for he was small in stature. <sup>4</sup>So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree in order to see Him, for He was about to pass through that way. <sup>5</sup>When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house." <sup>6</sup>And he hurried and came down and received Him gladly.*

*<sup>7</sup>When they saw it, they all began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." <sup>8</sup>Zaccheus stopped and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much." <sup>9</sup>And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham." *Luke 19:1-9 (NASB)**

### **Make sure you really mean it**

God knows those people who are genuine and those who don't really mean it. He knows whether you have made a real commitment to turn away from sin and to change your life, or whether you are just play-acting. If you were to tell me that you had repented, I would not know whether you really had or not. I have no way of knowing for certain what is really going on in your heart.

However God knows, and what's more, *you* know. You do not know if anyone else is genuine, but you do know whether you are genuine when you say something. If you are not genuine, then do not pretend to repent. Only repent if you mean it sincerely. Otherwise, you are just mocking God and it will not be effective anyway, because God knows where you really stand:

*"And you, my son Solomon, acknowledge the God of your father, and serve him with wholehearted devotion and with a willing mind, for the LORD searches every heart and understands every motive behind the thoughts. If you seek him, he will be found by you; but if you forsake him, he will reject you forever." *1 Chronicles 28:9 (NIV)**

Repentance does not need to be done in any fancy way or with any particular formula or elaborate form of words. It does however need to be sincere. Only you can know whether you are. If you

aren't, then ask God to help you to see the full gravity and dreadfulness of your sin. Remember, God is watching and testing you to see whether you are genuine and whether your repentance is truly heartfelt:

***"This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.  
Isaiah 66:2 (NIV)***

Repentance is probably the most neglected aspect of Christianity, at least in the Western world and in modern times. In previous centuries when the gospel was preached, sin, judgment and repentance were spoken about openly. Now, they are glossed over, if they are even mentioned at all. It is partly because they are so under-emphasised, even ignored, in the modern church that I have tried to emphasise them so strongly within this book. In part I am trying to redress the balance.

Moreover, it is clearly right that repentance should be emphasised as being the foundation for salvation. That is precisely what God does in the New Testament. If you look at Matthew's Gospel you will see that before Jesus began His public ministry, John the Baptist was sent on ahead of Him to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist was, in effect, the last of the Old Testament prophets. In a sense, he was the greatest of them all. He was sent by God to go ahead of Jesus Christ and to prepare the people for Him.

John the Baptist therefore had a ministry that went on for some years. He spent most of His time out in the open countryside, not in grand buildings. Probably more than a million people went to hear him in the open air and to baptise themselves in rivers like the Jordan to demonstrate their repentance. It is no coincidence that the very first recorded word spoken in public by John the Baptist was "repent":

***<sup>1</sup>In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the Desert of Judea <sup>2</sup>and saying, "Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is near."  
Matthew 3:1-2 (NIV)***

The ministry of John the Baptist was focused very strongly upon repentance. He spoke of it with great urgency and emphasis. He did so because God wanted to ensure that genuine repentance was in place as a solid foundation before Jesus Christ began His public teaching ministry and before people were invited to follow and believe in Him. In other words, Jesus' ministry was built upon the foundation that John the Baptist built, namely repentance.

If that does not persuade you to emphasise repentance and to put it first, take a look at the first words that Jesus Himself spoke publicly in His own ministry. He too began it with the word "repent", just like John the Baptist did:

***"Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand".  
Matthew 4:17 (NIV)***

Jesus deliberately chose to ensure that the word 'repent' was also the first word He uttered publicly in His own ministry. As with John the Baptist, it was no accident. It reaffirmed the emphasis that God places on repentance as the foundation for everything else in the Christian life.

Three and a half years later it is, again, no coincidence that the apostle Peter used similar words when addressing the crowds at the very beginning of his ministry:

***<sup>38</sup>Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.  
Acts 2:38 (NIV)***

***Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord,***  
*Acts 3:19(NIV)*

### **The downplaying of repentance in the modern church**

It is equally no coincidence that the Devil has done everything he can to downgrade the importance of repentance. He has managed to persuade multitudes of people that it does not really matter much and that preachers should not speak about it or emphasise it. He has had great success in the Western church in getting many Christian leaders to leave repentance out of their message altogether, or to just mention it briefly, with awkwardness and apology, rather than boldness and urgency.

One of the reasons why Christian ministers and teachers choose not to talk about repentance is that they are too embarrassed and afraid to do so. There is the fear that it will offend people and be controversial. They also fear that it will make them appear old-fashioned or even judgmental. Yet, our duty is to explain the gospel in the same way that Jesus explained it. We have no right, or need, to change it or to 'improve' it.

Note what apostle Paul says when he is on trial before King Agrippa. He is explaining what he has been preaching. See how Paul also emphasises repentance right at the outset, as the very first thing he tackles when he preaches the gospel, just like John the Baptist, Jesus and Peter:

***<sup>19</sup>"So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from Heaven. <sup>20</sup>First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.***

*Acts 26:19-20 (NIV)*

See also how apostle Paul says that we should prove our repentance by our deeds, i.e. by what we do. Mere speech is no proof that a person has really repented. There needs to be some visible and practical change. Something needs to stop, or begin, or change. When God sees that He can be satisfied that our repentance is real.

In the past, when seeking to explain the gospel to somebody I used to mainly look for signs that the person truly believed. Now I focus much more on whether there is any evidence of repentance. That is much easier to assess than the person's beliefs.

Therefore when you repent take real steps to change your lifestyle. Get rid of any known sin that you are involved in. You can only begin with what you know about. From that point on God will bring to your mind, one by one, other sins that you need to repent of and actively put right. But He will not deal with it all in one go. He will take it in stages, provided that you genuinely begin by repenting to the best of your ability at that point.

Repentance is not a negative thing. It is actually very positive and joyful. The experience of Ebenezer Scrooge in 'A Christmas Carol' is an inspired illustration of what repentance really is and the joy it brings. If you are unsaved, repentance leads to forgiveness and the starting of a relationship with God. If you are already a genuine believer then repentance restores closeness with God, which sin always spoils:

***If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.***  
*1 John 1:9 (NIV)*

***<sup>12</sup>As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.***

*Psalms 103:12 (NASB)*

## **Don't be phoney or hypocritical**

God sees and knows everything. There is no point even attempting to trick Him or hide things from Him, hoping He won't notice. He can never be deceived and He never misses anything:

*Nevertheless, God's solid foundation stands firm, sealed with this inscription: "The Lord knows those who are his," and, "Everyone who confesses the name of the Lord must turn away from wickedness."*  
2 Timothy 2:19 (NIV)

There are many people in churches who say that they are Christians but are living a double life. They attend church, participate in worship, listen to teaching, and even teach others. Yet, they brazenly lie, cheat, gossip, engage in adultery, or fornication (sex outside of marriage) are lazy, selfish, manipulative, crafty and self-indulgent. This kind of hypocrisy is not something exceptional or rare. It is commonplace.

Insincere, unrepentant Christians make poor employees or work colleagues. They also bring dishonour to the name of Jesus through their attitudes and life style. I am not just speaking about the day to day ways in which we all fail by losing our tempers or being unreasonable, although that is bad enough. I mean blatant and shameless sin, which they have no intention of doing anything about, and for which they feel no sorrow or conviction.

If you challenge their behaviour they will not feel ashamed. On the contrary, they will be defensive and angry and will brazenly deny it, even if they are clearly guilty. They will often even turn on you resentfully and attack you verbally. This happened to me once when I challenged the leader of the church that I was in at that time. I was chairman of the trustees of the church, responsible for paying salaries etc.

I went to see the leader privately, one to one, in the biblical way, as out in Matthew 18:15. I raised with him my growing concerns about his worldly lifestyle and lack of personal honesty. He was developing a reputation in the town as a liar and as a carnal, boastful person. I tried to appeal to him in private, as gently and politely as I could, to look at his life and to repent. But he would not. He was defiant and just attacked me verbally and then tried to undermine me to others.

I then went to speak to the other leaders in the church about this, in the way we are told to do by Jesus in Matthew 18:16. To my surprise, they weren't interested either. They just criticised me for asking questions. Some of them were very hostile, especially one particular man in the leadership team. I couldn't understand it. After some months of this conflict we left that church.

Some time later it all made a lot more sense when it emerged that the leader had left his wife for another woman, and was giving up church ministry. What's more, it emerged that the hostile man in the senior leadership team had also been involved for some time in an adulterous affair. No wonder he had been so touchy about the questions I was putting to the leader. He had been doing even worse things himself, although I did not know it at the time.

## **Do not be brass faced about your sin**

In many churches today, even among some leaders, there is blatant ongoing sin, for which those individuals feel no shame. They are not repenting and don't intend to repent. They are "brass-faced". That brazenness comes from repeatedly refusing to repent. It begins in smaller ways, as people sin here and there and "get away with it". At least they imagine they are getting away with it, because other people don't find out and don't stop them. So they carry on and commit bigger sins, and more frequently.

Whilst this is going on, God will speak to the person through their conscience. The still, small voice of the Holy Spirit will speak quietly to the person to urge them to stop, repent, seek forgiveness and start afresh. But, the person ignores God's voice and suppresses it. They do not want to stop. So they repeatedly ignore their conscience and God's voice.

Unbelievers do this too, but my point is that even believers, and those who call themselves believers, do it. It is a very dangerous thing to do, because although God will try, again and again, to speak to you and to urge you to repent, if you persist in ignoring His voice and go on sinning, then there will come a day when you will no longer be able to hear Him. Moreover, God will eventually step back from you and let you pursue the foolish and sinful path that you have chosen for yourself:

*<sup>12</sup>"So I gave them over to the stubbornness of their heart,  
To walk in their own devices.*

*Psalm 81:12 (NASB)*

When that happens, it is as if your conscience is switched off, as you might turn off a radio. The conscience (or radio) is still there, but not functioning. It cannot pick up the 'transmission'. The biblical phrase for this is that the conscience is "seared". That means it becomes leathery and hard, like skin that has been branded with a hot iron. Look how Zechariah describes it:

*<sup>8</sup> And the word of the LORD came again to Zechariah: <sup>9</sup> "This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. <sup>10</sup> Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor. In your hearts do not think evil of each other.' <sup>11</sup> "But they refused to pay attention; stubbornly they turned their backs and stopped up their ears. <sup>12</sup> They made their hearts as hard as flint and would not listen to the law or to the words that the LORD Almighty had sent by his Spirit through the earlier prophets. So the LORD Almighty was very angry. <sup>13</sup> " 'When I called, they did not listen; so when they called, I would not listen,' says the LORD Almighty. *Zechariah 7:8-13 (NIV)**

This is a terrible condition to be in. If you are not listening to God, it is as if you are flying with your radio and your instruments switched off. In the end, it will result in disaster. God will eventually bring along someone or something to expose your sin and to bring judgment. Sometimes, when disaster comes and a marriage or a ministry is destroyed, the person finally repents and sees what a fool they have been.

However, usually they do not, even at that stage. Instead, they abandon even the pretence of being a Christian. Such people find it very hard later on to soften their hearts towards God and seek His forgiveness. They could, if they wanted to, but they usually *don't choose to*. The hardness of their hearts, which has built up over years of disobedience, becomes almost incurable.

### **Do not harden your heart towards God**

We all need to beware of hardening our hearts. I have seen it in some surprising people. The best protection against it is to deliberately soften your heart towards God and to want to hear His voice. Make it your aim to listen to and obey your conscience whenever God speaks to you through it. If you do these things His voice will grow clearer and louder, like a radio being tuned in better and turned up in volume. Note what apostle Paul says:

*<sup>4</sup> 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? <sup>5</sup> But because of your stubbornness and*

*your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God's wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed.*  
*Romans 2:4-5 (NIV)*

To illustrate this further, look at the famous “parable of the sower” which Jesus told. That’s what people often call it, but it would be more accurate to call it the *parable of the soils*, because that is what it is really about:

*<sup>1</sup>That same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the lake. <sup>2</sup>Such large crowds gathered around him that he got into a boat and sat in it, while all the people stood on the shore. <sup>3</sup>Then he told them many things in parables, saying: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. <sup>4</sup>As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. <sup>5</sup>Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. <sup>6</sup>But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.*

*<sup>7</sup>Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants. <sup>8</sup>Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown. <sup>9</sup>He who has ears, let him hear." <sup>10</sup>The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"*

*<sup>11</sup>He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of Heaven has been given to you, but not to them. <sup>12</sup>Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. <sup>13</sup>This is why I speak to them in parables: "Though seeing, they do not see; though hearing, they do not hear or understand. <sup>14</sup>In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: " "You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.*

*<sup>15</sup>For this people's heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.' <sup>16</sup>But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. <sup>17</sup>For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.*

*<sup>18</sup>"Listen then to what the parable of the sower means: <sup>19</sup>When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. <sup>20</sup>The one who received the seed that fell on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. <sup>21</sup>But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. <sup>22</sup>The one who received the seed that fell among the thorns is the man who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful. <sup>23</sup>But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown."*

*Matthew 13:1-23 (NIV)*

In the parable that Jesus tells, the seed represents God's Word and the four types of soil represent four types of person, or rather four types of heart attitude:

#### **a) The Path**

This is the person whose heart is so hard, unrepentant and indifferent that the 'seed' of God's Word cannot even germinate. The birds just eat it up and it has no effect. It is as if God's Word just bounces off them.

**b) Rocky Ground**

This person is not quite so hard or indifferent as the person whose heart is like the path. Here, although his heart is stony, there is at least a thin layer of poor quality soil. So the seed of God's Word can germinate, but it cannot grow for long, because it cannot take root.

**a) Soil full of weeds**

This weed-infested soil represents people who receive God's Word and it begins to germinate and grow but, in the end, it is choked and crowded out by other competing interests or priorities. It could be career, worldly friends, a carnal relationship with an unbeliever, or the pursuit of money. It could be anything that captivates and distracts you.

**b) The Good Soil**

This is the humble person whose heart is soft, teachable and willing to repent. The seed therefore germinates, and grows to a full sized plant. This person continues as a Christian and bears much fruit in their life over the years.

**How this applies to you – make the effort to dig, weed and soften the “soil” of your heart**

The kind of heart you have developed over your life so far is largely what determines how you respond to God's Word when you hear it. The point of the parable is that it is up to you to work on the 'soil' of your own heart. You must dig it and soften it to enable yourself to hear and act on God's Word. The responsibility for the state of your heart is yours. It is not something beyond your control. It may be a painful and difficult process to change it, but it is worth the effort.

If your heart is hard and stony like the path or the rocky ground, then God's Word, (represented by the seed) will not be able to get through to you in order to germinate. The “birds” will eat it before it has any effect on you. Or, even if God's Word begins to affect you, like the seed that germinates in the rocky ground, it cannot put down any deep roots in your life, because your heart is too hard.

If you are like that, make a decision now to persistently and deliberately do everything you can to soften your heart. You can do that by taking every opportunity to repent, to obey God, to humble yourself, and to read the Bible. As you do those things diligently it is just like a gardener digging into rocky ground, taking out stones and putting in compost and manure to improve it. As he does that, and keeps on doing it, the soil will steadily improve. Our hearts are just the same. It is our responsibility to soften it and not to let it remain hard or stony.

If the problem is weeds, the gardener tackles it by removing and preventing them so that his soil has fewer of them. You can do the same by removing things from your life which you know are likely to distract you or lead you into temptation or bad company. You might not have realised that God expects you to do anything about those things, but He does.

If not, why bother to tell the parable? There is no point telling us that the condition of the 'soil' of our hearts is what determines whether we succeed in the Christian life unless there is some way of improving that soil. There clearly is. Look at King David's experience of how it felt to openly confess his sins to God and get them dealt with, as compared to how it felt if he kept them hidden:

*<sup>3</sup>When I kept silent about my sin, my body wasted away  
Through my groaning all day long.*

*<sup>4</sup>For day and night Your hand was heavy upon me;  
My vitality was drained away as with the fever heat of summer. Selah.*

*<sup>5</sup>I acknowledged my sin to You,  
And my iniquity I did not hide;*

***I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD";  
And You forgave the guilt of my sin. Selah.  
Therefore, let everyone who is godly pray to You in a time when You may be found;  
Surely in a flood of great waters they will not reach him.***

***Psalm 32:3-6 (NASB)***

Note though that we need to repent while we have the chance to do so because the time for doing so can be lost. Therefore, the right time to repent is always now. Never postpone it:

***Seek the LORD while He may be found;  
Call upon Him while He is near.***

***Let the wicked forsake his way  
And the unrighteous man his thoughts;  
And let him return to the LORD,  
And He will have compassion on him,  
And to our God,  
For He will abundantly pardon.***

***Isaiah 55:6-7 (NASB)***

***Harvest is past, summer is ended,  
And we are not saved."***

***Jeremiah 8:20 (NASB)***

Therefore focus on softening your heart. Work at learning how to humble yourself and to confess your sins. Keep away from temptations, bad influences or immoral TV programs. Reset your computer to block all pornographic content, as you would set it for a child. That will keep temptation away and prevent any problems developing. Continually repent and confess your sins, instead of hiding or denying them. Regularly ask God to help you to soften your heart and to make you more conscious of your sin and of His coming judgment.

Ask Him to increase your ability to hear Him speaking to you through your conscience. He will quickly respond to prayers like that and your heart will change. As it does, you will succeed more and more in becoming a genuine Christian and a real disciple.

***He who conceals his sins does not prosper,  
but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.***

***Blessed is the man who always fears the LORD,  
but he who hardens his heart falls into trouble.***

***Proverbs 28:13-14 (NIV)***

Also, learn to ask God to give you a correct and realistic view of yourself, your smallness and how brief your life is. Realising that will help you repent and will also reduce your pride and self-sufficiency. Consider the following passages:

***Show me, O LORD, my life's end and the  
number of my days; let me know how fleeting is  
my life. You have made my days a mere  
handbreadth; the span of my years is as  
nothing before you. Each man's life is but a  
breath..... Man is a mere phantom as he goes  
to and fro He bustles about, but only in vain; he  
heaps up wealth, not knowing who will get it.***

***Psalm 39:4-6 (NIV)***

***The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken  
spirit; a broken and contrite heart  
O God, thou wilt not despise.***

***Psalm 51:17 (RSV)***

*You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.  
Jeremiah 29:13 (NIV)*

*No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.  
1 Corinthians 10:13 (NIV)*

The point of this last verse is that it is possible to avoid particular sins *if we want to*. Though we will face temptation, God has promised that He will help us to find a way out, or way of escape, if we *want* Him to. The snag is that often we do not actually want to avoid the sin.

The truth is *we like our sins*. Therefore we prefer to yield to the temptation. If we change our attitude and seek God's help, we can really start to win victories over sins and habits. We won't become perfect, but we can make progress. But, we have to want it, and that is far from automatic.

A person can easily "play at" Christianity, attending church and saying all the right sounding phrases, but not genuinely wanting to repent. Many people have a curiosity about the gospel. God may be drawing them to Himself but, because their hearts are hard and cold, they do not respond to God. A good example of that attitude is the Roman governor, Felix. He liked to talk to apostle Paul, when Paul was in prison:

*<sup>22</sup>Then Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. "When Lysias the commander comes," he said, "I will decide your case." <sup>23</sup>He ordered the centurion to keep Paul under guard but to give him some freedom and permit his friends to take care of his needs. <sup>24</sup>Several days later Felix came with his wife Drusilla, who was a Jewess. He sent for Paul and listened to him as he spoke about faith in Christ Jesus.*

*<sup>25</sup>As Paul discoursed on righteousness, self-control and the judgment to come, Felix was afraid and said, "That's enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you." <sup>26</sup>At the same time he was hoping that Paul would offer him a bribe, so he sent for him frequently and talked with him. <sup>27</sup>When two years had passed, Felix was succeeded by Porcius Festus, but because Felix wanted to grant a favour to the Jews, he left Paul in prison.*

*Acts 24:22-27 (NIV)*

Felix had a growing understanding. And he had an outstanding teacher in Paul. He also felt conviction and knew he was hearing the truth. But he still held back. There is no evidence that he ever repented or became a Christian, despite two years contact with the apostle Paul. What a waste of a chance to really learn about God's Word and to grow as a Christian! Felix apparently threw it all away by choosing not to repent.

### **The way your awareness of sin will increase in future**

It is only after you become a Christian and begin the process of maturing, or sanctification, that you will realise just how sinful you really are. Whatever level of sinfulness you may think you have at the moment, you will have underestimated it. The longer you go on in the Christian life the more acutely aware you become of the true extent of your own sinfulness.

Awareness of sin is a little like consciousness of the bacteria on your hands. The average school boy would probably not give them a thought. He would not even be aware of bacteria at all, or care about them, even if told. However, his mother would be much more aware of bacteria on her hands and would give it some serious thought. So, her hands would be cleaner than her young son's hands, and

have fewer bacteria. Yet she would be more concerned about their cleanliness and would pay more attention when handling things than her son does.

If however we were then to look at a professional chef, his hands would be even cleaner than the mother's hands, having fewer bacteria. Yet he would be even more concerned than her about the bacteria that remain, and would consider them an even bigger problem.

However, if we were then to look at a consultant surgeon, perhaps one who operates on tiny babies born prematurely, we may well find that before operating he washes his hands with the utmost carefulness for many minutes and thus has even fewer bacteria than a chef. Yet the few remaining germs on his hands would cause him even greater concern still. He would be acutely conscious of his hands and their cleanliness and the vital need to disinfect them. It would be at the forefront of his mind every day when at work.

That analogy works quite well to show how a Christian, as he matures in the Christian life, actually sins less in absolute terms. He gradually gains mastery over bad habits, thought patterns, and attitudes and begins to slowly weed them out, or reduce them, with God's help. Yet, even though the sin in his life is getting less than it used to be in absolute terms, the fact that he is maturing means his ability to see his own sin increases.

Also his concern about his own sin increases. Therefore it is ironic that even though the level of sin gets less and less *in absolute terms*, a real Christian becomes more and more concerned about it *in relative terms*.

So, practically speaking, you have to begin by facing up squarely to the reality of your own sin and your need for repentance. If you do not get this right, then you will not get anything right. You may fail even to become a Christian. Or, if you do, then only a very weak one. If you can get this right however, and repent properly, then you will make excellent progress in the Christian life. You will rapidly mature in your first one to two years.

Repentance is a little bit like the elastic in a catapult. The more you pull back the elastic, i.e. the stronger the repentance, the farther you will be propelled forward in the early stages of the Christian life. The less however that you pull back the elastic in terms of your repentance, the more likely it is that you will make a feeble start. There will be no propulsion to get you started, or momentum to keep you going.

### **The vital importance of forgiving other people**

We have looked closely at the need for us to repent of our sins, but what about other people's sins towards us? What should we do? What should our attitude and response be? The answer is clear, but it's not easy. We are commanded to forgive others. Then we are to leave it to God to judge and punish them if they do not repent, or to bless and forgive them if they do:

***Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord.*** ***Romans 12:19 (NIV)***

If we do not forgive others, and instead hold onto the bitterness and resentment and nurse our anger, it grows inside us like a tumour. That cancer of bitterness will not necessarily hurt the other person, but it will certainly damage you. It will affect, and even ruin, your life and will rob you of peace and joy. That is true even if the person who wronged you is wicked and you were an innocent party. The same principle still applies.

Forgiveness therefore means letting it go and handing over to God the responsibility for judging and punishing the wrong done to you. He has promised He will do that. Therefore, if you know He is going to judge it all, then why do you need to usurp the responsibility for doing so? You are the wrong person to judge or punish the wrongdoer. You do not have total wisdom, knowledge and understanding as God does. He knows exactly how to handle it, and He will do so, in His time, not yours.

If you let go of the wrong and hand it all over to God, you will be set free from bitterness. You will feel better and a burden will lift. This is true of any wrong done to you, whether large or small. So you will benefit if you forgive everyone who has wronged you. If you seek to be the 'judge and executioner' yourself then you are usurping God's role. It's as if you are saying to God "*No, I will be the judge, not you. I will repay them myself*". That would be rebellion.

Tragically, when we are wronged by others, it can often lead us into sin ourselves as we adopt that attitude of seizing God's role as judge. Even worse it can cause us to sin in other ways too as we seek to get even, which can often mean repaying one wrong with another wrong. Instead, God wants us to do the very opposite and to forgive other people when they do wrong to us:

***.....as the Lord has forgiven you so you must forgive each other.***  
***Colossians 3:13 (NIV)***

In fact, God insists that we forgive others and He even goes as far as to make it a condition of His forgiving us:

***<sup>14</sup>"For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your Heavenly Father will also forgive you. <sup>15</sup>"But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.***  
***Matthew 6:14-15 (NASB)***

(See chapter five of Book Two in this series for more detail on how to forgive other people and what it really involves).

But how do we forgive people in practical terms? It has to begin with prayer. We need to ask God to give us the grace to be able to forgive. In ourselves we may not be capable of it. But He can give us the ability to do it, if we ask. We also need to realise that forgiveness is a *decision*, not a *feeling*. We do not need to wait until the hurt or anger has gone. We must forgive the person now, even if those angry feelings continue, which they are likely to do.

Forgiveness does not depend on feelings. It is something you do as a decision of your will. Therefore you can do it even if you are unable to stop feeling anger/hurt/bitterness. Simply decide to speak the words of forgiveness, and let the feelings come later.

I should also add that this does not mean that we are never to sue people or go to the police. We can do those things if we are wronged, (and if that is the right thing to do). The point is that you then leave it to a lawyer or to the police to act and even to dwell on it, instead of you doing so. God has put in place civil authorities and police for that very purpose. They are doing His work and are a part of His judgment of wrongdoers.

But even when we do go to the police, we personally are still to forgive and release the offender from our thoughts. Then we can leave it to the police, or others, to deal with it instead of us seeking vengeance ourselves.