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## WHAT IS REPENTANCE? – *Part 2*

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Repentance is supposed to affect us on a level deeper than our external actions – it seeks to change the very root of our actions. Paul stated in a very different context an applicable truth: “If the root is holy, so are the branches (Romans 11:16). Any understanding of repentance that falls short of this sets us up to repeat our sins. Since sin begins in the heart, the only way sin can be overcome is to change our hearts and our minds. Until the cause is changed, the effect will always be the same.

### **Repentance: What? When? What Then?**

As human beings, we are complex creatures. Perhaps nothing is more complex about us than our minds. While you can change his thought on the spur of the moment, if you are seeking to repent – to transform your mind – you find yourself with a much more difficult task.

Behavioral science is only beginning to scratch the surface of the complexities of human volition, but this much is known: lifestyles can be as addictive as any drug. The human brain is in fact a giant neural net; as men repeat thoughts and actions, this neural net becomes more and more solidified in a process known as crystallization. Simply put, the nerves in our brain that fire together wire together; even more simply put, we create our habits, and then our habits create us. This aspect of human nature comes up over and over again in the New Testament epistles: the Galatians, historically fickle and fond of change, turned to another gospel; the Corinthians, accustomed to worshipping idols, went back to the temple and participated in idolatrous feasts; the Romans, some of whom had Jewish roots, needed to be reminded that justification came by the gospel and not the law of Moses.

While it is important for us to understand this aspect of our thinking so that we do not get discouraged when old temptations rear their head, it is equally important that we realize that man is neither an animal nor a robot. God desires of man no impossible thing, and this is certainly true in His command for man to repent. In order to carry out this all so important command, it is important to realize what precedes it, what it involves, and what it will produce.

**Before repentance can occur there must be recognition of sin.** Once accountable man has rejected God either purposefully or in ignorance, he has nothing left but a “debased mind” which will lead him “to do those things which are not fitting” (Romans 1:28). Man must discover or rediscover the living God – a God who is loving and merciful, but at the same time is just and holy and cannot tolerate those things that are contrary to His nature. Man can only do this by discovering and believing God’s word, for without it, it is impossible to know God’s nature and what is contrary to that nature. Paul said, “I would not have known sin except through the law,” for, as John added, “sin is the transgression of the law” (Romans 7:7; 1 John 3:4, KJV).

**Recognizing sin, man must have regret.** As any parent can testify, there are two types of regret – the type that says, “I’m sorry I’ve hurt you,” and the type that says, “I’m sorry I got caught.” The type of regret that will produce repentance is the former and never the latter; it is the emotion produced upon the realization that one’s actions in sin have struck against the very being of God. Paul called this emotion “godly sorrow” – the Corinthians had it after he wrote to

them and condemned their failure to properly handle a brother in open sin (see 1 Corinthians 5:1-5; 2 Corinthians 2:4-8; 7:7-13). Paul explained concerning this situation, “For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death” (2 Corinthians 7:10).