

What does repent really mean?

Repent is one of those “churchy” words that we hate to hear. Maybe it's because we associated with mentally unstable, self-proclaimed prophets yelling at people through a megaphone, "Repent the end is near!" Or maybe we have pictures of John the Baptist an ascetic in camel hair clothes, baptizing people for the repentance of their sins. In any case, images that we have related to the concept of repentance lead us to feel that we are somehow unworthy and good-for-nothing, if not downright evil, ready for God to condemn to everlasting punishment.

It is unfortunate that the word "repent" has acquired such a negative connotation. It really doesn't mean much more than rethinking our attitude towards life in God's world. “Pent” means “think” (like pensive). “Re” simply means to do it again. Repentance therefore is to think again in reference to our faith journey. It relates to thinking again about the way we are living our lives vs. the way, God would have us live our lives. We see this exemplified in *The Story of the Prodigal Son* where the son strays so far from how his father raised him, that he ends up mucking about in the slop, feeding pigs, the ultimate insult to his Judaic heritage. He re-thinks (repents) his situation and decides to return to his father and his father's ways. Something that is important within this story is that there is no punishment ushered upon the son by his father. The son's repentance is greeted with total grace, unconditional love and forgiveness.

Often repentance leads us to a 180° reversal of how we are living our lives. That is because we tend to accept cultural norms that are not necessarily in compliance with how God would have us live our lives. We tend to be very selfish, thinking of ourselves, thinking of ways that we can make other people serve our needs and desires. Jesus, on the other hand, teaches and models servant leadership, looking for ways in which we can serve others. We prefer to seek revenge or retaliation when we are wronged, or at least some kind of compensation for the perceived wrong. Jesus on the other hand teaches forgiveness, even forgiveness to those who are our enemies. We love to judge other people yet Jesus perpetually teaches us not to do so. We love to be exclusive, to be included in a group that distinguishes itself from other people. However, Jesus was radically inclusive reaching out to everyone. We seem to have no problem with dealing with our enemies through violence, yet Jesus did not approach his opponents with violence and in fact, forgave and embraced those who persecuted him. Maybe that's why repentance seems so difficult. In fact, it's probably impossible to make an entire 180° reversal of how we naturally would behave in reference to each other and those who are different than us. I don't think God expects a 180° reversal. I think that his hope is that we may start to follow his ways as taught by Jesus, even if it goes against our instincts, against our human nature. He knows that as we gradually try the ways taught by Jesus, we will acquire the true joy that comes from that approach. Slowly, but surely, we will begin to interact with each other and with God in the way that he intended. That is repentance.