

# SUNDAY ARTICLE

ST DAVID'S PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH ♦ 20 OCTOBER 2019



## 8 Signs of True Repentance

Jennifer Greenberg

“I’m sorry,” I remember my dad saying. “I’m sorry, and I love you.”

He didn’t say what he was sorry for. He didn’t mention the hand-shaped bruises aching up and down my small 11-year-old body. He didn’t seem to understand how afraid and devastated I’d been. But that was the first time I’d ever heard my dad say sorry, and the relief it brought felt like rain after a drought.

In the back of my mind, a little voice said, *Don’t trust this. He’s only apologising because Mom threatened to tell Pastor Jim if he didn’t.* I shoved that voice down. I smothered my doubts. I had prayed for so long that Dad would change. I had tried to be a good daughter who reminded him of Jesus.

His apology, however vague, was hope and a sign that God was working. Or was it?

### Cruelty of False Repentance

Around a decade would pass before I’d hear my dad apologise again. Initially, I didn’t assume sincerity. By that time, I’d already blown the whistle. I’d told our pastor everything. Dad was under church discipline. His marriage was imploding. He had nothing to gain by lying, did he?

And then something strange happened. As I began sharing my story with pastors, family, and friends, my dad would admit and apologise for things he’d done, but

then weeks or even days later, claim he didn’t remember any of it. He’d say he didn’t recall beating me, throwing me down on the stairs, or even his recent apologies for those events. He didn’t remember his sexual comments, throwing a knife at me, or threatening to shoot me. He’d apologise, then retract. Remember, then claim to forget. Back and forth this went for maybe a year, until I felt like I was losing my mind.

“I don’t know what to think,” I told him over the phone one day. Huddled on the kitchen floor, I spoke between sobs. “I can believe either you’re crazy and didn’t know what you were doing, or you’re evil and you understood completely.”

“I’m not crazy,” he replied calmly. “You’re just going to have to accept that I’m evil.”

### Analysing Repentance

I’ve had a lot of experience dealing with unrepentant people: multiple abusers spanning two decades of child abuse, domestic violence, and sexual abuse. All of this was reinforced and compounded by psychological abuse, which continued well into my 30s. Because of my background, I’ve accrued some practical wisdom. Because of my faith, I’ve turned to the Bible for guidance when distinguishing real from fake repentance.

There are stubborn sinners who refuse to apologise, liars who claim to be sorry when they’re not, and hypocrites who may truly believe they’re sorry yet lack sympathy or understanding of biblical repentance. So what are the attributes of genuine repentance? Here are eight signs I’ve gleaned, from life and from God’s Word.

### 1. A Repentant Person Is Appalled by Sin

Horrified by what they’ve done, they’ll humble themselves, grieve the pain they’ve caused, and be cut to the heart in their conviction. As the prophet mourned in Isaiah 6:5, “Woe to me! I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips.”

### 2. They Make Amends

In Luke 19:1-10, we read the story of Zacchaeus and the generosity he demonstrated as part of his repentance. A tax collector, thief, and oppressor of God’s people, Zacchaeus made amends: “Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount”

(verse 8). And Jesus confirmed the authenticity of Zacchaeus’s repentance: “Today salvation has come to this house” (verse 9).

### 3. They Accept Consequences

A genuinely repentant person will accept consequences. These may include losing the trust of others,

*... they’ll humble themselves, grieve the pain they’ve caused, and be cut to the heart in their conviction.*

relinquishing a position of authority, or submitting to worldly authorities such as law enforcement. When the thief on the cross repented, he said to his companion, "Do you not fear God?... We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve" (Luke 23:40-41). And Jesus commended his repentance by assuring him of his salvation: "Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise" (Luke 23:43).

#### 4. They Don't Expect or Demand Forgiveness

Often I've been told by my abuser, "If you don't forgive me, God won't forgive you." But this threatening posture indicates insincere repentance. It's unloving, manipulative, and implies the offender doesn't accept or comprehend the gravity of what they've done. When Jacob approached Esau and repented, he didn't expect mercy, let alone compassion. In Genesis 32, we read he felt "great fear" and "distress" (verse 7). He anticipated an attack (verse 11) and considered himself unworthy of kindness (verse 10). In fact, so certain was Jacob of retribution that he separated his wives, children, and servants from him, lest Esau's anger fall on them too.

#### 5. They Feel the Depth of the Pain They've Caused

A repentant person won't try to minimise, downplay, or excuse what they've done. They won't point to all their good works as if those actions somehow outweigh or cancel out the bad. They'll view even their "righteous acts" as "filthy rags" (Isaiah 64:6). They won't shame the offended party for being hurt or angry. They won't blame their victims or other people for making them sin. Rather, they'll take responsibility, acknowledge the damage they've done, and express remorse.

#### 6. They Change Their Behaviour

A truly repentant person will realise they need God to sanctify their heart. They'll proactively work to change their behaviour and take steps to avoid sin and temptation. That may mean seeing a counsellor, going to rehab, or asking friends, pastors, or law enforcement to give them oversight and hold them accountable. Consider the stark contrast between the church persecutor Saul before salvation and after. Acts 9 tells us that even though some Christians were understandably hesitant to trust him, his character had already altered dramatically.

#### 7. They Grant Space to Heal

The fruit of the Spirit includes patience, kindness, grace, and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23). A truly repentant person will demonstrate these consistently. They won't feel entitled to trust or acceptance; rather, they'll be humble, unassuming, and willing to sacrifice their own wants and needs for the benefit of the injured party. They won't pressure us to hurry up and "get over

it" or "move on." Rather, they'll understand our distrust, acknowledge our grief, and honour the boundaries we've requested.

As an abuser, they loved their sin more than they loved you. As a repentant sinner, they should love you more than their sin and pride.

#### 8. They're Awestruck by Forgiveness

If a person feels entitled to forgiveness, they don't value forgiveness. When Jacob received Esau's forgiveness, he was so astounded he wept: "To see your face is like seeing the face of God, for you have received me favourably" (Genesis 30:10). Jacob realised that forgiveness is a divine miracle, a picture of the Messiah, and a sign of the Lord's mercy. Though Jacob and Esau hadn't spoken for 40 years, Jacob knew God had enabled Esau, by grace, to forgive him.

#### Repentance and Forgiveness Are from God

When these eight signs of repentance are authentically present, we are blessed. Our offender has forsaken evil, and the God of peace is glorified. But what do

we do when these signs are not present? What do we do when someone lies about being sorry to avoid consequences, or uses our goodwill as an opportunity to hurt us again?

For more than three decades, I begged God to call my abusive dad to repentance. Instead, like Pharaoh, his heart only hardened. His pretences at change turned out to be a strategy he used to enable his wickedness. My own love and trust were weaponised to betray me.

Eventually, I had to accept that my dad didn't want to get better. And no matter how much I loved him and wanted him to repent, change, be a good dad, love me, and love Jesus, salvation is God's work, and I couldn't fix my dad. Sometimes the most loving thing we can do for a person is to not let them hurt us any longer.



*Jennifer Greenberg is an author, recording artist, and church pianist.*

*She worships at Cornerstone Orthodox Presbyterian Church in Houston, Texas.*

*Jennifer is married to her best friend, Jason, and they have three daughters: Elowyn,*

*Leianor, and Gwynevere. You can follow her on her website: [jennifergreenberg.net](http://jennifergreenberg.net).*

Source: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/8-signs-true-repentance/>

For the complete library of St David's Articles, please go to [rest.org.au](http://rest.org.au).

**Kindly pass on this article.**

*What do we do when someone lies about being sorry to avoid consequences?*