The Two-Sided Coin

Vince Vitale · Repentance For the Rest Of Us · Acts 11:18; 1 John 1:7-9; Luke 7:36-47

AT A GLANCE

Opening Menlo Church's series 'Repentance For the Rest Of Us,' Vince Vitale argues that repentance has quietly been recast in Christian imagination as punishment, self-harm, or private atonement — when Scripture calls it a granted gift leading to life. Because repent and believe are two sides of one coin, repentance must be as present-tense and horizontal as belief, never a box checked once at conversion.

- Repentance is a gift that leads to life, healing, and fellowship — never a punishment we perform to atone for our own past.
- Genuine repentance is present tense and horizontal, meant to overflow from our relationship with God into every relationship we hold.
- Replacing 'I'm sorry' with 'will you forgive me' refuses self-protection and excuse-making, asking humbly instead of merely describing a feeling.

> *"Repentance is not self-harm. It's not punishment. It is certainly not atonement."*

EXPOSITION

Scripture engaged

> Acts 11:18 — When the Jewish believers heard this, they stopped arguing. They praised God and said, "So God is also allowing even those who are not Jews to change their hearts so that they can have the life he gives!" (ERV)
>
> 1 John 1:7-9 — [7]We should live in the light, where God is. If we live in the light, we have fellowship with each other, and the blood sacrifice of Jesus, God's Son, washes away every sin and makes us clean. [8]If we say that we have no sin, we are fooling ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [9]But if we confess our sins, God will forgive us. We can trust God to do this. He always does what is right. He will make us clean from all the wrong things we have done. (ERV)
>
> Luke 7:36-47 — [36]One of the Pharisees asked Jesus to eat with him. Jesus went into the Pharisee's house and took a place at the table. [37]There was a sinful woman in that town. She knew that Jesus was eating at the Pharisee's house. So the woman brought some expensive perfume in an alabaster jar. [38]She stood at Jesus' feet, crying. Then she began to wash his feet with her tears. She dried his feet with her hair. She kissed his feet many times and rubbed them with the perfume. [39]When the

> Pharisee who asked Jesus to come to his house saw this, he thought to himself, “If this man were a prophet, he would know that the woman who is touching him is a sinner!” [40]In response, Jesus said to the Pharisee, “Simon, I have something to say to you.” Simon said, “Let me hear it, Teacher.” [41]Jesus said, “There were two men. Both men owed money to the same banker. One man owed him 500 silver coins. The other man owed him 50 silver coins. [42]The men had no money, so they could not pay their debt. But the banker told the men that they did not have to pay him. Which one of those two men will love him more?” [43]Simon answered, “I think it would be the one who owed him the most money.” Jesus said to him, “You are right.” [44]Then he turned to the woman and said to Simon, “Do you see this woman? When I came into your house, you gave me no water for my feet. But she washed my feet with her tears and dried my feet with her hair. [45]You did not greet me with a kiss, but she has been kissing my feet since I came in. [46]You did not honor me with oil for my head, but she rubbed my feet with her sweet-smelling oil. [47]I tell you that her many sins are forgiven. This is clear, because she showed great love. People who are forgiven only a little will love only a little.” (ERV)

The argument

Repentance Reframed As Gift, Not Payment — why 'that's my job' undoes the impulse to atone

Vitale names the quiet mistake at the root of dead religion: treating repentance as debt-repayment. When a business executive said, 'I really need to make up for some stuff in my past,' the room affirmed him — it sounded humble. But Vitale heard Jesus interrupt: 'That's my job.' The wages of sin is death, and no one can make that payment himself. Scripture instead calls repentance a granted gift: in Acts, watching Gentiles come to faith, the Jewish believers praise God because 'even to Gentiles, God has granted repentance that leads to life' — not to shame, not to punishment, but to life. If repentance still feels like self-harm, Vitale argues, we have not yet believed the gospel we claim to preach.

> **Insight** — *Repentance stops being self-punishment the moment we remember Christ already paid the debt it feels like we still owe.*

The Anatomy Of Repentance Is Contagious — acknowledge, grieve, turn, and ask — modeled inside one marriage's crisis

Vitale tells of a friend's mental health crisis traced to a twelve-year-old unaddressed hurt in his marriage — proof that 'conflict is contagious,' leaking out until, like David, our bones waste away. A counselor walked him through repentance's actual shape: acknowledge the wrong, grieve its impact without excuse, turn in a new direction, then ask, 'will you forgive me?' The silence after that question, Vitale says, 'felt like forever' — until forgiveness fell and the weight lifted. What happened next mattered more: the wife, moved by what she'd witnessed, asked to repent something of her own. 'Repentance is even more contagious than conflict,' Vitale observes — one honest confession opens the door for another.

> **Insight —** *Real repentance names the wrong without excuse and waits for an answer, which is why it spreads wherever it is genuinely modeled.*

Present Tense, Not Past Tense; Horizontal, Not Only Vertical

Vitale names two habits that quietly domesticate repentance: treating it as something finished at conversion, and as something owed only to God. 'Why think that we repent once any more than we believe once?' he asks — no one would say that about love. He roots the corrective in 1 John: walking in the light, confessing sin, is what produces fellowship 'with one another,' not only forgiveness and purification before God. 'Vertical love overflows horizontally, vertical service overflows horizontally, and vertical repentance also overflows horizontally. That's the natural flow of the Christian life.' Repentance confined to a past decision or a private transaction with God has, in Vitale's phrase, stopped being what Scripture calls it.

> **Insight —** *If repentance never moves outward into your relationships, it has not yet finished the work God intends it to do.*

Forgiven Much, Loved Much — Luke 7's woman and Simon the Pharisee expose two ways of measuring a debt

Turning to Luke 7, Vitale contrasts the woman who anoints Jesus' feet with tears and hair against Simon the Pharisee, offended that Jesus would let her touch him. Jesus' parable of two forgiven debts lands on one line: 'whoever has been forgiven little loves little.' Vitale confesses he spent years trying to be forgiven as little as possible, proving how good he was; now he wants the opposite. That same logic reshapes his marriage's language: he and his wife banned 'I'm sorry,' because it only describes a feeling and quietly blames the other person for taking offense. 'Will you forgive me?' cannot be said without surrendering control — it requires an honest wrong, no ifs, no buts, and an answer only the other person can give.

> **Insight —** *How much you love is tethered to how honestly you have let yourself be forgiven, so guard against minimizing your debt.*

Repentance Answers Cancel Culture's Half-Truth — the gospel already hides inside our accusations, missing only that someone died

Vitale reworks cancel culture's assumptions to expose the gospel hiding inside them: we are more offensive than we think; without God, forgiveness is impossible; therefore, as his friend Amy points out, someone must be canceled — silenced, made to cease existing, made to die. Secular culture gets the diagnosis right and stops one sentence short. 'Someone did die,' Vitale says — 'the gospel redeems this narrative, literally turns it upside down' — so that forgiveness becomes possible despite real, deserved offense. Because Jesus pursued reconciliation while Vitale was still unreconciled, he insists we can go first too: 'If Jesus could go first, even though he was utterly blameless, then I can take the first step in the conflicts of my life as well.'

> **Insight —** *Cancel culture already senses the size of our offense; the gospel supplies the death that makes forgiveness possible anyway.*

Cross-references

- 2 Corinthians 7:9-10 — cited to show godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation without regret
- James 5:16 — cited for confessing sins to one another so that we may be healed
- Luke 15:7 — cited to show heaven's rejoicing over one repentant sinner exceeds any earthly triumph
- Revelation 3:21 — cited as the reward for the one who perseveres in repentance: a seat with Christ on his throne
- 2 Kings 22:19 — cited to show God hearing Josiah because of his responsive, repentant heart

DEVOTIONAL

A tomato plant, replanted from porch to porch through a whole childhood, was one family's entire vocabulary for reconciliation: no naming of the wound, no request for forgiveness, only a silent offering handed back and forth until nobody could recall the fight. Many of us have kept some version of that plant — the topic we've agreed never to raise again, the years we let stand in for an apology we never gave. Vince Vitale asks us to notice how much energy that takes, and how little life it produces compared to what Scripture promises. Because the strange, freeing claim of the gospel is that repentance was never meant to be punishment we administer to ourselves. It is granted, not extracted — a gift that unlocks life, fellowship, healing, and, astonishingly, a seat beside Christ on his throne. The weight that falls off a shoulder mid-confession, the smile that breaks out unrehearsed, the silence before an answer that 'felt like forever' — these are not incidental. They are what repentance was built to produce, because someone already died so that the debt would not have to be repaid twice. So the tomato plant can stay buried. What we need instead is a voice steady enough to name the wrong without flinching, and humble enough to ask a real question and wait for a real answer: will you forgive me? Heaven, we're told, throws a louder party for that turning than for any triumph we could stage ourselves.

Reflection

- Where in your life have you kept a version of the tomato plant — a peace offering that quietly skips over naming what actually happened?
- Is there a repentance you consider finished rather than a posture you return to daily before God and the people you've hurt?

- Who is the one person you most need to ask, 'will you forgive me?' instead of offering a quick, self-protective 'I'm sorry'?

Closing prayer

Lord, would you bring one name into each of our minds — someone toward whom you'd have us take a concrete step of repentance? Help us see repentance as the gift it is, leading to the fullness of life you hold out to us if we will only turn and receive it. Give us the conviction and the courage to take that step with you. In Jesus' name, amen.

FORMATION

One thing to remember

Because Jesus went first toward you while you were still the offender, you can be the one to go first in your unresolved conflict.

This week

This week, ask God in prayer to bring one name to mind — someone you have wronged — and go to them with 'will you forgive me,' naming what you did without excuse, trusting Christ's finished work rather than your own performance to restore you.

Return to James 5:16