Repentance and remission of sins are inseparably linked by Jesus in the matter of salvation. It is now, and always has been, a necessary prerequisite to receiving forgiveness from God. In Old Testament times, Ezekiel preached repentance to the house of Israel because of their idolatry. (Ezekiel 14:6) “Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord God “repent, turn away from your idols, and turn your faces away from all your abominations.” John the Baptist preached repentance. His message was: “Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2) “John did baptize in the wilderness, and preach the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” (Mark 1:4) Jesus preached repentance. (Matthew 4:17) “From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Luke 13:3) “I tell ye nay but except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish.” The apostles preached repentance, before the death of Christ. “And they went out, and preached that men should repent.” (Mark 6:12) After the death of Christ, but before his ascension, Jesus gave the great commission which also requires repentance to be preached. (Luke 24:46-47) On the day of Pentecost, Peter preached repentance. (Acts 2:38). Also, in Acts 3:19, “repent and be converted that your sins may be blotted out.” Paul preached repentance in Acts 7:30-31. “And the times of this ignorance God winked at, but now commandeth all men to repent...” (Acts 26:20) “…and to the Gentiles that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.”

It is evident from these passages that repentance is a necessary step in anyone coming to God, and that His representatives have consistently preached its necessity in every age. Yet, it remains one of the most misunderstood of God’s commands, and in many ways, one of the least obeyed.

I. Who Should Repent?

Jesus said, “I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repent.” (Luke 5:32). Sinners should repent. “All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) (Romans 3:9-10)
“...for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin...” (Galatians 3:22) “For the scripture hath confined all under sin...”

Thus all sinners (both aliens and erring children of God) should repent. (Acts 2:28 and 3:19 and 8:22) “Repent therefore of this your wickedness, and pray God if perhaps the thought of your heart may be forgiven you.” Since God is no respecter of persons, He requires all in sin to repent of sin.

II. What Is Repentance?

In order to get a clear understanding of the meaning of repentance, let us study what it is not, as well as what it is.

A. Repentance is Not:

1. The denying of sin, or the covering up of sin is not repentance.

We will pay for our sins. (Numbers 32:23) “…be sure your sin will find you out.” (Proverbs 28:13) “He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy.” Sins are truly covered, only when they are forgiven. (Psalms 32:1) “Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered.” Sins are blotted out only when there is repentance. (Acts 3:19)

2. Just (or only) being sorrowful is not repentance.

A criminal may be sorrowful because he’s arrested, or that his scheme failed, but that is not repentance. Judas was sorrowful, but no true repentance was involved. (Matthew 27:3-5) “Then Judas, His betrayer, seeing that He had been condemned, was remorseful and brought back the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders saying I have sinned by betraying innocent blood...” He went and hanged himself. Herod was “exceeding sorry...” that the daughter of Herodias requested the head of John the Baptist, but there was no true repentance. “he did not want to refuse her.” We learn from 2 Corinthians 7:10, that “Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation” but “the sorrow of the world worketh death.

3. Just a promise to quit sinning is not repentance.

The fruits of repentance demand that we quit sinning, and not just promise to do so. (Matthew 3:8-9) “Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance.”

4. Merely admitting or confessing that one is a sinner is not repentance.

Admitting sin may be a step in the right direction, but that is not repentance. The fact that a drunkard, liar, etc., admits his sin does not mean that he has repented.
5. Just being fearful or afraid is not repentance.

Fear is important. We are taught to fear God. “…fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.” (Matthew 10:28) Unfortunately, with many, there is “no fear of God before their eyes.” (Romans 3:18)

6. Reformation, by itself, is not repentance.

A drunkard may stop drinking because of liver trouble, but that is not repentance. 
A man may stop smoking because of emphysema, but that is not repentance. 
A thief may stop stealing because of the fear of being caught, but that is not repentance. 
A business man may stop cheating in order to improve his image, but that is not repentance.

7. Just going forward when the invitation song is sung is not repentance.

Confession of sin in the assembly of the saints is in order at times, but the confession is not, in itself, repentance.

8. Prayer is not repentance.

Peter told Simon in Acts 8 to “repent… and pray God…” Note: Peter told Simon to do two different, separate things. Repent and pray.

9. Baptism is not repentance.

Note Acts 2:28. Peter demanded repentance and baptism. Baptism, without repentance, is worthless, just as repentance, without baptism, is without effect.

B. Repentance is:

1. A change of heart (mind) that is wrought by godly sorrow that results in a change of life.

When a person repents, he changes his mind for the better. He abhors the sins of the past. He desires and intends to do right from that point on. Repentance is in heart (mind) turning from evil to good. (Matthew 12:41) “the men of Nineveh… repented at the preaching of Jonah…” (Jonah 3:10) “And God saw their works, that they turned from their evil way…”

Note the Parable of Matthew 21:28-30.

This parable indicates that when one repents, a change of action follows a change of mind. The first son refused to go when asked by his father to work in his vineyard. He refused to accept any responsibility to honor and obey the one who had given him life. It should be observed that his refusal did not cancel or remove any of his duties or obligations. His duty did not derive from his commitment, but sprang from the father’s inherent right and authority to demand such a requirement. Some, today, do not see this. They “won’t
promise anything”, as if such a refusal completely cancels their duty. We must remember that all of man’s duties in the church derive their authority, not from man’s voluntarily accepting them, but from God who has the right to command His creation.

The second son’s response was, “I go, sir,” but he went not. Here we have a promise to go, but no action or follow through. Hence, repentance is much more than promising to do something.

II. Repentance is a privilege granted from the Lord after one believes. (2 Peter 3:9) “The Lord is not slack concerning His promise, as some count slackness, but is long-suffering toward us not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.”

III. What Produces or Leads to Repentance?

1. Godly Sorrow. (2 Corinthians 7:10) “For Godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted; but the sorrow of the world produces death.” Repentance is never waived. It is always necessary. Christians who commit sin, until they do repent, are not in a saved condition, else the repentance of the Corinthians could not have been said to be “unto” salvation. Repentance is not sorrow for sin, which in many cases is mere “sorrow of the world”, due to the inconvenience caused by sin or its discovery. Even godly sorrow is not repentance, but a condition that produces repentance. (Psalms 38:18) “For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin.”

“Sorrow of the world worketh death...” Through remorseful sorrow for sin, Judas committed suicide; and there have been countless other examples of the sorrow of the world working death; but what is mentioned here goes beyond physical death and speaks of eternal death, which is the opposite of salvation.

2. The Goodness of God

Paul said, “Or despiseth thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and long-suffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? (Romans 2:4) The goodness of God is not to show approval of men’s sins, but to extend to them further opportunities of repentance, and to persuade them by means of such goodness.

3. A contemplation of the judgment.

A fear of the destruction of Nineveh motivated the Ninevites to repentance. (Jonah 3:4-10) A contemplation of the judgment day should cause all sinners to repent. (Acts 17:30-31)
IV. When Should One Repent?

The evidence points to now. When in sin, you cannot repent too soon. To delay, even one day, may mean it’s too late. “Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts…” (Hebrews 3:15)