



## The Power of Repentance to Help Relational Healing

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### AMERICAN FAMILIES OF FAITH

October 22, 2025

*What does repentance mean for families of faith? They show it restores peace and strengthens bonds with God and family.*

*All American Families of Faith participant names are pseudonyms to protect identity.*

For many immersed in 21st-century culture, the idea of repentance may be jarringly akin to “shaming,” guilt-tripping, or fear-based condemnation. These connotations suggest links to depression, anxiety, and relational struggles and strife.

In sharp contrast, however, many of the roughly 200 wives and husbands we interviewed in our *American Families of Faith* project—people with religious and relational strengths—discussed repentance as personal *transformative change* that has strengthened or even saved their marriage, their parent-child relationships, or both. For

them, repentance is not a dark night of the soul, but the dawn of a better day for them and their loved ones.

Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son opens with the words: "A **certain man** had two sons" (Luke 15:11). We learn that one of the two sons wanted to be finished with his life at home and requested "his portion" of his inheritance.

The son wandered far from his father's home and values, and gloried for a time in unfettered hedonism. The inheritance, however, was soon squandered, and when a famine hit, the prodigal son was reduced to caring for swine, the filthiest of animals in Jewish tradition. At rock bottom, the consequences of the wayward son's foolish choices led him to think back on his father and filled him with a desire, or at least a desperation, to return home.

As the father watched the road, he hoped that one day his son would come back to him, and "while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he **ran to his son**, threw his arms around him and kissed him" (Luke 15:20, NIV). His son, with a humble heart, pleaded, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son" (Luke 15:18-21, NIV).

Instead, the father asked his servants to bring the finest robe, a ring, and shoes to clothe his son, then ordered a feast to celebrate his return.

As in the story of the Prodigal Son, in the *American Families of Faith* project, we have found instances of families being reunited, restored, preserved, and strengthened through acts of repentance. Personal transformative changes tend to have positive relational consequences. A close exploration of participants' responses helped us to understand the processes and power of repentance among diverse Christian, Jewish, and Muslim families.

The families' recurring references, discussions, and explanations of repentance and forgiveness were particularly noteworthy given that we asked no direct questions about repentance and forgiveness. These insights emerged as participants shared the key practices and principles they embraced to become the type of family their respective clergy deemed strongest and most exemplary in their faith community.

## Reasons for Repentance

Among participants, three main reasons were offered regarding the desire to repent. The first and primary reason for making difficult changes was *having faith and a relationship with God*. Charles, an Orthodox Christian father, said, “The desire to be with God, to be able to speak to Him, brings one to repentance and toward better action.”

Similarly, Rachel, an Orthodox Jewish wife, related:

When you become more closely acquainted with Hashem<sup>1</sup> and ... what His expectations are, you come to a realization that what you yourself want is not the most paramount thing on earth. ... My goal [and] my purpose is to live a more Jewish life; not to live a more self-fulfilling life in the sense of material stuff ... [and] egotistical things.

A second motivating force or influence toward repentance and forgiveness is *religious practices and rituals*. These sacred practices reportedly reminded individuals of their spiritual beliefs and motivated them to consider how they could improve their behavior. Tyra, an African American Baptist wife, said of her husband of about two decades,

I'm *sure* to get on his nerves. He gets on my nerves ... [but] we're able to go to Bible study and go to Sunday service, and we're going to hear something. God is always going to bring a word back to our [remembrance] that's going to make us realize and ask Him for forgiveness, and we [then] come back and ask each other for forgiveness.

We found similar narratives surrounding parent-child relationships, where the *parents were inspired to repent and change because of their children*. Such changes included improving dietary intake in ways that were health-conscious, religiously driven, or both. Changes also included increasing religious involvement, “walking the walk” to avoid hypocrisy, and striving to better “practice what you preach.” Indeed, an overarching lesson that emerged from the strong families we interviewed was a conviction that “*Our behavior is permission to others to behave similarly ... but it is more than that. It is an invitation to do so.*”<sup>2</sup> To summarize the leading motivations for repentance, parents

changed for God, they changed because of their religion, and they changed for their family members.

## Steps for Repentance

*American Families of Faith* participants discussed various processes involved in repentance. First, one recurring idea was that *repentance is a daily process that must be repeated often*. Brent, a Jehovah's Witness husband, said, "We're constantly praying to God for forgiveness."

Other instances of *repentance occurred as couples worked together*. Tanner, an Orthodox Christian husband, said, "I was not very religious when I first met [my wife] Amy, but she got me thinking about it. ... I hadn't really had any experience in the church for probably 15 years ... but she made it an important thing to explore."

Several couples stressed the importance of *patience with others as you are striving to be better*. An African American Christian wife named Joelle determined that she would help her husband in his own faith journey, even if it took time. She recalled,

Even though I was on fire for God and I had made some changes in my life ... my husband loves to [go to clubs] ... and so I would still go with him. And you know, I think a lot of times women make that mistake, they become so self-righteous. ... [But] until he was ready ... [I believed] it was up to God to make the changes in him, that it wasn't up to me. ... And when he had begun to make changes, I just stepped it up a bit. ... [It] was a matter of matching my steps with his steps so that we were still in harmony.

This idea of growing together was echoed in the words of Quon, an Asian Christian husband, who said, "Sometimes she was ahead, sometimes I was ahead, and we encouraged each other to grow in the Lord together." Likewise, Ramzi, a Muslim husband, shared,

Our being together has influenced our progression in the faith. ... Sometimes, I become lazy with some of the aspects of religion, then she reminds me, "[Y]ou are slacking off ..." [For example], you are slacking off with your

prayers, and you need to do them on time. So definitely, being together has helped us progress in our faith gradually.

Husbands from various backgrounds noted that their wives helped them to stay on track. They also found vital actions of repentance during their relational struggles and conflicts that helped them to recognize the need for repentance.

## Resources to Aid in Repentance

There were two resources that participants mentioned as especially helpful in efforts to make constructive changes and repent. The first resource was *having a belief in and a relationship with God*, gaining strength through seeking divine assistance and grace. Christi, a Hispanic Christian mother, illustrated how she used this resource:

Only through my faith, that's the *only* way [I was able to change], because ... I just enjoyed smoking marijuana, that was just a part of my [life]. ... There are [old friends], who are still smoking it, who can't believe [that I've quit]. ... Everything around my faith is positive for our marriage because it [helps us do what] we need to do.

Not only did participants reportedly employ their faith and belief in God to change their individual behaviors, but faith was also central in helping *to change the behaviors in their relationships*. Ali, an Arab American Muslim father, said, "If we can't get along, we [have] got to ask for God's assistance. ... We have to beg Him for His help and His aid, we have to receive His [guidance]."

A second recurring resource we identified among participants' responses in helping them make personal changes was various forms of *religious practice and worship*, including both public and private practices.

Attending church was an example mentioned by Sophie, a Presbyterian wife who said, "Our practice of going to church on Sunday ... reminds me of those things [I should be doing], [and] literally, I feel transformed within the hour, that I can actually do it."

Another example was from Yuusif, an Arab American Muslim father, who expressed:

[The] five prayer times are basically reminders for Muslims [as to what] they should be doing. ... You are alive to have a better afterlife, and to do that is to please God, and the way to please God is to praise God and ask for forgiveness for whatever you have done wrong. ... People who do [these prayers] will be better people, better human beings. ... Personally, it does affect me, and I would say my family [too], that it reminds us what the priority is.

Other religious resources mentioned included studying sacred texts, seeking the support of one's faith community, sacraments, fasting, the observance of High Holy Days and Shabbat (for many Jews), and the month of Ramadan (for many Muslims).

## How Repentance Strengthens Relationships with Others and God

There were many reports of positive outcomes for families and individuals that came from repentance. Many said repentance led them to *have a better connection or relationship with God*. Timony, an Evangelical Christian husband, said, "As we invite Him into our life and He forgives our sins ... He changes us and makes us more like Him, and the desire of our hearts changes and we develop friendship with *God*. I mean, that's amazing!"

There were also many *positive family outcomes* from repentance. Like the statement in *The Family: A Proclamation to the World*<sup>3</sup> which states that "Successful marriages and families are established and maintained on principles of faith, prayer, repentance, forgiveness ...," we found that repentance helped strengthen family relationships. Felipe, a Hispanic Catholic husband and father, explained,

There have been so many times ... our children have tried to do things that we haven't taught them to do, but then when you come to them and say, 'Hey, remember what the Bible says, you shouldn't be doing that.' And then, it is like they wake up again, and they say, 'Alright, I was doing bad.' And that happens many times. And the same for others, and adults, you know? ... [Correcting] things like that make[s] your family life much better.

Similarly, Sandra, an Orthodox Christian mother, said that a key for her family "to help avoid or reduce conflict, whether in the family or the marriage, is ... frequent

forgiveness and confession. And having those things is what keeps us, the kids and the parents together.” Reports like those from Sandra and Felipe indicated that repentance helped create peace in the family.

Finally, when peace was disturbed or destroyed, repentance helped *reduce and resolve marital conflict*. Jian, an Asian Christian wife, said, “When we had some disagreements, we prayed together, confessed our sins before God, and learned to forgive each other.”

Repentance also helped participants to develop habits and virtues that made it easier to reduce and resolve marital conflict. Dustin, an Episcopal husband, said that they had learned: “We are capable of looking at ourselves and seeing and being able to admit that we’re wrong. I do think that a religious background and a belief in God have an effect on that.”

In summary, repentance creates and maintains peace, but when peace is fractured, it is also repentance that helps to restore peace.

Repentance is often misunderstood as a term associated with shame and punishment, but for the families of faith we interviewed, it was honored as a powerful resource that promotes both personal and relational transformation.

We can all relate to the spiritual or relational weight we may feel when we have committed a mistake, but like the Prodigal Son, we can repent and come back to our better selves. The families we interviewed remind us that as we do so, not only are we healed, but our relationships can be as well.

## Personal and Relational Processes of Repentance in Religious Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Families

### Notes:

1. Hashem (meaning “The Name”) is how many Orthodox Jews refer to God in order to honor the name of God.
2. Marks, L. D., & Dollahite, D. C. (2017). *Religion and families*. Routledge. (Direct quote from p. 250).

### 3. [A statement](#) of the First Presidency and Council of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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