

THE DOCTRINE OF REPENTANCE

"Testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Acts 20:21.

Of all the doctrines which are given prominence in God's Word, repentance is perhaps the most neglected in the teaching and preaching of our day. People do not like to hear about repentance. Because this doctrine is unpopular, the call to repentance is seldom heard. Yet, it is very doubtful if there was ever a day when the need for the call to repentance was as great as it is today. The twentieth century man is as deeply involved in sin as the man of any century in the past. Modern secularism is attempting to dethrone God and to enthroned man. Humanism sees no perspective beyond the grave. Modern society is characterized by a lust for possessions and a love for pleasure.

I. The Importance Of Repentance.

The Scriptures attach great importance to the doctrine of repentance. Taught repeatedly in the Old Testament, repentance comes into even clearer focus in the New Testament. The latter teaches the importance of repentance with unique uniformity, as every open-minded reader thereof well knows.

God commanded repentance. The Bible says: "And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30). The parties to whom His command applies is clearly indicated: "Now commandeth all men everywhere to repent." All men, women, boys, and girls who are sufficiently endowed to be personally accountable for their thoughts, words, and actions are commanded to repent.

All three of the synoptic writers picture John the Baptist as being adamant in demanding real repentance and insisting on the expression of it in everyday living. Repentance was the keynote of his preaching, although he did not define the term. John the Baptist preached many sermons in the wilderness of Judea, but the Holy Spirit has preserved for us only one text, which was the burden of his message: "Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:2). When the Pharisees and Sadducees sought baptism at his hands, John the Baptist rebuked them for their sins, called upon them to repent toward God, and demanded them to "bring forth fruits meet for repentance" before he would administer the solemn rite to them. He preached a repentance that would result in the bearing of good fruit in transformed lives.

When Christ began His public ministry, He took up the very same theme which had been enunciated so forcefully and effectively by John the Baptist. He preached: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mark 1:15). He also said: "They that are whole have no need of the physician, but they that are sick: I came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (Mark 2:17). Christ preached that repentance is essential to salvation. He said, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish" (Luke 13:3,5).

When Christ sent forth the twelve apostles to minister in His name, "They went out, and preached that men should repent" (Mark 6:12).

On the day of Pentecost Peter stood up before the hardhearted throng and preached to them about their sins, but especially about their crucifixion of Christ. His memorable sermon was used by the Holy Spirit to convict the hearers of their sins. They cried out: "What shall we do?" (Acts 2:37). Peter answered: "Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38). The record reveals that on that day three thousand repented, believed, and were baptized.

Paul had the same message for the people to whom he preached. The substance of Paul's message was "Repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). In his defense before Agrippa, Paul testified that he had preached to both Jews and Gentiles "That they should repent and turn to God, and do works meet for repentance" (Acts 26:20).

According to the Scriptures, the Lord is desirous that all repent. They state plainly: "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is long-suffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9).

To one of His churches our Lord said: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent" (Revelation 2:4-5). To another of His churches He said: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent" (Revelation 3:19). The existing conditions in the Lord's churches today prove the need for repentance.

II. The Interpretation Of Repentance.

Repentance was better understood in the days of Christ and the apostles than it is today. When they preached repentance, the meaning of the word was clear in the minds of the people, so that it was not necessary to define the word, but this is not true today.

1. What repentance is not.

(1) Repentance is not a mere conviction of sin.

A conviction of sin and guilt before God is wrought in the sinner by the Holy Spirit, but this is not repentance. In his sermon at Pentecost Peter charged the murderers of the Son of God with the enormity of their crime in these words: "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain" (Acts 2:23). Convinced of their guilt, "They were pricked in their heart." Pained deeply by a conviction of their sin, they cried: "What shall we do?" Peter answered them, "Repent." His reply indicated clearly that, even though they had been convicted of their sin and guilt, they had not repented. Conviction of sin is an essential preparation for repentance, but it is not repentance.

(2) Repentance is not regret.

Regret may be an expression of sorrow because of inability to accept an invitation. One may have taken that which did not belong to him. For his theft he may be arrested, tried, convicted, and sentenced to serve a term in the penitentiary. He may regret very much that he got caught for his crime and has been incarcerated in prison, but that is not repentance. He may be quite sorry for the consequences of his sin, but not have any regret whatever for the crime itself. He may still be a thief at heart, and would steal again if he had the opportunity. Such a person certainly has not repented. This is sorrow according to self, but it never leads to salvation. No one repents of anything until he regrets or is sorry that it happened.

(3) Repentance is not remorse.

Regret and remorse do not mean the same thing. Remorse is the compunction of conscience for some evil which has been committed, but it also contains the element of self-reproach. Remorse, or sorrow according to the world, is sorrow for the

consequences of sin, but not for the motive or act which prompted the sin. Worldly sorrow is stimulated by public exposure. If his sin did not become public, the sinner might not have any remorse or sorrow. His sorrow is not caused by his sin, but by the loss of his reputation. Many people never experience any remorse for their sinful deeds until they are exposed. When the consequences of social sins become evident people frequently lose self-respect and sorrow over their being humbled. Remorse is a manifestation of regret for sin, but does not mean a reversal of one's moral purpose. Many people have been sorry because they have done wrong, but have never demonstrated any desire to change their course in the future.

Judas Iscariot is a splendid example of remorse without repentance. Matthew wrote of him in these words: "Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, repented himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders, Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that" (Matthew 27:3-4). This simply means that Judas had remorse with reference to his personal sin, but when the priests refused to have anything to do with him he ran from the temple and committed suicide instead of truly repenting.

2. What repentance is.

The Greek word, "metanoia," which is translated "repentance," literally means a change of mind. It involves a change of mind with respect to sin, to self, and to God. Genuine repentance has three elements:

(1) An intellectual element.

One can possess much knowledge without repentance. One may know enough to be the wisest person in a community and yet not know anything about scriptural repentance. The audience to which Paul delivered his marvelous sermon on Mar's Hill in Athens was the most intellectual and cultured that the world could furnish. But Paul knew that all of their intellectual achievements were wholly inadequate as a substitute for repentance toward God.

One never repents until he realizes that he is a sinner. The natural man does not see sin in its true colors. To him sin is attractive and entrancing. He has a ruined taste, so he calls sweet bitter and bitter sweet. He confounds good and evil. He is all mixed up when it comes to the question of right and wrong. As long as a person has the attitude that he is not such a bad fellow, in fact not half as bad as some hypocritical church members, he has not repented. There must be a consciousness of sin, guilt, and condemnation or there will not be any repentance.

David sinned against God when he committed adultery with Bathsheba and had her husband, Uriah, murdered. One day, in response to instruction from God, Nathan the prophet went to the palace and preached a sermon to David alone. In that sermon he told David of his sins and guilt in violation of God's commandments. Presently David said, "I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight" (Psalm 51:3-4). His realization of the heinousness of his sin was the first step of David toward repentance. The most hopeless student is one who does not realize his ignorance. The most hopeless sinner is one who does not realize the sinfulness of his sin. Carlyle stated it well when he said: "The greatest of all faults is to be conscious of none."

In the parable of the two sons Christ said: "A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work to day in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went" (Matthew 21:28-29). In other words, the son who said he would not go changed his mind and went. This is an illustration of repentance.

On the day of Pentecost Simon Peter preached to a multitude of religious people and accused them of the murder of the Son of God. He preached it with such convincing power that he made the accusation stick. They were cut to the heart, and cried out, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" In other words, "We have murdered the Son of God, and now we must answer to Him for our crime. What hope is there for us?" Such conviction usually produces good results. Peter told his questioners to repent, or to change their minds about Christ being the promised Messiah and believe on Him. When they repented toward God and believed on Christ they were saved.

People do not repent and believe until they know that they are sinners and that they need the Saviour and His salvation. A person will not be saved until he acknowledges his personal unworthiness and shows a determined readiness, in the power of the Holy Spirit, to abandon iniquity in his life. One must come to an understanding of his condition as a sinner and realize something of the guilt and condemnation of his sin before he will repent. This conviction comes through hearing the gospel of Christ and the enlightening work of the Holy Spirit.

Repentance is based upon an intellectual apprehension of sin. No unsaved person will change his mind about sin until he understands the significance of sin. Before we ask people to repent, we must faithfully and plainly show them from the Scriptures that they are guilty sinners in the sight of God. Peter told the Jews that they were guilty of having a part in Christ's death. They had been waiting for the Messiah to come, and so Peter, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, told them that the Messiah had already come and that it was He Whom they had rejected and hanged upon the cross. With that true picture before them, they were ready for the message of repentance. If Peter had merely commanded them to repent, without first bringing them to an intellectual apprehension of their sin, there would not have been any repentance on their part, for they could not have known of what they should repent. There must always be a presentation of the fact of sin before the call to repent is sounded. It is the awakening of the mind to the fact of sin which results in a readiness and willingness to repent.

(2) An emotional element.

As long as sin is a sweet morsel to you, and as long as sin is something pleasant for you to indulge in without any pricking of your conscience, it is a certainty that you have never repented. With a change of mind about sin, self, and God there must of necessity come a change of attitude and of feeling. One who truly learns that his sin helped crucify the Lord of Glory will be distressed because of that sin and will grieve over its terrible consequences.

The awful nature of sin is realized in the fact that it is wrongdoing to God. Wrongdoing related to society is vice, and society can frown on or favor vice as it will. Wrongdoing related to the state is crime, and the state can pardon or punish crime as it deems wise. But wrongdoing related to God is sin, and only God can forgive sin. Since sin is wrongdoing related to God, then repentance toward God is essential. Contrition, or sorrow for sin, follows conviction or there is no repentance, and without repentance there is no forgiveness. Sorrow for sin is not a mere embarrassment due to the fact that one's sins have been exposed, but it is a sincere regret that one is sinful. Godly sorrow will produce a confession of sin. Perhaps the three hardest words to speak are: "I have sinned." It is not

easy for any sinner to make this confession, and yet if he has remorse for his sins he will confess. The slightest sorrow for sin is sufficient if it results in a turning from sin to God, but the greatest sorrow for sin is insufficient if we do not break with our sins and turn to God for salvation.

Unless we face up to the fact that we have sinned against God, that sin is grievous in His sight and cannot be overlooked, we shall not have any inclination to repent. That was true of the Pharisees in the first century; they did not have any consciousness of sin and consequently did not have any remorse of conscience or any desire for pardon. The man who does not loathe sin still clings to it. Peter denied and Judas betrayed the Lord Jesus Christ. Both of them were sorry. Peter was sorry for his sin. Judas was sorry about the consequences of his sin. When Peter realized the awfulness of his sin, we are told that "he went out, and wept bitterly" (Luke 22:62). Peter's realization of his sin, his sorrow for it, and his hatred of his sin led to his forgiveness. The sorrow of Judas simply led him to go out and commit suicide. Whether or not you weep tears that are visible on account of your sin, you must have Peter's spirit of contrition and deep sorrow for your sin if you are to know the blessings that accompany repentance.

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(3) A volitional element.

There is no repentance where there is not a willingness to turn from sin and self to God. Where there is real conviction of sin and contrition on account of sin, there will be a renunciation of sin. Repentance is never genuine or complete until there is a repudiation of sin as an act of the will. If a person still loves sin, of course there has not been any repentance. When the mental and emotional attitudes are right, there will be proper action also. When one truly repents he has a different attitude toward sin. Instead of sin appearing desirable and fascinating, it is actually odious and detestable to the one who has repented. No one ever repents while trying to justify his sinful habits, or while continuing in the wrong course of behavior. When Christ saves it is from sin. When one repents he abandons his sinful ways. God's Word says: "Thus saith the Lord God; Repent, and turn yourselves from your idols; and turn away your faces from all your abominations" (Ezekiel 14:6). "Repent, and turn away yourselves from all your transgressions; so iniquity shall not be your ruin" (Ezekiel 18:30). It is not enough to repent of one sin, or even a dozen sins, or still more; one must repent of his sinful disposition. When asked what was the difference between remorse and repentance a boy said: "Remorse is when you say you are sorry, and do it again. Repentance is when you are sorry enough to quit."

III. The Instruments Of Repentance.

1. God's Word.

At Pentecost Peter preached the Word of God. When the people heard it they were pricked in their hearts. Upon hearing their inquiry, "What shall we do?", and seeing the conviction wrought through the Word, Peter said: "Repent." It was not the personality of Peter that caused the people to repent, but the clear setting forth of God's Word in the power and demonstration of the Holy Spirit. The same was true of all apostolic preaching. To hear and to believe the Word of God precedes all true repentance. Every minister's first obligation to his hearers is to proclaim faithfully what God has said, for only the Word will produce the conviction and contrition which will lead to repentance.

Through the preaching of the gospel of Christ, the Holy Spirit leads a man to see his guilt and his distance from God. Perceiving his sin and guilt, man realizes that he stands justly condemned as the transgressor of the laws of a holy God. There comes into his soul a regret and a sorrow that he has sinned against God. This sorrow causes him to change his mind about his sinful course and causes him to turn to God in penitence.

2. The Holy Spirit.

"And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin" (John 16:8). Not only does the Holy Spirit convict of sin, but He also brings godly sorrow which worketh repentance.

3. God's goodness.

"Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance" (Romans 2:4). The goodness of God is a mighty stimulus toward repentance. If we remember, reflect upon, and heartily believe in the goodness of God toward us, we shall be led to change our thinking, our feeling, and our acting with reference to God. If a man despises the mercy and goodness of God, which are intended to lead him to repent, he is storing up wrath to be poured out upon him in the day of judgment. But so many have abused

and misused the goodness of the Lord. Some have even used the goodness of God as an excuse for neglecting and rejecting Christ.

IV. The Results Of Repentance.

1. Remission of sins and their being blotted out.

"And that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47).

2. Joy in heaven.

"I say unto you, that likewise joy shall be in heaven over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety and nine just persons, who need no repentance" (Luke 15:7).

"Likewise, I say unto you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth" (Luke 15:10).

3. The gift of the Holy Spirit.

"Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (Acts 2:38).

4. Times of refreshing.

"Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

V. The Evidences Of Repentance.

1. A change of thinking.

2. A change of feeling.

Repentance causes one to hate the sins he formerly cherished. It turns a love for sin into a hatred of sin.

3. A change of acting.

Repentance causes one to turn from his wicked ways. Isaiah 55:7 says: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon."

What a change repentance made in Saul of Tarsus! It changed him from a persecutor of Christians into a noble preacher of the gospel of Christ.

Repentance and faith are mutually inclusive, like the two sides of a coin. They are inseparable graces, so that you cannot really have the one without the other. The New Testament sometimes uses both terms to express a saving experience, while at other times only one or the other term is employed. When we read that repentance is unto life, saving faith is implied; and when we read that the individual believes, repentance is implied. While repentance and faith are inseparable, they are also distinct exercises of the human soul. Paul testified: "Repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21).