

GOD'S CALL TO REPENTANCE

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Our text is taken from Paul's sermon on Mars' Hill in Acts 17:21:

At the time of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.

It has been said that we put too much stress on baptism, and not enough on repentance. Some people think that because we do not preach some direct, incomprehensible, inconceivable, unintelligible, intangible, mystical, mystified, better-felt-than-told sort of an operation that we "leave the Holy Spirit out" and do not preach repentance. Their trouble lies in not knowing what repentance is nor when it is preached. As for baptism, I have never been able to put as much stress on it as Christ and the Apostles did. There is not a case of delayed baptism in the Bible—not one on record—after the subject was commanded to be baptized. On Pentecost "about three thousand" were baptized that day. In Acts 8, the eunuch was baptized by the way, without waiting until he reached his destination; he did not even wait for a church to vote on him! In Acts 9, Paul "arose, and was baptized" forthwith upon being told. In Acts 16, the jailor was baptized "the same hour of the night." The apostles evidently put much stress on the command to be baptized, to have obtained such ready response. As hard as I try, people will often delay their baptism for a time, even when convinced, and sometimes after the good confession has been made. Perhaps, I am not putting **enough stress** on this important command after all. But if it seems to some that too much is said on the subject, let it be remembered that it is the one command that people so universally oppose, and that preachers so unanimously ignore; hence it requires much stress on our part. You see, friend, it is necessary for us to do our part of the preaching on the subject and make up for what all the other preachers fail to do! If they would all preach baptism, as they do faith, we would not feel bound to give so much attention to it: and if the situation should be reversed, and all the preachers should begin preaching baptism and ignoring faith (even branding it as nonessential) then we would feel impelled to put the stress there. But in the midst of this skeptical, doubting, unbelieving, impenitent age I must concede, friends, that much more preaching on both faith and repentance is in demand.

The Hardest Command

Repentance is the hardest command to obey. Do you wonder if this is true? Well, it is—for it has to do with the will of man. The obstinacy of the human will has always been, and yet is, the greatest obstacle in the way of his salvation. Faith is not hard to induce unless one is determined not to believe, and in that case, it becomes one of obstinacy again. Someone said, "If weak thy faith why choose the harder side?" Unbelief is the harder side. Faith is easily imparted and "groweth exceedingly" in those who are not obstinate. Neither is baptism a hard command. When one has believed, actually, and repented, truly, he will readily be baptized. "Then they that gladly received the word were baptized" (Acts 2:41). Impenitence is the trouble.

And thinkest thou this, O man ... that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance? But after thy hardness and impenitent heart treasurest up unto thyself wrath against the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous

judgment of God; who will render to every man according to his deeds ... for there is no respect of persons with God (Rom. 2:3-11).

God says stubbornness is as bad as idolatry, and rebellion is the same as witchcraft in the Lord's sight. The impenitence that will reject all warnings of a righteous judgment is plain hardihood.

It has been said that infidels live but do not die. That is likely the truth for infidelity is a poor rod and staff in death. Someone else said that there will be no infidels in hell. The renowned French infidel, Voltaire, is reported to have screamed in his death: "O God if there be a God, save my soul, if I have a soul, from hell if there is a hell." It is also said of the bold and brazen Ingersoll that he shrieked out in the clutches of death: "O, what shall become of my poor soul!" As the unbelieving and impenitent face, a leap into the dark caverns of eternity where "tribulation and anguish" await "them that are contentious, and do not obey the truth." They reach for a hand that can save, but God has said:

Because I have called and ye refused; I have stretched out my hand, and no man regarded; but ye have set at nought all my counsel, and would none of my reproof: I also will laugh at your calamity: I will mock when your fear cometh; ... then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer (Pro. 1:24-28).

These are solemn words, impenitent friend, and you should heed them to "seek the Lord while he may be found" and "call upon him while he is near." The time will come, and that soon, when you will renounce your unbelief and sue for mercy, but mercy's day may have passed you by. "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor. 6:2).

What Repentance Is

It is not enough to merely call upon people to repent; they must know what repentance is, in order that they may repent. Theology has obscured the subject and blurred the eyes of those who otherwise might see. It has been preached as something that God gives, a weird something from an unknown source, something a sinner should pray for, and received in strange sensations and inexplicable experiences. Now, friends, let us see if we cannot get an intelligent definition of repentance—just try to find out what this thing is that God "commands all men everywhere" to do. Men cannot do a thing unless they know what it is; nor can they do the thing that is done for them. Since repentance is commanded, it is an act of man and not of God. It is done by man and not for man.

Repentance is not fear. Many preachers seem to think so, for in their preaching they use the "fear psychology." They take you to the sick room, then to the death chamber, then to the undertaker's parlor, then to the cemetery, then to the land of ghostdom; and they tell you many creepy stories that make the hair stand on ends, and the knees knock, and the teeth chatter, and the blood run cold, and all sorts of creepy feelings play up and down the spine—and they think they are preaching repentance, when in fact they are preaching nightmares! No, repentance is not fear.

Repentance is not regret. Many have regretted their sins who never once repented. Men are sorry for their sins because they have been caught; because they suffer the shame or humiliation of being exposed; because they suffer the penalties of its retributive justice—but mere regret is not repentance.

Repentance is not prayer. Some prayers are an abomination in the sight of God. "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall he abomination" (Pro. 28:9). And David said, "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psa. 66:18). But there are people who think that all who pray have repented and will be saved. Jesus said: "Not every one that saith unto me Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he

that doeth the will of my father which is in heaven" (Mat. 7:21). It takes more than mere prayer to define repentance.

Repentance is not conviction. Now, all of you have heard the preachers talk about being "under conviction"—and they don't know what it means themselves. On the day of Pentecost, when the first gospel sermon was preached, the people were "pricked in their hearts"—they were convicted, whether they were "under" it or not. Convicted—but they had not repented. For when these convicted Jews said to the apostles, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Peter told them to "repent and be baptized." So they had not repented—it takes more than conviction to make repentance.

Repentance is not sorrow. Paul says. "Godly sorrow worketh repentance." Hence, sorrow—the right kind of sorrow—is the cause and repentance is the effect. When regret turns into sorrow, then sorrow turns into repentance.

Repentance is not reformation. It produces reformation, just as sorrow produces repentance. Reformation is the fruit of repentance. A man regrets his sins to the extent of sorrow, he repents, and reforms. Hence, repentance stands in between the time that a man becomes sorry for his sins and when he abandons his sins and begins the better course of life. "For I am ready to halt, and my sorrow is continually before me. For I will declare my iniquity; I will be sorry for my sins" (Psa. 38:18).

Then what is repentance? Friends, repentance is a mental act—the act of the mind that determines to quit sin. It is resolution; it involves the functions of the human will. Hear Jesus: "But what think ye? A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not: but afterward he repented, and went" (Mat. 21:29). This short parable defines repentance. The impenitent son said, "I will not." The penitent son said, "I will." The difference between repentance and impenitence is the difference of one word. It is the word *not*, and that is the word that spells the difference between rebellion and disobedience on one hand and submission and obedience to God on the other. When a man who is living in sin determines to abandon his life of sin, when he says, "I will quit sin—I will sin no more," he has repented. How long does it take one to repent? Just long enough to determine to quit sin. So, repentance, friends, is that resolution, determination, that decision to obey God. Faith precedes it, baptism follows it. Hence, "repent and be baptized every one of you."

The Necessity Of Repentance

The absolute necessity of repentance is seen by its prominence in the divine text. Enoch, the first preacher mentioned in the Bible, preached repentance. He preached "judgment upon all" and sought "to convince them of all their ungodly deeds" (Jude 14-15). Noah preached repentance. For about a century he thundered forth the coming judgment of God upon a world utterly wed to evil and incorrigible in crime. But the world was in the grip of universal apostacy; they gave no heed and God "spared not the old world, but saved Noah, the eighth person, a preacher of righteousness, bringing in the flood upon the world of the ungodly" (2 Pet. 2:5). Had the world repented at the preaching of Noah, the story might have been a different one. The prophets all preached repentance. Isaiah said, "though your sins be as scarlet, I will make them white as snow; though they be red like crimson, I will make them a wool." Ezekiel said, "turn ye from your transgressions, for why will ye die, O house of Israel." And the first preacher that appears on the scene in the New Testament is a fearless preacher of repentance. John, the Baptist, preached the "baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4). He did not preach the kind of baptism preached by those preachers today who call themselves Baptists. Let it be observed, in the first place, that Baptist was not John's name, but his work; and in the second place, that the Baptists today do not preach John's baptism. He preached

the “baptism of repentance (growing out of repentance) for the remission of sins.” Modern Baptist preachers could not fellowship John, and he could not fellowship them. Moreover, John was not a Baptist—but “the” Baptist—the only one, and there was never another who was called such. He started no church, and belonged to no church, and was beheaded by Herod before Jesus Christ built the church—yet the effort is made to identify the Baptist church today with the New Testament. It is a vain effort. Their own translation of the New Testament some years ago by their own Baptist scholars ruined that effort—for their scholars translated the word *baptism* “immersion” and the word *baptize* “immerse,” and translated “John the Baptist” in the term “John the Immerser.” They later discarded the translation because their scholars had taken out their name! We have a copy of this translation and will be glad to show it to any Baptist who might like see it.

So, Jesus preached repentance—but not repentance only; he preached the **baptism** of repentance. And John preached baptism—but not baptism only—he preached the baptism of **repentance**, and it was for the remission of sins.

One day Jesus came to be baptized of John—and John hesitated. He was preaching repentance and baptism for the remission of sins, and he knew that Jesus could receive no such baptism, as he had no sins. Jesus said, “suffer it to be so now.” That means that John was preaching it exactly right—but Jesus was an exception. He said “suffer” it. We suffer an exception, not the rule. And Jesus further said, “Suffer it to be so”—now; that one time only—and He (the Son of God) was thus the only exception to “the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” Jesus did not receive John’s baptism—he received an exception to it.

But Jesus went forth preaching “that men should repent”—the Son of God preached repentance. He put it in the Great Commission which, as worded by Luke, reads: “That repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all the nations beginning at Jerusalem.” Then, beginning at Jerusalem, Peter preached repentance on Pentecost, commanding the Jews to “repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins.” Paul preached it on Mars Hill to the men of Athens, and told them that “at the time of this ignorance” (Gentile ignorance, when God had not given them his Oracles) God had “winked at” or overlooked, but under this gospel age none is excused or excusable, and “all men everywhere” must repent. Yes, repentance is necessary. Jesus said “repent or perish,” and there is no alternative. It is repentance here or perdition hereafter. It means—turn or burn. In the very nature of things, and in the stern commands of God through all of his preachers in every dispensation, repentance is imperative.

The Coming Judgment

Upon one occasion certain Jews came to Jesus and called his attention to a tragedy in which eighteen men had lost their lives. They appeared to think these men were sinners above others and that it was God’s judgment sent upon them. There are yet preachers who take advantage of every calamity that occurs, from cyclones and tornadoes, to blasts and floods, to preach tirades and diatribes on the judgment of God sent upon the people for their particular sins. If such were true, floods would not be confined to the Ohio and Mississippi valleys, but we would have one like Noah’s, for sin is not a local commodity. It shows just how little the ordinary preacher knows or has to preach about! Jesus answered the question by saying “I tell you, nay”—that is, no, God does not send judgments upon men in such disasters and tragedies. But “except ye repent, ye shall perish.” There is coming a time when God will judge the world, not by cyclones and floods, but by the judgment of the last day. His command is to repent—or perish. The judgment is coming. It is certain, for “God has appointed a day” to judge the world. There are two billion people that inhabit the globe today, and they will be there. The teeming millions of the past, and the unborn future will be there—he will judge **the**

world. What a stupendous occasion it will be! The issue will be “righteousness”—he will judge the world in **righteousness**. The gospel, (for all of his commandments are righteousness) will be the sole standard of judgment. There will be a separation—for the line will be drawn, sad to say, right through the families of the earth. The first family that ever lived will be divided in the judgment, because Cain will be on one side of the line and his good brother Abel on the other. Wives will be on one side and husbands on the other; parents on one side and their children on the other. Let us save our children! Repent—because he has appointed a day in which he will judge the world. Ample warning has been made. Every motive and incentive consistent with the moral and spiritual nature of man has been placed before the race. There is the **love of God**—matchless love—infinite goodness, that “leadeth thee to repent.” There is the **fear of judgment** that calls men to repentance. And there is the **hope of heaven**, the climax of all incentive and inducements to lead men into the life of obedience to God. Thus, your soul stands, my hesitating friend, squarely in between the divine charms of God’s love and the divine terrors of God’s wrath. Repent or perish! ~ *Deceased*