

Repentance Before Prayer for Forgiveness

by Charles Finney

Charles Finney emphasizes the importance of repentance before prayer for forgiveness, highlighting the distinction between conviction and repentance, and the need for sinners to abandon selfishness and pursue benevolence.

Scripture: Acts 8:22

Topics: "Repentance", "Prayer for Forgiveness"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the necessity of true repentance before seeking forgiveness, using the example of Simon Magus to illustrate that one must first turn away from selfishness and sin to genuinely approach God in prayer. He explains that repentance is not merely feeling sorry or remorseful, but a complete change of mind and heart towards God and others. Finney argues that many sinners mistakenly pray for forgiveness without true repentance, which only leads to deception and continued sin. He stresses that true repentance involves honesty with God, restitution, and a commitment to abandon all forms of sin. Ultimately, Finney calls for a return to the biblical principle that repentance must precede prayer for pardon.

Transcript

"Repent, therefore, of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bonds of iniquity.["] Acts, 8:22, 23

These words were addressed to Simon Magus. A revival of religion was in progress in Samaria, under the labors of Peter and Philip; many were converted to God, and among them Simon Magus also professed conversion. He had been a great man in that place and had deceived many by his magic arts. Seeing the greater wonders wrought by these Christian apostles, he was struck with surprise, and his ambitious spirit caught at the idea of augmenting his own power over men by obtaining this new secret. Hence he offers the apostles money to buy this new power. Peter saw his heart at once and nobly replies--"Thy money perish with thee; thou hast neither part nor lot in this matter, for thy heart is not right in the sight of God." He then gives him directions as in our text: "Repent, therefore, of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee."

Following the order of thought as in the text, I will

I. NOTICE THE PRINCIPLE HERE DEVELOPED, IN THE LIGHT OF WHICH PETER SAW THIS MAN YET IN HIS SINS;

II. SHOW WHAT REPENTANCE IS;

III. WHAT IS IMPLIED IN REPENTANCE;

IV. SHOW WHY SINNERS ARE EXHORTED FIRST TO REPENT, AND THEN TO PRAY FOR PARDON;

V. DWELL ON THE IMPORTANCE OF FOLLOWING THIS EXAMPLE IN ALL OUR DEALINGS WITH MEN.

I. Peter did not profess to learn Simon Magus' character by inspiration. He had no such omniscience. Inspiration he doubtless had, but inspiration taught general truth, not individual character. Peter saw his heart to be selfish, and not at all in harmony with the gospel spirit. Simon still had his old spirit, and wanted power to give the Holy Ghost to whom he pleased for the same reason that he had before sought and valued his magic powers. Hence he offered money, as if the apostles were as sordid as himself. Peter saw that he was selfish and therefore blind, far indeed from understanding the subject of Christianity.

II. Hence Peter exhorted him to repent. What is repentance?

Repentance should always be distinguished from conviction for sin. The latter is an involuntary state of mind, and of course has no virtue in it. There may be as much of it as there is in hell itself, and yet no virtue. There is awful conviction in hell; but no genuine repentance.

Neither does repentance consist merely in sorrow. Indeed this is properly and strictly no part of it, for sorrow does not belong to the thinking department of the mind,--much less does it appertain to the will, and to the department of voluntary action.

Nor again is repentance the same thing as remorse. Remorse, though it amounts to the keenest and most galling self-condemnation, does not necessarily imply repentance. There may be in it no change of mind whatever.

Repentance is simply and precisely a change of mind. The original term denotes, a thinking again--a turning of the mind--as when one finds himself going wrong and turns about to pursue the opposite course. The term, when applied to evangelical repentance, means, not merely a turning of the mind, but a change of the entire purposes of action, change in the entire attitude of the will. Repentance, therefore, is not remorse, is not sorrow, not anything of this kind; but is the mind turning away from selfish attitudes to benevolent--from being selfish to being really benevolent.

III. What is implied in repentance?

1. Conviction of sin as a wrong committed against God. Without this there can be no rational repentance.

2. That the sinner becomes truly honest with God. He must honestly admit the truths affirmed by his reason and pressed on his soul by his conscience. Especially must he recognize God's rights--that he himself is God's property and belongs truly to God.

3. That he becomes just and equitable towards men--truly an honest man. Selfishness is the greatest dishonesty in the world. No man is radically honest who is selfish, unless a man can be honest in

practically denying every body's rights but his own. No; selfishness is the perfection of dishonesty. It is absurd for a wicked man to pretend to be honest. He has not a particle of genuine honesty, more than Satan has! What is honesty? Respecting all other men's rights and especially God's rights according to their true value. But the sinner sets himself up for an honest man while he utterly denies God's rights. How false their pretensions! They respect their neighbor's rights only for their own interests--only because in some way they expect to reap good to themselves from the respect they hypocritically show to their neighbor's interests. The fact is, men are totally deceived if they think themselves honest towards men while they are not really honest towards God. The heart of honesty is not in them. If they do not love their neighbor as themselves, they are not honest. No man has a right to say practically that his rights and interests are greater than his neighbor's. The practical assumption of this is both false and dishonest.

4. No man is penitent who is not an honest man in the sense that he renders to God what is God's and to man what is man's. He must begin with restoring to God his stolen self. God has created him--has kept him alive--and has redeemed him;--this threefold claim God has on him; and yet he sets himself up in opposition against God and has no sympathy with God whatever. No man therefore is honest till he repents towards God. The first step is to give himself back to God, and with himself whatever remains of his time, his talents, his property and his influence. It is always implied in true repentance that you make full restoration of every thing you have not squandered and so squandered as to feel it beyond your power to restore it.

5. Repentance implies confession of sin to God and to all those whom you have injured. Let no man think himself truly penitent until he has made confession in all things where it is due. Some sins are known only to God, and some are committed only against God. These should be confessed to God. In some excepted cases, God holds men to the duty of confessing secret sins. This however is the exception and not the rule.

I cannot enter now into those discriminations which should be made on this subject. But obviously where restitution cannot be made without confession, as for example, where character is injured, there you persist in the wrong unless you confess. You have deceived many in respect to your neighbor, to his hurt, and this wrong which you have done him, you must undo, or you cannot suppose yourself to be really penitent.

6. But besides confession, restitution is always implied in repentance. Each man should make it to the extent of his power. This is always implied, because the penitent man is also benevolent. He loves his neighbor as himself, and therefore like Zaccheus he hastens to restore, and thinks it no hardship even to restore four-fold.

7. Repentance implies the entire abandonment of all courses of life and of business which are inconsistent with Christian character. Think you that a man, really benevolent in spirit, could pursue a business adapted to ruin instead of save men? No indeed! Shall a man who loves the well-being of others as he does his own, devote himself to traffic in human flesh? No sooner than he would sell his own flesh and blood--his own person into bondage, or the bodies and souls of his own wife and children!

8. Repentance also implies not only an abandonment of all selfish branches of business, but of all selfish modes of transacting business, even of business in itself right. Selfish men often pursue a good business in a bad way--on most selfish principles and policy. This also repentance precludes, because repentance is a change of the heart and life from selfishness to real benevolence. It implies an abandonment of all

selfishness.

9. Repentance implies a universal reformation of life,--a reformation extending to all forms of sin. Penitent men turn from all sin as sin--because they regard it as sin, and therefore can have no sympathy with it. All known sin therefore they at once abandon. And since to them nothing can be sin except what is known to be such, the forsaking of all known sin is really the forsaking of all sin. No man is truly penitent who allows himself to continue in some chosen sin, and who picks and chooses his indulgences. This is not repentance at all.

When I speak of abandoning sin, I do not imply that the penitent man never for even a moment relapses into it; but I imply that he sets himself against it in real honesty and earnestness.

10. Finally, true repentance implies confidence in God and in Jesus Christ. If a man truly repents of sin he will of course believe on Jesus Christ.

IV. What is implied in the consecutive order of duties, as enjoined by Peter--repentance before prayer for pardon?

1. He assumed that Simon Magus was totally depraved--totally alienated from God, and hence unwilling to give up his sins. Hence he could not exhort him to pray for pardon while yet in his sins. Peter knew full well that Simon would spring at the idea of being forgiven before he repented; but he meant to caution him in the strongest way against such a delusion. He knew that his sin consisted in cleaving to his selfishness, and therefore told him first to give up his sins and then to ask forgiveness. Peter assumed that his unwillingness to give up his selfishness was his great sin, first of all to be repented of and put away.

2. He assumed that God could not forgive him until he should put away his sin. Peter knew Simon's great difficulty--knew that he held on to his course as an ambitious and selfish man; and therefore assured him that mercy could come to him only after full repentance.

3. Peter did not regard Simon as having any right to ask or wish for pardon until he had repented. You will observe that Peter saw Simon impenitent and selfish. Hence he assumed that he had no right to ask or expect forgiveness while in this state of mind. He did not tell him to pray for repentance, because he knew he was unwilling to repent, and therefore such a prayer would only be mocking God.

Yet many direct the sinner to pray for repentance! Ah, do you want the sinner to mock God? Peter did not direct Simon to pray for repentance, for he knew that this would be only mocking God until he should himself be willing to repent; and he could not invite him to insult Jehovah.

4. It is also assumed that he was abundantly able to repent. Men sometimes teach sinners to pray that God would make them able to repent, and many even imply that the sinner is trying as hard as he can to repent, and therefore needs only cry unto God to help him repent, the only difficulty is his case being that God does not give him strength enough!

"Trying to repent" always implies two things--a willingness to repent, and a want of power to do it. Trying is making an effort to accomplish that on which the mind is set, and, if unsuccessful, implies that the failure results from lack of power.

Now Peter understood this whole subject. Peter knew that this man had free will enough and ability enough to repent if he would. Therefore he directs him first to repent, and then ask pardon. Asking

forgiveness before repenting would only blaspheme God, and Peter could not advise him to do that.

5. Peter implies that he had conviction enough, and therefore need not wait for more. Hence, he did not tell him to wait for it, but at once to repent. This of course assumed that he had conviction enough. Many set sinners to praying for conviction just as if they needed more and desired to have it, neither of which are usually true.

6. Peter assumed that the sinner is without excuse for either his sin or his remaining impenitent. He insisted on repentance as the present duty of that man, which of course implies that in God's judgment it is the duty of every sinner to repent. Now it must be of the very first importance for us to know how God judges in this matter. It is a remarkable fact that both Peter and all other inspired teachers concur in representing God as requiring sinners at once to repent.

V. It is of the utmost importance to follow this inspired example. For,

1. This direction to repent before asking forgiveness, and this only, is consistent with the facts in the case.

For what are the facts? Simply these. The sinner is a free-acting, voluntary agent. In this capacity he sets himself selfishly against the demands of God's law of love. Now what shall God require him to do? Change his course to be sure--in other words repent. Nothing can be plainer than that a voluntary agent who is voluntarily doing wrong should turn about and voluntarily do right. This, and this only, is consistent with the facts and with the right of the case.

But suppose you undertake to give direction to a sinner who is still selfish, that is, devoted to self-pleasing. First of all you set him to praying. Praying for what? That God would give him the desire of his heart? Of course if he prays without first changing the purpose of his heart, he will pray for what he desires--that is, he will pray that God would grant him the selfish desires of his heart. His prayer would be--O Lord, let me have heaven without holiness: Lord, pardon my sins, and yet let me live on in sinning, for I have no heart to repent!

Now can such mocking of God be of any use? Would you suppose it probable that the Bible would give such directions to awakened sinners?

If men are really willing to repent and forsake all sin, God asks no more of them, for the willing is essentially the doing; but there can be no greater mistake in this world than to assume that sinners are willing to repent and want to repent, before they actually do it.

2. The usual order in which enquirers are set at work is the reverse of that enjoined in the Bible, as if the sinner was ready and God not ready, and therefore the sinner needs to use means to make God ready and to urge Him forward to do his duty.

3. To set the sinner to praying for repentance is to assume that he is willing to repent but cannot, and therefore needs God's power to help him.

The truth is, no man can will to renounce sin without doing so; for to will it is to do it.

4. To direct sinners otherwise than God does in the Bible is to deceive them. Thousands have been deceived thus to the ruin of their souls forever. If you set them to pray for pardon before they repent, you leave them under the delusion that they are doing something they ought to do--are doing their

duty;--whereas they are not doing their duty until they repent! What a horrible doctrine is this! Teach an impenitent sinner, still holding on to his sins, to pray for pardon! This would ruin a world of sinners. It would leave them all deceived and deluded in their sins and under God's wrath forever!

5. To tell the sinner to pray for the Holy Ghost is only the same thing in a slightly different form. Nothing can be more deceptive than to tell the sinner to pray for the Holy Ghost while you know he is only resisting the Holy Ghost, and while you allow him to go on, still resisting. "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost,["] says the word of God through one of its most faithful and truthful preachers. What does the Holy Ghost do? He takes truth and reveals it to the sinner in impressive aspects. This is his office-work as respects the sinner. As soon as the sinner yields to the truth as presented and enforced by the Holy Ghost, he is converted. Until he repents he only resists the Spirit. What avails it then to direct him to pray for the Spirit, so long as he is resisting the Spirit? What can his prayer be while pursuing this course, except mocking God? The thing he should do is not to pray for the Holy Ghost, but to yield to his influence as already exerted on his mind. The first thing and the only right thing for the awakened sinner to do in reference to the Spirit, is to yield his heart to the demands of God's revealed truth. Let him do this and he would be converted in a moment. He should be told that he does not feel his need of the Spirit, and therefore cannot pray intelligently for its greater influence on his mind. He should also be told that the only honest thing he can do in the first place is to cease to resist the Spirit.

Peter did not say to Simon--Pray for the Holy Ghost to strive with you, or to repent for you, or to make you repent, or even to help you repent; but simply, Repent yourself--repent first of all, and then ask forgiveness.

6. To direct a sinner yet in his sins, to pray instead of repenting, is to leave him under the impression that after he has prayed he has done his duty. You tell him to pray; he prays, and then says--now I have done my duty and why am I not converted? But if you tell him as Peter did, first to repent and then to pray--if he follows your direction he is converted, and then his prayer can be acceptable to God.

The opposite course--that is, the reverse order, which puts prayer before repentance, virtually casts the blame of continued impenitence upon God. If you direct the sinner to pray first instead of repent first, you virtually imply that the difficulty in the sinner's way is one that God must remove--that the reason why he has not repented lies in God not in himself. If the sinner follows your direction, he prays before he repents, and then having prayed, he says, Why am I not converted and saved? I have prayed;--God does not convert me;--the blame be on God and not on me! --How horrible must the influence of this course be on the sinner's mind!

7. No inspired writer warrants any other course than this of the text. Search the scriptures from beginning to end, you find no directions to sinners different from this. You might well wonder in amazement if you should, for to bid the sinner go and pray first before repenting overlooks the very nature of repentance and of a sinning state of mind.

8. Every doctrine of Scripture is consistent with the course of directions given in the text and with no other course. Every doctrine of scripture shuts the sinner up to the doing of present duty. The whole Bible urges him to do present duty and if he is in unrepented sin, it tells him that his first duty is to repent. Men have struck out for themselves a strange way that they should direct sinners to do something else than repent;--but the Bible holds steadfastly to the only consistent course--urging evermore on every sinner that first of all he should repent. John came crying in the wilderness of Judea--Repent ye;--and Jesus Christ

followed him preaching the same thing and nothing different from this;--"Repent, says he, for the gospel kingdom is at hand." So every prophet, and every apostle, each in his place, cried aloud--Repent, REPENT, as if there was nothing else they dared to say till this first duty is done.

This is the only rational course--the only course which is based upon scripture, upon reason, and upon the true science of mind. Every sinner knows that he is a sinner. You no more need the Holy Ghost to make you see yourself a sinner than to make you see that you exist. This shows why the Bible always faces the sinner down with the assumption--You are a sinner, and the fact needs no proof. Every sinner knows it.

9. Sinners are often very willing to pray, but not to repent. Only let him off from the heart-work of repenting, and he will gladly do many other things. A young man once said to me--"I would travel to any part of the world if I might thereby be saved." Yes, said I, but one thing you will not do;--give up your self-righteousness, and be saved on Christ alone, without doing anything meritorious yourself.

So with every sinner. Tell him to pray for conviction. O yes, he will pray for conviction, but he will resist conviction, until he repents. Tell him to pray for the Holy Ghost. O yes, he will pray for the Holy Ghost, but still he will perhaps resist the Holy Ghost continually. He is ready to do the outside work, but not the heart-work;--he will readily cleanse the outside of the cup and platter, but the turning of his own heart from his sins and selfishness, that is the hard thing--the thing which of all others he is reluctant to do.

Sinners are wont to assume in self-vindication that it is impossible for them to control their own hearts. They admit they can control their muscles; if Jesus were on earth, they could come to him and bow their knees before him;--but they cannot come with their hearts and bow their hearts to him. But what is the heart that you cannot control it? You are controlling your own hearts all the time, and the very thing God complains of is that you control it too stubbornly, so that his truth and his Spirit cannot move you--that you control it wrong and with so much obstinacy as to baffle all his efforts to save you. Therefore He cries--"Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die?"

REMARKS.

1. But you ask--Should not a sinner pray? The answer depends upon what the question means and implies. If it means--Shall a sinner mock God? I answer, No. If you mean--Shall he truly pray, in sincerity and honesty? Yes. Shall he lie to the Holy Ghost? No. Shall he turn to God? Yes.

But the sum of all that need be said on this point is that the sinner should be told to repent and pray--not pray and repent. Let him observe the scriptural order--an order founded in reason and in the nature of the case.

2. This order of duties is eminently reasonable.

Suppose a sinner had stolen money. He knows that God is greatly displeased with him for this, and he is also afraid of being detected and disgraced. Now he says--What shall I do? Shall I repent and then pray God to forgive me, or shall I pray first? Greatly disliking to confess, repent and restore, he says--I will do the other thing; I will pray. I will go alone and pray about it, and then perhaps I will repent. See him. He takes out his stolen money. He passes it from one hand to the other; I am greatly distressed, he says, what shall I do? Shall I put it in my pocket and go and pray? No, sinner, no. Carry it back--repent first, and then go and pray. Don't go and pray for the Holy Ghost first: there is no need of that; the Holy Ghost is already convicting you of your great sin. Don't insult Him by refusing to yield to his persuasions, and by

pretending to pray for his guidance and help!

Let this represent all sin. Stealing money is only one form of sin; let it represent all forms of sin. You, sinner, are fully committed to living for yourself. You have robbed God by wresting yourself away from his service. God says--Restore. Give yourself back to me and to my service. But you reply--What shall I do? Shall I not go and pray? God says--Restore first; give back the stolen goods first; then you may pray. What should you pray for--until you have restored what you have stolen? You surely will not insult God by praying for pardon before you have restored what you have stolen. You need not pray for the Holy Ghost unless you restore, for to pray and not restore is only resisting and mocking the Spirit of God.

But the sinner says--You talk as if I could repent. Yes, and so does God. God in his word always speaks as if you could repent, and as if you ought to know that you can. What if Simon Magus had said--But you don't expect me to repent, do you? You will observe he did not say any such thing. His own conscience neither suggested nor allowed such a defense, nor did the preaching of the Apostles encourage it.

But you say, Does the Bible always assume that I can repent? Yes, every where--in all its commands--by every prophet, every Apostle--by the lips of every fore-runner of Christ--by the lips of Christ Himself. Every inspired command--every inspired direction, holds the same language and makes the same implication. You can repent and you ought to do it immediately!

3. When the sinner says, I can't repent, he virtually charges God with being a tyrant. For what can be tyranny if charging God with requiring you to do impossibilities is not?

4. But does not the Bible teach that God gives men repentance? Yes, and in the same sense as He gives you daily bread--which, however, you must yourself provide and yourself eat. God does not give you your daily bread, so long as you persist in starving yourself. So God gives you repentance by persuading you to repent--by drawing you--impressing truth on your heart and conscience. Indeed there is no other possible way in which He can give you repentance. It is only by bringing truth before your mind--impressing it by a thousand ways upon your heart and conscience. For, repentance is a rational, voluntary act--an act done by the sinner, because he sees that truth and reason demand it.

5. Every sinner should see and feel that immediate repentance is what God requires. He should see that he is shut up to this precisely and to nothing else.

Nor is there anything strange or absurd in this. Suppose a man had committed murder, and you should tell him to repent of this great sin. Is there anything mysterious in this? Or if you see a man engaged in any particular form of wickedness, and you exhort him to desist and repent: is there in this course anything strange or unreasonable? How then can there be anything unreasonable in requiring a sinner to repent of all his sins? or of that which embraces the sum of all wickedness?

6. Some of you are so much afraid you shall repent, that you get a book, even under the most solemn preaching, and try to keep from thinking of your own sins; and even then you will pretend that you cannot repent, and would fain imply that you would repent if you could! Is not this beautifully consistent!

7. Many professors of religion are greatly backslidden from God, yet they pray in form, but don't repent. Many talk about praying as if they made up in prayer what they lack of pleasing God in sinning. I asked a young lady--Do you pray? Yes sir. When? On retiring to rest at night. What for? That God would take me to heaven if I should die before morning. Do you expect God would do so? No. You expect then to so on in

sin. Now be so honest as to tell God just the truth. Say to him--Lord, forgive my sins--give me strength by sleep and food that I may sin a little more; I have sinned all the day past--I don't intend to repent; I only want to be taken to heaven if I die, for I cannot bear to sink down to hell: Lord help me to sin on against thee as long as I live, and then take me up to heaven!!

You are shocked; but what shocks you? Your course, or my language?

There, see the sinner. He gets on his knees to tell God that he wants repentance, but he lies in saying so, every moment until he does in fact repent. And you, backslidden professor, lie to God in every word of your pretended prayer. Do you say--I will not repent--I don't intend to repent? If you say anything else than this you lie to God, for nothing else is true until you do in fact repent. The truth is, so long as you continue in your selfish, impenitent state, you don't mean to repent. Therefore, let him pray as he will, his true meaning is, I have no intention of repenting of my sins. This is always true, until he does repent.

But this praying of sinners in their sins when they do not mean to repent! Hear him, "O Lord, I beseech thee to search my heart." No, you don't mean any such thing; you are covering up your own heart all the time. "O God, come near to me." But you are pushing away from God every moment, and as you strive to get away, you only look back over your shoulder and cry to God to reveal his face and draw near to your soul! Hark, hear what the Bible says. "He that turneth away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination." And what is your course but this?

8. Let me tell you, God is infinitely ready to meet and bless you. He comes with pardons in his hands--pardons all sealed with blood. You need only renounce your sins and come to Him; then all will be well. The very first moment you come before God with a penitent heart, He will meet you with smiles of loving-kindness. His parable of the prodigal son, both illustrates and proves this. See, the wandering son comes to himself. Instead of staying away and trying to live on husks, he turns his face towards home, and comes with a confession on his lips, and tears of penitence on his cheeks. He is coming--and now see the aged father. He spies him in the distance; he recognizes his long-lost son. [S]ee how he leaps from his door, and rushes to embrace this returning son. O how ready! O how much more than merely READY!! O how ready is God in your case to meet you with the fullest pardon--and wipe all your tears away, and soothe down that aching sensibility!

Now, dear hearer, don't go away and say I told you not to pray. If I should tell you not to go into your closet, get upon your knees and swear, and blaspheme God, could you say with any truth that I told you not to pray? So I do not teach you not to pray; but I do teach you to be honest. I warn you when you pray not to mock God. I entreat you when you pray to give up your heart to God and repent of all your sin. When I repented first, I did it on my knees and in the act of prayer. I knelt down an impenitent sinner, and rose up a penitent. In the very act of speaking to God, my heart broke; I yielded myself to God. This is the way. And do you ask--Can I believe God? Yes. Can I pray in faith? Yes. Can I give my heart to God in penitence? Yes. Why not you as well as Paul--as well as Peter--as well as any one of the myriads who have done this very thing, and in so doing have found mercy?

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