

Repentance and Forgiveness

by Harry Ironside

The sermon emphasizes the importance of repentance, forgiveness, and revival in our individual lives and local assemblies.

Scripture: Matthew 18:21

Topics: "Forgiveness", "Repentance"

Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes the necessity of repentance and forgiveness in the Christian life, explaining that while God's forgiveness is based on grace through Jesus Christ, it is not extended to unrepentant sinners. He highlights the importance of acknowledging one's guilt and the need for believers to forgive others as they have been forgiven. Ironside illustrates this with the parable of the unforgiving servant and stresses that true forgiveness requires a heart of repentance, both from the sinner and towards those who have wronged us. He calls for a genuine return to God, urging believers to seek revival through honest confession and reconciliation with one another. Ultimately, he reassures that God's grace is boundless for those who come to Him in true repentance.

Transcript

We may be instructed as to the how and when of divine forgiveness if we consider carefully what the Scriptures teach as to our own attitude toward our sinning brethren. This will emphasize anew what has come before us so frequently in these studies, that, while God gives remission of sins on the principle of pure grace, based upon the work our Lord Jesus has accomplished, when on the cross He provided a righteous ground upon which God could be just and yet the justifier of sinners who trust His Son, nevertheless this forgiveness is not granted to unrepentant sinners. His heart is ever toward all men, but He does not force His pardoning grace upon anyone. The moment the trembling sinner comes to Him, owning His guilt and judging himself as utterly lost and unworthy, thus taking the ground of repentance, He speaks peace through Jesus Christ.

"The sinner who believes is free,

Can say the Saviour died for me,

Can point to the atoning blood

And say, This made my peace with God."

He who is thus forgiven is then called upon to forgive those who sin against him. The prayer, "Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors," is not a prayer for the lips of a lost sinner. It is the cry of a disciple. Forgiven eternally, the believer nevertheless needs daily forgiveness when, as an erring child of God, he grieves His Holy Spirit by allowing any unholy thing in his life and walk. And he is therefore exhorted to forgive as God in Christ has forgiven him. He who refuses to show grace to an erring brother will have to feel the rod upon his own back.

This was hard for Peter to comprehend, and doubtless also for the other apostles. As spokesman for them all, Peter asked, "Lord how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? until seven times?" Seven was to Peter the number of spiritual and mystical perfection, but how feebly did he enter into the perfection of the grace that should characterize the child of the new creation. The reply of Jesus is challenging in its comprehensiveness, for it shows not only what should be the extent of our forgiveness in dealing with our fellow sinners, but it surely suggests the illimitable mercy that God our Father exercises towards us. He answered, "I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but Until seventy times seven" (Matt. 18:21-22). This is from the account as we have it in Matthew's Gospel, and it is immediately after this that we have the parable of the implacable servant who, forgiven himself, refused to show mercy to his fellow servants and found himself delivered to the tormentors; for governmental forgiveness, in the house of God, may be revoked if the object of it behaves unworthily afterwards. In this respect it is altogether different from eternal forgiveness.

Matthew gives the scope of forgiveness, but does not tell us anything concerning the attitude of the sinning brother who is to be the recipient of such grace. When we turn to Luke 17:3-4 we learn the terms upon which this forgiveness is to be granted. "Take heed to yourselves: If thy brother trespass against thee, rebuke him; and if he repent, forgive him. And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee, saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him." Christian forgiveness is not to be confounded with indifference to evil. The brother who trespasses is to be rebuked, and that for his own good. In the Law it was written, "Thou shalt in any wise rebuke thy neighbor, and not suffer sin upon him" (Lev. 19:17). It might be far easier simply to ignore the wrong done and pay no attention to the evil doer. But this is not God's way, and He would have His children be imitators of Himself. He brings their sins home to them, thus seeking to arouse the conscience and create a sense of need; for, until they are conscious of sin, there will be no desire for forgiveness, nor true self-judgment.

When the guilty one has faced his sin, Jesus adds, "If he repent, forgive him." Again, let me stress what so often has come before us in this discussion. There is nothing meritorious in repentance; it is simply the recognition of the true state of affairs. So long as this is ignored the offender will not sue for pardon. When he honestly faces conditions as they are and comes confessing his sin he is to be forgiven.

But the extent of all this, and the many times that such grace may have to be manifested, is almost staggering, as we read in verse 4, "And if he trespass against thee seven times in a day, and seven times in a day turn again to thee saying, I repent; thou shalt forgive him." If we, with all our personal sinfulness and shortcomings, are to forgive to this extent, how illimitable is the grace that our God waits to lavish upon those who come to Him saying, "I repent." There are no bounds to His restoring mercy.

Are we not all inclined to limit Him as to this? Have we not said in our hearts if not with our lips, 'I have failed so often. I have sinned so frequently. I am ashamed to come to Him again for forgiveness when I have proven myself so unworthy of His loving favor in the past.' But, if you were to prove yourself worthy, then His forgiveness would not be grace. He forgives because of the worthiness of Christ. He only waits

for His sinning child to say, "I repent."

But if we thus need to repair to Him so frequently when conscious that we have dishonored His holy Name which we confess, how gracious should be our attitude toward others. I am persuaded there are many of God's dear children who know very little of real fellowship with the Father simply because they cherish the memory of wrongs, real or imagined, which they will not forgive. 'Oh,' exclaims one, 'if you knew how terribly he has injured me you would not wonder that I cannot forgive him. If he had not spoken so ill of me or acted so badly it would be easy to forgive; but the offense is too great.' What strange nonsense is this for a child of grace to utter! Why, if you had not been wronged there would be no occasion to forgive. It is because you have been trespassed against that you are called upon to show the grace of God to the offender.

But perhaps we should be thinking more of the other side in this matter. Am I the one who has done the wrong? And am I refusing to repent? Then I have no right to expect forgiveness, and my Father Himself will not grant it until I can say from the heart, "I repent." Nay, my very gifts are so defiled that God cannot accept my attempts at worship and praise until I repent. The Saviour has said, "If thou bring thy gift to the altar, and there rememberest that thy brother hath ought against thee, leave there thy gift before the altar, and go thy way; first be reconciled to thy brother, and then come and offer thy gift" (Matt. 5:23-24). This is an abiding principle that transcends all dispensations. Yet how frequently is it ignored.

In many of the assemblies of God's saints there are brethren, and sisters too, who have been estranged from each other for years. Forgetting that sin never dies of old age, they have sought to ignore wrongs done years ago, and to justify themselves in an un-Christlike attitude to each other, as, with sins and trespasses unconfessed toward each other and toward God, they offer strange fire upon His altar and fancy He receives the money they give ostensibly for His work and the worship they offer in His house.

But He will have none of it. To Him it is all an abomination. He is of purer eyes than to behold iniquity. He will be sanctified in them that come nigh Him. He says, "Go ye, and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice." When wrongs are put right, when sins are confessed, when tears of repentance take the place of formal lip service, He will accept the offerings that are brought to His altar and give "beauty for ashes and the oil of joy for mourning and the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness."

We speak of the need of revival, we sing of revival, we pray for revival; but the heavens seem as brass above our heads. We could have revival and blessing tomorrow if we were willing to pay the price. "Be zealous therefore, and repent."

Another practical illustration, a fully authentic narrative related to me by eye and ear witnesses who participated in the revival described, will perhaps enforce this more clearly than a further attempt at didactic instruction. In a community that shall be nameless, because some of the persons referred to are still living, there had been a long period of spiritual famine and dearth. Years before a church had been born there in a time of great awakening, when the Spirit of God had wrought powerfully and hundreds had been brought to repentance and had found peace with God. Bound together in the love of the Spirit they had been a witnessing assembly whose testimony had borne abundant fruit throughout all the district. Missionaries had gone forth from their midst with hearts of flame and tongues of fire to carry the Gospel to adjacent regions and even to far-away lands.

But all this was in the distant past. A period of coldness and powerlessness had succeeded to that of the warmth of early days, and though the same people came together for the regularly announced meetings

all was formal and lifeless, excepting that a little group who mourned over the fallen estate of the church met from time to time to weep before God and to entreat Him to refresh His thirsty heritage. It was doubtless in answer to their prayers that two devoted men of God came among them for what were euphemistically called "revival services," though it was soon manifest that the true spirit of revival was conspicuously absent. Nevertheless, for a period of some three weeks the crowds thronged the largest obtainable building, where the singing was hearty and the preaching clear and convincing. Yet there were no apparent conversions although the evangelists pleaded with men to be reconciled to God and faithfully endeavored to win the lost to Christ.

At last, oppressed in spirit by conditions that seemed inexplicable it was announced that for a time there would be no more preaching, but, instead, a day of fasting and prayer, to be followed by others if necessary until God Himself would reveal the hindrances and remove them.

To describe the exercises of that day of waiting upon God would be impossible. There was much in the way of individual confession and crying to Him to make bare His arm in the restoration of backslidden saints and the awakening of the Christless. At the night meeting the building was crowded, but there was no address. One after another prayed, some in agony of spirit, that God might come in. Suddenly a period of solemn silence was broken by a loud sobbing, and a strong man, an elder in the church, rose to his feet. "Brethren," he cried, "I am the one who has been hindering the blessing. I am the stumblingblock in this community." Then he openly confessed that for years he had cherished malice and hatred in his heart against a fellow elder who had been at one time his bosom friend. There had been a dispute over a property line in which he claimed he had been cheated out of a few feet of land. Wrangling had led to increased bitterness. Strife had gone on for months, and when at last the matter was settled in the courts it left him with a heart filled with hatred against his brother.

Striding across the front of the building he offered his hand to this man who had also risen to his feet and amid tears declared it was he who was to blame rather than the other. Together they both went to the foot of the speaker's platform and dropped upon their knees confessing their sins and forgiving each other. The effect upon the vast crowd was marvellous. It was the beginning of a mighty work of grace in that town, the good results of which were recognized for years afterwards. Many who had been under deep conviction but who had been stumbled by the unworthy conduct of these two leaders who should have been examples to the rest soon joined them at the front, and the vast hall resounded with the cries of penitents and the glad songs of those who were led to rejoice in God's salvation. To the two who for so long had stood in the way of others and whose lives had been so barren and fruitless came new experiences of restoration and usefulness as their old-time spiritual fervor returned. This is no imaginary tale, and I am persuaded that in many a place there would be similar, or even greater blessing if there were downright honesty in dealing with God and with one another.

Often have I heard the question discussed, Is there any possibility of another great world-wide revival before the Lord's return? Some have insisted that we are too near the end of the age to expect anything of the kind. Others are more optimistic as they point out that it would be in keeping with God's mercy to give one last powerful witness to His grace ere the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together unto Him. But after all we do not need to discuss the pros and cons relating to world-wide revival. We should rather be concerned about revival in our own individual lives, and in our local assemblies. And surely it is never too late to seek for this. God is ever waiting to hear the cry of repentant hearts and to give showers of blessing where there is recognized need and a readiness to obey His Word.

The hindrances are all on our side, never on His. The great trouble is, we are so unreal, so self-satisfied, so little exercised as to our true condition in His sight. Shall we not come to Him as repentant supplicants crying with the psalmist, "Wilt thou not revive us again, that thy people may rejoice in thee?" Then with every doubtful thing cast aside, with every known sin confessed and judged, we shall prove the truth of the words, "The joy of the Lord is your strength," and, as we thus joy in Him and He in us, we shall commend His loving-kindness to others and have the added gladness of leading needy sinners to His feet.

"Let us search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord." He is waiting to be gracious. We are robbing Him of what is rightfully His if we hold anything back. He has said, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, and he shall not destroy the fruits of your ground; neither shall your vine cast her fruit before the time in the field, saith the Lord of hosts. And all nations shall call you blessed: for ye shall be a delightsome land, saith the Lord of hosts" (Mal. 3:10-12). What will be fulfilled literally for Israel, when they at last meet His conditions, we may enter into spiritually at this present time if we but give Him His rightful place and deal resolutely with every evil thing in our hearts and lives as His searching light reveals it to us.

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