

Repentance in the Apocalypse

by Harry Ironside

Harry Ironside's sermon highlights the urgent call to repentance in the letters to the seven churches of Revelation, emphasizing the need for spiritual renewal in the church today.

Scripture: Revelation 2:5-21

Topics: "Spiritual Revival", "Repentance"

Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes the urgent call to repentance found in the book of Revelation, particularly in the letters to the seven churches. He highlights the spiritual conditions of these churches, noting that many have strayed from their first love or tolerated sin, and he warns that without repentance, they risk losing their witness. Ironside stresses that true repentance involves a heartfelt return to God and a commitment to live out the love of Christ, which is essential for the church to be effective in its mission. He calls for a revival of fervent devotion among believers, asserting that a lukewarm church lacks the power to impact the world. The sermon serves as a reminder that the time for repentance is now, as the end of the age approaches.

Transcript

The book of the Revelation of Jesus Christ fittingly closes the volume of Holy Scripture. It deals with both the present age and the coming era, climaxing all God's ways with man, and bringing before us the eternal issues of the long conflict between good and evil. It is the Lord's last word to mankind until the voice of the returning Saviour is heard from the heavens, calling His redeemed to meet Him in the air, preparatory to taking His great power in order that the kingdoms of the world may become the Kingdom of our God and of His Christ. And, significantly enough, it contains a most urgent summons to repentance. In fact, the call to repent is found seven times in the letters to the seven churches, and four times we are told of men whom God had visited in grace and in judgment who repented not, and thus refused to give Him glory.

Time was when comparatively very few Christians paid much attention to the book of Revelation. As a result of the great revival of Bible study in our day, however, this is no longer so evident. Ministers and people are now studying the Apocalypse, eagerly seeking to find in it some explanation of the present difficult times and some clear light on the impending future.

Many believe that in the letters to the seven churches God has not only given a message that had a direct, literal application to the assemblies named in John's day, but that there is a hidden, prophetic meaning in them, outlining in a very striking way the state of the church from apostolic days to the end of its testimony

on earth. All, however, are not agreed as to this.

But one thing is very evident, and that is, that in these letters the Lord has given us a diagnosis of every state or condition in which His churches may be found at any time throughout the Christian epoch.

Looked at in this way, we see in Ephesus a thoroughly orthodox church that has failed because it has left the freshness of its first love. Smyrna is a suffering church, true to Christ despite persecution and poverty. Pergamos is a worldly church, yet reasonably sound in doctrine, though tolerating much that is very unsound in practice. In Thyatira superstition and gross immorality prevail, save among a very small minority who grieve over conditions, but do not seem able to remedy them. Sardis is cold and formal, with very little evidence of divine life, though even in it a few are found whose garments are undefiled. Philadelphia is a true Bible church, where the authority of the Lord is owned and His name revered. Consequently there is an open door for testimony and faithfulness is manifested in maintaining the truth of God. Laodicea is lukewarm and latitudinarian. Its members play fast and loose with eternal verities and, while professing to have Christ in their midst, He is actually seen outside the door.

Now to all of these churches there comes the voice of the Lord, declaring, "I know thy works." Everything is open to His searching gaze. It is noticeable that in each letter the order is the same: First, the Lord presents Himself in some special way suited to the spiritual condition of the church addressed. Second, He gives His own diagnosis of the state of that particular assembly. Third, there is a special exhortation or warning, as needed in each case. Fourth, we have the promise to the overcomer and the summons to harken. In the first three letters, however, the call to hear precedes the promise. It is the opposite in the last four. That there is a divine reason for this is evident, but it need not detain us at the present time.

In five out of the seven letters we find the exhortation to repent. Smyrna and Philadelphia are both without rebuke, so there is no such command given to them. Let us note carefully, however, what is said to the other five.

Ephesus is rebuked because of having left her first love. Orthodox to the core, this church seemed to pride itself on its jealousy for fundamentals. But there may be great zeal for doctrinal standards where there is very little manifestation of the love of the Spirit. It is a grievous mistake to suppose that the Lord delights in correct dogma and ignores the lack of love. A cold, hard, censorious devotion to a creed, however correct, will never make up for lack of brotherly kindness and a tender Christlike spirit. So we get the exhortation, "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" (2:5). How affecting and solemn is this! It is not a question of one who has been a Christian losing his soul, but of a church that once witnessed boldly for Christ now in danger of losing its testimony.

Mere doctrinal correctness is not enough to keep the Gospel light brightly burning. It is as the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit that our words count with others. Emerson said once, "What you are speaks so loudly, I cannot hear what you say." And an inconsistent, un-Christlike church will cause the world to turn in scorn from its message. So the Lord calls for repentance. That this is more than a mere change of opinion is evident, for He adds, "and do the first works." He would have them turn from their supercilious self-satisfaction to the love and earnestness of their early days, when He Himself was precious to their souls and for love of Him they could toil and suffer that others might know Him too. Surely to many of us today the same call comes, coupled with the warning that unless there be a new attitude, a turning back to the Lord in contrition and confession, He will take away the candlestick, and we shall be

useless so far as witnessing for Him in a dark world is concerned.

The condition of the Pergamos church is even worse. For there positively evil things were tolerated and unholy alliances formed, which were an affront to the One they professed to serve. Again comes the call to repent. Note the words, "Repent; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth" (v. 16). What a solemn alternative! Repent, or I will fight against thee! He cannot tolerate unjudged iniquity in His professed people. He will be sanctified in them that come nigh Him. To boast of salvation by grace while living in sin is detestable to Him. The sword of His mouth is His Word. That Word is positively against all who make a pretence of godliness while walking in unholy ways.

Could anything be more needed today than such a message as this? Is not the church in many places dwelling comfortably on Satan's throne, settled down in the world, with no thought of separation to Christ? Balaam of old taught Balak that, if he could break down the wall of separation between his own wicked Moabites and Israel, their own God would have to punish them for their backslidings. The iniquity of Baal-Peor accomplished what Balaam's attempt to curse could not do. It is indeed a serious matter when the Lord has to take sides, as it were, against His people. But He refuses to condone sin in His saints. Surely we all need to heed the call to repent.

When we turn to consider the Thyatira church we are confronted with conditions so grave and wickedness so shocking that we might naturally hesitate to recognize it as a church of God at all. Yet the Lord addresses it as such. It bore His name. It professed to represent Him in the world. Yet it condoned iniquitous practices that were below the level of ordinary decency. On the other hand, this church had once been characterized by love and devotion of an unusually high order, and there were in it still a faithful remnant who mourned over its fallen condition and who were as the salt preserving it from utter corruption.

Are there not many such churches at the present time? Is it not true that in scores of instances known evil of the vilest kind is tolerated in Christian communities, and no attempt made to cleanse the leprous house? How often have wealth and prominence protected wrongdoers and seemingly made it impossible to deal with them, lest whole families be disgraced or the church be actually disrupted. But desperate diseases require drastic treatment. The voice of God is still calling to repentance. Until there be a changed attitude toward unholy practices there can be no blessing.

In Thyatira there was open immorality, and that of the most revolting type. Like the licentious orgies of the heathen Nature worshippers, it was often practiced under the guise of pretended piety. That wicked princess Jezebel, who brought her hateful Phoenician idolatry over to Israel and grafted it into the perverted worship of Jehovah, is used as the symbol of what had crept into this church. Degrading and revolting behavior was thus linked with the holy Name of Christ.

It had gone so far, and the proponents of this corruption had been so persistent and so determined, that the Lord says, "I gave her space to repent of her fornication; and she repented not. Behold, I will cast her into a bed, and them that commit adultery with her into great tribulation, except they repent of their deeds" (Rev. 2:21-22). The last words indicate that there was hope still. He had not utterly rejected them. But blessing and restoration were conditioned upon repentance. How marvellous is the long-suffering of the grieved and offended Spirit of God. And if today the churches would heed the call, and repent, honestly facing every wicked thing in the light of the Word of God, there would come, we may be sure, revival and renewal that would make the once powerless assemblies a living witness for Christ in the world.

In the church in Sardis we see a very different condition prevailing. There all is outwardly correct. There is no intimation that vile practices of any kind were being tolerated. But all is cold and formal. It is the respectability of spiritual death. Yet it is evident there was a time when this church was aflame with passionate devotion to Christ. Hence the admonition, "Remember therefore how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent. If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee" (Rev. 3:3).

One thinks of many churches founded in revival days or reformation times where the light of truth shone brightly and the members were marked by intense zeal and energy. Evangelizing the lost and building up believers were characteristic under a Spirit-filled ministry that made such churches centers of blessing for miles around. But little by little all this has been changed. Formality has taken the place of living power. Coldness has succeeded the old time spiritual fervor. Academic pulpitering has displaced the Bible preaching of the olden days. And smug self-complacency now holds sway where once deep concern for the souls of others was manifest.

O that in such former strongholds of evangelicalism and active evangelism there might be a great turning to God, a repentance that would again fill nearly vacant prayer rooms and bring the churches to their knees in brokenness of spirit until God should open the windows of heaven and pour out life-giving showers to revive the barren wastes and give the world to see again a mighty movement of His Holy Spirit.

"Revive Thy work, O God,

Disturb this sleep of death.

Quicken the smoldering embers, Lord,

By Thine Almighty breath."

Such a revival is sorely needed, but it can only come in the wake of sincere repentance.

With the church in Philadelphia the Lord finds no fault. He commends it for its faithfulness and promises rich reward, so we find here, as in the letter to Smyrna, no call to repent.

But it is otherwise with lukewarm Laodicea. Another has remarked that "a lukewarm state is not a passing from cold to hot, but from hot to cold" (Russell Elliot, in *A Last Message*). And this is what has so often taken place. Moreover, it is a state easy to fall into. Most of us realize that true, spiritual fervor is maintained only where there is a constant sense of our weakness and the need of much prayer and of nourishing the soul upon the Word of God. If private devotion be neglected we will soon become lukewarm, and the church itself is just what its members make it. These Laodiceans did not seem to know that their condition called for any rebuke. Like Israel in Hosea's day it could be said, "Gray hairs are here and there upon him, but he knoweth not." Like Samson, their strength had departed and they wist it not. Backsliding begins so insidiously that one may get far from God in heart and mind before some terrible failure reproves and arouses him. Hence the need of constant watchfulness.

The believer out of fellowship with God may be quite satisfied for a time, boasting of being rich and increased with goods and needing nothing. Yet all the while the Lord detects the sad lack of practically everything that makes for vital godliness. In His grace He sends trial and affliction to draw the wayward heart back to Himself. "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten: be zealous therefore, and repent" (3:19). No halfway measures will do. There must be positive, earnest endeavor to trace the evil to its source and

to take the right attitude toward it and to the One who has been so grievously wronged. For He stands outside the door -- and mark, it is the door of the church, not merely of the individual -- knocking and seeking restoration of fellowship. The door is unlatched only by repentance; it can be opened in no other way. So long as there is pride and arrogance He remains outside, for He has said, "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at my word" (Isa. 66:2). He delights to dwell with those who fear Him and cleave to His truth, but he knoweth the proud afar off.

How touchingly He speaks to His disciples, as recorded in John 14:23: "If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." It has often been pointed out that the word translated "abode" here is the same as that translated "mansions" in verse 2. He has gone back to the glory to prepare an abiding place for us. Meantime the Father and the Son delight to find an abiding place in the hearts of the redeemed while still in this wilderness-world.

Oh, the shame of keeping Him outside the door! Like the bridegroom in the Song He cries, "Open to me, my sister, my love, my dove, my undefiled: for my head is filled with dew, and my locks with the drops of the night" (Cant. 5:2). But we coldly slumber on, or if barely awakened find some flimsy excuse for not giving Him admittance.

"Be zealous therefore, and repent." Conditions are worse than we know. Lethargy and drowsiness have blunted our sensibilities. The hour is late. The end of the age draws on. And we are indifferent and lukewarm still. Repentance, if it be worth while, must come soon. Otherwise it will be too late, and He will say of us as of Thyatira, "I gave her space to repent ... and she repented not."

Oh, what God might yet do with a truly repentant church, aflame with loving devotion to her adorable Lord!

Mr. Sunday, the eccentric evangelist so recently gone to his reward, used to relate a graphic story of a well known village atheist who was seen running vigorously to a burning church building intent on joining with others in subduing the flames. A neighbor observing him, exclaimed facetiously, "This is something new for you! I never saw you going to church before." The atheist replied, "Well, this is the first time I have ever seen a church on fire." Who can tell how many might be drawn to the people of God if they were only on fire for Christ and burning with zeal to win the lost?

"O kindle within us a holy desire

Like that which was found in Thy people of old,

Who valued Thy love and whose hearts were on fire,

While they waited in patience Thy face to behold."

A lukewarm church is a powerless church. There is nothing about it to make unsaved men believe its testimony is worth while. But a church characterized by fervent love for Christ, and energetically reaching out after the lost makes an impression even upon the most ungodly that it is hard to ignore. When the churches themselves heed the command to repent and get right with God, we may expect to see repentant sinners flocking to their altars.

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