

# Repentance: Its Nature and Importance

by Harry Ironside

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*Repentance is a change of mind and a recognition of the need of grace, which is essential for salvation.*

**Scripture:** Psalm 51:6, Proverbs 28:13, Matthew 4:17, Mark 1:15, Luke 13:3, Acts 3:19, Romans 2:4, 2 Corinthians 7:10, James 2:26, 1 John 1:9

**Topics:** "Grace", "Repentance"

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## Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes the critical nature of repentance in the Christian faith, arguing that true repentance is a divine work that leads to a genuine acknowledgment of one's sinful state and the need for God's grace. He warns against the superficiality of modern preaching that neglects the importance of repentance, which is essential for salvation and cannot be separated from faith. Ironside clarifies that repentance is not merely feeling sorrow for sin or attempting to atone for wrongs, but a complete change of mind and attitude towards sin, self, and God. He asserts that without repentance, one cannot truly believe in Christ, and that the deeper the understanding of God's grace, the more profound the repentance becomes. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the biblical understanding of repentance as a necessary step towards salvation.

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## Transcript

More and more it becomes evident that ours is, as Carlyle expressed it, an "age of sham." Unreality and specious pretence abound in all departments of life. In the domestic, commercial, social, and ecclesiastical spheres hypocrisy is not only openly condoned, but recognized as almost a necessity for advancement and success in attaining recognition among one's fellows.

Nor is this true only where heterodox religious views are held. Orthodoxy has its shallow dogmatists who are ready to battle savagely for sound doctrine, but who manage to ignore sound living with little or no apparent compunction of conscience.

God desires truth in the inward parts. The blessed man is still the one "in whose spirit there is no guile." It is forever true that "He that covereth his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall have mercy." It can never be out of place to proclaim salvation by free, unmerited favor to all who put their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. But it needs ever to be insisted on that the faith that justifies is not a mere intellectual process -- not simply crediting certain historical facts or doctrinal statements; but it is a faith that springs from a divinely wrought conviction of sin which produces a repentance that is sincere and genuine.

Our Lord's solemn words, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish," are as important today as when first uttered. No dispensational distinctions, important as these are in understanding and interpreting God's ways with man, can alter this truth.

No one was ever saved in any dispensation excepting by grace. Neither sacrificial observances, nor ritual service, nor works of law ever had any part in justifying the ungodly. Nor were any sinners ever saved by grace until they repented. Repentance is not opposed to grace; it is the recognition of the need of grace. "They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick." "I came not," said our blessed Lord, "to call the righteous but sinners to repentance."

One great trouble in this shallow age is that we have lost the meaning of words. We bandy them about until one can seldom be certain just how terms are being used. Two ministers were passing an open grocery and dairy store where, in three large baskets, eggs were displayed. On one basket was a sign reading, "Fresh eggs, 24 cents a dozen." The second sign read, "Strictly fresh eggs, 29 cents a dozen." While a third read, "Guaranteed strictly fresh eggs, 34 cents a dozen." One of the pastors exclaimed in amazement, "What does that grocer understand 'fresh' to mean?" It is thus with many Scriptural terms that to our forefathers had an unvarying meaning, but like debased coins have today lost their values.

Grace is God's unmerited favor to those who have merited the very opposite. Repentance is the sinner's recognition of and acknowledgment of his lost estate and, thus, of his need of grace. Yet there are not wanting professed preachers of grace who, like the antinomians of old, decry the necessity of repentance lest it seem to invalidate the freedom of grace. As well might one object to a man's acknowledgment of illness when seeking help and healing from a physician, on the ground that all he needed was a doctor's prescription.

Shallow preaching that does not grapple with the terrible fact of man's sinfulness and guilt, calling on "all men everywhere to repent," results in shallow conversions; and so we have a myriad of glib-tongued professors today who give no evidence of regeneration whatever. Prating of salvation by grace, they manifest no grace in their lives. Loudly declaring they are justified by faith alone, they fail to remember that "faith without works is dead"; and that justification by works before men is not to be ignored as though it were in contradiction to justification by faith before God. We need to reread James 3 and let its serious message sink deep into our hearts, that it may control our lives. "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me." No man can truly believe in Christ, who does not first repent. Nor will his repentance end when he has saving faith, but the more he knows God as he goes on through the years, the deeper will that repentance become. A servant of Christ said: "I repented before I knew the meaning of the word. I have repented far more since than I did then."

Undoubtedly one great reason why some earnest Gospel preachers are almost afraid of, and generally ignore, the terms "repent" and "repentance" in their evangelizing is that they fear lest their hearers misunderstand these terms and think of them as implying something meritorious on the part of the sinner. But nothing could be wider of the mark. There is no saving merit in owning my true condition. There is no healing in acknowledging the nature of my illness. And repentance, as we have seen, is just this very thing.

But in order to clarify the subject, it may be well to observe carefully what repentance is not and then to notice briefly what it is.

First, then, repentance is not to be confounded with penitence, though penitence will invariably enter into it. But penitence is simply sorrow for sin. No amount of penitence can fit a man for salvation. On the other hand, the impenitent will never come to God seeking His grace. But godly sorrow, we are told, worketh repentance not to be repented of. There is a sorrow for sin that has no element of piety in it-- "the sorrow of the world worketh death." In Peter's penitence we see the former; in the remorse of Judas, the latter. Nowhere is man exhorted to feel a certain amount of sorrow for his sins in order to come to Christ. When the Spirit of God applies the truth, penitence is the immediate result and this leads on to repentance, but should not be confounded with it. This is a divine work in the soul.

Second, penance is not repentance. Penance is the effort in some way to atone for wrong done. This, man can never do. Nor does God in His Word lay it down as a condition of salvation that one first seek to make up to either God or his fellows for evil committed. Here the Roman Catholic translation of the Bible perpetrates a glaring deception upon those who accept it as almost an inspired version because bearing the imprimatur of the great Catholic dignitaries. Wherever the Authorized Version has "repent," the Douay-Rheims translation reads, "Do penance." There is no excuse for such a paraphrase. It is not a translation. It is the substituting of a Romish dogma for the plain command of God. John the Baptist did not cry, 'Do penance, for the kingdom of God is at hand.' Our Lord Jesus did not say, 'Do penance and believe the gospel,' and, 'Except ye do penance ye shall all likewise perish.' The Apostle Peter did not tell the anxious multitude at Pentecost to 'Do penance and be converted.' St. Paul did not announce to the men at Athens that 'God commandeth all men everywhere to do penance' in view of a coming judgment day. No respectable Greek scholar would ever think of so translating the original in these and many other instances.

On the contrary, the call was to repent; and between repenting and doing penance there is a vast difference. But even so, we would not forget that he who truly repents will surely seek to make right any wrong he has done to his fellows, though he knows that he never can make up for the wrong done to God. But this is where Christ's expiatory work comes in. As the great Trespass Offering He could say, "Then I restored that which I took not away" (Psa. 69). Think not to add penance to this -- as though His work were incomplete and something else were needed to satisfy God's infinite justice.

In the third place, let us remember that reformation is not repentance, however closely allied to, or springing out of it. To turn over a new leaf, to attempt to supplant bad habits with good ones, to try to live well instead of evilly, may not be the outcome of repentance at all and should never be confounded with it. Reformation is merely an outward change. Repentance is a work of God in the soul.

Recently it was the writer's privilege to broadcast a Gospel message from a large Cleveland station. While he was waiting in the studio for the time appointed an advertiser's voice was heard through the loud speaker announcing: "If you need anything in watch repairing go to" such a firm. One of the employees looked up and exclaimed, "I need no watch repairing; what I need is a watch." It furnished me with an excellent text. What the unsaved man needs is not a repairing of his life. He needs a new life altogether, which comes only through a second birth. Reformation is like watch repairing. Repentance is like the recognition of the lack of a watch.

Need I add that repentance then is not to be considered synonymous with joining a church or taking up one's religious duties, as people say. It is not doing anything.

What then is repentance? So far as possible I desire to avoid the use of all abstruse or pedantic terms, for I am writing not simply for scholars, but for those Lincoln had in mind when he said, "God must have thought a lot of the common people, for He made so many of them." Therefore I wish, so far as possible, to avoid citing Greek or Hebrew words. But here it seems almost necessary to say that it is the Greek word *metanoia*, which is translated "repentance" in our English Bibles, and literally means a change of mind. This is not simply the acceptance of new ideas in place of old notions. But it actually implies a complete reversal of one's inward attitude.

How luminously clear this makes the whole question before us! To repent is to change one's attitude toward self, toward sin, toward God, toward Christ. And this is what God commands. John came preaching to publicans and sinners, hopelessly vile and depraved, "Change your attitude, for the kingdom is at hand." To haughty scribes and legalistic Pharisees came the same command, "Change your attitude," and thus they would be ready to receive Him who came in grace to save. To sinners everywhere the Saviour cried, "Except ye change your attitude, ye shall all likewise perish."

And everywhere the apostles went they called upon men thus to face their sins -- to face the question of their helplessness, yet their responsibility to God -- to face Christ as the one, all-sufficient Saviour, and thus by trusting Him to obtain remission of sins and justification from all things.

So to face these tremendous facts is to change one's mind completely, so that the pleasure lover sees and confesses the folly of his empty life; the self-indulgent learns to hate the passions that express the corruption of his nature; the self-righteous sees himself a condemned sinner in the eyes of a holy God; the man who has been hiding from God seeks to find a hiding place in Him; the Christ-rejector realizes and owns his need of a Redeemer, and so believes unto life and salvation.

Which comes first, repentance or faith? In Scripture we read, "Repent ye, and believe the gospel." Yet we find true believers exhorted to "repent, and do the first works." So intimately are the two related that you cannot have one without the other. The man who believes God repents; the repentant soul puts his trust in the Lord when the Gospel is revealed to him. Theologians may wrangle over this, but the fact is, no man repents until the Holy Spirit produces repentance in his soul through the truth. No man believes the Gospel and rests in it for his own salvation until he has judged himself as a needy sinner before God. And this is repentance.

Perhaps it will help us if we see that it is one thing to believe God as to my sinfulness and need of a Saviour, and it is another thing to trust that Saviour implicitly for my own salvation.

Apart from the first aspect of faith, there can be no true repentance. "He that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him." And apart from such repentance there can be no saving faith. Yet the deeper my realization of the grace of God manifested toward me in Christ, the more intense will my repentance become.

It was when Mephibosheth realized the kindness of God as shown by David that he cried out, "What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am?" (2 Sam. 9:8). And it is the soul's apprehension of grace which leads to ever lower thoughts of self and higher thoughts of Christ; and so the work of repentance is deepened daily in the believer's heart.

"Let not conscience make you linger,

Nor of fitness fondly dream,  
All the fitness He requireth  
Is to feel your need of Him.  
This He gives you,  
'Tis the Spirit's rising beam."

The very first evidence of awakening grace is dissatisfaction with one's self and self-effort and a longing for deliverance from chains of sin that have bound the soul. To own frankly that I am lost and guilty is the prelude to life and peace. It is not a question of a certain depth of grief and sorrow, but simply the recognition and acknowledgment of need that lead one to turn to Christ for refuge. None can perish who put their trust in Him. His grace superabounds above all our sin, and His expiatory work on the cross is so infinitely precious to God that it fully meets all our uncleanness and guilt.

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