

Repentance Not to Be Repented Of

by Harry Ironside

Repentance is necessary for spiritual growth and to deal with the old nature that still resides in believers, and it leads to a deep and real change in the heart and behavior of the believer.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 7:8

Topics: "Church Discipline", "Repentance"

Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes the necessity of repentance for both believers and the church, highlighting that even saints are still sinners. He discusses the case of the Corinthian church, which, despite its gifts and zeal, was plagued by moral failures and divisions, leading to a need for collective repentance. Ironside points out that true repentance, characterized by godly sorrow, leads to restoration and a renewed relationship with God. He urges the church to take sin seriously and to practice discipline not for condemnation, but for the recovery of the sinner. Ultimately, he calls for a return to God's Word as the foundation for genuine repentance and revival.

Transcript

In any discussion of the nature and importance of repentance it would be a great mistake to overlook the fact that children of God may have as much occasion to repent as any one else. For we should never forget that, after all, saints are sinners. This may seem to be a strange paradox, but both Scripture and experience attest its truthfulness. The closer a believer walks with God, the more he will realize the incurable corruption of his Adamic nature. New birth is not a change of this nature, nor is sanctification a gradual process whereby this nature is purified. New birth is the impartation of a new nature altogether, and practical sanctification is produced by the indwelling Holy Spirit, through the cleansing power of the Word of God, bringing the whole man into conformity to Christ. By the Spirit's power, in the yielded Christian, the old nature is kept in the place of death.

But through the infirmity of the flesh we do fail again and again -- yea, will always fail if we turn the eyes of our hearts away from Christ. Hence the need of daily, and constant, self-judgment which, we have seen, is the true meaning of sincere repentance.

Failure, too, may be collective as well as individual, and thus will call for collective repentance. So God of old sent His prophets to Israel and Judah to show His people their sins and summon them to national repentance. In the same way, in the New Testament, He calls upon churches to repent, when failure and sin have marred their testimony. We shall see this in the letters to the seven assemblies in Asia, as

recorded in the Apocalypse, a section of Holy Writ which we will examine in a separate chapter. At the present time I would ask the reader to consider with me the case of the church of God in Corinth.

We learn from Paul's first letter to this group of believers that it was a church that came behind in no gift, a church characterized by great activity and zeal, but sadly divided by party spirit. Human leaders were being unduly exalted one against another. Sectarianism was rife. This had not led to actual separations into opposing denominations as today, but in the one assembly there were conflicting schools of thought. Heresies abounded, and Christ was being dishonored.

We are not surprised that there followed, in the wake of all this carnality and worldliness, positive indifference to moral evil which had found a lodgment in the church itself. One man among them, and he in all likelihood a person of some prominence, had flaunted the laws of common decency and had entered upon an incestuous relationship with his father's wife, that is, of course, with his stepmother. Thus the grace of God was being turned into lasciviousness. The adulterer's course was condoned and his evil life exonerated on the specious plea of the liberty of the dispensation of grace.

The infection was spreading through the church, like leaven in a lump of dough. Others were being contaminated by this vicious example. Instead of dealing with the matter as a grave offense against the Christian moral code, the Corinthians actually gloried in their tolerance and the evil-doer was permitted to sit unrebuked at the sacred table of the Lord. It was a condition calling for drastic action, but so blind were the members of Christ's body to the affront thus offered to their Head, that they did not even pray that the wicked man might be taken away from among them.

Are there not many churches today similarly affected? Is it not sadly true that in many places discipline in the house of God is practically unknown? Are not adulterers, drunkards, extortioners, profane persons, and blasphemers permitted to retain membership in Christian churches and to defile the assemblies of saints by partaking of the communion feast unchallenged? Is not this one of the main reasons why it is becoming increasingly difficult to reach the unsaved with the Gospel? While it is no valid excuse for any man to offer as a reason for rejecting Christ, yet is it not a fact that these hypocrites are everywhere stumbling blocks in the way of the unregenerate? What need there is of a call to repentance being sounded out in the church, as well as in the world!

In the particular case before us, when news of the unholy condition prevailing in Corinth reached the Apostle Paul, he wrote an indignant letter of protest calling upon them to judge the matter in their local assembly and to purge out the old leaven by putting away from among themselves the wicked person. There probably were intimate friends and others linked with this man who might attempt to shield him, but there must be no temporizing. The evil would not admit of delayed action. Something must be done at once to cleanse the church of its leprous state.

When we turn to the second letter we are relieved to learn that something was done, and done immediately, after receiving the first Epistle. The adulterer was excommunicated, but not in any spirit of self-righteousness on the part of his brethren. The whole company, with very few exceptions, bowed before God and owned the sinfulness of their former indifference to the evil, and judged themselves for abetting in any degree the gross violation of decency that they had tolerated so long.

It is heart moving to read the Apostle's stirring words regarding their action and its result. In chapter 2 he opens up his very soul to them and shows them how deeply he had been exercised in this matter and how hard he found it to be obliged thus to censure his own children in the faith. He was no cold, legal judge. He

wrote as a broken-hearted father whose anxiety was great lest he might wound more deeply where he meant to heal. Hardly had the first letter gone forward until he had such serious misgivings that he almost regretted sending it (2 Cor. 7:8); but he rejoiced to know that they had taken it in good part and had acted resolutely upon it.

The offender had been disciplined, and proving refractory and unwilling to end his unholy relationship, had been put out of the fellowship of the local church. Now in the outside place, shunned by his former associates as a veritable moral leper, he had come to his senses. He was literally convulsed with sorrow over his wicked ways, and had manifested sincere repentance, turning from his sinful life and walking again in rectitude before God. Now, writes the Apostle, "Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many; so that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow. Wherefore I beseech you that ye would confirm your love toward him" (2 Cor. 2:6-8). As Christ's representative, he assures them that, if they now see their way clear to forgive their erring brother, they may be certain that he joins as heartily in that forgiveness as before he was intensely in earnest in demanding his excommunication (2:9-10).

Church discipline should always have in view the restoration of the sinner. It is not simply a question of keeping the good name of the church free from reproach, or of maintaining the honor of the Lord; the real object is the recovery of the one who has gone astray. How often we forget this! We either condone evil by failing to take proper disciplinary measures, or we become so severe and self-righteous that we drive the disciplined one farther away instead of solicitously looking for evidence of his repentance in order that we may restore him to fellowship.

The way in which the Spirit of God wrought in the souls of these Corinthians is brought out clearly in chapter 7. Note the Apostle's words, as we read verses 9-12: "Now I rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye sorrowed to repentance: for ye were made sorry after a godly manner, that ye might receive damage by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. For behold this selfsame thing, that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you, yea, what fear, yea, what vehement desire, yea, what zeal, yea, what revenge! In all things ye have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter. Wherefore, though I wrote unto you, I did it not for his cause that had done the wrong, nor for his cause that suffered wrong, but that our care for you in the sight of God might appear unto you."

What an insight all this gives us into the real condition brought about by the reading of Paul's letter. And how it emphasizes the reality of their repentance. In fact, the more we weigh each word and study carefully these strong expressions, the more we will be able to fathom the depths of the self-judgment produced in the hearts and consciences of these early Christians. Theirs was indeed a complete change of attitude as a result of hearing the Word of God and being searched through and through by it.

In an earlier chapter, when we were attempting to point out the distinction between penitence and repentance we referred to 2 Cor. 7:10. Let us note it more particularly. "Godly sorrow," we are told, "worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of." This is sorrow produced by the Spirit of God, as distinguished from the sorrow of the world which is simply remorse because of the dire consequences following upon evil ways. It is sorrow according to piety, the penitence that a pious person feels when aware of having grieved the God whom he loves, and whom he desires above all things to please.

Note the terms used to depict this exercise. He tells them they "sorrowed after a godly sort," because they entered into the mind of God in regard to the sin that had so defiled His house. "What carefulness it wrought in you," exclaims Paul. Like the Israelites who searched their houses for every possible bit of leavened bread in order that they might put it away and properly keep the feast of the Lord, so they had looked into this question with most meticulous care, dealing with it in the spirit of men who would have everything now suited to God's holy eye, that fellowship with Him might be renewed.

"Yea, what clearing of yourselves!" Heretofore they had been tacitly condoning the offense, thus linking the Name of the Lord with sin and permitting that to continue among them which rendered His dwelling place unclean. For the assembly of God is in His house, and He has said, "I will be sanctified in them that come nigh me." He is the Holy and the True, and, if He is to manifest His gracious presence in the midst of His church, it is our responsibility to so behave ourselves as to make Him feel at home among us. Have we not all sinned terribly here, and does not our failure explain why the testimony of the churches generally is so powerless and so little is accomplished in the way of winning the lost to Christ?

"Yea, what indignation!" In Ephesians 4:26 we read, "Be ye angry, and sin not." An old Puritan, commenting on this command, wrote, "I am determined so to be angry as not to sin; therefore to be angry at nothing but sin." The enormity of the sin had so impressed the minds of the Corinthian believers that they looked now with utter detestation and abhorrence upon that which previously they had weakly excused as though after all it were a matter of small concern one way or another. Low thoughts of sin come from low thoughts of God's holiness and righteousness. Sin seen in the light of what He is will fill the soul with indignation and horror. Nor will it be indignation against some particular person, but against the sin itself and against ourselves that we should ever have thought lightly of it.

"Yea, what fear!" We are warned against the fear of man that bringeth a snare. On the other hand, the fear of the Lord is to hate evil and every evil way. This reverential, not slavish, fear had laid hold upon these saints. "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Hence they now put away folly and iniquity and undertook to clean house, as we say, in order that God might be glorified in their assembly.

"Yea, what vehement desire!" Another translation renders this, "Yes, what intense yearning!" meaning, yearning to do the will of God. Where this is found He will unquestionably make known His mind and guide aright.

"Yea, what zeal!" In this they but imitated Him who could say, "The zeal of thine house hath eaten me up." To be zealously affected in a good thing is commendable and pleasing to God, as lethargy in regard to spiritual responsibilities is most offensive in His sight.

Yea, what revenge!" It was not that they were intent upon wreaking vengeance upon the wretched man and his guilty paramour who had brought such dishonor on the Name of the Lord, but they visited upon the offender that retribution which God had commanded by His Apostle, that he should be delivered "unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus." It was love, not revengefulness, that so dealt with him, for things had come to such a pass that temporizing would only have bolstered him up in his iniquity and would have been the ruin of their Christian fellowship and testimony. Put outside, back as it were into that world that lieth in the wicked one, he was in a place where he could realize the dreadful state into which he had fallen. Sifted, like Peter, in Satan's sieve, the chaff would be separated from the wheat and eventually his soul restored.

Thus in all things they had approved themselves to be clear in this matter. Their repentance was deep and real, and their behavior manifested it. Oh, if similar repentance were but characteristic of our churches today, what might God yet do, in the way of revival and blessing among His own and the awakening of a lost world!

The first step toward such a repentance would be our facing conditions, as they prevail on all sides, in the light of the unerring Word of God. Instead of sitting in Judgment on that Word, we should let it judge us. This would in turn produce that godly sorrow which results in repentance not to be repented of. Then indeed would come that revival for which many have been praying, and others debating about, but which cannot be looked for until we "search and try our ways, and turn again to the Lord." We cannot expect blessing so long as He has to say to us, as to Israel of old, "I have written to him the great things of my law, but they were counted as a strange thing" (Hos. 8:12).

In the history of God's people of old we read of many dark days when the Word was forgotten, the house of the Lord neglected, and idolatry had displaced the worship of Jehovah. But time after time God granted revival to His people. In every instance this was the effect of a return to His Word, producing individual and national repentance, apart from which there could be no revival. These things were written for our learning. May we have grace given to take the lesson to heart and, wherein we have sinned, to confess and judge our evil ways, and to turn again to the Lord, who "delighteth in mercy," and is waiting to hear the cry of a repentant church.

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