

The Ministry of Peter

by Harry Ironside

Harry Ironside's sermon on 'The Ministry of Peter' emphasizes the critical role of repentance in the apostolic preaching of the Gospel and its implications for both Jews and Gentiles.

Scripture: Isaiah 1:18, Mark 6:12, Luke 24:46, Acts 2:23-24, Acts 2:36, Acts 2:38-39, Acts 3:19-21, Acts 4:11-12, Acts 10:43, Ephesians 2:13

Topics: "Repentance", "The Gospel Message"

Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes the ministry of Peter, highlighting the central theme of repentance in his preaching. He explains that Peter, as a key figure in the early church, consistently called for repentance and faith in Jesus Christ, linking it to the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. Ironside illustrates how Peter's messages at Pentecost and after the healing of the lame man underscored the necessity of changing one's attitude towards sin and God to receive forgiveness. The sermon stresses that repentance is not merely an emotional experience but a critical step towards salvation, applicable to both Jews and Gentiles. Ultimately, Ironside calls for preachers today to boldly proclaim the need for repentance as part of the Gospel message.

Transcript

When the Lord Jesus, in the days of His earthly ministry, sent forth the Twelve Apostles to go throughout the land of Israel heralding His word, He evidently commanded them to emphasize the same message that John the Baptist preached and which He Himself proclaimed; for we are told in Mark 6:12 that "they went out, and preached that men should repent."

After His atoning death and glorious resurrection, when He commissioned the eleven to go out into all the world and make known His Gospel among all nations, we find Him again stressing the same solemn truth. We read in Luke 24:46 that He "said unto them, Thus it is written, and thus it behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem." The rending of the veil had ended the old dispensation; His triumph over death introduced the new one; but the call for men to repent was unrepealed. The Gospel of the grace of God did not set this to one side, nor ignore it in the slightest degree. Men must still be called upon to change their attitude toward God and the sin question if they would receive forgiveness of sins.

True, forgiveness is by faith, but there can be no faith without repentance, and no repentance without faith. What God hath joined together let no man put asunder.

We are quite prepared, therefore, when we con the pages of the book of the Acts, to see the large place given to repentance. Ordinarily we speak of this book as The Acts of the Apostles. But a closer examination of its twenty-eight chapters shows us that it is occupied largely with the ministry of two apostles, and those are Peter, one of the Twelve, and Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles who came in afterwards to complete the Word of God. Very few of the other apostles are even mentioned by name. We may say, then, that in Acts 1-12 we have The Acts of Peter, and in chapters 13-28 The Acts of Paul. I propose at this time to see what place repentance has in the preaching of Peter.

In the great Pentecost chapter we find Peter as the chief spokesman of the Twelve, Matthias being now numbered with them, addressing the multitudes of Jews and devout men, proselytes of the gate, from every nation under heaven. With marvelous clearness and spiritual power and insight he links the significant happenings of that day to Joel's prophecy of the outpouring of the promised Holy Spirit in the last days. He does not exactly say that Joel's prophecy was at that time being literally fulfilled, but he explains the power manifested as identical with that predicted by the prophet. "This is that," he declares. That is, this power, this outpouring, this divine manifestation, is the same as that spoken of by Joel.

Then he undertakes to show that, after long years of waiting on the part of Israel, Messiah had appeared in exact accord with the prophecies going beforehand. But the Jews had fulfilled their own Scriptures in rejecting Jesus. "Him, being delivered by the determinate counsel and foreknowledge of God, ye have taken, and by wicked hands have crucified and slain: whom God hath raised up, having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that he should be holden of it" (Acts 2:23-24). It was true, God had sent Him into the world to die for sinners, but they were nevertheless terribly guilty who stretched forth their hands against Him and treated Him with such shame and ignominy. They dishonored Him. God had glorified Him and had commissioned them to bear witness that He "hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ" (v. 36).

This declaration brought sharp and pungent conviction. They were "pricked in their heart." As the awfulness of their crime burst upon them they realized the terrible position in which they stood. How could they extricate themselves from this? In other words, how could they dissociate themselves from the guilty majority over whom the judgment of God hung like a Damocles sword and might fall in fearful vengeance at any moment? They "said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Do not confound this question with that of the Philippian jailer, who asked, "What must I do to be saved?" He was a godless Gentile, suddenly awakened to a sense of his lost condition, and he was eagerly seeking deliverance from that unhappy state.

But these Israelites were men of the covenant. They had looked expectantly for Messiah. Peter showed them that He had come, and gone! The chosen nation of which they formed a part had rejected Him. Because of that God had set them aside as a people under condemnation. In His righteous government He was about to visit them with His wrath to the uttermost, as Paul afterwards explained to the Thessalonians. If these awakened men, who fully believed Peter's testimony, were to escape that doom, what was their responsibility? What could they do to dissociate themselves from the crime of the guilty nation? The answer came clear and plain: "Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost. For the promise is unto you, and to your children, and to all that are afar off, even as many as the Lord our God shall call" (Acts

2:38-39). Surely all this is plain and perfectly appropriate, as we might expect, for Peter was a divinely directed messenger. The call to repent was as though he had said, 'Change your attitude! The nation has rejected Jesus. You must receive Him. The nation has crucified Him. You must crown Him. Attest your repentance by baptism in His Name. By doing this you, so to speak, identify yourself with the Messiah, as your fathers were identified with Moses, owning him as their leader when baptized in the cloud and in the sea.'

John's baptism was with a view to the remission of sins. So with this. It was not that there was saving merit in baptism. The merit was in the One they confessed. Governmentally, however, they passed out from their place in the nation that rejected Christ by thus identifying themselves with Him. That this was clearly his meaning comes out in the next verse, "With many other words did he testify and exhort, saying, Save yourselves from this untoward generation." They could not save themselves from their sins. Only the blood of Christ could do that. But they could save themselves from the doom hanging over the nation by taking sides, in repentance and faith, with the One the nation refused to own as the Anointed of the Lord. He had said ere He went to the cross, "Your house is left unto you desolate." Those who believed Peter's message were to leave the desolate house and go forth unto Him, bearing His reproach.

Nor was this responsibility and blessing only for those who that day heard the message. It is still the responsibility of every believing Jew in all the world, and in a wider sense of the Gentile too -- of "all that are afar off." In Ephesians we learn that we who once were "afar off are made nigh by the blood of Christ." The repentant man, whether of Israel or the nations, judges the world and turns from it to the Christ that the world has spurned. In so doing he finds eternal blessing, though he may suffer now for his confession of the Lord Jesus as His Saviour.

In the third chapter of Acts we have another wonderful scene. After the healing of the lame man who sat at the Beautiful Gate of the Temple, Peter preached to the wondering and excited multitude who thronged Solomon's Porch, telling again the same story of the coming of Messiah, only to be "denied" and "killed," but whom God had raised from the dead, the efficacy of whose Name had given the once lame beggar soundness of limbs in the presence of them all. The inspired Apostle went on to declare that, though they had ignorantly done this dreadful thing, there was a city of refuge into which they might flee from the avenger of blood. Dramatically he exclaimed, "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when [or, so that] the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord; and he shall send Jesus Christ, which before was preached unto you: whom the heavens must receive until the times of restitution of all things, which God hath spoken by the mouth of all his holy prophets since the world began" (Acts 3:19-21).

Observe here, that Peter did not proclaim the eventual salvation of all men, as the Universalists and other teachers would have us believe. There is no absolute universal restoration predicted here. What he did proclaim was the restoration of all things of which the prophets had spoken. Beyond that limit he does not go. This restoration is still future and depends upon the repentance of Israel. When they shall turn to the Lord, His saving health shall be known among all nations.

But Peter called upon his hearers that day to take the course the nation will take later on, and that in view of the promised return of Messiah, to repent and be converted. It is as though he commanded, 'Change your attitude toward this wondrous Prince of Life. Turn right about face, and take the very opposite ground to that of the representatives of the nation who in answer to the question, "What then shall I do with Jesus who is called Christ?" had vehemently demanded His death, crying "Away with him! Crucify him! Crucify

him!" By thus turning to, instead of turning from Him, they would receive forgiveness of sins and so be ready to welcome Him upon His return in power and glory. This was exactly the attitude taken by a dying Jew in modern times, who was heard to exclaim, "Not Barabbas, but this man!" He had reversed the sentence of his people.

Throughout the entire ministry of Peter we see the same dominant note. On every occasion where he is found preaching the Word he exalts the risen Christ and drives home to the people their great wickedness in spurning the One sent of Jehovah to turn them away from their iniquities. Always in no uncertain tone he calls for self-judgment, for the recognition and acknowledgment of their sins, and for personal faith in the Lord Jesus as the only means of deliverance. "This," he cries, "is the stone which was set at nought of you builders, which is become the head of the corner. Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:11-12).

Surely no sane, thoughtful reader of the record can escape the conclusion that repentance, while in no sense meritorious, is nevertheless a prerequisite to saving faith. An unrepentant man can never, in the very nature of things, lay hold of the Gospel message in appropriating faith, thus receiving the Lord Jesus as his own personal Saviour.

Why, then, should any preacher of the Gospel be hesitant about calling men to repentance today? If it be objected that the grace of God was not yet fully revealed in Peter's ministry, I would remind the objector that in his inspired First Epistle he tells us distinctly why he wrote it. In verse 12 of chapter 5 he says, "I have written briefly, exhorting, and testifying that this is the true grace of God wherein ye stand." How does this differ from the testimony of Paul in Romans 5:2, "We have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God"?

If others object on the ground that Peter was the Apostle of the circumcision and that there is a distinction to be drawn between the message to the Jew and that to the Gentile, I would point to the fact that, in the house of Cornelius with a Gentile audience before him, his message is of exactly the same character as when he is preaching to his Jewish brethren after the flesh, excepting that there is no occasion to call for immediate separation from a nation exposed to judgment, and so the stress is put upon the responsibility to believe the Gospel. But he proclaims, as before, the story of the anointed Jesus, of His death of shame, of His resurrection by omnipotent power, and of the fact that He is ordained of God to be judge of living and dead. "To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). Undoubtedly, he was addressing a truly repentant group, as Cornelius' attitude clearly attested. And in a moment the Gospel finds lodgment in their hearts, and they believe the Word and are baptized by the Holy Spirit into the body of Christ and sealed with the Spirit of adoption as the sons of God.

That this surmise is correct is evidenced from what is said by the brethren in Judea, when Peter later on explains why he went in to uncircumcised Gentiles (11:3), in violation of Jewish prejudices. When his brethren heard the whole story "they held their peace, and glorified God, saying, Then hath God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life" (v. 18). This explains the readiness of Cornelius and his friends to receive the Word in faith.

Only recently the statement was made by one who should have known better: "Repentance is Jewish. Jews could repent because they were in covenant relation with God and had violated that covenant. But Gentiles have never known such a relationship. They are dead sinners. Therefore they cannot repent until

after they are born of God." This is a choice bit of ignorant exposition that would be laughable were it not so dangerous. The Gentiles to whom Peter preached were granted repentance unto life. They did not receive life that they might repent, but through the preached Word they were led to change their attitude and to believe the Gospel. Like other Gentiles, they "turned to God from idols," and through faith in Christ were saved. How this confirms what we have seen to be the general teaching of Scripture, namely, that repentance is not a meritorious act or a wrought-up temperamental or emotional experience, but a new attitude definitely taken toward sin and God which results in a readiness to receive with meekness the engrafted word which is able to save the soul.

It is God who gives repentance unto life, but we may say that repentance comes, like faith itself, by hearing the Word of God. Therefore man is responsible to heed that Word, to face it honestly, and thus allow it to do its own work in the heart and conscience. It is this that brings one to an end of himself and prepares the soul to trust alone in the finished work of Christ and so be saved by free, unmerited grace.

To say that because a sinner, whether Jew or Gentile, is dead toward God, therefore he cannot repent, is to misunderstand the nature of that death. It is a judicial, not an actual, death. The unsaved man is identified with sinning Adam by nature and practice, and so is viewed by God as dead in trespasses and sins. He is spiritually dead, because sin has separated him from God. But actually he is a living, responsible creature to whom God addresses Himself as to a reasoning personality, "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isa. 1:18). An examination of the previous verses will show that these words of grace follow a very definite call to a change of attitude, to the bringing forth of works meet for repentance.

It is not incongruous to call upon dead sinners to repent. It is the preacher's bounden duty so to do, and it is man's responsibility to obey.

I recognize the fact that the age-long questions concerning the divine sovereignty and human responsibility are involved in this discussion. But why need anyone attempt to explain that which it is above the capacity of the mind of man to grasp? God has said, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways ... As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts." Scripture clearly teaches that God is Sovereign and "worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." It just as plainly shows us that man is a responsible creature, who has the power of choice and is called upon by the Lord to exercise that power and to turn to Himself. "Turn ye, O, turn ye ... for why will ye die?" "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve." "Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely." To those who refused His testimony the Saviour sadly said, "Ye will not come to me, that ye might have life."

The truth of God's electing grace does not come into conflict with that of man's responsibility. Mr. Moody used to say in his downright, sensible, matter-of-fact manner, "The elect are the whosoever wills; the nonelect are the whosoever won'ts." What theologian could put it more clearly?

"Sovereign grace o'er sin abounding!

Ransomed souls the tidings swell.

'Tis a deep that knows no sounding,

Who its breadth and length can tell?

On its glories

Let my soul forever dwell."

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