

# The Preaching That Produces Repentance

by Harry Ironside

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of repentance and the need for true, old-fashioned, Christ-centered, Bible preaching to call upon all men to repent in view of the coming day when God will judge the world in righteousness.*

**Scripture:** Acts 17:30

**Topics:** "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Repentance"

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## Description

Harry Ironside emphasizes that true repentance is a work of the Holy Spirit, not a self-generated effort, and that effective preaching must lead individuals to recognize their lost condition and the necessity of salvation through Christ. He argues that while the term 'repentance' may be misunderstood, it remains essential in preaching the Gospel, as demonstrated by the apostles. Ironside highlights the importance of presenting the message of Christ's life, death, and resurrection in a way that resonates with the audience, ultimately leading them to repentance and faith. He calls for a return to Christ-centered preaching that addresses the need for individual salvation rather than merely social reform.

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## Transcript

In all that I have written I have failed completely to express what was surging up in my soul if I have given anyone the impression that I think of repentance as something meritorious which must be produced in man by self-effort ere he is fit to come to God for salvation. On the other hand I hope I have made myself clear that it is the work of the Holy Spirit producing repentance, that leads any soul to come to Christ in order to be saved. The formula used by Paul the Apostle to describe the substance of his preaching ought to make this plain. He proclaimed to Jew and Gentile alike the necessity of "repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ."

Since this is the divine order it behooves those of us who seek to give the Gospel to a lost world to inquire as to the type of preaching that is best calculated to produce such results. In other words, what kind of message is needed to bring our hearers to repentance?

And in trying to answer this very proper inquiry let me first say that it is not necessary invariably to use the actual term "repentance" in order to bring about this very much to be desired effect. In many quarters men have attached to the words "repent" and "repentance" meanings that do not properly belong to them. So that there is the possibility that our hearers may altogether misunderstand us if we urge them, in so many words, to repent. They may imagine they must, by some effort of their own, produce that which entitles

them to consider that they have attained a state where they are acceptable to God. This is not the truth as set forth in His Word, as every Bible-taught preacher well knows.

But, on the other hand, it is not wise to be too squeamish about the use of an expression which we have seen to be eminently scriptural, and which the Holy Spirit Himself has used in all dispensations. John the Baptist and our Lord, the Twelve Apostles and Paul, preached that men should repent and do works meet for repentance; yet in no case did the thought of anything meritorious on man's part enter into it. Evidently the term used had not then been misapplied as it has been since. But what Biblical expression is there that has not been perverted in the interest of some false system throughout the so-called Christian centuries? Such words as regeneration, justification, sanctification, yes, and even the very word salvation itself, have all been grievously misused and the most unscriptural doctrines have been built upon them. Are we therefore to discard the terms themselves, or shall we not rather seek to present them in a right way, clarifying their meaning so far as we possibly can, in order that wrong conclusions may be averted?

So in the present case we want results. How best can men be brought to see their lost condition, and therefore to feel the need of the salvation God offers so freely in His blessed Son? In endeavoring so to preach as to bring this to pass we are not shut up to one method of presentation, however, though the message must always be the same. God has only one remedy for man's lost condition and that is the Gospel of His grace. But the manner in which this is set forth may differ according to the circumstances and the state of mind of the people addressed. Thus Paul was made all things to all men if by any means he might save some. And a somewhat careful analysis of the few sermons recorded in the book of the Acts will show us how differently the truth was proclaimed upon different occasions.

Yet in one thing they all were alike -- in each instance Christ was lifted up; His life, His death, His resurrection, His glorious return personally, and His power to save, were plainly set forth. The one solitary exception seems, at first glance, to be Paul's sermon on Mars Hill, in Athens. But we need to remember that he was interrupted by a mocking crowd before he had opportunity to finish. He began by a logical, calmly reasoned attempt to prove the unity of the Godhead and so to stress the sin of idolatry -- for he was addressing a heathen people -- that they might realize their sin and folly. Then he announced that God, who in His patient grace had overlooked much of their past ignorance, "now commandeth all men everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness, by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). He was now prepared to tell them more of the Lord Jesus and show how God had set Him forth as the one only Saviour. "And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked: and others said, We will hear thee again of this matter" (v. 32). And so they turned contemptuously away, thus losing, perhaps forever, the opportunity of hearing the Gospel of the grace of God, unfolded in all its beauty and power.

In Peter's sermons, on Pentecost and on the occasion of the healing of the lame man, he could bring directly home to his Jewish hearers their fearful guilt in rejecting the Redeemer whom God had sent, in accordance with the ancient oracles, to save and to bless by turning them away from their iniquities. In great power He pressed upon them their responsibility in regard to Jesus, a responsibility they could not possibly evade.

In each instance conviction seized upon many who listened, and they repented of the great sin of Christ-rejection, and identified themselves with Him whom now they owned as Lord and Saviour by being baptized in His Name.

In Cornelius' house the method of presentation was somewhat different, for Peter was there addressing a Gentile group, but nevertheless a company who were through Jewish contact quite familiar with the hope of Israel. They had heard of Jesus, and of the treatment He had received at the hands of His own nation. Peter showed with all simplicity and clearness how every blessing was bound up with Him. He rehearsed the story of His wondrous life, His sacrificial death, and His triumph over the grave, climaxing all with the glorious message, "To him give all the prophets witness, that through his name whosoever believeth in him shall receive remission of sins" (Acts 10:43). During the time he was speaking the hearts of his listeners had been responding to the truth. When he made this declaration they, as one man, received the message and the Holy Spirit sealed and baptized them into the body of Christ.

It is true that repentance as such is not mentioned, but it is plainly implied. Turning from all else these Gentiles trusted alone in Christ.

Paul, in the synagogue at Antioch in Pisidia, followed a similar outline, and with amazing results. It is a model sermon for all who would endeavor to preach the Gospel today. There was no effort to be startling or original, no attempt at eloquence or rhetorical flourish, no pandering to the natural desire to win the approval of his audience. Solemnly, honestly, earnestly, he told the story of Jesus, and showed at the last that all hope for salvation was in Him and in Him alone: "Be it known unto you therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him, all that believe are justified from all things, from which ye could not be justified by the law of Moses" (Acts 13:38-39). Then with a solemn warning of the judgment that must fall upon them if they spurned the message of grace, he brought his discourse to a close. The whole city seemed to be stirred by the sermon of the strange preacher, for the Gentiles begged that it might be repeated, at least in substance, to them on the next Sabbath, and the eventual result was that many were converted and a church established in that city ere the Apostle and his companions moved on.

It is noteworthy that so simple a method of presentation should be accompanied with such power. But where the preacher is truly a godly man and seeks in the fear of God to show his hearers their need and then presents Christ -- His person and His work -- as the all-sufficient answer to their need, the Holy Spirit can be depended on to use the Word in producing conviction and leading to repentance.

The Epistle to the Romans, while not merely a sermon or homily, but rather a careful treatise, is the fullest unfolding of the Christian message given us in the Scriptures. It is true that in this letter we have the Gospel taught rather than preached, and in a certain sense it is the evangel set forth for the clearing of saints instead of for the salvation of sinners, yet God has used it, in whole or in part, to lead thousands to repent and believe in the Lord Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. He who would preach so as to produce these desirable results cannot do better than saturate his own soul and fill his own mind with the truth as therein set forth.

How much Augustine in the fourth century and Luther in the sixteenth owed to this Epistle! It is the cornerstone of New Testament theology and the battle-ground of the Reformation. From the day that the Vicar-general Staupitz drew the monk Martin's attention to the key verse, "The just shall live by faith," it began to open up to the troubled spirit of the earnest young priest, leading him to see the folly of trusting any righteousness of His own, and the blessedness of resting in the righteousness of God as revealed in the Gospel. This was repentance indeed, never to be repented of!

In the opening chapters the inspired writer brings all mankind, as it were, into the court-room, and proves that all are sinners and guilty before God. The ignorant heathen are not to be judged for rejecting a Saviour of whom they have never heard, but they are already lost and guilty because of their own sins and will be judged accordingly. He deals with these sins unsparingly and in this becomes an example for all who would faithfully minister the truth to the souls of sinful men.

In the first part of the second chapter he exposes the hypocrisy and wickedness of the more cultured, philosophic class who condemned and despised their more uncouth and barbaric fellows, while themselves slaves to enormities just as vile and abominable in the sight of God. Then he looks at the religious Jew, boasting in the Law and priding himself on being of the seed of Abraham, while his life is such that through him the Name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles. He shows conclusively that none can ever hope to attain salvation on the ground of human merit or legal works, "For there is no difference between the Jew and the Greek." "All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God." "There is none righteous, no, not one." The Law which had been proposed as a test for life had proven to be but a ministry of death and of condemnation. By disobedience all have come under judgment. No future reformation could atone for the past. All the world is brought in guilty before God.

Then comes the wonderful setting-forth of the divine provision for man's desperate need. "But now" -- upon the proven unrighteousness of all men -- "the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets; even the righteousness of God, which is by faith of Jesus Christ, unto all and upon all them that believe."

Thus the question that perplexed Socrates was answered five hundred years later. Puzzled, he exclaimed, "It may be, Plato, that the Deity can forgive sins, but I do not see how." Christ's vicarious atonement is the righteous basis upon which God "can be just and the justifier of him who believes on Jesus."

Why waste time on substitutes that can never move the conscience and produce repentance when the Gospel is the dynamic of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth? This is the message for our unreal and hypercritical age, as truly as for every era of the past. Men talk of a new evangel for changing times. But the old story of Calvary still meets the needs of sinners -- and Christ came not to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance. Thousands can bear witness that they never realized how utterly lost and ruined they were until they saw themselves in the light of the cross of Jesus. No wonder Paul declared, "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." The old hymn is right that says,

"I need no other argument,

I want no other plea.

It is enough that Jesus died,

And that He died for me."

Such was the Gospel of Luther, that set half Europe aflame with love for the Saviour and devotion to God. Such was the burning message of Whitefield, Edwards, and the Wesleys, that transformed untold thousands of lives in the days of the great awakening at the close of the eighteenth century.

Such was the story, which, told in living power by Jeremiah Meneely and his associates, shook Ireland and Scotland in the great revival of 1859-60.

Such was the trumpet call of Caughey and Finney and later of Dwight L. Moody, that brought tens of thousands to repentance in the mighty visitations of the nineteenth century in America and Britain.

Such was the forceful evangel of Reuben A. Torrey, J. Wilbur Chapman, and a host of other stalwarts as they visited Australia, New Zealand, Britain, and every corner of America in the early years of the present century.

Such was the flaming proclamation of that prince of preachers, Charles H. Spurgeon, as for a generation he ministered by tongue from his London pulpit, and by pen, to millions throughout the entire world.

"And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell" of Munhall, of A. C. Dixon, of Gypsy Smith, of Billy Sunday, of Mel Trotter, of the Stevens brothers, of Mordecai Ham, and scores of like-minded men of God, who in power have set forth men's sinfulness and God's great salvation through Christ's redemptive work, and thereby moved myriads to repentance.

The Salvation Army's marvellous success, in bringing the very vilest to find newness of life when they turned as confessed sinners to Christ, certainly did not rest upon a carefully reasoned out theology preached in cultured phraseology, but in stressing the awfulness of sin and its dreadful penalty, and the wondrous grace that provides deliverance for all who will come to the Saviour and find cleansing in His blood.

How pitiable it is to see men, who ought to be winners of souls, turning away from this grand old Gospel to the vapid puerilities of what is vaingloriously termed modern thought, and being content to preach on year after year without ever seeing a tear of repentance drop from the eyes of their hearers or moving any to cry in distress, "What must I do to be saved?"

Back to the Gospel, brethren, if like the men of God throughout the centuries who have turned many to righteousness, you would bring men to repentance and lead them to heaven. This will never result from substituting a social service gospel, which is really no gospel at all, but an attempt to make the cross of Christ of none effect. By saying this I do not mean for one moment to cast a slur upon well-meant efforts to ameliorate conditions under which millions of our fellow men are struggling. Everywhere that the pure evangel has found lodgment in human hearts it has bettered the social environment into which it has found its way. Even unsaved men profit by the love and grace set forth in the teaching of our Lord Jesus Christ. Men are ashamed to do in the light what they will do unblushingly in the dark, and so the Gospel has curbed many social evils and bettered living conditions, wherever it has been received.

Of old it was said of Paul and his companions when they entered a certain city, "These that have turned the world upside down are come hither also." The trouble with this fallen world is that it is wrong side up. It needs to be turned upside down in order to be right side up. And twenty centuries of missions and evangelistic testimony have demonstrated the glorious fact that civilization always follows in the wake of the story of the cross, and men learn to think kindlier of one another and to be concerned about the welfare of their fellows when the love of God is shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit who is given unto them.

To take the position, as many who are hailed as "great thinkers" do today, that we are not to be so much concerned about individual salvation as we are to seek the social regeneration of the nations, is to be false to our commission, and is a case of sadly misplaced emphasis. Man is made for eternity. His few years here on earth are but as a moment in contrast to that which is to come and which lies beyond the grave. It

is of all importance to every individual that he be properly oriented to his Creator -- in other words that he be right with God -- then all other necessary things will follow.

I recall hearing William Booth, the first general of the Salvation Army say, when explaining his "Darkest England" scheme, that its real objective was, not just the amelioration of social conditions, but first and foremost the bringing of men to repentance that their souls might be saved. I can recall the flash in his eye, and the noble bearing of his commanding figure as he exclaimed, "Take a man from the filth and squalor of the slums, exchange his rags for decent clothing, move him from the stifling stench of the city tenement to a neat little cottage in the pure air of the country, put him on his feet economically where he can make a decent living for himself and his family, and then let him die in his sins, unsaved, and be lost forever at last -- really it is not worth while, and I, for one, would not attempt it."

Godliness has "promise of the life that now is, and of that which is to come." But the only way one can enter into godliness is by turning to God as a repentant sinner and receiving the Saviour He has provided in the Gospel. Therefore the crying need of our degenerate times is for a revival of true old-fashioned, Christ-centered, Bible preaching that will call upon all men everywhere to repent in view of that coming day when God will judge the world in righteousness by His Risen Son.

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