

Repentance

by Richard Owen Roberts

True repentance is a gift from God, an ongoing attitude of turning from sin and towards Him, and is necessary for salvation.

Duration: 58:52

Scripture: Acts 26:20

Topics: "True Repentance", "Christian Sanctification"

Description

This sermon emphasizes the essential nature of repentance in the Christian life, highlighting the misconception that repentance is unnecessary or solely a work. It delves into the importance of true repentance, the dangers of false repentance, and the need for repentance to be accompanied by faith. The sermon draws from various biblical examples and teachings to underscore the significance of genuine, ongoing repentance that involves turning from sin and dead works, being open and positive, and ultimately centered on Christ.

Transcript

I remember a conversation with a pastor from one of the Campbellite churches in which he was vigorously denying the place of repentance and insisting that we are saved by faith alone and of course holding out very strongly for baptism, or in other words, in actual truth, representing a position that it doesn't really take repentance and it doesn't really take faith, it just takes baptism in the right place and you're saved. Now that was a long time ago and I was amazed at the position that he represented, but I have found since then that in a great many circles repentance is struggled against, taught, that indeed it has no place whatsoever in the Christian life. Preaching not long ago in Kansas, a series of meetings had been scheduled for a long time, but a week or two before the meetings I had a phone call saying, we have just discovered that we've made a dreadful mistake, we scheduled you to preach, and unfortunately on the Sunday night we scheduled something else and there's no way we can do both.

So we can either end the series Sunday morning and you can return home or we could arrange meetings in another church, which would you prefer? I said arrange meetings in another church. So I went to this church which was totally strange to me, it was greeted with great warmth by the pastor and by the people, but as soon as I stood and read the text, the pastor dropped his head down between his knees and turned pink. As I proceeded with the sermon the pink became red to the place where in an hour and a half sermon he never once looked up, and all the time he was such a bright red that I was fearful he might

somehow blow a gasket.

He then immediately disappeared totally, which was strange because there were a great many visitors and most pastors obviously are quick to work the crowd, but after a bit a great big distinguished looking man stepped up to me and he introduced himself as a policeman, and I thought now what? But he said to me, I work on the day shift and I've been attending bible college at night. I have a question I want to ask you. What would you think of a bible college that teaches that repentance has nothing to do with Christianity but is solely for covenant Israel? What? He repeated it.

I said I wouldn't waste another evening in a bible institute like that, but later I discovered that the pastor who turned red was the teacher of this class in the bible school, and of course I understood his problem. There are multitudes in the church who believe that we are saved by faith alone and that repentance is work and we're not saved by work, but what they don't seem to understand is it is impossible to go in two directions at once. We are going our own way and we must turn and go God's way.

Repentance and faith are wed. They cannot be divorced. They go together.

It's impossible to believe without repenting. It's dangerous to repent and not believe. What happens to a person who tries to turn from their sin and yet they don't turn to Christ? Our Lord gave a small parable which I believe touches powerfully upon that issue.

He talked about a house and was of course speaking of the human heart. A house that had been inhabited by a demon. The demon was driven out.

The house was swept and garnished, to use King James English, but it stood empty. The demon passing by saw that the former place of his inhabitants was still empty. He went and gathered some of his pals and they entered the place and of course the last estate was worse than the first.

Repentance and faith, I repeat, are wed, linked together. We turn from and we turn to. It's impossible to turn to without turning from.

It's dangerous to try and turn from without turning to. Let's turn in scripture please to the book of Acts and let me read a portion from chapter 17. The book of Acts chapter 17.

We'll pick up the reading at verse 16. Acts 17 verse 16. This of course is the record of Paul being in the city of Athens and the reception that he received there.

So verse 16. Now while Paul was waiting for them at Athens, his spirit was being provoked within him as he was beholding the city full of idols. So he was reasoning in the synagogue with the Jews and the God-fearing Gentiles and in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be present.

And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him and some were saying what would this idol babbler wish to say. Others, he seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection. And they took him and they brought him to the saying may we know what this new teaching is which you are proclaiming.

For you are bringing some strange things to our ears. We want to know therefore what these things mean. Now frankly friends, of all the books that I have written that have been published, none has had a poorer reception than the book Repentance.

And some people who see it say I wonder what this madman has to say. It seems to me preaching on repentance today brings pretty much the same reaction that Paul received in Athens. Now all the Athenians and the strangers visiting there used to spend their time in nothing other than telling or hearing something new.

And Paul stood in the midst of the Areopagus and he said men of Athens, I observe that you are very religious in all respects. For while I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription to an unknown God. Now that's the God of the American church, an unknown God.

Let me break into the reading and lay out this simple series of statements that are connected one with another. What I think of God determines what I think of myself. That then determines what I think of sin.

And those things together determine what I think of salvation. So because we worship an unknown God, we offer a salvation that is pure foolishness. We report millions of converts who are no more converted than Satan himself.

There is no way that one can be saved by the God they know nothing about. You cannot worship the unknown God and be a Christian. Now the difficulty that we've got to face rarely is because we are living at a time when the viewpoint of salvation is sheer nonsense.

We cannot hope to correct the problem by starting with the issue of salvation. We teach, we preach, we adhere to an erroneous view of salvation because we don't really know what sin is, and the offensiveness of sin to God Almighty. And we don't know what sin is because we have an enlarged view of ourselves.

We think that we are big enough to determine what is acceptable and what is unacceptable conduct. And we have this overestimate of our own significance because we don't know the God of the Bible. If indeed we are going to see a change in our church society, it has got to start with a correct view of God.

When a person comes to a biblical understanding of God, they're not satisfied with the ridiculous notion of salvation. They must have reality, and nothing other than reality is sufficient. But let us read on in this passage.

Let me repeat verse 23. While I was passing through and examining the objects of your worship, I also found an altar with this inscription, to an unknown God. What therefore you worship in ignorance, this I proclaim to you.

The God who made the world and all the things in it, since he is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands. Neither is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all life and breath and all things. And he made from one every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God, if perhaps they might grasp for him or grope for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us.

For in him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, for we also are his offspring. Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the divine nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and the thought of man. Therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere must repent, because he has fixed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness through the man whom he has appointed, having furnished

proof to all men by raising him from the dead.

And when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some began to sneer, but others said, we shall hear again concerning this. So Paul went out of their midst, but some men joined him and believed, among whom also was Dionysius the Arthagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them. Well, it should be apparent that our text is plain and straightforward as anything could possibly be.

Verse 16, therefore, having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all everywhere must repent. Now let me speak figuratively just for a moment. Insofar as I am able to see, we all have two ears.

Let me request that you listen with one ear for yourself. It is possible to be 30 years in the ministry and unrepentant. The evidence is overwhelming that that is true.

I remember as a young preacher the first time I heard of a man in ministry who had been caught in sexual sin. I was flabbergasted. I had no idea such a thing ever occurred.

It was years before I heard of another incident like that, but now it's not uncommon to hear of seven prominent ministers in the course of a single week who have been shown to have been living in some kind of sexual sin. The evidence is perfectly clear that multitudes of Christians, so-called, are not living repentantly. So we do need to listen for ourselves.

How could I possibly know what the heart of each person here is? There may be someone here who is thought to be the shining light of their church, the most devout and godly person in the membership who is nonetheless living an unrepentant life. So listen for yourself. But at the same time, listen for others.

Because all around us in the churches are multitudes of people who are not living repentantly, who do not even know that repentance is mandatory, or who foolishly suppose that having had a moment of repentance somewhere in their lifetime, all is well. So with the text in mind, God is now commanding all men everywhere to repent. Let's focus upon this urgent issue.

How do I know if what I call repentance is truly the repentance that God commands all men everywhere to engage in? And with the other ear, how about the people around me, the people in my church, the people that I work with who are professing Christians? How do I know whether indeed their repentance is valid? What can I do to help those who have been falsely informed, those who honestly think they're all right with God, but they don't even know who the God is they think they're all right with? So let me give a series of statements that we can utilize to analyze our own repentance and to help those around us who may indeed not be aware at all what God's requirement of repentance really is. First, true repentance is a gift from God. Now that's simple.

It is easily established biblically. For instance, Acts chapter 5, verses 30 and 31, the God of our fathers raised up Jesus whom you had put to death by bringing him on a cross. He is the one whom God has exalted to his right hand as a prince and a savior to grant repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sin.

Repentance is not something I find within myself. It is not something I inherit from my godly ancestors. It's not something that the church gives out.

Repentance is a gift from God. It is possible to think that you have repented and yet to have never received the gift of repentance that God gives. In the eleventh chapter of the book of Acts, verses 17 and

18, it further amplifies the matter of which we read in Acts 5, if God therefore gave to them the same gift as he gave to us after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way? And when they heard this, they quieted down and they glorified God saying, well then, God has granted to the Gentiles the repentance that leads to life.

So if you are repentant, it is because God has offered you a gift and you have received it. Now God doesn't give lousy gifts. There's nothing stinking shameful about anything that God distributes.

If you've got repentance, it's God's repentance that you've got. It's valid. It is pleasing in his sight.

It accomplishes the purpose for which it was given. It's the kind of repentance that leads to life eternal. In the seventh chapter of 2 Corinthians, Paul made a dramatic contrast between the kind of sorrow that leads to a form of repentance that results in death and the kind of sorrow that leads to true repentance and life eternal.

And he made it quite clear that a person can be caught in sin and they can feel ashamed and maybe even apprehensive, lest their sin will lead them to eternal destruction. And because they're caught, because they're ashamed, because they're seeking to head off the consequence of sin, they demonstrate the kind of sorrow and they think themselves to have experienced a kind of repentance. But that kind of repentance, Paul makes it clear, leads to death.

But there is a sorrow that is godly, a sorrow that is indeed given by God himself that leads to true repentance and life eternal. We must ascertain for certain whether we have God's gift of repentance or we are simply seeking to improve ourselves by some moral reformation. And as I suggested, we must first concern ourselves with ourselves, but then we must ask concerning those whom God has given us some measure of responsibility for, do they have the gift of repentance? If they do, why do they love sin? Is it not perfectly clear? If it is a gift from God, it will bring to us that same concern for sin that God himself has.

Let me mention a second matter now of great consequence. True repentance is not a single act, but an ongoing, a continual attitude. Repentance is not something once done, forever accomplished.

We don't get much exposure to this sort of thing currently, but I remember as a younger man being frequently in testimony meetings, and some aged person would stand up and say, well, when I was 21 years of age, I repented and I believed and I'm on my way to glory. Hallelujah. And I want to stand up and shout and say, who cares what happened when you're 21? I'd like to know what's happening today.

True repentance is not some past experience that we happen to, but it's an ongoing, continual attitude of turning from everything that God loves to everything that God delights in. And we have more than ample scripture to verify the validity of what I've said. Have you ever concerned yourself seriously with the book of Hebrews and the warning passages that are found in the book of Hebrews? If you have paid any close attention at all to the book of Hebrews, you surely realize Christianity is not a good beginning, but a glorious ending.

It doesn't really matter so much how you start, it's how you finish that counts. And to be able to say, well, years ago, I had this wonderful experience. Everybody in their right mind should cry out, who cares? Tell us what's going on in your heart and life right now.

Are you repentant in this very hour? And can you honestly testify you are living repentantly day in, day out, month after month, year after year? Some while ago in a series of meetings in Texas, a woman stepped

up to me and she said, Mr. Roberts, I'd like to ask you to pray for my daughter. I said, what is it you wish me to pray concerning your daughter? Well, my daughter's in prison and I'd like you to pray that she'll be released. I said, why is your daughter in prison? Well, she said she was arrested as a prostitute and on drug charges.

Will you pray that she be released from prison? No, I said, I will not pray that she be released from prison. If I were to pray for your daughter, it would be that she would repent and believe. Oh, you don't need to pray that.

My daughter accepted Christ when she was nine years of age. I know that she's a Christian. Please pray that she will be released from prison.

I talked as seriously and tenderly as I knew how to that woman. And finally, I said to her, your daughter's biggest problem is her mother, who is foolish enough to believe that her daughter can live for Satan and engage herself in all the wiles of the devil and at the same time be a Christian. Many of us need to face reality that children that we have pretended are Christians are proving every day that they are not by the non-repentant way in which they live.

So let us ask honestly, am I like those persons to whom the epistle to the Hebrews was written, persons who seem to have made a good beginning but were being seriously attempted to turn aside and to go back to the old way? Ask simply, do I live repentantly? Number three, true repentance is not merely turning from what you have done, which is evil, but from what you are. Let me repeat those words. For some of you, they may not be familiar-sounding words.

True repentance is not merely turning from what I've done that is displeasing to God, but it is turning from what I am. Our real problem is not merely that we sin. Our real problem is that we are sinners.

Isn't this what King David was saying in Psalm 51? In sin did my mother conceive me. Now obviously he's not blaming his great fall on his mother. He's recognizing the fact that he was born apart from God, that he was born depraved, that there was an internal wickedness in him that had to be repented of.

So I'm asking now, have you repented both of what you had done and of what you are? When was the last time there were tears on your face because you realized that you truly are nothing other than a vile, reprobate sinner apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some of us need to learn to distinguish between repentance of the fruits of sin in our lives and repentance of the roots of sin in our lives. I began the message this morning by a very brief reference to the book of Jude.

I made ever so short comment on three statements. The unbelief of Israel, the stubbornness and rebellion of the fallen angels, and the pride of Sodom and Gomorrah that led to their destruction. All of us need to realize that it is possible to repent of the fruits, f-r-u-i-t-s, the fruits of sin in the life, and yet never to repent of the roots.

I have to speak carefully. If you interpret what I'm about to say politically, shame on you, but I do run the risk in saying it. We had in the White House a president who, before he was elected to the presidency, was governor of the state of Arkansas, where he was well known as a pathological liar and an habitual adulterer.

In the White House, he was caught in sexual sin. He denied it up and down, but eventually, when the evidence was so overwhelming that he could not hope to go on denying it, with bitter tears he admitted

that he had sinned. And immediately, some of the Christian leaders spoke up and said, now the president has admitted his guilt and asked for forgiveness, and we must all forgive him.

Whenever I had an opportunity, I said, stop the nonsense. He was caught. He admitted it to try and head off the consequences.

There is no reason at all to think that he has come to repentance, because you don't have to just repent of the fruit. You've got to repent of the root. And if you don't repent of the root, then the fruit will keep appearing, maybe in different form, but time after time there will be evidence of an unrepentant heart.

Have you repented, not only of what you've done, but who you are? If you're a preacher, are you helping people to realize that what is required is not a simple moment of confession, not even a flood of tears? What is required is turning from the very roots of sin in the life. Now, to repeat again from the Jude passage, three root sins are clarified in that passage. The root sin of unbelief, which was the sin of Israel.

The root sin of stubbornness, rebellion, which was the root of the fallen angels. The root sin of sex, out of order, contrary to God. The root sin of Solomon Gomorrah, which was pride.

No one has truly repented unless they have repented of the very roots of sin. And I'm pleading with you to be certain that in your own case you have repented of the roots and not merely of the fruits of sin in which you were caught. Number four, true repentance is not merely of sin, but of dead works.

Have you ever weighed that? Not merely of sin, but of dead works. It is no accident that in Hebrews chapter six, where the author makes it clear, I am not going back to lay again the foundation issues. And he speaks of faith toward God and repentance of dead works.

He has told people at this time you ought to be way beyond the point of milk. You ought to be tasting on the rich blessed truths of the word of God. Instead, you're acting like infants still being breastfed.

As I said, it's no accident that when he speaks of the foundation doctrines, he doesn't speak of the repentance from sin, but the doctrine of repentance from dead works. What do you know about repentance from dead works? This matter is spoken of again in Hebrews chapter nine, verses 13 and 14. So I'm asking you plainly, have you ever repented of dead works? And those people for whom you bear a burden spiritually, are they clinging to dead works or have they repented of dead work? You say, well, what is a dead work? Well, let me speak of it in three realms.

First, a dead work is anything you do to gain merit with God. Think of that, anything you do by which you hope to gain merit with God. Millions of people have responded to the altar call and come forward, signed a decision card, prayed perhaps the sinner's prayer in the hopes that they could do something that would gain merit with God.

Millions have been assured that because of those dead works, they're now Christian. Anything you do to gain merit with God, it is a well-known fact that there are men in pastoral ministry who entered the ministry in the hopes that doing something for God would gain merit for them. Obviously there is nothing we can do to gain merit with God.

We are not saved by our merits, but by Jesus Christ and his provision of salvation, his atonement for our sin. Have any of you hoped that anything you have done could possibly gain merit with God? Then repent of it and repent of it now. But secondly, a dead work is anything you do in the name of Jesus that cannot

be quickened and made alive by the Holy Spirit.

So any of us could preach a sermon. There was nothing other than a dead work. We could teach a Sunday school class.

We could sing a solo. We could serve as an usher. We could engage in any activity in the life of the Church and have it demonstrated that it was nothing other than a dead work.

A dead work is anything we do that cannot be quickened and made alive by the Holy Spirit. You say, I'm not sure I quite get that. Well, think of these solemn words.

If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me. Think of the consequence of that. If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me.

So you're asked to sing a solo. Oh Lord, bless what I'm about to do. But deep in your heart, there is some sin that you've coddled, that you've given place to.

If in any way you regard iniquity in your heart, if you give place to anything that is in opposition to God, then your prayer is rendered useless. Even the most eloquent prayer in the Church prayer meeting can be nothing other than a dead work, if indeed there is sin that is held in secret in the life. I have no way to know how many sermons I preached over the years, but I know it's approaching at least 20,000.

And the thought that any or all of those sermons could be nothing other than dead work is a very frightening thought. Every avenue of service is potentially a dead work. If you regard iniquity in your heart.

Number three, a dead work is anything you do that is not quickened and made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit. Now there is a distinction between two and three. Two, it cannot be quickened.

Three, it is not quickened. I have listened to many a sermon that sounded to me as if the preacher took it for granted that the power of the Holy Spirit was upon his preaching. But no, no, we take nothing for granted.

Every service we render should be bathed in prayer. All of us are in danger of serving God with our gifts and not serving him with fresh graces. Everything I endeavor in the name of Christ must be saturated in prayer and rendered in complete subjection to Christ and in the hope of the empowerment of the Holy Spirit upon it.

But many of us are careless here. We never think to seek the anointing of God's Spirit upon what we do. So repentance both from sin and dead works.

Number five, true repentance is not something done in secret, but it is absolutely open. Those of you who are familiar with the story of King Saul recognize that Saul admitted to God that he had sinned, and he admitted to Samuel that he had sinned, but he pretended before the elders and the people that he had not sinned. True repentance is never secret.

It's always open. Take in contrast the terrible iniquity of King David, and yet he wrote Psalms 32 and Psalm 38 and Psalm 51, and who knows what other passages in which he declared to the whole world his guilt before God and his repentance before him. Is your repentance open so that anybody in all your world knows that truly you are living a repentant life? Number six, true repentance is both negative and positive.

In Acts 20, it speaks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Isaiah in the first chapter described the consequence of ceasing to do evil, learning to do good. When Daniel spoke to that King Nebuchadnezzar, he said, therefore, O King, may my advice be pleasing to you.

Break away from your sins by doing righteousness and from your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. And we read in both Matthew chapter 3 and Luke chapter 3, bring forth fruit in keeping with or appropriate to your repentance. And in Acts 26, we should repent and turn to God, performing deeds that are appropriate to repentance.

So repentance is both negative and positive, turning from, turning to, crowding out of the life those things that are dishonoring to God and filling the life with those things that are pleasing to God. Finally, number seven, true repentance is not so much what I do for myself as it is what I do for Christ. Think of that.

True repentance, not so much what I do for myself, but what I do for Christ. Now, I want to give you a small task. I wish I had more time, but I'm slow at speech and I never seem to quite get finished.

I want to give you this little task. Ask this question, of all the sins of which I've been guilty in my lifetime, is there a common thread that winds its way through all of my sin life? One of those missionaries that served under the Southern Baptist Board, who was in China at the time of the Boxer Rebellion, and was among those who experienced that incredible revival known as the Shantung revival. When she reached a certain age, she was forced to retire, but she spent the last 20 years or so of her life traveling the country and confronting pastors in particular.

Dozens of men have said to me that Miss Bertha, she was known as Bertha Smith, stepped up to them and said to them, young man, I'm giving you an order. Get yourself a handful of pens and a large pack of paper. Go to some secret place, get alone with God, and ask God to show you every sin of which you have ever been guilty.

And men said to me, I mean grown men, even some my age, have said to me, I didn't dare refuse. There was something about Miss Bertha that you almost felt that you refused to do what she told you, you were refusing to do what God told you. So I got the pens and I got the paper, and I went aside not expecting anything very much, and I wrote and I wrote and I wrote I could hardly believe page after page after page after page filled with sins that God revealed to me in my life.

Some of them under the blood, some of them not yet laid on the altar. But I'm asking you, think about your own sin life and ask this question, is there a common thread that winds its way through all of your sin life? If you do that, you will discover the answer is yes. Sin is self.

It's me versus you. It's us versus them. It's me versus God.

It's us versus God. If your repentance is something you have done solely for yourself, all you have done is to add to your sin life. Suppose you came to repentance because the danger of hell was dangled in front of you and you said I don't want to go there.

Suppose you had suffered a bitter experience, perhaps a spouse who betrayed you or someone whom you had great confidence just simply forsook you and left you in an awful mess, and you were so lonely that when the preacher said come to Christ, he is the friend that sticks closer than a brother. You turned to Christ because you desperately needed a friend or like the pilgrim in Bunyan's great work, you find yourself all burdened with the weight of sin and you come to Christ to escape the burden. Do you realize

any motivation of that sort is self-centered? And what we have in the church are multitudes of people who started out on the wrong foot.

They were serving themselves in the repentance and they never went from the wrong foot to the right foot. They might be in the vestibule, but they never entered into the Holy of Holies. They've never come to repentance for Christ's sake.

The great motivating power of Christianity is not what I do for myself, but what I do for Christ. Is he not worthy of our full repentance? My heart goes out week after week to pastors who are trying to shepherd goats, and the goats are butting them about and giving them an impossible life. And I say to them, preach! Preach! Don't just teach, preach! Until the goats are either converted or driven out, and you have the joy of pastoring sheep.

Trying to pastor people who are in the vestibule with a self-centered repentance is a very, very tiring task. What a tragedy that someone should have taken a step toward Christ with a selfish motive and never, ever seen his greatness and his worthiness. Our call is to live repentant lives for Christ's sake.

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