

A Call to Repentance

by Vance Havner

Vance Havner's sermon emphasizes the critical need for repentance within the Church to foster genuine revival and spiritual growth.

Duration: 36:16

Scripture: Matthew 3:2, Matthew 4:17, Mark 6:12, Acts 2:38, Acts 20:21, Romans 13:14, Revelation 2:5

Topics: "Repentance"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker uses the analogy of a water wheel in an old-fashioned mill to illustrate the importance of removing hindrances and obstacles in order for the church to operate effectively. He emphasizes the need for repentance and the removal of sin in order for the church to be successful in evangelism. The speaker also highlights the danger of trying to do things in our own strength, rather than relying on the power of the Holy Spirit. He encourages listeners to let God work through them and to abide in Him, rather than striving in their own efforts.

Transcript

I am glad to return to Moody Bible Institute. I had steadfastly set my face toward Chicago from sunny Arizona. Never had but one complaint against D.L. Moody, and that is that he was born in February.

But it's good to be here. I couldn't tell you if I tried what a place Moody Bible Institute holds in my heart. I attended the first Founders Week conference in 1923.

I listened to Lee Andrew Kaiser and Gretchen Guinness and Gresham Machen and James and Gray, R.A. Torrey and William Jennings Bryan. There were giants in the land in those days. But the blessing of God has continued on this good place.

Now I've been in Moody Church at Founders Week when the place was packed, during the war years especially. Everybody likes to see that many people gather for such a purpose, but who knows? Maybe this is the way God wanted it tonight, and we're here and he's here, and all we want is his will. I remember hearing Dr. Paul Rees tell over at Winona Lake about a certain preacher who, every time his wife served leftovers, had a special prayer of thanks for that occasion.

When he saw leftovers coming up for lunch, he always began, Lord, we thank thee for thy continued blessings. We thank the Lord for his continued blessings at Founders Week. We anticipate more.

When John the Baptist went out preaching, he preached repentance, Matthew 3.2. When our Lord began to preach, he preached repentance, Matthew 4.17. When our Lord sent the disciples out to preach, they preached repentance, Mark 6.12. Peter, after Pentecost, preached repentance, Acts 2.38. Paul at Athens preached repentance, Acts 20.21. And to five of the seven churches of proconsular Asia, our Lord said, repent. His last word to the Church was not the Great Commission. The last thing the Lord said to the Church was repent.

It's not the last thing the average Church is willing to do, but it's the last word of our Lord to the Church. He did not say to Ephesus, what you need is a bigger evangelistic program. He said, repent, get back to your first love, you'll be evangelistic.

He didn't say to Pergamos and Thyatira, what you need is to step up your missionary activity. He said, you need to repent and deal with Balaam and Jezebel. He didn't say to the Church at Sardis, what you need is more tithers.

He said, what you need is to repent. He didn't say to the Laodiceans, what you need is more witnessing laymen. He said, you need to get over your lukewarmness and come to Aboah.

Be zealous and repent. I've been to some churches, been simmering for forty years, never have come to Aboah. The Lord said, come to Aboah and repent.

And it is, repent or else, beloved, have you noticed the alternatives to repentance in our Lord's five calls in Revelation? Repent or else, I will remove, I will fight, I will kill, I will come as a thief, I will spew you out of my mouth. It doesn't sound like Jesus at first thought, but he said it. And these are the consequences that may fall unrepentant Christians and Churchmen.

I've been preaching now for around fifty-three years, and I go to churches where I find bulletins galore announcing revival, calling on people to visit, invite, sing and pray, and all that's good. But I've looked in vain for what is so obvious in the New Testament that only a blind spot in our eye can account for such silence. Almost nothing is ever said about the need for repentance in the Church, getting right with God and men.

We'll do everything else, but the average revival is just a drive for more Church members, and the present membership is left untouched. Where is the prophet among all the priests who will call the Church to repentance? We assume that the present fellowship is in good shape. We wouldn't dare touch the status quo with a forty-foot pole.

The status quo needs to be unquoted. M. F. Ham said, until we get some of God's people right, we cannot hope to get sinners regenerated. And Sam Jones said at the beginning of one of his campaigns, until the Church members of this city make restitution, confess, slander, forgive one another, forsaking worldliness, social drinking, gambling and card playing and other sins, they are not ready to lead sinners to Christ.

Let us clean up ourselves and sinners will be converted. I know, you're saying that kind of preaching is out of style, yes, and so are revivals pretty generally. When Mr. Moody went to England the second time, he preached repentance.

The first time he gloried in the grace of God. But Paul Moody says, he had come to know that unless there was a genuine turning away from known sin in life and thought, there would be little permanency of change. And this business of calling the Church to repentance is a thankless job.

People like to go to great meetings where they get lost in the crowd, but stand in a local church where everybody knows everybody, and call on deacons and elders and stewards and what have you, and choir singers and Sunday school teachers to repent. And you will need to remember what Joseph Parker meant when he said, The man whose sermon is repentance sets himself against the age and will be battered mercilessly by the age whose moral tone he challenges. There is but one in for such a man off with his head.

You had better not preach repentance until you have pledged your head to heaven. The Church must first repent. The majority of our Church members in America give no evidence of ever having been born again.

If you're what you always have been, you're not a Christian. The Christian is something new, something different. I could have led some people to the Lord if they hadn't joined the Church.

Too many Church members are living in sin. We are bypassing sin. When Joshua was defeated at Ai, he could have said, Well, we didn't do so well that time, but let's regroup our forces and throw our heads up and here we go again.

But they'd have been defeated again. There was sin in the camp. Israel had sinned.

Well, as a matter of fact, only Achan had sinned, but Israel had sinned. God said we must do something about it. And Paul wrote to the church at Corinth.

There was plenty wrong with that church. They were chasing pet preachers around, going to low, and there were disorders at the Lord's table, and one man was living with the wrong woman, and Paul could have said, Yes, I know we have some defects, but we have a lot of good people, and I want to accentuate the positive, so we'll skip it. But Dr. Campbell Morgan says 1 Corinthians deals in the first half with the carnalities and the second half with the spiritualities, and you have to deal with the carnalities first.

Oh, I know there are those who say all you have to do is preach love, just preach love, and that'll take care of everything. And if that'll take care of everything, why did Paul wait until the 13th chapter of 1 Corinthians before he ever got around to love? I know we like to be optimistic and say, Well, things could be worse, yes, maybe, but I belong to the school that says things could be better, and I believe we ought to belong to that school. I noticed that one of your emphases this week will be evangelism, and I am sure that if you're a thinking Christian, you will agree that perhaps we're trying to evangelize with an unawakened and undedicated church.

You can't do that, not successfully. I heard of some small boys who went out to play ball some time ago, and when they got out to the field, they discovered that they had forgotten the ball. There were some moments of frustration, and finally one of them said, Oh, forget the ball, let's get on with the game.

And I think that's what we're trying to do again and again today. The church can do many things after she repents, but she can do nothing until she repents. There are those who say, Let's forget our faults and failings, our theological differences, our worldliness, close ranks and march ahead.

But one man in the ranks, one traitor in the ranks, can cause more trouble than a thousand out in front. This spiritual warfare today is a good deal like the war in Vietnam. There is no front.

There is no front line over there. The Viet Cong are everywhere. There is no front line now.

We've been infiltrated by the powers of evil. The devil is not fighting churches, he's joining them. Tell a sick man to go out and act like a well man, and that will make a well man out of him, but it won't.

There is something wrong with a sick man, and that has to be dealt with, and when the trouble is removed, he will naturally act like a well man. And then they say today, Let's not talk about what's wrong with the church. Let's call a halt to all this and get to work for the Lord.

Suppose our linen isn't spotless. The robes of Christ are, and let's major on that. Now that sounds good, but it's misleading.

After all, I seem to remember something about the saints in Sardis who had not defiled their garments. There were a few. I seem to remember something about being unspotted from the world.

I know Christ is our righteousness, but I believe in righteousness in you as well as on you. I heard of a testimony meeting where an old brother got up and said, Well, I think it's like this. Out here in the wintertime, there's an old barn covered over with the snow.

He said, That's the way my old sinful heart has all been covered over with the righteousness of Christ. And the old lady got up and said, Brother, if you ever thaw out, you'll be in a terrible fix. I believe in righteousness in you as well as upon you, and I think your position up there and your condition down here, your standing up there and your state down here ought to correspond.

We're not going to be faultless down here, but we can be blameless. I know the good book says, Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, but what does it say next? Make not provision for the flesh. I know that we're to major on the grace of God, but what does the grace of God teach us? The denying ungodliness in the world, unless we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present world.

I know we ought to major on the promises of God, but having, therefore, these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit. I know we're not to judge people. The Lord knoweth them that are His.

I'm glad He does. Otherwise, some of them would be pretty hard to identify. But it goes on to say, Let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

I miss A. W. Tozer these days. Tozer said, The popular notion that the first obligation of the Church is to spread the gospel to the uttermost part of the earth is false. Her first obligation is to be spiritually worthy to spread it.

Our Lord said, Go ye, but He also said, Tare ye. Tozer said, Evangelical Christianity is now tragically below the New Testament standard. Worldliness is accepted as a part of our way of life.

Our religious mood is social instead of spiritual. We've lost the art of worship. We're not producing saints.

Our models are successful businessmen, celebrated athletes, and theatrical personalities. We carry on our religious activities after the methods of the modern advertiser. Our homes have been turned into theaters.

Our literature is shallow, and our hymn it is, thanks. Borders on sacrilege, and scarcely anyone appears to care. We must have a different kind of Christian soon, or within another half century we may have no true Christianity at all.

Increased numbers of demichristians is not enough. We must have a reformation. The first business of the Church is not to evangelize, but to get ready to evangelize.

There's no use in trying to excite an unprepared, undedicated mob of Church members to rush into a business for which they're not ready in mind or heart. A Gideon's 32,000 without training, a carnal mixed multitude, with no understanding of spiritual warfare, knowing little about it, and caring less. Our first business is to produce a better grade of Christians before we add more names to roles when already we have too many of the kind that most of them are.

We need seriously to ponder our Lord's word in Matthew 23, 15, when he said to the play actors, the hypocrites, the Pharisees, you compass land and sea to make one cross the light. When he has made you, make him twofold more the child of hell in yourselves. After all, the Pharisees had some good points.

My Lord said, do as they say. They sit in Moses' seat. They read the scriptures, they prayed, they went to God's house, they tithed, they lived separated lives.

They were anxious to preserve religion in Israel. There was a time when winning converts to the religion of Moses was good and the right thing to do. But religion had become institutionalized, and now they were propagating a dead faith, and every new convert was both a lost heathen and a lost Jew.

Now, generally there are exceptions that prove the rule, but for the most part, we are propagating a subnormal, degenerate brand of Christianity. And unless the Church repents and has a complete overhauling, and I don't mean a tune-up job, but an overhauling, our evangelistic and missionary drives may only add a multitude of proselytes, just like the crowd we already have for the most part, for like produces like, and it's possible that they may be twofold more the children of hell-unsaved pagans and unregenerate Church members. Worldly churches produce worldly Church members.

Churches that are weak or unsound in doctrine produce more members like that. Churches that operate in the energy of the flesh instead of the Holy Spirit produce more members like that. We must improve the quality of our churches, for converts tend to take on and reproduce the qualities of the churches that convert them.

It's not enough to get excited and rush out to add a host of new proselytes. Any false cult can do that. Any worldly organization can do that.

Our first business is to get the Church ready to evangelize. After all, my Lord did not say in Acts 1.8, He shall bear witness unto me. He said, ye shall be my witness.

And there's such a thing as sending people out to bear witness when they don't know how. Trying to get people to talk, trying to get them to testify when they have nothing to testify to. The word Christian is both a noun and an adjective.

We've got a lot of noun Christians today who are not very Christian Christians. We need to do something about the adjective. There'll be no revival until the Church repents.

Most people don't know what revival is. It isn't evangelism. It produces evangelism.

Evangelism is the result of revival. David said, Restore unto me the joy of thy salvation. Then I'll teach transgressors thy ways, and sinners shall be converted unto thee.

Gypsy Smith used to say, I'm here to help the Church get right with God. That'll be the revival. Conversion will be the fruit of revival.

As a matter of fact, revival is an Old Testament word. It isn't in the New Testament. The New Testament word is repent.

Repentance is the underside. Revival is God coming down upon these people. Repentance is the response of the awakened soul to the Holy Spirit.

And it brings conviction of sin, confession of sin, forsaking of sin, reconciliation, restitution, giving up the world, making Jesus Lord, and being filled with the Holy Spirit. That's revival. It is time for thee, Lord, to work, the psalmist said.

And Hosea said so to yourselves in righteousness. Reap in mercy, break up your fallow ground. It is time to seek the Lord till he come and reign righteousness upon you.

God's side and our side, it's time for God to work. That's God's business. It is time to seek the Lord.

That's our business. Break up your fallow ground. You know what fallow ground is.

It's ground that is lame, idle, uncultivated, and it's unproductive because it's undisturbed. And so are churches that are unproductive. They're unproductive because they're undisturbed.

I wonder, frankly, whether we can expect a deep revival in a shallow generation. You say it's the work of God. Yes, but my Lord, in the parable of the sower, the seed and the soil, told us about one type that hears the word and on with joy receives it.

That would look pretty good, wouldn't it? People coming down the aisle, I'll receive the word, smile on their face. Yes, but my Lord said they have no root, no depth. They don't last.

Some time ago a preacher was asked, How large is your pasture? He says, Twenty miles wide and one inch deep. I think I've been in something like that. The Bible has a lot to say about disturbing the people of God.

You remember that Moab had settled on his leaves and had not been emptied from vessel to vessel. And that's a homely figure that refers to a jar of vinegar that has sat until there's a scum over it or milk that has sat until it's curdled. It needs to be churned up, and many churches need to be churned up and emptied from vessel to vessel.

Your medicine bottle sometimes says, Shake well before using. That's what God has to do with a lot of his people. God hasn't used you lately.

Maybe you haven't been, you shook up lately. Maybe you need to be churned and emptied from vessel to vessel. It's like the lemonade with the sugar all at the bottom.

It's there, but it needs to be stirred. Years ago when I was pastor in Charleston, South Carolina, I used to go to the military college there, the Citadel, and speak to the cadets. I gave the baccalaureate once.

The commandant was General Summerall. He used to be chief of staff and was with MacArthur in France in the First World War. Every inch a soldier, and I think a Christian.

He never had much to say, but when he said something, you could count on it. I remember one time after I'd spoken, we marched out, and I tried to be as military as I knew how and keep step with the general. We got out there, and he took my hand and said, Thank you.

You get under these boys' hides. And I've prayed from that day until this. Lord, help me to get under people's hides.

Because, beloved, unless somehow or other we get blasted out of our false composure today to face things as they are and do something about it, not much is going to happen. It was down in the First Baptist Church of Jackson, Mississippi, not long ago in meetings. One night after the invitation, the pastor said to me as we looked over the folks going out, he said, Well, we had some sub-soiling here tonight.

We need some sub-soiling today. One reason we don't have a revival is because a lot of people don't want a revival. I remember Dr. Torrey.

I talked to him once. I was a young preacher. He was riding on a train in California.

I engaged him in conversation, and I wasn't getting along too well as a young preacher. I was trying this a little and that a little and jumping around more or less unsettling. He would look at me with those steely eyes and say, What are you doing? Well, I wasn't doing much.

I gave him a very poor report, and I remember how he looked at me and said, Young man, make up your mind on one thing and stay with it. Many times I've gone up to the top of that hill in Montrose, Pennsylvania and looked at that epitaph on his tombstone. I thought a good fact.

I finished the course. I kept the faith. Thank God for a man with a set face who'd made up his mind and knew where he was going.

And Dr. Torrey said, If most church members knew what a revival really is and what it would cost, their prayer would be, Lord, keep us from having a revival. Well, they'd do it anyway by not coming. They vote against it.

I've never been in a church yet where most of the members thought a revival was worth going to. I think that's a commentary on the state of things. We don't need one.

We are rich and increased with goods. And worst of all, we need nothing. And in our prosperity today, we forget that the goodness of God should lead us to repentance.

Jesus Christ must be a necessity before he's ever a reality. We're too proud. Jeremiah said, The showers have been withholding because you have a horse for it.

You have a countenance like a woman of the street. You refuse to be ashamed. There's no burden to spend more money for chewing gum and dog food than for foreign missions over this land of ours.

And we know too much. We decide what kind of revival we want and then ask God to sign on the dotted line. God's not signing on anybody's little dotted line.

We must bow to the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. Just about the time the experts decide how God's going to do it, he always does it some other way. I heard of two fellows standing in front of a taxidermist's shop.

One of them said to the other, That fellow doesn't know how to stuff birds. See, that bird, no bird ever held on to a limb like that. Poorest job of taxidermy I ever saw.

Just then the bird flew down. Just about the time the experts decide it can't be this way and God won't do it that way. God upsets all our nice little calculations and does it his way.

It's about time the bird flew down. In vain we tune our formal songs. In vain we strive to rise.

Hosannas languish on our tongues and our devotion dies. Come Holy Spirit, heavenly dove, with all our quickening powers, kindle a flame of sacred love in these cold hearts of ours. It's about time for that dove to fly down.

Dr. Phillips says the Church is so prosperous that she's fat and out of breath, so organized that she's muscle-bound. Out of breath. God breathed into Adam the breath of life and he became a living soul.

My Lord breathed on him and said, Receive ye the Holy Spirit. The Church is trying to exhale all the time today without inhaling. We must breathe into us what God breathes upon us.

But before that happens we must repent. There was an article in Reader's Digest some time ago on deep breathing. Of course you know that very few of us ever use most of our lungs.

We really live by gasps of air. And we do just about the same thing spiritually. We do not take in full draughts of the breath of God.

That's why I meet so many dear men in Christian work, preachers, educational men, music men, puffing and glowing and red in the face, and out of breath, dashing around from one duty to another. Out of breath. Dr. Phillips is right.

Before we breathe we must get ready to. And repentance is not penance. It's not penitence.

It's a change of mind about sin and self and the Savior, turning with a broken and contrite heart from sin and self to the Savior. It's not just a change of opinion. It's a change of one's inner attitude.

It's being willing not only that God should take away sins by forgiving them. It's being willing to put them away by forsaking them. Almost anybody is perfectly willing for God to take them away.

Are you willing to put them away? There's nothing meritorious about repentance or about faith or about prayer. They just bring us in contact with God. That's what gives them value.

And the step must be followed by the walk. We must bring forth fruits, meat for repentance. Plenty of people make decisions, never do anything about it.

If I were to say that three frogs were sitting on the edge of the pond and one decided to jump, how many did that leave? You'd all say two. No. I didn't say the frog jumped.

I said it just decided to. The prodigal son said, I will arise and go to my father. That was a decision.

But what did he do next? And he arose. Went to the frog. When I was a little boy, my father used to take me out in the country to an old-fashioned mill operated by a water wheel.

And the stream would flow up in that wheel and it would turn and all the little wheels would turn and the miller was in business. Now suppose he came down there some morning and the wheel wouldn't turn, the mill wouldn't operate, how foolish he'd be by straining and striving to try to make the wheel go round. How foolish he would be to call in the neighbors and strive to get the wheel going.

But I can tell you what he could do. He could go up the creek and remove the hindrances and clear the channel and get the dead loaves and the debris out of the way and the water would flow and the wheel would turn and the mill would operate and he'd be in business. All of these wonderful things that we read about in the Acts of the Apostles were simply the outflow and the overflow of the inflow of the Spirit of God.

Just that. And I meet pastors and church workers all over the country sweating and straining and striving trying to make the wheels go round. It's about time we went up the creek and cleared the channel and got sin out of our hearts and our lives.

Last year is the busiest year in my ministry, but I've been thinking about it and especially about what Dr. Jawed said. We are not always doing most business for God when we're busy. Sometimes I wonder whether I'm abounding in the work of the Lord or just bounding in the work of the Lord.

I know one thing, beloved. If I could live life over, I'd try to do less for God and let him do more through me. He wants to work in us to will and due of his good pleasure.

It takes us a long time to learn the simple lesson of abiding and abounding and that our responsibility is simply our response to his ability. Now you say you're passing the book to God. No, no, you'll work harder than you ever did.

But you won't be striving in your own strength. That would be the overflow of a spirit-filled life. You've read in the biographies of Mr. Moody and have been particularly charmed in the Newen by Pollock how that they called him Crazy Moody as a young lay witness.

Oh, he was a human dynamo if ever there was one. He could wear out a dozen other men with his apparently endless energy. There came a day when he realized that he couldn't do it even with all his determination and all his strength without endearment from on high, special endearment.

And Mr. Moody said this, and I had never read it before. Maybe you have. I was all the time carrying water.

Now I have a river that carries me. I wonder if I speak tonight to some dear preacher in this place that's wearing yourself out carrying buckets of water. Some Sunday school teacher, some church worker.

Oh, beloved, have you ever gotten to that blessed place where the river carries you? Let's go up the creek and get rid of debris and obstructions, hindrances. We cannot be channels of blessing if our lives are not free from known sin. What are you going to do about this tonight? Are you going to say, I move we accept this as information and be dismissed? Are you willing to deal with whatever clogs your life, whatever is between your soul and the Savior so that his blessed face is not seen? Is it a sin of omission, the good that I would and do not? Is it a sin of commission, the evil that I would not but I do? Is it a sin of disposition? Let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit.

Is it a doubtful thing in your life? Whatsoever is not of faith is sin. Is it something in your body? Is your body a temple or a tavern? Is it a sin of the mind? Is it an evil habit? Is it something in your family life, your business life, your school life? Is it neglect of the Bible and prayer? Is it a fighting spirit or a frivolous spirit

or a fed-up spirit? Are you critical of your preacher, your neighbor? Is there too much sin under the roof where you live? A husband and wife need to have a pram eaten and confess false one to another that they may be healed. Whoso covereth his sin shall not prosper, but whoso confesseth and forsaketh him shall have mercy.

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. I have listened to a lot of lectures and panel discussions and read a lot of books about what ails us today and how to make evangelism relevant and all the rest of it. I think the greatest need among us is to go up the creek and get the channel clear.

And then what we do will be the outflow and the overflow of the inflow of the Spirit of God. I could ask you to do something about it in a public way tonight, and I'd rather think this takes some time. If you mean business, you will.

I have a feeling that the best thing that could happen tonight would be for a lot of the Lord's people to seek the quiet place and go up the creek and remove the hindrance. Don't just ask God to take it away, you put it away. Whoso confesseth and forsaketh him shall have mercy.

And then what you've been striving and sweating and straining to do with the best of intentions but not doing will be rolled because it will be the outflows and the overflows and the inflows of the Spirit of God. And you'll learn like Mr. Moody, the quick carrying buckets of water, and let the river carry you.

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