

EXCEPT YE REPENT

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 6, 1960 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

“And in those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judea, saying, Repent ye; for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matt. 3:1-2) “Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name unto all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.” (Luke 24:46-47). Then a little later, when on Pentecost, Peter preached the first great sermon of the Christian era the people were pricked in their hearts and said, “Brethren, what shall we do?” To which Peter replied, “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38). Then in Acts 3:19, “Repent ye therefore, and turn again, that your sins may be blotted out, that so there may come seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.” Later on, when Paul had been converted to Christ, when he had made one missionary journey and had started another, he came to the city of Athens and there in that matchless sermon on Mars Hill said, “The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as he hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; wherefore he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead.” (Acts 17:30-31). Much later, when the apostle Peter came to write the second book of Peter, he said, “The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some count slackness; but is longsuffering to you-ward, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance.” (II Peter 3:9). And finally, I would read the words of our Lord as recorded in Luke 13:3, “Except ye repent, ye shall all in like manner perish.”

Hearing

Recently, I discussed with you the theme, “The Responsibility of Listening,” and pointed out that when God’s word is preached that each one who hears it has a responsibility to accept it. The word of God is compared to seed, and men are compared to soil. The way we hear, the reception that we give to the hearing of God’s word, is like the reception which the various kinds of soil give to the seed. In some soils the seed does not have a chance, and therefore never produces a crop. In other soils it brings forth thirty or sixty or a hundred-fold. God has provided the word. The word will guide us in such a way that we will spend eternity in heaven, but we have to be willing to receive it. This we do by the way we hear.

Believing

It was only last Sunday that I talked with you concerning the tremendous importance of what a man believes. More important than anything else about a man is what he believes. The most important thing that any of us can believe is to believe in God, the Creator of the universe, and in Christ as his divine Son, and in the Bible as God’s inspired word. When we have realized the importance of hearing and when we have focused our minds on the crucial matter of faith, then we are ready to consider the most difficult thing in the process of conversion--the matter of repentance. The word repent, in the verb form, occurs thirty-four times in the New Testament. It occurs twenty-four additional times in the noun form. It must, therefore, be important.

What Is Repentance?

Let us consider what it means to repent. Repentance is not sorrow for sin. Let me say that again. Repentance is not sorrow for sin. Sorrow for sin, called in the Bible godly sorrow, has a very significant part to play in the total act of repentance, but repentance is not merely being sorry for sin. I want to read II Cor. 7:8-10 to you. The apostle Paul had written at least twice before to the Corinthians, and referring back to those earlier writings, he said, “For though I made you sorry with my epistle, I do not regret it: though I did regret it (for I see that epistle made you sorry, though but for a season), I now rejoice, not that ye were made sorry, but that ye were made sorry unto repentance; for ye were made sorry after a godly sort, that ye might suffer loss by us in nothing. For godly sorrow worketh repentance unto salvation, a repentance which bringeth no regret: but the sorrow of the world worketh death.”

In the tenth verse of II Cor. 7 we have two kinds of sorrow for sin. One is the sorrow of the world, the kind of sorrow that a man feels when he has done something that is wrong and gets caught, when he realizes that he has to pay the penalty. That is the sorrow of the world. Sinners will all be sorry in that sense some day. Even in this life we often see it. A person travels the wrong road then after a while it catches up with him. His sins find him out, and there is a period of remorse, because he must pay the piper. That is not the sorrow which Paul is commending here. He is speaking of godly sorrow, the kind of sorrow for sin that one feels because he has come to realize that sin is wrong. He has come to love the Lord enough that he is genuinely sorry for sin even if he is never caught, and even if he should never have to pay for his sins. He turns away from sin as a result of that kind of sorrow. Paul says, “For godly sorrow worketh repentance.” Godly sorrow leads to repentance, or causes repentance.

Not A. Changed Life

I might also say that repentance is not a changed life. A changed life must result from repentance, but repentance is in between the godly sorrow and the changed life that results from repentance. Let me turn back a few pages in the Bible to the third chapter of Luke. "Bring forth therefore fruits worthy of repentance." John the Baptist then shows what kind of fruit repentance should bear. "The multitudes asked him, saying, What then must we do? And he answered and said unto them, He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none: and he that hath food, let him do likewise. And there came also publicans to be baptized, and they said unto him, Teacher, what must we do? And he said unto them, Extort no more than that which is appointed you. And soldiers also asked him, saying, And we, what must we do? And he said unto them, Extort from no man by violence, neither accuse anyone wrongfully; and be content with your wages." (Luke 3:8, 10-14).

Repentance is an attitude of heart. Godly sorrow leads us to repentance. Then, after we have had this change of will toward sin, it results in a changed life. Repentance is the hardest step one takes in reaching heaven, for repentance is the bringing of our stubborn wills under bondage to God's will. I do not know why, but there seems to be born in each of us a desire to be independent, a desire to go our own way. We do not like for anyone to tell us what we must do, yet, if we are going to reach heaven, we must somehow humble ourselves before God and say, "Speak, Lord, thy servant heareth." That is repentance. It is a turning toward God; it is a turning away from Satan. It is a changed will in regard to sin.

### Examples

In the New Testament there are many examples of repentance. In I Thess. 1:9, the apostle Paul speaks of those who have turned away from paganism toward the true God, and true righteousness. That is repentance. In Acts 16, we have the story of the Philippian jailor. Early in the story he had thrown Paul and Silas into prison and had clamped them in the stocks. Later in the story he came into the prison, brought them out and washed their stripes. What a change of attitude.

In Acts 19:19 we read of Paul preaching at Ephesus. He preached with such power that even the magicians, the soothsayers, were convicted of their sins. As a result they brought their books, valued at 50,000 pieces of silver, and burned them. They must have had a very deep change of will to burn books at a time when books were written by hand and were unusually expensive and precious. These books also had to do with their trade. In Matt. 21:28-29, we have the little story of the husbandman who said to his sons, "Go, work in the vineyard." One of them said "No," but later "he repented and went." He had a change of will.

My favorite example in the whole New Testament is that in Luke 15. It is the story of the prodigal. He had gone willfully into a far country and had wasted his share of the inheritance in riotous living. He was tending swine. Then the scripture says, "He came to himself." Over the miles there came the memory of his father and his home. He turned around, went back home and said, "I am no more worthy to be called thy son, make me as one of the hired servants." This shows the genuineness of his penitence. "I am no more worthy to be a son, 'let me work for wages.'" The repentance of the prodigal was rewarded by the generous love of his father. He did not have to work as a servant. The father forgave him and received him as a son.

### Changed Radically

I was reading this past week a little book called *Early Times in Middle Tennessee* by John Carr. While he described many things, he had just a little space for the revivals of the 1800's and in that little space he described Barton Warren Stone's work in those revivals. It is not appropriate for me to take time to read the entire section, but those revivals 160 years ago in Tennessee and Kentucky were outstanding because of one factor. That one factor was that they pricked the hearts of men. People repented. They came in wagons; they came on horseback; they walked. One report says that 30,000 people assembled on one camping ground and as many as twenty preachers would be preaching at one time out under the trees. People fell on the ground. They did strange things as they were convicted of their sins. I would not hold up the revivals of the 1800's and say that all they did was right and worthy, but there is something refreshing about religion taking hold of people to the extent that it changes them radically.

Ours is a day in which Christianity has become a comfortable and easy thing. A man can become a Christian without seriously changing his habits of thinking or of behavior. As long as he does not go too far in the direction of sinning and as long as he keeps up the outward appearances of Christianity--church attendance, and the like--he can be relatively the same as he was before becoming a Christian. It means a little loss of time and a little giving of money, but not much more. Sometimes it almost degenerates to "Come be baptized. The water is warm."

The tragedy is that it does not really seem to require a "change of heart" in regard to anything. It is popular to be a Christian. It is easy to be a Christian. A man can still love the world and spend almost his entire thought and effort in regard to material things and yet be counted a Christian. Christianity has often become simply a veneer, covering the life of a man who is not really converted to Christ.

We need to restore New Testament Christianity in all its aspects. Man needs to be shaken to his very foundation when he becomes a child of God. There needs to be a revulsion toward sin of all kinds and a complete dedication of self to the Lord. He must not walk with one foot in the world and one foot in the church. He needs to feel a humility and have a broken, contrite spirit. He needs to repudiate his own pride and come to God, so to speak, on his knees.

The New Testament clearly declares that there are two things that will lead men to repent. The first is the fear of judgment. When the apostle Paul was in Athens, he preached a great sermon on Mars Hill concerning the Christian religion. In that sermon were the words, "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent." (Acts 17:31). The same emphasis is found in II Peter 3:9, which we quoted earlier. The writer then goes on to describe the destruction of the world amidst great noise, with the melting of the elements because of fervent heat.

This reminds us of the Old Testament example of Jonah. After he had run away from God, he repented and came back to preach to the people of Nineveh. His message was "Yet forty days and forty nights and Nineveh shall be overthrown." The result was that the people feared and repented in sackcloth and ashes. No man who fully comprehends what it will mean to be lost can keep from repenting. Only by turning aside, by changing the subject, by closing one's mind to the reality of the judgment and of eternal damnation can men keep from repenting.

The second means by which the Lord leads us to want to repent is found in the goodness of God. In writing to the Romans, Paul said, "Or despiseth thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" (Romans 2:4). When we take the time to enumerate the many blessings that we receive from God, surely we are led to want to turn away from sin and turn toward God in appreciation for what he has done for us. As James said it, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom can be no variation, neither shadow that is cast by turning." (James 1:17). No man who fully comprehends the goodness of God can fail to respond to God's appeal.

### Conclusion

During Christ's ministry he once scathingly rebuked the cities of Chorazin and Bethsaida, because they had had great opportunities to know God's will but had turned deaf ears. Here are his words, "I say unto you, It shall be more tolerable in that day for Sodom, than for that city. Woe unto thee, Chorazin! woe unto thee, Bethsaida! for if the mighty works had been done in Tyre and Sidon, which were done in you, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the judgment, than for you. And thou, Capernaum, shalt thou be exalted unto heaven? thou shalt be brought down unto Hades." (Luke 10:12-15).

We in America have had every opportunity to know the will of God. Ours is a land of Bibles and churches. Surely this land of ours is the worst place on earth from which to go to hell. Our opportunities to read the Bible, and to obey its commands have been so great that our responsibilities are greater than the responsibilities of people anywhere else in the world.

Let us feel this depth of responsibility and let our Christianity overwhelm us, so that truly God has first place in our lives.