

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
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Resolutions and Repentance

How many of you have made New Year's resolutions? How many resolutions have already gone by the wayside? We should seek to mend our ways. We should seek to make improvements in our personal lives, and we should seek to do things differently (having realized that we have made mistakes in the past). These are noble ambitions – but these things should never be equated with what the Bible means by *repentance*. The Gospel is glad tidings or good news. But the words of Jesus in Luke 13:3 appear to be stern and severe: “Except you repent, you shall all perish” – is that command to *repent* really part of the Gospel? To answer that question we must first discover the Biblical meaning of *repentance*. Question 87 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism reads: “*What is repentance unto life? Answer: Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.*” We need to be careful how we understand the term *repentance*. The word can be used in three specific ways.

I. NATURAL REPENTANCE

This is something that is the common experience of mankind, regardless of their various religious convictions. “*Natural* repentance is that natural feeling of sorrow and self-condemnation, of which a man is conscious for having done that which he sees he ought not to have done, and which arises from a discovery of the impropriety of it, or from reflecting on the disagreeable consequences of it to others, and especially to himself. This feeling of regret frequently occurs. When a man, especially a proud and vain man, is convinced of his having been guilty of some glaring instance of improper conduct, either against, or in the presence of a fellow-creature, it is sometimes very keen and painful.”¹

II. LEGAL REPENTANCE

“*Legal* repentance is a feeling of regret produced in a legalist by the fear that his violations of the Divine law and especially his gross sins do expose him to eternal punishment. This regret is increased by his desire to be exempted on the ground of it from the dreadful punishment to which he knows he is condemned for them. He is extremely sorry, not that he has transgressed the law, but that the law and the justice of God are so very strict that they cannot leave him at liberty to sin with impunity. His love of sin and his hatred of holiness continue in all their vigour. And yet under the dominion of his legal temper he presumes to expect that such repentance as this will in some measure atone for all his crimes against the infinite Majesty of heaven.”² In summation, Robert Reymond writes, “The Scriptures are clear that men may feel remorse over their sins for any number of reasons. But unless their sorrow for sin is their response to their sense of not only the danger of but also of the filthiness and odiousness of their sins as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God with full purpose and endeavor to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments, it must be judged as mere “worldly sorrow that produces death.” Godly sorrow, the sinner's response to the Spirit's regenerating work in his soul which normally accompanies the

evangelical preaching of the doctrine of repentance, produces “repentance leaving no regrets and leading unto salvation.”³

III. EVANGELICAL REPENTANCE

John Colquhoun, one of the finest 18th century theologians, wrote with great insight, “*Evangelical* repentance is altogether different from either of these. It is a gracious principle and habit implanted in the soul by the Spirit of Christ, in the exercise of which a regenerate and believing sinner, deeply sensible of the exceeding sinfulness and just demerit of his innumerable sins is truly humbled and grieved before the Lord, on account of the sinfulness and hurtfulness of them. He feels bitter remorse, unfeigned sorrow, and deep self-aborrence for the aggravated transgressions of his life, and the deep depravity of his nature; chiefly, because by all his innumerable provocations he has dishonoured an infinitely holy and gracious God, transgressed a law which is ‘holy, and just, and good’, and defiled, deformed, and even destroyed his own precious soul. This godly sorrow for sin and this holy abhorrence of it arise from a spiritual discovery of pardoning mercy with God in Christ, and from the exercise of trusting in His mercy. And these feelings and exercises are always accompanied by an unfeigned love of universal holiness, and by fixed resolutions and endeavours to turn from all iniquity to God and to walk before him in newness of life. Such, in general is the nature of that evangelical repentance, to the habit and exercise of which the Lord Jesus calls sinners who hear the Gospel.”⁴

In another work Colquhoun made this pastoral observation: “If the disconsolate believer would recover pure consolation, let the exercise of his faith and hope be penitential. And if, after all his endeavors, he finds that he cannot shed a tear, or feel such bitter sorrow for sin as he longs to feel, let him not be discouraged, but recollect that turning with holy abhorrence from all iniquity to the Lord is the very essence of true repentance. Let him turn from his sins of omission, and especially from his sin of suffering himself to be discouraged by a sense of the corruption of his nature from the great duties of believing and rejoicing in Christ Jesus (Philippians 3:3), by which he has brought up an evil report upon the good ways of the Lord. And he ought not to fear that his repentance is legal or hypocritical, so long as he is conscious that he endeavors to exercise godly sorrow for all sin as sin, and to turn from it because it is sin. The repentance of the legalist or hypocrite is not so much sorrow for sin, as a sullen grief that he is not allowed to sin with impunity; not so much a turning from sin to the Lord as a turning from one sin to another.

“As the exercise of evangelical repentance is an appointed means, so it is a sure means of recovering holy consolation; for thus said the Lord: ‘To this man will I look, even to him that is poor, and of a contrite spirit, and trembleth at My Word’ (Isaiah 66:2). ‘The Lord is nigh unto them that are of a broken heart, and He saveth such as be of a contrite spirit’ (Psalm 34:18). ‘He healeth the broken in heart, and bindeth up their wounds’ (Psalm 147:3). As soon as Ephraim’s heart is troubled for his iniquities, God’s bowels are troubled for Ephraim; and He will surely have mercy upon him (Jeremiah 31:20). Godly sorrow for sin is not only a means of attaining future comfort, but is accompanied with present consolation. There is more joy in the penitential mourning of a humble believer than in all the vain mirth of an unregenerate man.”⁵

CONCLUSION: “Beware,” warned the good Bishop J.C. Ryle, “that you make no mistake about the nature of true repentance. The devil knows too well the value of that precious grace not to dress up spurious imitations of it. Wherever there is good coin there will always be bad money. Wherever there is a valuable grace, the devil will put in circulation counterfeits and shams of that grace, and try to palm them off on men’s souls. Make sure that you are not deceived.”⁶ People often turn from their sin and actually grieve over what they have done. But that, by itself, is not true repentance. It is only the negative part; there must be also a sincere turning to God (Psalm 119:59; I Thessalonians 1:9). Simply to express sorrow for sin is not a sign of genuine repentance. Judas when he saw that Jesus was condemned, *repented* (Matthew 27:3). The word translated repented in the KJV is actually better translated *seized with remorse* (as in the NIV).⁷ The great Puritan preacher Thomas Manton wrote, “There

is repenting and sorrowing for sin in hell. The repentance is never sound till the heart be so turned from sin that it may be turned against it.”⁸ The signs of true repentance, notes John Flavel, are as follows: “Fear of sin; care to preserve ourselves from it; and zeal to honour God by new obedience; II. Cor. vii. 11. For behold, this selfsame thing that ye sorrowed after a godly sort, what carefulness it wrought in you; yea, what clearing of yourselves; yea, what indignation; yea, what fear; yea, what vehement desire; yea, what zeal; yea, what revenge? In all things you have approved yourselves to be clear in this matter.”⁹ One final thing. I have often quoted from *The Book of Common Prayer* the opening words from the morning prayer, “Almighty and most merciful Father; We have erred and strayed from thy ways, like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done; And we have done those things which we ought not to have done; And there is no health in us.” I recently read an excellent book by Ed Welch in which he noted the emphasis Scripture places on the proper role for passions. “Scripture, too, makes distinctions among our passions. It talks about passions and desires as either good or evil. It commands us to put to death ungodly desires and teaches us to nurture true spiritual passion. Our relationship to God in Christ should be characterized by holy, intense affections; our response to our own sin should be hatred and tears; our love for others should be such that we are moved by both their pleasure and pain. Scripture does not oppose strong desire; instead, it both approves of it and commands it. The problem is in what we are passionate about and why. Do our passions express a heart that seeks the glory of Christ? Are we passionate about the things for which Jesus is passionate? Or do our passions express our desire to serve ourselves and our own glory? It is likely that when we repent over our addictions, we should include repentance for not being passionate about Christ and the things he loves.”¹⁰

ENDNOTES

¹ “Men may be outwardly reformed, as the Pharisees were, and yet not repent of their sins, as they did not, Matthew 21:32 and 23:28 and after such an external reformation, men may return to their former sinful course of life, and their last end be worse than the beginning; besides, there may be true repentance for sin where there is on time and opportunity for reformation, or shewing forth a reformation of life and manners, as in the thief upon the cross and others, who are brought to repentance on their death-beds; and reformation of life and manners, when it is best and most genuine, is the fruit and effect of repentance, and a bringing forth fruits meet for it, as evidences of it, and so distinct from that itself.” John Gill, *A Body of Divinity* (rpt. Sovereign Grace, 1971), p. 715.

² Robert Lewis Dabney carefully notes that legal repentance “means a genuine sorrow for sin, including both fear of its dangers, and conscience of its wrongness, and also loathing of its odiousness, with a thorough justifying and approving of God’s holy law; a sorrow wrought by the Holy Ghost, but wrought by Him only through the instrumentality of the convincing Law, and unaccompanied with conscious hopes of mercy in Christ.” *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (rpt. Zondervan, 1972), p. 653.

³ R. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nelson, 1998), p. 725.

⁴ These theological distinctions are commonly recognized. The definitions I have listed are drawn from the introduction to John Colquhoun, *Repentance* (rpt. The Banner of Truth, 1965), pp. 9-10.

⁵ J. Colquhoun, *Spiritual Comfort* (rpt. Soli Deo Gloria, 1998), p. 250.

⁶ J.C. Ryle, *Old Paths: Being Plain Statements on Some of the Weightier Matters of Christianity* (rpt. James Clarke, 1972), p. 408.

⁷ The word is METAMELOMAI lit., “to be sorry afterwards” A.T. Robertson has remarked, “But mere sorrow avails nothing unless it leads to change of mind and life (METANOIA), the sorrow according to God. (II. Cor. 7:9). This sorrow Peter had when he wept bitterly. It led Peter back to Christ. But Judas had only remorse that led to suicide.” *Word Pictures In the New Testament I* (Broadman, 1932), p. 222.

⁸ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton* 19 (rpt. Maranatha, 1979), p. 218.

⁹ *The Works of John Flavel VI* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1968), p. 267.

¹⁰ E.T. Welch, *Addictions: A Banquet in the Grave: Finding Hope in the Power of the Gospel* (P&R, 2001), p. 211.