

THE WAY TO GOD

by

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CHAPTER SIX

REPENTANCE AND RESTITUTION

“God commandeth all men everywhere to repent” (Acts 17:30).

REPENTANCE is one of the fundamental doctrines of the Bible. Yet I believe it is one of those truths that many people little understand at the present day. There are more people today in the mist and darkness about repentance, regeneration, the atonement, and such-like fundamental truths, than perhaps on any other doctrines. Yet from our earliest years we have heard about them. If I were to ask for a definition of repentance, a great many would give a very strange and false idea of it.

When is a Man Prepared to Receive the Gospel?

A man is not prepared to believe or to receive the Gospel, unless he is ready to repent of his sins and turn from them. Until John the Baptist met Christ, he had but one text, **“Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”** (Matthew 3:2). But if he had continued to say this, and had stopped there without pointing the people to Christ the Lamb of God, he would not have accomplished much.

When Christ came, He took up the same wilderness cry, **“Repent: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand”** (Matthew 4:17).

And when our Lord sent out His disciples, it was with the same message, **“that men should repent”** (Mark 6:12).

After He had been glorified, and when the Holy Ghost came down, we find Peter on the day of Pentecost raising the same cry, **“Repent!”** It was this preaching—Repent, and believe the Gospel—that wrought such marvelous results then (Acts 2:38-47). And we find that, when Paul went to Athens, he uttered the same cry, **“God now commandeth all men everywhere to repent”** (Acts 17:30).

Before I speak of what repentance is, let me briefly say what it is not.

Repentance is not fear. Many people have confounded the two. They think they have to be alarmed and terrified; and they are waiting for some kind of fear to come down upon them. But multitudes become alarmed who do not really repent.

You have heard of men at sea during a terrible storm. Perhaps they have been very profane men; but when the danger came they suddenly grew quiet, and began to cry to God for mercy. Yet you would not say they repented. When the storm had passed away, they went on swearing the same as before.

You might think that the king of Egypt repented when God sent the terrible plagues upon him and his land. But it was not repentance at all. The moment God's hand was removed Pharaoh's heart was harder than ever. He did not turn from a single sin; he was the same man. So that there was no true repentance there.

Often, when death comes into a family; it looks as if the event would be sanctified to the conversion of all who are in the house. Yet in six months time all may be forgotten. Some who read this have perhaps passed through that experience. When God's hand was heavy upon them it looked as if they were going to repent; but the trial has been removed—and, lo, and behold, the impression has all gone.

Repentance is Not Feeling

Then again, repentance is not feeling. I find a great many people are waiting for a certain kind of feeling to come. They would like to turn to God; but think they cannot do it until this feeling comes.

When I was in Baltimore I used to preach every Sunday in the penitentiary to nine hundred convicts. There was hardly a man there who did not feel miserable enough; they had plenty of feeling. For the first week or ten days of their imprisonment [many of them cried half the time. Yet, when they were released, most of them would go right back to their old ways. The truth was, that they felt very bad because they had got caught; that was all.

So you have seen a man in the time of trial show a good deal of feeling: but very often it is only because he has got into trouble; not because he has committed sin, or because his conscience tells him he has done evil in the sight of God. It seems as if the trial were going to result in true repentance; but the feeling too often passes away.

Once again, repentance is not fasting and afflicting the body.

A man may fast for weeks and months and years, and yet not repent of one sin. Neither is it remorse. Judas had terrible remorse—enough to make him go and hang himself; but that was not repentance. I believe if he had gone to his Lord, fallen on his face, and confessed his sin, he would have been forgiven. Instead of this he went to the priests, and then put an end to his life. A man may do all sorts of penance—but there is no true repentance in that. Put that down in your mind. You cannot meet the claims of God by offering the fruit of your body for the sin of your soul. Away with such a delusion!

Repentance is not conviction of sin.

That may sound strange to some. I have seen men under such deep conviction of sin that they could not sleep at night; they could not enjoy a single meal. They went on for months in this state; and yet they were not converted; they did not truly repent. Do not confound conviction of sin with repentance.

Neither is Praying Repentance

That too may sound strange. Many people, when they become anxious about their soul's salvation, say, "I will pray, and read the Bible"; and they think that will bring about the desired effect. But it will not do it. You may read the Bible and cry to God a great deal, and yet never repent. Many people cry loudly to God, and yet do not, repent.

Another thing: it is not breaking off some one sin.

A great many people make that mistake. A man who has been a drunkard signs the pledge, and stops drinking. Breaking off one sin is not repentance. Forsaking one vice is like breaking off one limb of a tree, when the whole tree has to come down.

A profane man stops swearing; very good: but if he does not break off from every sin it is not repentance—it is not the work of God in the soul. When God works He hews down the whole tree. He wants to have a man turn from every sin. Supposing I am in a vessel out at sea, and I find the ship leaks in three or four places. I may go and stop up one hole; yet down goes the vessel. Or, suppose I am wounded in three or four places, and I get remedy for one wound: if the other two or three wounds are neglected, my life will soon be gone. True repentance is not merely breaking off this or that particular sin.

What, then, is Repentance?

Well then, you will ask, What is repentance?

I will give you a good definition: it is "right about face!"

In the Irish language the word "*repentance*" means even more than "right about face!" It implies that a man who has been walking in one direction has not only faced about, but is actually walking in an exactly contrary direction.

"Turn ye, turn ye; for why will ye die?"

A man may have little feeling or much feeling; but if he do not turn away from sin, God will not have mercy on him.

Repentance has also been described as "*a change of mind*."

For instance, there is the parable told by Christ:

"A certain man had two sons; and he came to the first, and said, Son, go work today in my vineyard. He answered and said, I will not" (Matthew 21:28, 29).

After he had said, "**I will not**," he thought over it, and changed his mind. Perhaps he may have said to himself, "I did not speak very respectfully to my father. He asked me to go to work, and I told him I would not go. I think I was wrong."

But suppose he had only said this, and still had not gone, he would not have repented. He was not only convinced that he was wrong; but he went off into the fields, hoeing, or mowing or whatever it was. That is Christ's definition of repentance.

If a man says; "By the grace of God I will forsake my sin, and do His will," that is repentance—a turning right about.

Some one has said, man is born with his face turned away from God. When he truly repents he is turned right around towards God; he leaves his old life.

Can a Man at Once Repent?

Certainly he can. It does not take a long while to turn around. It does not take a man six months to change his mind.

There was a vessel that went down some time ago on the Newfoundland coast. As she was bearing towards the shore, there was a moment when the captain could have given orders to reverse the engines and turn back. If the engines had been reversed then, the ship would have been saved. But there was a moment when it was too late.

So there is a moment, I believe, in every man's life when he can halt and say, "By the grace of God I will go no further towards death and ruin. I repent of my sins and turn from them."

You may say you have not got feeling enough; but if you are convinced that you are on the wrong road, turn right about, and say, "I will no longer go on in the way of rebellion and sin, as I have done."

Just then, when you are willing to turn towards God, salvation may be yours.

I find that every case of conversion recorded in the Bible was instantaneous.

Repentance and faith came very suddenly. The moment a man made up his mind, God gave him the power. God does not ask any man to do what he has not the power to do. He would not "**command all men to repent**" (Acts 17:30) if they were not able to do so.

Man has no one to blame but himself if he does not repent and believe the Gospel.

A Conversion Described

One of the leading ministers of the Gospel in Ohio wrote me a letter some time ago describing his conversion. It very forcibly illustrates this point of instantaneous decision. He said:

“I was nineteen years old, and was reading law with a Christian lawyer in Vermont. One afternoon when he was away from home, his good wife said to me as I came into the house: ‘I want you to go to class-meeting with me tonight and become a Christian, so that you can conduct family worship while my husband is away.’

“‘Well, I’ll do it,’ I said, without any thought. When I came into the house again she asked me if I was honest in what I had said.

“I replied: ‘Yes, so far as going to meeting with you is concerned; that is only courteous.’

“I went with her to the class-meeting, as I had often done before. About a dozen persons were present in a little schoolhouse. The leader had spoken to all in the room but myself and two others. He was speaking to the person next me when the thought occurred to me; he will ask me if I have anything to say. I said to myself: I have decided to be a Christian sometime; why not begin now? In less time than a minute after these thoughts had passed through my mind he said, speaking to me familiarly—for he knew me very well—‘Brother Charles, have you anything to say?’

“I replied, with perfect coolness : ‘Yes, sir. I have just decided, within the last thirty seconds, that I will begin a Christian life, and would like to have you pray for me.’

“My coolness staggered him; I think he almost doubted my sincerity. He said very little, but passed on and spoke to the other two. After a few general remarks, he turned to me and said, ‘Brother Charles, will you close the meeting with prayer?’

“He knew I had never prayed in public. Up to this moment I had no feeling. It was purely a business transaction. My first thought was: I cannot pray, and I will ask him to excuse me. My second was: I have said I will begin a Christian life; and this a part of it. So I said, ‘Let us pray.’ And somewhere between the time I started to kneel and the time my knees struck the floor the Lord converted my soul.

“The first words I said were: ‘Glory to God!’ What I said after that I do not know, and it does not matter, for my soul was too full to say much but ‘Glory!’ From that hour the devil has never dared to challenge my conversion. To Christ be all the praise!”

Many people are waiting, they cannot exactly tell for what, but for some sort of miraculous feeling to come stealing over them—some mysterious kind of faith. I was speaking to a man some years ago, and he always had one answer to give me.

For five years I tried to win him to Christ, and every year he said, “It has not ‘struck me’ yet.”

“Man, what do you mean? What has not struck you?”

“Well,” he said, “I am not going to become a Christian until it strikes me; and it has not struck me yet. I do not see it in the way you see it.”

“But don’t you know you are a sinner?”

“Yes, I know I am a sinner.”

“Well, don’t you know that God wants to have mercy on you—that there is forgiveness with God? He wants you to repent and come to Him.”

“Yes, I know that; but—it has not struck me yet.”

He always fell back on that. Poor man! he went down to his grave in a state of indecision. Sixty long years God gave him to repent; and all he had to say at the end of those years was that it “had not struck him yet.”

Is any reader

Waiting for Some Strange Feeling

you do not know what? Nowhere in the Bible is a man told to wait. God is commanding you now to repent.

Do you think God can forgive a man when he does not want to be forgiven? Would he be happy if God forgave him in this state of mind? Why, if a man went into the kingdom of God without repentance, heaven would be hell to him. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people.

If your boy has done wrong, and will not repent, you cannot forgive him. You would be doing him an injustice.

Suppose he goes to your desk, and steals ten dollars, and squanders it. When you come home your servant tells you what your boy has done. You ask if it is true, and he denies it. But at last you have certain proof. Even when he finds he cannot deny it any longer, he will not confess the sin, but says he will do it again the first chance he gets.

Would you say to him, “Well, I forgive you,” and leave the matter there? No! Yet people say that God is going to save all men, whether they repent or not—drunkards, thieves, harlots, whoremongers, it makes no difference. “God is so merciful,” they say.

Dear friend, do not be deceived by the god of this world. Where there is true repentance and a turning from sin unto God, He will meet and bless you; but He never blesses until there is sincere repentance.

David Made a Woeful Mistake

in this respect with his rebellious son, Absalom. He could not have done his son a greater injustice than to forgive him when his heart was unchanged. There could be no true reconciliation between them when there was no repentance. But God does not make these mistakes. David got into trouble on account of his error of judgment. His son soon drove his father from the throne.

Speaking on repentance, Dr. Brookes, of St. Louis, well remarks:

“Repentance, strictly speaking, means a ‘*change of mind or purpose*’; consequently it is the judgment which the sinner pronounces upon himself, in view of the love of God displayed in the death of Christ, connected with the abandonment of all confidence in himself and with trust in the only Saviour of sinners. Saving repentance and saving faith always go together; and you need not be worried about repentance if you will believe.”

“Some people are not sure that they have ‘repented enough.’ If you mean by this, that you must repent in order to incline God to be merciful to you, the sooner you give over such repentance the better. God is already merciful, as He has fully shown at the cross of Calvary; and it is a grievous dishonor to His heart of love if you think that your tears and anguish will move Him, **‘not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance.’** It is not your badness, therefore, but His goodness that leads to repentance; hence the true way to repent is to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, **‘who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification.’”**

How to Tell if Repentance is Genuine

Another thing. If there is true repentance it will bring forth fruit. If we have done wrong to any one we should never ask God to forgive us, until we are willing to make restitution. If I have done any man a great injustice and can make it good, I need not ask God to forgive me until I am willing to make it good. Suppose I have taken something that does not belong to me. I have no right to expect forgiveness until I make restitution.

I remember preaching in one of our large cities, when a fine-looking man came up to me at the close. He was in great distress of mind. “The fact is,” he said, “I am a defaulter. I have taken money that belonged to my employers. How may I become a Christian without restoring it?”

“Have you got the money?” He told me he had not got it all. He had taken about \$1,500, and he still had about \$900. He said, “Could I not take that money and go into business, and make enough to pay them back?”

I told him that was a delusion of Satan; that he could not expect to prosper on stolen money; that he should restore all he had, and go and ask his employers to have mercy upon him and forgive him.

“But they will put me in prison,” he said, “cannot you give me any help?”

“No, you must restore the money before you can expect to get any help from God.”

“It is pretty hard,” he said.

“Yes, it is hard; but the great mistake was in doing the wrong at first.”

His burden became so heavy that it got to be insupportable. He handed me the money—\$950 and some cents—and asked me to take it back to his employers. The next evening the two employers and myself met in a side room of the church. I laid the money down, and informed them it was from one of their employees. I told them the story, and said he wanted mercy from them, not justice.

The tears trickled down the cheeks of these two men, and they said, “Forgive him! Yes, we will be glad to forgive him.”

I went down stairs and brought him up. After he had confessed his guilt and been forgiven, we all got down on our knees and had a blessed prayer-meeting. God met us and blessed us there.

Getting Right with the Government

There was a friend of mine who some time ago had come to Christ and wished to consecrate himself and his wealth to God. He had formerly had transactions with the government, and had taken advantage of it. This thing came up when he was converted, and his conscience troubled him.

He said, “I want to consecrate my wealth, but it seems as if God will not take it.”

He had a terrible struggle; his conscience kept rising up and smiting him. At last he drew a check for \$1,500 and sent it to the United States Treasury. He told me he received such a blessing when he had done it. That was bringing forth **“fruits meet for repentance.”**

I believe a great many men are crying to God for light; and they are not getting it because they are not honest.

I was once preaching, and a man came to me who was only thirty-two years old, but whose hair was very grey.

He said, “I want you to notice that my hair is grey, and I am only thirty-two years old. For twelve years I have carried a great burden.”

“Well,” I said, “what is it?”

He looked around as if afraid some one would hear him.

"Well," he answered, "my father died and left my mother with the county newspaper, and left her only that: that was all she had. After he died the paper began to waste away, and I saw my mother was fast sinking into a state of need. The building and the paper were insured for a thousand dollars, and when I was twenty years old I set fire to the building, and obtained the thousand dollars, and gave it to my mother. For twelve years that sin has been haunting me.

"I have tried to drown it by indulgence in pleasure and sin. I have cursed God. I have gone into infidelity. I have tried to make out that the Bible is not true. I have done everything I could, but all these years I have been tormented."

I said: "There is a way out of that."

He inquired "How?"

I said: "Make restitution. Let us sit down and calculate the interest, and then you pay the company the money."

It would have done you good to see that man's face light up when he found there was mercy for him. He said he would be glad to pay back the money and interest, if he could only be forgiven.

There are men today who are in darkness and bondage because they are not willing to turn from their sins and confess them; and I do not know how a man can hope to be forgiven if he is not willing to confess his sins.

Bear in mind that

Now is the Only Day of Mercy

you will ever have. You can repent now, and have the awful record blotted out. God waits to forgive you; He is seeking to bring you to Himself. But I think the Bible teaches clearly that there is no repentance after this life. There are some who tell you of the possibility of repentance in the grave, but I do not find that in Scriptures. I have looked my Bible over very carefully, and I cannot find that a man will have another opportunity of being saved.

Why should he ask for any more time? You have time enough to repent now. You can turn from your sins this moment if you will. God says: "**I have no pleasure in the death of him that dieth, wherefore turn yourselves, and live ye**" (Ezekiel 18:32).

Christ said, He "**came not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.**" Are you a sinner? Then the call to repent is addressed to you.

Take your place in the dust at the Saviour's feet, and acknowledge your guilt. Say, like the publican of old, "**God be merciful to me a sinner!**" and see how quickly He will pardon and bless you. He will even justify you and reckon you as righteous, by virtue of the righteousness of Him who bore your sins in His own body on the Cross.

There are some perhaps who think themselves righteous; and that, therefore, there is no need for them to repent and believe the Gospel. They are like the Pharisee in the parable, who thanked God that he was not as other men— “**extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican**”; and who went on to say: “**I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all I possess.**” What is the judgment about such self-righteous persons?

“**I tell you, this man** [the poor, contrite, repenting publican] **went down to his house justified rather than the other**” (Luke 18:11-14).

“**There is none righteous, no, not one.**”

“**All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God**” (Romans 3:10, 23).

Let no one say he does not need to repent. Let each one take his true place—that of a sinner; then God will lift him up to the place of forgiveness and justification.

“**Whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted**” (Luke 14:11).

Wherever God sees true repentance in the heart He meets that soul.

~ end of chapter 6 ~

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