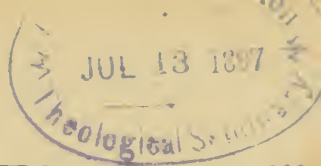


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## XXI.

### DUTY OF REPENTANCE.

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And the times of this ignorance God winked at; but now commandeth all men every where to repent.—ACTS xvii. 30.

THE times of "ignorance" referred to by the Apostle, were the days when the nations of the earth were left generally to unrebuked idolatry. They worshipped departed heroes; the host of heaven; images of gold and silver, the work of their own hands; "birds, four-footed beasts," and even "creeping things." The expression "winked at" does not imply that God approved of their course. The word thus rendered is composed of a Greek word that means *to see*, and a preposition which signifies *over*. *Overlooked* would be a literal translation. It means, first, that God suffered the nations, with no special visitation, whether of light or of wrath, to pursue their chosen way. There were wise reasons for this. It was well that the polluting and debasing tendency of sin should be fully manifested. It was well that the utter absence of any recuperative power in the human heart should be put beyond a doubt. It was well that the might of man's vaunted intellect should be tested, and all be compelled to own, that the "world by wisdom" would forever fail to know God. The necessity of divine interposition was thus to be demonstrated.

The phrase in hand intimates, in the second place, that the guilt of the benighted Gentiles was the less on account of their ignorance. God estimates blameworthiness, other things being equal, according to the light enjoyed. "This is the condemnation," said our Lord, "that light is come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil." "If I had not come and spoken to them, they had not had sin"—comparatively, he means—"but now they have no cloak for their sin." And again, "That servant which knew his Lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes; but he that knew not, and did commit things worthy of stripes, shall be beaten with few stripes." This principle of judgment commends itself to all consciences. The guilt of one walking in the midnight, whether of ancient or of modern heathenism, is far inferior to thine, my unbelieving hearer, on whom the noonday brightness of the gospel falls.

The world of old was thus left to itself; but we live "now" under a new dispensation. Now that the Son of God has come to earth, and made atonement, and ascended to glory; now that the way of access to the Father is fully opened, and the gospel proclaimed, "He commandeth all men every where to repent." THE DUTY OF REPENTANCE is the theme here presented. We shall speak first of the NATURE of this duty, and, in the second place, of the ENFORCEMENTS of it suggested by the text.

I. THE NATURE OF THE DUTY.—No question is of greater moment than, What *is* repentance? It is an initial work. It meets us at the threshold of salvation. If it be omitted, all is lost. A radical mistake here, such as men often make, is fatal to the soul. It is important always that it be clearly understood, but especially at the present

time. We are deeply solicitous, amid the general awakening of the public mind—when interest is so liable to evaporate in mere feeling, or to be misdirected—to present the truth of God, on all the great, fundamental points, in the simplest and clearest manner. At a season like this, above all others, and on a subject like this, “that the soul be without knowledge, it is not good.” True repentance embraces three things :

1. *A Conviction of Sin.*—A conviction, I mean, of our own sinfulness. Else there will be no disposition to receive Christ. “They that be whole need not a physician, but they that are sick.” There must be a conviction not merely nor mainly of particulars—of this or that outward or inward act—but of sin in its great unity, *as committed against God*. This is the main view. This embraces the chief evil of sin. Fail of thus apprehending it, and whatever else you think or feel, you fail of true contrition. How prominent was this view in David’s penitence. “Against thee,” he says, “thee only, have I sinned.” Other dark and fearful aspects there were of his transgression; but this, to his eye, so transcended them all, that they were comparatively forgotten. And this estimate accorded perfectly with truth. For sin is simply a transgression of the law—not of a law of nature, so termed, but of *a personal God*. It can be called sin, in the strict and proper sense, only in that view. As God is infinitely exalted above all creatures, and above the sum of all, so a wrong done to him infinitely transcends the aggregate of all other wrongs. It is not difficult to see how the human heart may act, in its repentings, on such a principle. It does work thus, often, in merely human relations. That profligate son, whose evil ways have brought down the grey hairs of a loving and faithful mother with sorrow to the grave, has not, indeed, wronged her alone. Many others have been

harméd by his misdeeds. Yet, as he musés, at that grave, over the greater obligations that bound him to her who bore him, and the greater wrong she has received at his hands, it is no strange thing if all other aspects of his guilt are merged and lost in the blackness of this. It is no marvel if he exclaims, while his bitter tears are flowing, "Against thee, my mother, thee only, have I sinned."

We must be convinced of sin against God, in its two chief relations to him. It is, in the first place, *against God as a lawgiver*. Not merely that we have broken one or another of his commands in the outward form. The great fact is, that we have, in spirit, broken them all. We have lacked the principle of loyalty. We have failed practically to recognize God's sovereignty. We have not enthroned that will divine which gave the law. We have accorded supremacy rather to our own will. At one point or another—at whatsoever point it has seemed good to us—we have said, virtually, "Not thy will—but mine be done." Not in words has this broken from our lips—that would have shocked us. But in the clearer language of conduct we have spoken—the heart's truest dialect. Offending in one point—knowingly, willingly, deliberately, coming short even—we are "guilty of all." We lack utterly the true spirit of obedience; that which acts at every point, which yields itself submissively to every precept. So the Scripture affirms, as in the testimony of the apostle James, just referred to. Such, too, is the verdict of common sense.

We must be convinced also, of our sin *against God in Christ*. Here is the culmination of our guilt. "Of sin," says Christ, speaking of the convincing work of the Holy Spirit, "because they believe not on me." It is impossible to separate, as some would fain do, our relations to Christ from our relations to God. It is the



will of God "that all men should honor the Son even as they honor the Father." Christ is "the brightness of his glory and the express image of his person." In a word, "God is in Christ." As Christ is treated, so God is treated. If Christ be rejected, God is rejected. So Jesus said to the Jews, "He that hateth me, hateth my Father also." Nay, as the most glorious manifestation of God is in Christ—as God thus comes nearest to us, making the most potent of all possible appeals to our every susceptibility—so the rejection of Christ is the most aggravated of all our sins. "He that despised Moses's law died without mercy under two or three witnesses. Of how much sorer punishment shall he be thought worthy who hath trodden under foot the Son of God?"

A true conviction of sin embraces, first, of course, its *intrinsic wrongfulness*. It is deemed evil in itself. It is seen to be unreasonable and indefensible. The sinner has done with palliations and excuses. He complains no more of the exceeding strictness of the commandment. He sees it now to be "holy, just, and good." He finds fault no longer with the provisions of the gospel. He makes no apologetic reference to circumstances—he pleads not, in self-justification, inability or the power of temptation. He acknowledges his sin—as it stands related both to God in the law and to God in Christ—to be unspeakably blameworthy. He sees, too, the *entireness* of his depravity. Not that he lacks amiable natural traits; not that he is as bad as he can be, sin having reached in him the fullest possible development; but simply that sin reigns. He has broken the whole law, and rejected the whole gospel. Having repudiated God's supremacy, and having enthroned his own will, there is in him, of course, no principle either of obedience or of faith. There is no law of life in

his soul. He is "dead," he sees, "in trespasses and sins." In close connection with all this, he is convinced, too, of his *ill-desert*. The penalty is righteous, as well as the precept. It is meet, he judges, that a holy and just God should frown on a rebel like himself. He "accepts the punishment of his iniquity." Not that he is "willing to be damned." God does not require this—but rather that he be willing to be saved. Terrible to his thought is the perdition of the ungodly. Yet his language still is,

"Should sudden vengeance seize my breath,  
I must pronounce thee just in death;  
And if my soul were sent to hell,  
Thy righteous law approves it well."

It should be noted here, however, that while all we have set forth is substantially embraced in every instance of true conviction, it is by no means embraced in all cases with equal clearness. It is with the facts of our depravity as with many others. Intellectual capacity may differ. Instruction, earlier or later, may be various. Circumstances may have an influence. In the matter of salvation, too, the same Spirit hath a diversity of operation. This only is essential, that we come to judge ourselves wholly and inexcusably sinful, justly condemned—in ourselves hopelessly lost—that this be so seen as to insure the appropriate practical results. Let no one hesitate, then, to come to Christ, merely because his conviction of sin, though it includes all the main elements, has been marked by less of distinctness and vividness than many others have experienced.

2. The second element of repentance is *an abhorrence of sin*. We mean by this, that there must be something more than mere intellectual apprehension. We mean that what the judgment and the conscience condemn,



the heart must repudiate. There must be a real aversion from it, and desire of the contrary. It must not only be *seen* to be wrong, it must be *felt* to be hateful; else you go not beyond the experience of lost men at the day of judgment, or even of devils. Milton has aptly represented the arch-fiend as seeing "virtue in her shape how lovely;" and a greater than Milton has said, "The devils also believe and tremble!"

Few words are required to set forth this point. Yet, awakened souls are liable to a serious misapprehension just here. They imagine, often, some certain degree of emotion to be requisite; and not having been conscious of it, they judge themselves unprepared to accept Christ. They lay great stress on sorrow as an element of penitence, and having never known such intensity of grief as others have professed, they regard their own exercises as essentially defective. Let it be well understood, then, that penitence turns not chiefly on emotion. That, indeed, is of comparatively little moment. The main thing is the decision of the will, the settled bent of the affections. That is as the ground-swell of the sea. The stir of the emotional nature is as the mere foam upon the surface, or as the ripple raised by the passing breeze. This surface-excitement does commonly more or less attend the deeper feeling—just because the several parts of our being are, by joints and bands which God has devised, firmly knit together. Yet it varies indefinitely in different persons—mainly as temperament varies, in part as circumstances differ. As to mental anguish, of which some think so much, it is by no means essential to repentance; and where it exists, it is with great diversity, both in degree and in manifestation. So is it in relation to earthly matters. A dozen men convinced of bankruptcy, would probably exhibit about as many different phases of emo-

tion, about as many different measures of mental suffering. The chief point, you feel, if a man has basely wronged you, is not the play of his lighter susceptibilities, not even the tears he may shed, and the agony of soul he may evince. It is rather his full conviction and frank acknowledgment of guilt; his hearty, unqualified condemnation of the wrong done; and his desire and purpose, however calm, to do thus wickedly no more.

3. The third constituent of true repentance is *a forsaking of sin*. This is the crowning element. By this only can we prove to ourselves and others, that our abhorrence of sin is sincere. As to all feeling, we are liable to self-deception. It is intangible, changeful, evanescent. We may easily mistake a mere animal tremor for the deep movement of the will. Our fancy may transmute mere cloud-wreaths of sensibility into the granite of principle. The only sure test of all our inward exercises is the conduct. Not by mere seeds or germs are men known, according to the Scripture, but "by their fruits." The seed may be false, the germ may lack vitality. Repentance must be *acted*. In view of the importance of this point, let us inquire, for a moment, *how?*

There must be a forsaking of sin, we have said—of sin against God. First, of all sin *against the God of the law*. Against God, in other words, as manifest in the law. Whatever he frowns on, there must be a readiness to renounce. There must be an actual abandonment of everything—both in the heart and the life, both in thought and deed—which the divine law has forbidden. No matter how long cherished, or how dear it may be; no matter how painful the sacrifice, though it be as the plucking out of a right eye. If a single iniquity be knowingly, deliberately retained, there is no true repentance, there can be no good hope of salvation.

Let there be no mistake here. Let us not be understood as saying what we often deny, that the sinner is to delay his coming to Christ till he has purified his own heart, till the last vestige of corruption is purged away ; or until he finds himself able, in his own strength, to master all temptation, and to rectify perfectly his whole external conduct. That were a vain waiting, indeed. We do say, however, that even the heart's deep corruption must, in purpose and in aim, be renounced at once. Why, else, should the soul resort to Christ? He comes to save his people *from* their sins, not *in* them. He who would keep a single heart-sin, does not really desire Christ. We especially urge that, in reference to the specific and formal outbreaks of corruption, the particular acts on which conscience can fix its eye, and about which there must be some specific choice, there be no reserve, no compromise. They must be fully and forever renounced. Not even these, indeed, in a spirit of self-dependence, but in reliance on that divine aid which is so freely proffered. Let there be no wedge of gold hidden in your tent, no Babylonish garment. Say of no seemingly trivial sin, "The Lord pardon thy servant in this thing." On the forsaking even of that, your salvation may turn. A single secret sin is often as the hidden rock on which the soul is wrecked for eternity.

"Lord, with what care hast thou begirt us round!

Parents first season us; then schoolmasters  
 Deliver us to laws; they send us bound  
 To rules of reason, holy messengers—  
 Pulpits and Sundays; sorrow dogging sin;  
 Afflictions sorted; anguish of all sizes;  
 Fine nets and stratagems to catch us in;  
 Bibles laid open; millions of surprises;  
 Blessings beforehand; ties of gratefulness;  
 The sound of glory ringing in our ears;  
 Without, our shame; within, our consciences;

Angels and grace ; eternal hopes and fears—  
 Yet all these forces, and their whole array,  
 One cunning bosom-sin blows all away.”

There must be, in the second place, a forsaking of sin *against God in Christ*. Important as this point is, it is often overlooked. “Repentance,” says one, “is, indeed, a reasonable duty. I do not neglect it. I call to mind, daily, the sins I have committed ; I sorrow over them, and resolve to be guilty of them no more. What lack I yet?” We might press the inquiry, Do you indeed truly deplore *all* your violations of God’s law, and is the grieving followed by a forsaking? But just here we have another question to ask. Be it as it may in regard to the law, how is it in relation to the gospel? Have you repented of your sin against God as there manifested—of your rejection of his own dear Son? There can be no true penitence, be it ever remembered, until Christ is received. While you harden your heart against him, you harden your heart against the Father. While you refuse to trust in his blood, to avail yourself of his righteousness, to take him as your Saviour-Lord, to give yourself to him—while you stand aloof from him, however calmly, and with whatever outward tokens of respect for Christianity—you are still in opposition to God, you have still in your bosom the stony heart. Unbelief, Christ has assured us, is the great sin ; it is against the greatest display of God’s excellency. Just at this point, then, is the great work of penitence to be done. True contrition loves especially to break her alabaster box of ointment in the presence of Jesus ; to wash his feet with her tears, and to wipe them with the hairs of her head. Weep over sin wherever else you may, unless your grief is stirred at the foot of the cross, it is but “the sorrow of the world that worketh death.” We would still ask him, then,

who professes daily penitence, Have you ceased to turn away from Christ? Have you cast your soul upon him? Is he near and dear to your heart? Would you gladly come to your pastor's study to-day, and talk with him of the love of Jesus, and kneel with him in a common self-consecration to him who has bought us with his own precious blood? Trust, we beseech you, in no repentance which hath not issues like these.

II. We pass to speak, as was proposed, of the ENFORCEMENTS OF THIS DUTY. Not of all, indeed, for the Bible is full of them, but of such only as are naturally and directly suggested by the text. We observe, then,

1. *It is commanded.* We say this, with an eye to the impression, too prevalent, we fear, that this is, in some sense, an optional matter—that it is a proffered privilege, of which it is well that all avail themselves, but not an enjoined service. It is indeed a privilege and an overture—but it is also a mandate. God “commandeth,” the text reads, and so many other scriptures. The duty comes to us invested with all the authority of Jehovah. He lays this command, O unconverted man, athwart your path. It lies in your way to yonder door. You cannot leave your seat impenitent, without trampling it beneath your feet. Wilt thou thus war against thy Maker? “Hast thou an arm like God?” “Who hath hardened himself against Him and prospered?”

2. *It is a Gospel command.* The expression “now” suggests this. The nature of the case proves it. In repentance, it is true, the great principles of righteousness are all included, the very same that underlie the law. Yet in the law, distinctively apprehended, there can be no place for this duty, though you “seek it carefully with tears.” What the law requires, and what alone it will accept, is perfect obedience. Think of a statute against highway robbery, declaring that he who



breaks it shall be punished, unless he repent! Still more absurd would be a law of like character, under the perfect government of God. No; it is only in the gospel that repentance is enjoined—for there only is such an injunction possible. Bear in mind, then, as the duty is urged upon you, that it is a blessed gospel boon. Remember the infinite price wherewith it was purchased—the blood of the Son of God. Enforced it is, as we have said, by the divine authority, yet it is commended to you, also, by all that is tender and persuasive in the love of Christ. It is not Sinai that bids you repent. Only thunders of condemnation come thence, and flashes of wrath. In the words of the text, as in all like scriptures, it is Calvary that pleads with you. Refuse the voice that thus speaketh, and you “crucify” to yourself “the Son of God afresh.”

3. *Consider, finally, the help to repentance freely offered you.* This, again, the word “now” suggests. Not only do all the motives of the fully proclaimed gospel press upon you; the aid of the purchased Spirit may be yours. Otherwise, the humiliation and death of Christ would have been all in vain. Motives, alone, of whatever sort, and however arrayed before the mind, are impotent to work contrition. This, perhaps, you are forward to allege. You refer to it as a partial excuse, or you speak of it in a tone of despondency. We admit the fact; yet it aggravates, clearly, rather than lightens your guilt. Motives fail to affect you, not because you lack the faculties essential to moral agency, and which make you responsible, both as a subject of law and as addressed in the gospel. It is simply because of the depth and strength of your depravity. A humiliating fact it is, and one which may well awaken your fears—one which would warrant despair, but for the completeness of the salvation divinely provided. Dark though your



case is, hope still beams upon it. Unconquerable your depravity is by any finite power; yet the Spirit Almighty, the Spirit of all grace, comes to your deliverance. How do all the Persons of the Adorable Trinity pass before you in the appeal of the text—God the Father, as the author of the broken law, and as having given his Son that a place for repentance might be secured—God the Son, as having opened by his death the way of life, and having, nevertheless, been ungratefully and basely rejected by you—God the Holy Spirit, as pitying your guilty impotence, and offering to succor it—yea, with gentle and loving importunity, urging that offer upon you. Oh, yield to this wondrous appeal! Yield to the present pressure of the Spirit upon your heart. “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God that worketh in you to will and to do of his good pleasure.” Come, as the first act of penitence, to Christ; and if your heart seem to you still hard, say, as you come,

“Dear Saviour, steep this rock of mine  
In thine own crimson sea!  
None but a bath of blood divine  
Can melt the flint away.”