

Sermon XVII

"On Repentance"

by

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"Repent therefore and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, so that the times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

We have in these words the sum and substance of all the divine calls and counsels given to sinners in the Old Testament and the New, and one of the principal motives to a compliance with such merciful counsels and calls. They are the words of the apostle Peter to those Jews who had been concerned [involved] in the crucifixion of our Saviour. The occasion of this exhortation to them, of which my text is a part, was the astonishment excited by the miraculous cure of the one who had been a cripple from his birth. . . .

I shall consider what it is to repent, or what is implied in true repentance. This I shall endeavor to explain by taking into consideration [1] the object of it, [2] the exercises of heart implied in it, and [3] the principle from which these exercises proceed.

[The Object of It]

1. This is *sin*. Persons may repent of their conduct when it has not been sinful, or when it is not considered by them in that light. A man may repent of a generous action--[an example being] an instance of kindness toward his neighbor--when it meets with an ungrateful reception or an unsuitable return. Thus David seems to have repented of his kindness to Nabal, when he said, "Surely in vain I have protected all that this fellow has in the wilderness, so that nothing was missed of all that belongs to him. And he has repaid me evil for good" [1 Sam. 25:21].

Or one may repent of an undertaking or piece of labor when it appears not likely to answer the end proposed. Thus, speaking after the manner of men, God is said to have repented that he had made man upon the earth. Men often repent of what they have been doing merely because it has proved unsuccessful or because the profit has not been equal to the labor and expense. But the repentance of a sinner, spoken of in Scripture as connected with salvation, always means repentance of sin.

2. It is to be observed that in true repentance sin is repented of *on account of its sinfulness*. A man may repent of that which he sees and knows to be wrong, while yet he repents merely because of the imprudence of it and not because of its iniquity. His regret and remorse may be only on account of the hurt he may have done himself and not at all on account of the moral evil of his conduct. But in true repentance sin is repented of as sin.

3. It is necessary that the evil of sin should be seen, and that it should be repented of,

particularly *as it is against God*. An action may be wrong, and may be seen to be so, and be repented of as such, in other respects besides that of its being a violation of the divine law and a disregard of the divine authority. Persons may repent of having treated their neighbors and friends injuriously when a sense of the evil they have done extends no further, and they have no apprehension of having dishonored or offended their Creator. If the Most High should say to them, as he said to his people of old, "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me," they would readily reply, as that people did, "In what way have we robbed You?" They do not imagine that they have done God any injury, or ever meant to do him any.

But the great evil of all the unrighteousness, as well as ungodliness, of men consists in the disrespect shown to the supreme Governor of the world and the reproach cast upon his great and holy name. And a conviction of this is what principally affects the heart of a true penitent, and fills it with bitter remorse. "Against You, You only, have I sinned," was the confession of David in his penitential Psalm [51:4]. Nor is any repentance genuine and saving but what implies this apprehension and sense of the great evil of sin. Hence the apostle Paul describes that repentance, which he testified and urged wherever he preached, as being repentance toward God.

4. It ought further to be observed, respecting the object of repentance, that it is not some one sin only but all sin. I mean all one's own sins. Not that whenever a sinner truly repents he repents of every sinful act and omission which he has ever been guilty of in the whole course of his life, particularly considered. This is impossible. Not half of these is anyone able to recollect. But what I mean is that a true penitent repents of all his sins in general, and of every instance of iniquity in particular as far as he can remember it and is conscious of its being such. If in any one thing a person remembers to have done wrong and does not repent of it, this is a certain evidence that no part of his repentance is genuine. It is the doctrine of the apostle James: "For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in one point, he is guilty of all" [James 2:10], because the same divine authority that forbids one sin equally forbids another also. And for the same reason it holds true that if a man should seem to repent of all his known sins but one, while he has no repentance of that one he does not truly repent of any.

5. In explaining the object of repentance, it ought to be particularly observed that *original sin must be repented of* as well as actual sins. By original sin I do not mean the act of Adam in eating the forbidden fruit, but the sinfulness of our nature which we brought into the world with us. Though a man may feel humiliation and shame on account of the wicked conduct of another who is nearly [closely] related to him or from whom he proceeded, yet it seems naturally impossible that he should have all the feelings which are implied in the proper idea of repentance on account of any sins except his own personal ones.

But I see no difficulty in supposing that a person may as truly repent of "heart sins" as "sins of life," and of a depraved nature as well as of evil thoughts, volitions, and desires. And that David's repentance was thus deep we are plainly led to believe by his confession in Psalm 51:5: "Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me."

It is also evident that Solomon considered a conviction and sense of depravity of nature as being essential to that repentance without which a sinner can have no reasonable hope of pardoning mercy. This appears evident from his prayer at the dedication of the temple, recorded in the eighth chapter of the first book of Kings: "Whatever prayer, whatever supplication," says he, "is

made by anyone, or by all Your people Israel, when each one knows the plague of his own heart, and spreads out his hands toward this temple; then hear in heaven Your dwelling place, and forgive" [vv. 38,39]. And indeed, it seems plainly impossible that a person should have that self-abasement and self-condemnation, which true repentance implies, merely from seeing the evil of particular actions or transient exercises without have a sense of that depravity of his nature which alone can constitute a permanently wicked character.

[The Exercises of Heart Implied in It]

Having considered what sinners must repent of, we will next make some inquiry concerning those exercises and affections of heart which are implied in true repentance. These are sorrow, shame, self-condemnation, hatred of sin, and sincere purposes to forsake it and desires to be delivered from it.

1. True repentance implies grief and sorrow for one's sins. David says: "There is no soundness in my flesh because of Your anger, nor any health in my bones because of my sin. For my iniquities have gone over my head; like a heavy burden they are too heavy for me. My wounds are foul and festering because of my foolishness. I am troubled, I am bowed down greatly; I go mourning all the day long" [Ps. 38:3-6]. And verse 18: "For I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin."

2. Shame is essential to true repentance. "My dishonor is continually before me, and the shame of my face has covered me" [Ps. 44:15]. "Surely, after my turning, I repented; and after I was instructed, I struck myself on the thigh; I was ashamed, yes, even humiliated, because I bore the reproach of my youth" [Jer. 31:19]. And chapter 3:25 [of Jeremiah]: "We lie down in our shame, and our reproach covers us. For we have sinned against the LORD [Yahweh] our God."

3. Self-condemnation is implied in true repentance: "If their uncircumcised hearts are humbled, and they accept their guilt--then I will remember My covenant," &c. [Lev. 26:41,42]. "For if we would judge ourselves, we would not be judged" [1 Cor. 11:31]. Thus the penitent thief upon the cross condemned himself, saying to his fellow who scoffed at Christ: "Do you not even fear God, seeing you are under the same condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we receive the due reward of our deeds" [Luke 23:40,41]. Every sinner who truly repents is brought to see the justice of God in condemning him, and heartily to approve of the sentence of condemnation passed upon him.

4. True repentance implies hatred of sin, and turning from it in heart with a sincere desire and fixed purpose to keep the divine law for the time to come. This seems to be what the apostle means by it when he says, "For godly sorrow produces repentance leading to salvation, not to be regretted" [2 Cor. 7:10]. He is there telling the Corinthians what he had heard of the good effects his former epistle had had upon them. In the following verse he says: "For observe this very thing, that you sorrowed in a godly manner: what diligence it produced in you, what clearing of yourselves, what indignation, what fear, what vehement desire, what zeal" [2 Cor. 7:11]. That repentance is in vain which does not imply a sincere desire and fixed purpose of amendment, or which is not followed with a lasting reformation.

[The Principle From Which These Exercises Proceed]

As to the motives and principles of true repentance, I observe,

1. That it *does not proceed merely from a slavish fear of punishment*. A disobedient servant will profess to be sorry for his faults and will readily promise to do better when under the rod or when threatened with severe correction. And in like manner a sinner, when destruction from God is a terror to him, will confess and promise and feel a kind of sorrow for what he has done or neglected to do, and may have some serious thoughts of doing better. This has been commonly called *legal* repentance, because it is owing altogether to the terror of the divine law and the fearful apprehension of the wrath to come thence arising.

2. It ought to be observed that true repentance *does not originate from mercenary hopes of heaven or from a belief of God's electing love and pardoning grace*. Something *like* repentance, in all the forementioned parts and exercises of it, may arise entirely from a persuasion that one is an object of God's peculiar favor and a subject of his distinguishing mercy. There is hardly anyone so totally destitute of natural gratitude as not to feel some grief and sorrow, [some] shame and self-condemnation for atrocious offenses committed against a kind friend and great benefactor when a remembrance of his generous benefits is fresh in mind. Thus, when David had spared the life of Saul (having had a fair opportunity to have slain him while he and all his life-guard were soundly sleeping in the cave), Saul (on being certified of it) said, "I have sinned. Return, my son David. For I will harm you no more, because my life was precious in your eyes this day. Indeed I have played the fool and erred exceedingly" [1 Sam. 26:21].

So [too] an unregenerate sinner will naturally feel a kind of repentance toward God when he is made to entertain a strong belief of his special love and mercy towards him. [But] there is no need of a new heart in order to [do] this. Nor will another spirit be produced in the carnal mind by any remorse arising from such interested motives. Indeed, in *true* penitents a sense of God's goodness toward them increases godly sorrow and makes them appear more vile in their own eyes. This is agreeable to what is said in Ezekiel 16:63: "That you may remember and be ashamed, and never open your mouth anymore because of your shame, when I provide you an atonement for all you have done, says the LORD [Yahweh] God."

3. True repentance *arises from disinterested* [not influenced by selfish motives] *love to God*, a foundation for which is laid in the soul by the renewing of the Holy Ghost. When the stony heart is taken out of one's flesh and a heart of flesh is given, he will repent. But not merely as Ahab did at the threatening of Elijah, nor merely as Saul repented because of the kindness of David; but rather he will feel an ultimate concern for the honor of God and an ingenuous [sincere] sorrow and grief for all that he has done to his [God's] offense and displeasure--whether he believes that God is pacified toward him or not. When one is created after God in righteousness and true holiness, he will hate sin and resolve to forsake the ways of it, from that principle [of love to God] and not merely from a principle of self-love.

Excerpt from Sermon XVII, "On Repentance, Conversion, and Pardon," from *Sermons, on a Number of Connected Subjects* by John Smalley (Hartford: Oliver D. Cooke, 1803). **Note:** The text has not been modified except for some very light editing for clarity. Also, punctuation and KJV-era pronouns and verb forms have been modernized, long paragraphs have been divided, and the NKJV has been used for quotations.