

Whatever Happened to Repentance Preaching?



David Wilkerson January 15, 2007

In New York City, you can visit church after church, from stately cathedrals to small congregations, and you'll seldom hear a word preached about repentance. The same is true of many evangelical churches across America and worldwide. You can visit congregation after congregation for months on end, and never hear any mention of repentance.

Of course, there are churches today that do not compromise on this important biblical doctrine. But a vast number of churches have decided that repentance is too offensive a message. In fact, entire denominations have de-emphasized it.

In such churches, you can hear all about God's love, his blessings, his precepts for coping with life, but not a word about godly sorrow for sin. You can hear messages on loving others and being a good, kind person. All of that is indeed scriptural. But you won't hear a repentance message like the one Peter preached at Pentecost. His sermon led thousands to freedom in Christ.

Many pastors today would be appalled at what Peter preached that day. Acts 2 gives us the context for the apostle's powerful message: "Now when they heard this, they were pricked in their heart, and said unto Peter and to the rest of the apostles, Men and brethren, what shall we do?" (Acts 2:37).

As this verse demonstrates, there must be a knowledge of sin before there can be true repentance. That is the purpose of the law, to awaken a sense of sin. And the hearts of those people in Jerusalem were stirred when they heard God's Word and recognized their sin.

Peter answered their desperate cries by instructing them, "*Repent*, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost" (2:38, my italics). What does it mean to repent?

True repentance results in sorrow, remorse and regret over sin.

To repent is to experience such contrition as to change one's way of life. Simply put, repentance is turning from one's sin and going in the opposite direction.

Repentance is not meritorious. Only the sacrifice of Christ's blood can forgive. But repentance is the only way to know true healing and rejoicing. There is no other way to enter the peace and rest of Christ except through the doors of repentance. Paul wrote to the Corinthians about the fruit that results from repentance:

"Godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation not to be repented of: but the sorrow of the world worketh death. 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" (2 Corinthians 7:10–11).

Let me give you the background of Paul's letter to the Corinthians. He had exposed the sin of incest in their congregation, but nobody dealt with it. And because this awful sin was overlooked, there was no remorse among the people.

So Paul wrote the church an even stronger message. Now, as the people sat listening to his letter read aloud in the congregation, they were pricked at heart. And they repented, full of godly sorrow at not having faced the exceeding sin in their midst. That repentance brought great rejoicing.

Now Paul encouraged them, saying, "See what godly sorrow did for you? It wrought a carefulness in you. It brought an indignation against your own sin." Repentance is the only way healing and strength can come to those who are caught up in sin.

Repentance and trust in Christ's redeeming blood result in total remission of sin, and that means pardon, forgiveness and freedom from sin's power. According to Paul, there can be no conversion, no freedom, no born-again miracle without repentance: "Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, when the times of refreshing shall come from the presence of the Lord" (Acts 3:19).

Thus, Paul preached to the Athenians: "God...now commandeth all men every where to repent" (17:30). And Jesus tells us he came for that very purpose, "to call...sinners to repentance" (Mark 2:17). Perhaps clearest of all, Luke states, "It behoved Christ to suffer, and to rise from the dead the third day: and that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in his name among all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Luke 24:46-47). Repentance was the message we were commanded to bring when we started a church in New York City twenty years ago.

In the early days of Times Square Church, the Holy Spirit instructed our pastoral team to preach repentance. He fired our hearts with the truth that where sin abounds, God's grace abounds much more.

We were to plant our church in the heart of Broadway, near 42nd Street with its strip clubs, XXX theaters, pornography shops, drug dealers, prostitutes and militant homosexuals. So we began holding services at the Nederlander Theater on 41st Street. At the time that block was called "Junkie Alley," because addicts snorted and shot up right in front of the theater. It was a picture of hell on earth.

The Spirit warned us that because we were entering into Satan's territory, we had to take a stand against the dominion of sin. In short, we were going into a war zone, to reclaim those taken captive by the devil. So we had to be prepared for his powers to come at us and those we sought with all the weapons of hell.

We knew upfront we wouldn't be able to win those captives back by cozying up to their sin. To bring them the reality of Christ's mercy, we had to confront their sin, so they would be convicted and ready to forsake their sin. It was the only way to wage warfare in such an intense spiritual battleground.

And so we preached repentance. We told everyone who walked through our doors that nobody could claim Jesus as Lord if their lives hadn't changed. That message was preached to all who sat in our services, regardless of their social status: Broadway actors and drug pushers, Wall Street executives and transvestites. No one could say they loved Jesus if their lives didn't bear the fruit of repentance.

After confronting sin through repentance preaching, incredible joy began to break out. People were being freed from their sin and forsaking old habits and a sensual way of life. Men and women from executive offices to Junkie Alley were being transformed by Christ's cleansing blood and the power of his Spirit to break every bondage.

Twenty years later, this same joy continues at Times Square Church. And we still deliver the message the first church preached in Jerusalem on Pentecost: repentance and remission of sin. The feel-good gospel is all mixed up about the love of God.

Multitudes today are flocking to meetings where a feel-good pastor tells them, "All you need to do is believe, and you'll be born again." This doctrine is built on a passage in Acts 16, where an unsaved jailer asked the apostles what he should do to be saved. Paul's response was, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house" (Acts 16:31).

Ministers who emphasize this doctrine forget that when the jailer approached the apostles, he was so convicted that he "came trembling, and fell down" (16:29). This man was so distraught he had even considered suicide. He had a sense of his own sin, and his awe of God led him to repentance.

The truth is, human compassion alone cannot convert anyone's soul. It reaches only the flesh, unable to touch the deep places of the soul. This is an important truth we learned in those early days of Times Square Church. And it's a truth that is at the very core of the gospel. It says that biblical reproof against sin — a message warning the sinner to run to the Cross or perish — is the greatest love message that can be offered to man.

Today, underneath our church's name on the theater marquee, a message reads, "The Church That Love Is Building." To us, this is no maudlin, sentimental, mushy idea. Rather, it is a message that states clearly, "We are here to fight for you against all of hell. We will give you uncoated truth, if you want a new life." Ministers who once avoided the repentance message are being convicted to preach it again.

The pastor of a mega-church recently fell under conviction over his light, easy messages. For weeks he struggled, thinking, "I'm not a true shepherd. I'm not giving the people what they need to grow and mature in Christ."

So he changed his preaching to include repentance. At the time, his congregation numbered in the thousands. Then, once he started preaching repentance, he ended up with less than two hundred people. But he is fulfilled and blessed because he's now seeing his people grow in Christ.

I have to wonder: Is this why so many pastors never preach repentance? Are they afraid of losing people? Do they fear being unable to make mortgage payments? Are they mindful of needing people to give more toward the church's growing expenses? I'm convinced these things combine to persuade good men to preach a soft message.

At times I've wondered what it would be like for people in feel-good churches to hear a repentance message by their preacher. I picture multitudes filing in to hear his latest sermon. Yet, backstage this man is in the grip of the Holy Spirit, who speaks to him with powerful conviction:

"The day of the Lord is at hand. The handwriting is on the wall, and God will soon judge the nations. All things are being shaken, and men's hearts will fail them for fear.

"Do not go out on that stage tonight and comfort the people in their sins. Many are soul sick and blind, like sheep gone astray. They are in turmoil, with painful family problems, addictions, bondages the enemy torments them with.

"If you won't warn them, their blood will be on your hands. The prophet Ezekiel has warned that if you don't blow the trumpet to warn the wicked, they will die in their iniquity and the Lord will require their blood at your hand.

"Go now, and warn the people to repent and forsake their evil ways. Never again choke my conviction, for it leads to life. Then comfort and encourage them."

If that preacher were to obey, he would immediately witness two things: a mass exodus to the doors, and a fraction of the people left sitting stunned in their seats. After a few minutes, the preacher would begin to see tears and hear soft weeping. Finally, a voice would rise from among those who have stayed, asking, "What do we do now?"

This is already beginning to happen. A major prosperity preacher in Europe recently stood before a huge crowd and said, "The time has come to confess, to weep, to make things right with the Lord." A preacher friend of mine was there and reported that the event was stunning. My prayer is that the same will happen in all of our churches, here in America and throughout the world.

I have to admit, at times I have left the pulpit in great pain over a hard message I had to preach. At such times I often question myself: "Lord, that seemed so hard. Did I hear you right? If I was wrong to preach this, please show me." Once, when I was in deep agony over a message, I received a phone call from one of my children, who said, "Dad, thank you for preaching that message. The Lord spoke clearly to me through it. It brought me to a crisis with him that I've needed to face."

Many who have repented — trusting in Christ and being forgiven — still hold onto lingering fear and unbelief.

I'm certain God is grieved over churches that reject his message of repentance. In fact, it is my belief that the Holy Spirit will not abide in such churches.

Yet there is something else I believe grieves God's heart even more than neglecting the preaching of repentance. And that is *when those who confess Christ and have been forgiven continue to live in fear and unbelief.*

I speak of those who have known conviction for their sin. They've known godly sorrow over their trespasses, and they have testified that they've been forgiven. But they haven't yet entered the rest and joy that come from forgiveness through repentance.

You see, repentance leads to forgiveness — and forgiveness must lead to rest and rejoicing. These people, however, have no such rest. On the contrary, they live in constant fear that their lives aren't pleasing to God. They keep praying to renew their salvation, or they may even seek to be baptized over and over. Simply put, they have never come into a full knowledge of the power of forgiveness.

In truth, they are living under the Old Testament covenant. And they're being oppressed by a law that keeps them tormented by a condemning conscience. As Isaiah says, they are "afflicted, tossed with tempest, and not comforted" (Isaiah 54:11).

The burden of sin — the memories and hauntings of past sins — must not be carried beyond the Cross.

All mourning over past sins, all self-imposed humiliation, must be cast into the cleansing fountain of Christ's blood. Ultimately, there comes a time when all who follow Jesus must hear him say, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

The Lord calls out to all who have confessed, repented, and believed, yet who can't rejoice because they still carry a heavy burden of guilt and condemnation — all of these he calls to come to him and give him their heavy burden, and he will give them gladness of heart.

When we do this, the Holy Spirit comes to stand beside us. Jesus called the Spirit "the Comforter," a name that means "one who comes and stands by." In short, from that point on we no longer walk alone, in our own efforts, but in cooperation with the Holy Spirit.

This is all because of the New Covenant that God made with believers in these last days. According to Hebrews, this covenant went into effect the moment Jesus drew his last breath: "A testament [or covenant] is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth" (Hebrews 9:17).

What is the gift of inheritance that Jesus has left us through his testament? It is this promise: "I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more" (8:12).

Yet we are given more than forgiveness through this New Covenant. God gives us a further word of deliverance, saying he is "working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever" (13:21).

Are you under severe attack, your mind harassed?

Numerous Christians, including some pastors, have told me they are continually harassed by former sins. They say, "Brother Dave, if you only knew what I once did, how I sinned against such light, you would understand why I'm so down. My sin still hangs over my head, and I battle constant guilt over it. I believe the Lord has forgiven me, that his blood is sufficient to cover my iniquity. But I don't have the peace that comes from that knowledge."

Others tell me, "I believe I'm forgiven, but my mind is continually bombarded with hellish thoughts. It can happen anywhere, even in church, and it makes me feel so unclean. I have a hard time believing I'm pure in God's sight."

These believers forget that Satan also tempted Jesus with awful, ugly thoughts during his wilderness testing. Today, the devil sends little foxes into your life, to make you think you're hopeless, that God is mad at you. They inject thoughts into your mind meant to destroy your faith in the power of Christ's blood over you.

Dear saint, you are not to listen to those mental invasions. You have to cut them off, crying, "Holy Spirit, I know you're beside me. Help me."

You have to accept that all who take up the cross and fight the good fight of faith are in a constant battle. We're all going to face evil thoughts — thoughts that come because of our past, or because of a sense of rejection, or simply because we live in wicked, sensual times. Yet when we apply Christ's blood to these roots of doubt, it reaches into every cell of our being, including our minds, and thoroughly cleanses us. And that brings freedom and true rejoicing.

Are you fighting against a besetting sin, a stronghold of Satan?

Have you decided there's no hope you'll ever be free? I urge you, consider these four things:

1.
Be sure you believe that the Lord still loves you. You are still under his grace and mercy, and his banner over you is love.
2.
Repent, asking the Lord to produce godly sorrow in you.
3.
Receive God's love, and rest in his promise to forgive you.
4.
Believe his New Covenant word to you: "I will be merciful to you, and forgive all your sins. And I will work in you that which is well pleasing to me."

You are not alone in your struggle. He has sent you the Holy Spirit, who knows how to deal with the enemy and free you from all bondage. He is the still, small voice that will guide you and empower you through all your battles.

Pray with me: "Holy Spirit, I want to grow in spiritual fruitfulness. I want to be rid of all hypocrisy, and I want gentleness, patience and love. I know you still love me, in spite of my lack of these things. So, stand by me, and help me. Amen."

[Download PDF](#) [1]

Links

[1] <http://worldchallenge.org/printpdf/1272/>