

THE FIRST STEP

The subject this morning is one that nearly all Christians and non-Christians alike think they understand, but many really don't. There are many people today who have false ideas about the nature of true repentance, and I'd like to take some time this morning to talk about it.

I have talked to people in the past that think they can't come to Christ unless they first repent, and that this is what will prepare them to be forgiven of their sins. And it's true that repentance does come before forgiveness, because it's only those that understand their true condition before God as sinners that can feel their need of a Saviour, but does the sinner have to wait until they repent before they can come to Jesus? That's the question. Is repentance some kind of barrier that prevents us from getting the help we need so we can be forgiven and have the hope of eternal life?

First of all, notice what Jesus Himself said in **John 12:32**, "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will [**do what?**] draw [**or attract**] all men unto me." In John 3 Jesus referred Nicodemus to something similar when Moses was told to put a snake on a pole and lift it up among the congregation of Israel so everyone who looked could be healed from the bite of the deadly serpents that were there in the wilderness, and guess what? Everyone that looked was made well. Everyone! That tells me that God is no respecter of persons, that He will accept anyone and everyone who comes to Him. This serpent on a pole was an illustration of what would happen to Jesus, and what He would become for us if we would just look to Him for forgiveness for past sins and power to keep from continuing in them. Jesus became "sin for us, who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him." You can read that in **2 Corinthians 5:21**.

Christ, through the Holy Spirit, is all the time drawing people to Himself, and while He's doing that, the devil is doing everything he can to draw people away from Him. Because you see, there's a spiritual battle going on for your soul, and a lot of people aren't even aware of it. Somehow, maybe through you, maybe through me, maybe by a person just reading the word of God, Christ has to be made known to the sinner, that He died for their sins, and as they look to the cross of Calvary where Jesus was lifted up, the plan of salvation will begin to unfold to their mind, and it's this great sacrifice that will lead them to repentance. That's the way it works!

You know, the plan of salvation can be studied by the most intellectual person, and they'll never fully comprehend it, but at the same time it's not too difficult for a child to understand the necessary steps to come to repentance, find forgiveness, and receive the gift of eternal life. And so, while it's challenging for the greatest minds to grasp the fullness of it, the thing that's necessary to have eternal life is quite simple. God is not

trying to make salvation difficult, it's people who do that. He wants everyone to be saved, and everyone can be saved if they will.

I remember like it was yesterday, and yet it was 40 years ago, when the Saviour was lifted up to me through a humble servant of His, and Jesus drew me to Himself. I literally knew nothing of the Bible and the way of salvation, but when I heard what Jesus went through for me, and that He was willing to take the punishment that I deserved upon Himself, and that by accepting Him as my Saviour from sin I could be forgiven for all my past mistakes and enter into a new and living relationship with Him and have eternal life, I fell all broken at the foot of the cross and told the Lord how sorry I was for the kind of life I had been living up to that time, and He not only forgave me, but He gave me a new heart that wanted only to serve Him for the rest of my life. The repentance that was given to me that day as a gift, had nothing to do with my own intelligence or some goodness of my own, but had everything to do with the love that came from the throne of God to a sinner such as I. That love drew me to Jesus and I surrendered to it; that's where the repentance came from.

The Bible does not teach that the sinner has to repent before they can take advantage of the invitation that Jesus Himself gave in **Matthew 11:28**; let's read that: Jesus said, *"Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."*

The rest that Jesus spoke of here is a rest, or a cessation from sin. You see, we can labor all we want to correct our sinful habits, but we will meet with defeat every time unless we come to God first, and we can't come until we are drawn by God's love, and that love is drawing us all the time, but we need to recognize it.

There are many people today who are tired of the way they've been living, just like I was, but they're never going to find a better and more satisfying way to live until they heed the invitation to come to Jesus for the help they need. Everyone that wants to be saved from sin must come to Christ and see Him, and only Him, as their Saviour so they can be enabled to repent.

Because think of this, if a sinner could repent without coming to Christ, they could also be saved without Christ. And that's never going to happen! That's why we can't come to repentance on our own. We need help to feel sorry for sin and to have the desire and power to turn away from it. It's not something we can manufacture on our own. Men, more than women, especially have a problem with this, because they think they're strong enough and big enough to solve their own problems, but they aren't!

It's only the moral excellence or the goodness that goes forth from Christ that can lead to genuine repentance, and I'm a living witness to that, and so is everyone who has experienced conversion. The apostle Peter makes this point clear in **Acts 5:31**, let's

read it: *“Him hath God exalted with his right hand to be a Prince and a Saviour, for to **give** repentance to Israel **and** forgiveness of sins.”*

Repentance is **given**; it’s not something we choose to do on our own; and it comes before forgiveness. So, since we can’t forgive ourselves, neither can we repent of ourselves.

Notice also what it says in **Acts 3:25, 26**. Speaking to the Jews after the healing of a lame man, Peter told them something very important. He said, *“Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, and in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed. Unto you first God, having raised up his Son Jesus, sent him to bless you, **[how?]** in turning away every one of you from his iniquities.”*

You see, the blessing of God came through the death and resurrection of Christ for the purpose of turning away every one of us from our sins. That’s what repentance does. Repentance is not only sorrow for sin, but a turning away from it. And this blessing, we are told, comes as a result of the resurrection of Christ.

And so, repentance is as much the gift of God as is forgiveness, and it will never be found in your heart unless Jesus has first been at work there. We can no more repent without the Spirit of Christ to awaken our conscience, than we can be forgiven without Christ. Christ draws the sinner because of his love exhibited on the cross, and as this love softens the heart and impresses the mind, it’ll bring grief to the heart for having offended a holy God by breaking His Ten Commandment law, and that’s what will bring true sorrow to the soul; and once the sorrow comes, Jesus will then take it away through forgiveness and replace it with joy and happiness, and isn’t that what everyone is looking for? Yes, and we can only find it in one way, and Jesus is that way.

Now, there **are** some people that become absolutely ashamed of their sinful ways and give up some of their evil habits before they’re consciously motivated to come to Christ; but unbeknownst to them, it’s the power of the Holy Spirit that’s drawing them to make reforms in the first place. A holy influence that they’re unconscious of is working upon their heart and mind and their conscience becomes sensitive. They may think that they’ve corrected their own bad habits or made positive changes in their lives on their own, but it’s God who’s at work in their lives and they don’t recognize it. In **James 1:17** it says, *“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights”*, whether we know it or not, and repentance is one of those good and perfect gifts.

As Christ continues to draw sinners to Himself, and if they don’t resist, He will cause them to look upon His cross, to look upon Him whom their sins have pierced, and the

wickedness of their lives, and the deep-seated sin of their souls will be revealed to them. Then they begin to comprehend something of the righteousness of Christ, and they wonder, “Was all this love, all this suffering, all this humiliation and sacrifice that Jesus went through demanded that I might not perish but have everlasting life?” And when they understand that yes, all this was necessary to save them, then they begin to understand that it is indeed the goodness of God that leads them to repentance.

This kind of repentance is beyond the reach of our own power to accomplish; it’s obtained only from Christ. He’s the only one who can stir our sinful hearts to **cooperate** with Him, that’s the key word. If we **cooperate** with Him, He will create within us a hatred of sin.

In the book ***Messages to Young People***, page 147, it says it better than I can. It says, “*Here are revealed the conditions of success. To make God’s grace our own, we must act our part. The Lord does not propose to perform for us either the willing or the doing. His grace is given to work in us to will and to do, but never as a substitute for our effort. Our souls are to be aroused to co-operate [that’s what repentance does]. The Holy Spirit works in us, that we may work out our own salvation. This is the practical lesson the Holy Spirit is striving to teach us.*”

So, God gives us opportunities, and success depends upon the use we make of those opportunities.

In **Genesis 3:15** God said to the serpent, “*I will put enmity [or hatred] between thee and the woman [or the church] and between thy seed and her seed*”, and if we hate sin, don’t you think that it will be much easier to give it up? You see, that’s the real problem with sin. There are too many people that try to give it up without hating it, that’s why they go back to it after a short time. It’s kind of like New Year’s resolutions; they have good intentions, but before long they’re right back to their old ways, and even worse, because every time you try and fail, you become less confident that you’ll ever be able to quit for good, and if we understand it correctly, that’s not a bad place to be, because it’s then that you’ll realize you need help, and Christ is that help.

The only way you can really come to hate sin is to partake of the divine nature, as it says in **2 Peter 1:4**, and that’s not something you can do for yourself either. Receiving a new nature is something that happens after repentance and confession of sin. Unless God gives you a new nature that’s inclined to obey God from a heart of love, you’ll never stop sinning, because if all you have is the fallen sinful nature, you can’t obey, because sin is all our fallen nature knows how to do.

Oh, you may be able to fool people with outward obedience, because they can’t see

what's really going on in your mind, but God can. And so, there are only two beings in the universe that know what's going on in the human heart, God and the person themselves, and we can even sometimes fool ourselves into thinking we're better than we really are, and so our own mind is not a safe guide when it comes to knowing our true condition.

Jeremiah 17:9 says, *“The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?”* And **Proverbs 28:26** says, *“He that trusts in his own heart is a fool.”* And so, we're in a terrible condition, aren't we? How in the world are we ever going to know our true condition before God if we can't trust our own judgment? The answer is that we need to get very close to Jesus.

Notice what it says in the book ***Steps to Christ*, page 65**, “The closer you come to Jesus, the more faulty you will appear in your own eyes; for your vision will be clearer, and your imperfections will be seen in broad and distinct contrast to His perfect nature. This is evidence that Satan's delusions have lost their power; that the vivifying influence of the Spirit of God is arousing you. No deep-seated love for Jesus can dwell in the heart that does not realize its own sinfulness. The soul that is transformed by the grace of Christ will admire His divine character; but if we do not see our own moral deformity, it is unmistakable evidence that we have not had a view of the beauty and excellence of Christ.”

If a person is finding it impossible to overcome sin, it's probably because they're not spending time in prayer. As you read the gospels, you'll find that Jesus spent much time in earnest prayer, and not just for Himself, but in behalf of those for whose salvation he had left heaven for to come to this earth. Don't you know that He is our example? And if He's our example, how essential it is for us to pray and not be discouraged! How important that we should be instant in prayer, asking for the help that can come only from Christ. If we will find voice and time to pray, God will find time and voice to answer, it's just that simple!

When we talk about repentance, we're talking about the first step in the process of Justification, which simply means forgiveness. Some of you may be thinking that these things are too elementary, too simple, and that we should move on and talk about last day events and things we haven't heard before; things that are new light. But I want to tell you something, you can learn new things even about repentance, and there's no danger of spending too much time thinking about the subject of justification by faith, and by the way, justification by faith is what the third angel's message is all about. You'll remember we spent some time last month talking about the importance of not receiving the mark of the beast; well, being justified by faith is how that happens, and repentance is how it all starts; it's the first step in the process.

And yes, when we talk about repentance we **are** talking about last day events, because this subject will be present truth until human probation closes and is more necessary to understand and experience than prophecy charts, or who composes the 144,000, or who the king of the north is, or what the daily is, or whether or not Armageddon is a literal or spiritual battle, or whether or not we should keep the feast days, or a dozen other things. Not that a proper understanding of these things are unimportant, because I've preached about all of them in the past. But dear friends, you can understand all of these various things, and understand them better than anyone else, but if you don't repent of your sins, all the knowledge in the world about everything else won't help you a bit.

We have a problem in the Advent movement today because people aren't being properly instructed in justification by faith as it's taught in the Bible. They're being instructed all right, but it's either a counterfeit of the devil or a half a gospel that leaves people saved in sin.

If we don't understand and experience true repentance, we don't understand the third angel's message, and if we don't understand the third angel's message, we don't understand justification by faith, because these truths are all wrapped up together, they're all connected, and repentance is the first step in the learning process. And so, repentance is definitely a part of the third angel's message that we're to take to the world in these last days.

Let me read you a short statement. You can read this in several different places, but the original is found in ***Review and Herald, April 1, 1890***, "Several have written to me, inquiring if the message of justification by faith is the third angel's message, and I have answered, 'It is the third angel's message in verity. '"

Have you ever grappled with an understanding of how the third angel's message can be justification by faith, remembering that repentance is the first step in becoming justified, or pardoned of our sins? Have you read through the 4 verses of **Revelation 14:9-12** to determine which of those verses compose a justification by faith message? If someone were to ask you to explain how this can be, what would you say?

I think this is important enough to take a couple minutes to consider. Let's read through the third angel's message and see if we can find justification by faith there. Since the third angel's message is "justification by faith in verity", which means it's the most important point of the message, then it ought to be real easy to find.

Revelation 14:9-12, *"And the third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, If any man worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his forehead, or in his hand, The same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out*

without mixture into the cup of his indignation; and he shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: the smoke of their torment ascendeth up for ever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name.”

So far do you see a justification by faith message in these three verses? I see reasons for repentance, I see incentive to become justified, I see a fearful scene that I don't want to be a part of, and I see a warning, but I don't see the elements or an explanation of how to become justified by faith, do you? Therefore it must be in **verse 12**. Let's read on:

“Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.”

First of all, what is a “saint”? “Here is the patience of the saints.” By definition a saint is someone who is “holy.” The word “saint” and “holy” are the same word in the Greek. Are you holy? We're cautioned never to say that, aren't we? But if we're not saints, if we're not holy, then we must be sinners! Is that right? But here's the problem with that; the Bible teaches that sinners need to repent, and if we don't repent we're going to be eternally lost. And so, if we repent and are forgiven, or justified by faith, how can we still be sinners? When you think about it, a sinning Christian is an oxymoron.

The apostle Paul said something very interesting in **Galatians 2:20**; he said, *“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.”*

Now tell me, is Jesus a saint? Absolutely! In fact, **Revelation 15:3** says He is the “King of saints.” Is he holy? Absolutely! In **Revelation 4:8** the holy angles, when referring to Jesus sing, *“Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty.”* So, if I am crucified with Christ and yet still live; if by faith Christ lives in me, can I live a holy life? Can Christ live out His life within me? Yes! As long as I stay dead to selfish desire, I won't sin any more than a corpse does. A person can die a sinner, but they can't be dead and still sin.

You know the song, “Live out Thy life within me, oh Jesus, King of Kings! Be Thou Thyself the answer to all my questionings; live out Thy life within me, in all things have Thy way! I, the transparent medium, Thy glory to display.”

So, we are either saints or sinners, but we can't be both. We are either one or the other. If we chose for self to be resurrected after being crucified with Christ we will be sinners, but if we stay dead we will be saints.

In *The Youth's Instructor*, February 4, 1897 it says, "The eternal God has drawn the line of distinction between the saint and the sinner, between the converted and unconverted. The two classes do not blend into each other imperceptibly, like the colors of a rainbow, but are as distinct as midday and midnight."

This statement tells us that saints are converted, and sinners are unconverted. Which one are you?

Review and Herald, December 4, 1900, "Christ speaks of the church over which Satan presides as the synagogue of Satan. Its members are the children of disobedience. They are those who choose to sin..."

What church are you a member of? If sinners are members of the synagogue of Satan, then saints must be members of the church of Christ. By the way, the denomination you belong to can't save you, because there's no virtue in a name, and yet there are people that will take you to court and sue you over it, and those that will fight it and allow themselves to be sued. I find that interesting, don't you?

Manuscript Release, volume 21, page 350, "No one can occupy middle ground. Men and women are either saints or sinners, either entitled to a glorious life of eternity, or doomed to eternal death."

Pretty clear, isn't it? We are all one or the other, but not both.

Signs of the Times, August 22, 1900, "... the sinner must freely surrender his own will to God, and accept Christ as his substitute and surety. He must rely upon Him as the only one who can change a sinner to a saint."

Do you want that change, friends? If the answer is yes, then you must freely surrender your will to God when you are called to repentance.

Romans 5:19 says, "*For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so by the obedience of one (Jesus) shall many be made righteous.*" (or we could say made holy, or made saints).

If we choose to become a saint, does that mean we'll brag about it? No! But we will brag on Jesus the king of saints, because He will be living out His life within us since we've chosen to be crucified with Him.

Sermons and Talks, volume 1, page 343, "God does not live in the sinner. The Word declares that He abides only in the hearts of those who love Him and do righteousness. God does not abide in the heart of the sinner; it is the enemy who abides there."

I find these statements very interesting since there are many today who will try to convince you that you can be a saint and a sinner at the same time, which according to what we just read, is impossible. You see dear friends, we are supposed to be Christlike, that's what the name Christian implies; Jesus is our example. He had a fallen human nature just like we have, and yet He was no sinner. Read **Hebrews chapter 2** and **chapter 4 verse 15**. According to what we just read, having a fallen nature makes you a sinner if you yield to sin, which we've all done, but if we crucify the desires of the fallen flesh and live according to the dictates of the divine nature, we will not engage in sin. **1 John 3:4-10** makes that very clear.

Does that somehow make us equal with Christ, of course not! And please don't misconstrue my words to say that we are. But it does tell us that we can be saints and still have a fallen sinful nature. Temptation is not sin, but yielding to it is. The suffix "er" on the end of the word sinner means that one is engaged in sin. The dictionary defines the suffix "er" as "One that produces, or one that does, or performs; or one that is associated with something." Do you want to be associated with sin? I hope not. I know I don't.

Just as one's occupation signifies the type of work they do, such as a farmer being engaged with farming, or a banker being engaged in banking, or a welder in welding, or a plumber in plumbing; you get the picture; so the sinner is engaged in sinning. This may be a revelation to you, but a sinner is one who sins, plain and simple.

Romans 1:7 says we are "*called to be saints*", not only when we get to heaven, but here and now. And the third angel's message also indicates there's going to be a remnant who will have the patience of a saint, and it all starts with repentance.

Before we close, let me give you a few examples of false repentance, because there are many people that sorrow over their sins and even make an outward change, but their motives are all wrong. They do it, not because they fear God or because they understand how their sins hurt the One that created and died for them, but because they think it will bring some sort of suffering upon themselves.

This is the kind of repentance Esau had when he saw that the blessing of the birthright was forever lost. And then there was Balaam, when he became terrified by an angel with drawn sword standing in the pathway. He acknowledged his guilt when his life was at stake, but there was no genuine repentance for his sin or any kind of hatred of evil. Judas is another one many people think of. After betraying the Lord with a kiss, he cried out, "*I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood.*" However, his confession was forced from his guilty soul by an awful sense of condemnation and a fearful looking for of judgment, and not because he felt real remorse. And how about Pharaoh? When he was suffering under the judgments of God, he acknowledged his

sin in order to escape further punishment, but returned to his defiance of Heaven as soon as the plagues stopped. All of these people mourned over the results of sin, but didn't sorrow for the sin itself.

They were like the little boy that got his hand caught in the cookie jar and was sorry he got caught, but not because he had disobeyed his loving mother.

When God opens up your eyes and you see the enormity of your sins, and as you see yourself as you really are, there's no need to give up in despair, because it was for those like yourself that Jesus came to save. Through the Holy Spirit He is wooing you by His tender love to come to Him.

When Satan comes and tells you that you're a great sinner, and he will in order to discourage you, you need to look up to your Redeemer and talk of His righteousness which He freely gives to every repenting sinner. When that happens, just acknowledge your sin, and tell the enemy that "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" just like me. Oh, we may have been terrible sinners, it's true, but Christ died that we might be forgiven, and His righteousness and His sacrifice are sufficient to present to the Father in our behalf.

The Bible principle is that those to whom God has forgiven most will love Him most, and will stand nearest to His throne to praise Him for all eternity, and don't let the devil convince you otherwise. When we see the length of the chain that was let down to save us; when we understand something of the infinite sacrifice that Christ made in our behalf, our heart will melt because of so great a love, and true repentance will be given, and forgiveness will follow. That's God's promise, and I hope you will experience it whenever it's needed.