
REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE
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A SERMON DELIVERED ON SABBATH MORNING,
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*“Then has God also to the Gentiles granted
repentance unto life.” Acts 11:18.*

ONE of the greatest obstacles which the Christian religion ever overcame was the hardened prejudice which possessed the minds of its earliest followers. The Jewish believers, the 12 apostles and those whom Jesus Christ had called from the dispersed of Israel were totally attached to the idea that salvation was of the Jews. They believed that none but the disciples of Abraham, or, at any rate, the circumcised ones, could be saved. They could not bring themselves to the thought that Jesus had come to be the Saviour of all nations, and that in Him should all the people of the earth be blessed. It was with difficulty they could allow the supposition; it was so opposite to all their Jewish education, that we find them summoning Peter before a council of Christians and saying to him, “You went in to men uncircumcised and did eat with them.” Nor could Peter exonerate himself until he had rehearsed the matter fully and said that God had appeared unto him in a vision, declaring, “What God has cleansed, that call not you common,” and that the Lord had bid him preach the gospel to Cornelius and his household inasmuch as they were believers. After this, the power of grace was so mighty that these Jews could no longer withstand it— and in the teeth of all their previous education, they at once assumed the broad principle of Christianity and glorified God, saying, “Then has God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.” Let us bless God that we are now free from the chains of Judaism, and that we are not under those of a Gentilism which has, in its turn, excluded the Jew. Let us bless God that we live so near the

blessed time that is coming when Jew and Gentile, bond and free, shall feel themselves one in Jesus Christ, our Head! I am not, now, however, about to enlarge upon this—my subject this morning is “Repentance unto life.” May God give me grace so to speak to you that His word may be as a sharp sword, “piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow.”

By “Repentance unto life,” I think we are to understand that repentance which is accompanied by spiritual life in the soul, and ensures eternal life to everyone who possesses it. “Repentance unto life,” I say, brings with it spiritual life, or rather, is the first consequence thereof. There are repentances which are not signs of spiritual life, but of natural life; they are only effected by the power of the conscience, and the voice of nature speaking in men; but the repentance here spoken of is produced by the Author of life—and when it comes, it begets such life in the soul that he who was “dead in trespasses and sins,” is quickened together with Christ; he who had no spiritual susceptibilities, now “receives with meekness the engrafted word”; he who slumbered in the very centre of corruption, receives power to become one of the sons of God and to be near His throne! This I think is, “repentance unto life”—that which gives life unto a dead spirit. I have also said this repentance ensures eternal life, for there are repentances of which you hear men speak which do not secure the salvation of the soul. Some preachers will affirm that men may repent and may believe, and yet may fall away and perish. We will not consume our time by stopping to expose their error this morning; we have often considered it before, and have refuted all that they could say in defence of their dogma! Let us think of an infinitely better repentance. The repentance of our text is not their repentance, but it is a “repentance unto life.” It is a repentance which is a true sign of eternal salvation in Christ; a repentance which preserves us through this temporary state in Jesus, and which when we are passed into eternity, gives us a bliss which cannot be destroyed. “Repentance unto life” is the act of salvation of the soul—the seed which contains all the essentials of salvation—which secures them to us and

prepares us for them!

We are, this morning, to give a very careful and prayerful attention to the “repentance” which is “un- to life.” First, I shall devote a few minutes to the consideration of false repentance; secondly, I shall consider the signs that mark true repentance; and after that, I shall extol the divine beneficence of which it is written, “Then has God also to the Gentiles granted repentance unto life.”

I. First, then, we will consider certain FALSE REPENTANCES. I will begin with this remark—that trembling beneath the sound of the gospel is not “repentance.” There are many men who, when they hear a faithful gospel sermon, are exceedingly stirred and moved by it. By a certain power which accompanies the Word, God testifies that it is His own Word, and He causes those who hear it involuntarily to tremble. I have seen some men, while the truths of Scripture have been sounded from this pulpit, whose knees have knocked together, whose eyes have flowed with tears as if they had been fountains of water! I have witnessed the deep dejection of their spirit, when—as some of them have told me—they have been shaken until they knew not how to abide the sound of the voice, for it seemed like the terrible trumpet of Sinai thundering out their destruction! Well, my hearers, you may be very much disturbed under the preaching of the gospel, and yet you shall not have that “repentance unto life”! You may know what it is to be very seriously, and very solemnly affected when you go to God’s house, and yet you may be hardened sinners. Let me confirm the remark by an example—Paul stood before Felix with the chains upon his hands—and as he preached of “righteousness, temperance, and of judgment to come,” it is written, “Felix trembled.” And procrastinating Felix is in hell with the rest of those who have said, “Go your way for this time. When I have a more convenient season I will call for you.” There are many of you who cannot attend the house of God without being alarmed; you know what it is to stand aghast at the thought that God will punish you; you may often have been moved to sincere emotion under God’s minister. But

let me tell you, you may be, after all, a castaway because you have not repented of your sins, and neither have you turned to God!

Further still, it is quite possible that you may not only tremble before God's Word, but you may become a sort of amiable Agrippa, and be "almost persuaded" to turn to Jesus Christ, and yet have no "repentance." You may go further and even desire the gospel! You may say—"Oh, this gospel is such a good thing I wish I had it! It ensures so much happiness here, and so much joy hereafter; I wish I might call it mine." Oh, it is good, thus, to hear this voice of God! And you may sit and while some powerful text is being well-handled, you may say, "I think it is true!" But it must enter the heart before you can repent! You may even go upon your knees in prayer, and you may ask with terrified lips that this may be blessed to your soul; but after all that you may still be no child of God. You may say as Agrippa said to Paul, "You almost persuaded me to be a Christian"; yet, like Agrippa, you may never proceed beyond the "almost." He was "almost persuaded to be a Christian," but not, "altogether." Now, how many of you here have been "almost persuaded," and yet you are not really in the way of eternal life? How often has conviction brought you on your knees, and you have "almost" repented—but you have remained there without actually repenting? See that corpse? It is lately dead. It has scarcely acquired the ghastliness of death; the colour is still life-like; its hands are still warm; you may fancy it is alive, and it seems almost to breathe. Everything is there—the worm has scarcely touched it—dissolution has scarcely approached. There is no offensive smell—yet life is gone—life is not there! So it is with you—you are almost alive. You have almost every external organ of religion which the Christian has, but you have not life! You may have repentance, but not sincere repentance. O hypocrite! I warn you this morning—you may not only tremble, but feel a complacency towards the Word of God—and yet after all, not have "repentance unto life." You may sink down into the pit of hell that is bottomless, and hear it said, "Depart from Me, you cursed, into everlasting fire, prepared for the devil and his angels." Yet, again, it is possible for men to progress even further than this,

and positively to humble themselves under the hand of God, and still be total strangers to repentance! Their goodness is not like the morning cloud and the early dew that passes away, but when the sermon is heard they go home and commence what they conceive to be the work of repentance. They renounce certain vices and follies; they clothe themselves in sackcloth; their tears flow very freely on account of what they have done; they weep before God! And yet with all that, their repentance is but a temporary repentance, and they go back to their sins again! Do you deny that such a penitence can exist? Let me tell you of a case. A certain man named Ahab coveted the vineyard of his neighbor, Naboth, who would not sell it for a price nor make an exchange. He consulted with his wife, Jezebel, who contrived to put Naboth to death, and thus secure the vineyard for the king. After Naboth was put to death, and Ahab had taken possession of the vineyard, the servant of the Lord met Ahab, and said to him, "Have you killed, and also taken possession? Thus says the Lord, in the place where the dogs licked the blood of Naboth shall the dogs lick your blood, even yours! Behold, I will bring evil upon you, and will take away your prosperity." We read that Ahab went away and humbled himself, and the Lord said, "Because Ahab humbles himself before Me, I will not bring evil in his days." He had granted him some kind of mercy, but we read in the very next chapter that Ahab rebelled, and in a battle in Ramoth-Gilead, according to the servant of the Lord, he was slain there so that "the dogs licked his blood" in the very vineyard of Naboth! You, too, I tell you, may humble yourselves before God for a time, and yet remain the slaves of your transgressions! You are afraid of damnation, but you are not afraid of sinning; you are afraid of hell—but you are not afraid of your iniquities! You are afraid of being cast into the pit of hell, but not afraid to harden your hearts against His commands! Is it not true, O sinner that you are trembling at hell? It is not the soul's state that troubles you, but hell! If hell were extinguished, your repentance would be extinguished! If the terrors awaiting you were withdrawn, you would sin with a higher hand than before—and your soul would be hardened and would rebel against its Sovereign. Be not deceived, my brethren! Examine yourselves whether you

are in the faith. Ask yourselves if you have that which is “repentance unto life,” for you may humble yourselves for a time, and yet never repent before God!

Beyond this many advance, and yet fall short of grace. It is possible that you may confess your sins, and yet may not repent. You may approach God and tell Him you are indeed a wretch; you may present a long list of your transgressions, and of the sins that you have committed without a sense of the wickedness of your guilt, without a spark of real hatred of your deeds. You may confess and acknowledge your transgressions, and yet have no abhorrence of sin. And if you do not, in the strength of God, resist sin—if you do not turn from it—this fancied repentance shall be but the gilding which displays the paint which decorates! You may even, I say, confess your faults, and yet have not repentance.

Once more, and then I have gone to the farthest thought I have to give on this point. You may do some work meet for repentance, and yet you may be impenitent! Let me give you a proof of this in a fact authenticated by inspiration.

Judas betrayed his Master. And after having done so, an overwhelming sense of the enormous evil he had committed seized upon him. His guilt buried all hope of repentance—and in the misery of desperation, not the grief of true regret—he confessed his sin to the high priests, crying, “I have sinned, in that I have betrayed innocent blood.” They said, “What is that to us, see you to that.” Whereupon he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple to show that he could not bear to carry the price of guilt upon him, and left them there. He went out, and was he saved? No. “He went out and hanged himself.” And even then the vengeance of God followed him—for when he had hanged himself, he fell from the height where he was suspended and was dashed to pieces. He was lost, and his soul perished. Yet see what this man did. He had sinned;

he confessed his wrong; he returned the silver. Still, after all that, he was a castaway. Does not this make us tremble? You see how possible it is to be the shape of the Christian so nearly, that wisdom itself, if it is only mortal, may be deceived!

II. Now, having thus warned you that there are many false kinds of repentance, I propose to occupy a short time by some remarks on TRUE REPENTANCE and the signs whereby we may discern whether we have that “repentance” which is “unto life.”

First of all let me correct one or two mistakes which those who are coming to Jesus Christ very often make. One is they frequently think they must have deep, horrible and awful manifestations of the terrors of law and of hell before they can be said to repent. How many have I conversed with who have said to me what I can only translate into English to you, this morning, something in this way—“I do not repent enough. I do not feel myself enough of a sinner. I have not been so gross and wicked a transgressor as many—I almost wish I had. Not because I love sin, but because then I think I would have deeper convictions of my guilt and feel more sure that I had truly come to Jesus Christ.” Now it is a great mistake to imagine that these terrible and horrible thoughts of a coming judgment have anything to do with the validity of “repentance.” They are very often not the gift of God at all but the insinuations of the devil! And even where the law works and produces these thoughts, you must not regard them as being part and parcel of “repentance.” They do not enter into the essence of repentance. “Repentance” is a hatred of sin! It is a turning from sin and a determination, in the strength of God, to forsake it. “Repentance” is a hatred of sin and a forsaking of it. It is possible for a man to repent without any terrific display of the terrors of the law. He may repent without having heard the trumpet sounds of Sinai—without having heard more than a distant rumble of its thunder! A man may repent entirely through the power of the voice of mercy. God opens some hearts to faith

as in the case of Lydia. Others He assaults with the sledge hammer of the wrath to come! Some He opens with the picklock of grace and some with the crowbar of the law. There may be different ways of getting there, but the question is, has he got there? Is he there? It often happens that the Lord is not in the tempest or in the earthquake but in the “still small voice.”

There is another mistake many poor people make when they are thinking about salvation, and that is that they cannot repent enough. They imagine that were they to repent up to a certain degree, they would be saved. “Oh, sir,” some of you will say, “I have not penitence enough!” beloved, let me tell you that there is not any eminent degree of “repentance” which is necessary to salvation! You know there are degrees of faith and yet the least faith saves. So there are degrees of repentance and the least repentance will save the soul if it is sincere! The Bible says, “He who believes shall be saved.” And when it says that, it includes the very smallest degree of faith. So when it says, “Repent and be saved,” it includes the man or woman who has the lowest degree of real repentance. Repentance, moreover, is never perfect in any man in this mortal state. We never get perfect faith so as to be entirely free from doubting. And we never get repentance which is free from some hardness of heart. The most sincere penitent that you know will feel himself to be partially impenitent. Repentance is also a continual lifelong act. It will continually grow. I believe a Christian on his deathbed will more bitterly repent than he ever did before. It is a thing to be done all your lifelong. Sinning and repenting—sinning and repenting make up a Christian’s life! Repenting and believing in Jesus —repenting and believing in Jesus make up the consummation of his happiness! You must not expect that you will be perfect in “repentance” before you are saved. No Christian can be perfect. “Repentance” is a grace. Some people preach it as a condition of salvation. Condition of nonsense! There are no conditions of salvation! God gives the salvation, Himself! And He only gives it to those to whom He will. He says, “I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.” If, then, God has given you

the least repentance—if it is sincere repentance—praise Him for it and expect that repentance will grow deeper and deeper as you go further on! Then this remark, I think, ought to be applied to all Christians—Christian men and women, you feel that you have not deep enough repentance—you feel that you have not large enough faith. What are you to do? Ask for an increase of faith and it will grow! So with repentance! Have you ever tried to get deep repentance? My friends, if you have failed, still trust in Jesus and try every day to get a penitential spirit. Do not expect—I say again—to have perfect repentance at first—sincere penitence you must have—and then under divine grace you will go on from strength to strength, until at last you shall hate and abhor sin as a serpent or a viper! And then shall you be near, very near, the perfection of repentance! These few thoughts, then, in opening the subject. And now you say, what are the signs of true “repentance” in the sight of God?

First, I tell you, there is always sorrow with it. No man ever repents of sin without having some kind of sorrow with it. More or less intense, it may be according to the way in which God calls him, and his previous manner of life—but there must be some sorrow. We do not care when it comes, but at some time or other it must come, or it is not the repentance of the Christian! I knew a man once who professed that he had repented, and he certainly was a changed character so far as the external was concerned; but I never could see that he had any real sorrow for sin. Neither when he professed to believe in Jesus, did I ever see any marks of penitence in him. I considered in that man it was a kind of ecstatic jump into grace, and I found out afterwards he had just as ecstatic a jump into guilt again! He was not a sheep of God, for he had not been washed in penitence—for all God’s people have to be washed there when converted from their sins. No man can come to Christ and know His pardon without feeling that sin is a hateful thing—for it put Jesus to death! You who have tearless eyes, unbended knees, unbroken hearts—how can you think you are saved? The gospel promised salvation only to those who really repent.

Lest, however, I should hurt some of you and make you feel what I do not intend, let me remark that I do not mean to say that you must shed actual tears. Some men are so hard in constitution that they could not shed a tear. I have known some who have been able to sigh and to groan, but tears would not come. Well, I say that though the tear often affords evidence of penitence, you may have “repentance unto life” without it. What I would have you understand is there must be some real sorrow. If the prayer may not be vocal, it must be secret. There must be a groan if there is no word. There must be a sigh if there is no tear, to show the repentance, even though it is but small.

There must be in this repentance, I think, not only sorrow, but there must be practice— practical repentance— *‘Tis not enough to say we’re sorry, and repent And then go on from day to day just as we always went.’* Many people are very sorry and very penitent for their past sins. Hear them talk. “Oh,” they say, “I deeply regret that I should ever have been a drunk. And I sincerely bemoan that I should have fallen into that sin. I deeply lament that I should have done so.” Then they go straight home and when one o’clock on Sunday comes, you will find them at it again! And yet such people say they have repented! Do you believe them, when they say they are sinners, but do not love sin? They may not love it for the time. But can they be sincerely penitent and then go and transgress, again, immediately in the same way as they did before? How can we believe you if you transgress again and again and do not forsake your sin? We know a tree by its fruit and you who are penitent will bring forth works of repentance! I have often thought it was a very beautiful instance, showing the power of penitence which a pious minister once related. He had been preaching on penitence and had, in the course of his sermon, he spoke of the sin of stealing. On his way home a labourer came alongside of him, and the minister observed that he had something under his smock-frock. He told him he need not accompany him farther, but the man persisted. At last he said, “I have a spade under my arm which I stole up at that farm. I heard you preaching about the sin of stealing, and I must

go and take it back.” That was sincere penitence which caused him to go back and replace the stolen article. It was like those South Sea Islanders of whom we read who stole the missionaries’ articles of apparel, and furniture, and everything out of their houses, but when they were converted, they brought them all back! But many of you say you repent, yet nothing comes of it. It is not worth the snap of a finger! People who have committed a robbery, or have kept a gambling house do not sincerely repent when they are very careful that all the proceeds shall be laid out to their hearts’ best comfort! True “repentance” will yield works meet for repentance. It will be practical repentance. Yet farther, you may know whether your repentance is practical by this test. Does it last, or does it not? Many of your repentances are like the hectic flush upon the cheek of the consumptive person which is no sign of health. Many a time have I seen a young man in a flow of newly acquired but unsound godliness and he has thought he was about to repent of his sins. For some hours such a one was deeply penitent before God—and for weeks he relinquishes his follies. He attends the house of prayer and converses as a child of God. But back he goes to his sins as the dog returns to his vomit! The evil spirit has gone “back to his house and has taken with him seven others more wicked than himself. And the last state of that man is worse than the first.” How long has your penitence lasted? Did it continue for months? Or did it come upon you and go away suddenly? You said, “I will join the church—I will do this, that, and the other, for God’s cause.” Are your works lasting? Do you believe your repentance will last 6 months? Will it continue for 12 months?

Yet again, I must ask you one question more. Do you think you’d repent of your sins if no punishment were placed before you? Or do you repent because you know you shall be punished forever if you remain in your sins? Suppose I tell you there is no hell at all—that, if you choose, you may swear—and if you will, you may live without God? Suppose there were no reward for virtue and no punishment for sin—which would you choose? Can you honestly say this morning, “I think, I know, by the grace

of God, I would choose righteousness if there were no reward for it, if there were nothing to be gained by righteousness, and nothing to be lost by sin”? Every sinner hates his sin when he comes near to the mouth of hell. Every murderer hates his crime when he comes to the gallows. I never found a child hate its fault so much as when it was going to be punished for it. If you had no cause to dread the pit of hell—if you knew that you might give up your life to sin and that you might do so with impunity— would you still feel that you hated sin and that you could not, would not, commit sin except through the infirmity of the flesh? Would you still desire holiness? Would you still desire to live like Christ? If so— if you can say this in sincerity—if you thus turn to God and hate your sin with an everlasting hatred, you need not fear but that you have a “repentance” which is “unto life.”

III. Now comes the concluding and third point, and that THE BLESSED BENEFICENCE OF GOD in granting to men “repentance unto life.” “Repentance,” my dear friends, is the GIFT of God! It is one of those spiritual favours which ensure eternal life. It is the marvel of divine mercy that it not only provides the way of salvation, that it not only invites men to receive grace, but that it positively makes men willing to be saved. God punished His Son, Jesus Christ, for our sins and therein He provided salvation for all His lost children! He sends His minister. The minister bids men repent, and believe and he labours to bring them to God. They will not listen to the call, and they despise the minister; but then another messenger is sent, a heavenly ambassador who cannot fail. He summons men to repent and turn to God. Their thoughts are a little wayward, but after He, the divine Spirit, pleads with them, they forget what manner of men they were, and they repent and turn! Now, what would we do if we had been treated as God were? If we had made a supper or a feast and sent out messengers to invite the guests to come, what would we do? Do you think we would take the trouble to go round and visit them all and get them to come? And when they sat down and said they could not eat, would we open their mouths? If they still declared they could not eat, would we still

make them eat? Ah, beloved, I am inclined to think you would not do so! If you had signed the letters of invitation and the invited would not come to your feast, would you not say, "You shall not have it"? But what does God do? He says, "Now I will make a feast. I will invite the people and if they do not come in, My ministers shall go out and fetch them in bodily. I will say to My servants, "Go you out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in, that they may partake of the feast I have prepared.'" Is it not a stupendous act of divine mercy that He actually makes them willing? He does not do it by force, but uses a sweet spiritual persuasion. They are first as unwilling to be saved as they can be. "But," says God, "that is nothing, I have power to make you turn to Me, and I will." The Holy Spirit then brings home the Word of God to the consciences of His children in so blessed a manner that they can no longer refuse to love Jesus! Mark you, not by any force against the will, but by a sweet spiritual influence changing the will. O, you lost and ruined sinners, stand here and admire my Master's mercy! He sets not only a feast of good things before men, but He induces them to come and partake of them! He compels them to continue feasting until He carries them to the everlasting, eternal mansion! And as He bears them up, He says to each one, "I have loved you with an everlasting love, therefore, by My loving-kindness I have drawn you. Now, do you love Me?" "Oh, Lord," they cry, "Your grace in bringing us here proves that You do love us, for we were unwilling to go. You said, you shall go—we said we would not go, but You have made us go. And now, Lord, we bless You, and love You for that force. It was sweet constraint." I was a struggling captive, but I am now made willing— *"Oh, sovereign grace, my heart subdue! I would be led in triumph too—A willing captive to my Lord To sing the honours of His Word."* Well now, what do you say? Some of you will say, "Sir, I have been trying to repent for a long time. In pains and afflictions I have been praying and trying to believe, and doing all I can." I will tell you another thing—you will try a long time before you will be able to do it. That is not the way to get it. I heard of two gentlemen traveling. One of them said to the other, "I do not know how it is, but you always seem to remember your wife and family and all that is doing at home. And you seem as if you connected all things

around you with them. But I try to bring mine to my recollection constantly, and yet I never can." "No," said the other, "that is the very reason—because you try. If you could connect them with every little circumstance you meet, you would easily remember them. I think at such-and-such a time—now they are rising. At another time—now they are at prayers; at such-and-such a time—now they are having their breakfast. In this way I have them still before me." I think the same thing happens with regard to "repentance." If a man says, "I want to believe," and tries by some mechanical means to work himself into repentance, it is an absurdity and he will never accomplish it! The way for him to repent is by God's grace to believe—to believe and think on Jesus. If he pictures to himself the wounded bleeding side, the crown of thorns, the tears of anguish—if he takes a vision of all that Christ suffered, I will be bound for it—he will turn to Him in repentance! I would stake what reputation I may have in spiritual things upon this—that a man cannot, under God's Holy Spirit, contemplate the cross of Christ without a broken heart! If it is not so, my heart is different from anyone else's. I have never known a man who has thought upon, and taken a view of the cross who has not found that it beget "repentance," and beget faith! We look at Jesus Christ if we would be saved, and we then say, "Amazing sacrifice! That Jesus thus died to save sinners." If you want faith, remember HE gives it. If you want repentance, HE gives it! If you want everlasting life, HE gives it liberally. He can force you to feel your great sin and cause you to repent by the sight of Calvary's cross— *and the sound of the greatest, deepest death shriek, "Eloi! Eloi! Lama Sabacthani?" "My God! My God! Why have You forsaken Me?"* That will beget "repentance." It will make you weep and say, "Alas, and did my Saviour bleed? And did my Sovereign die for me?" Then beloved, if you would have "repentance," my best advice to you is—look to Jesus! And may the blessed Giver of all "repentance unto salvation" guard you from the false repentances which I have described and give you that "repentance" which exists unto life—

"Repent! The voice celestial cries. Nor longer dare delay. The wretch that

*scorns the mandate, dies, And meets a fiery day! No more the sovereign
eye of God Overlooks the crimes of men; His heralds are dispatched
abroad To warn the world of sin! The summons reach thro' all the earth Let
earth attend and fear! Listen, you men of royal birth, And let your vassals
hear! Together in His presence bow, And all your guilt confess— Embrace
the blessed Saviour now, Nor trifle with His grace. Bow, before the awful
trumpet sounds, And calls you to His bar— For mercy knows the appointed
bound And turns to vengeance there.”*