

Except Ye Repent

Introduction

The three words of this title come from Luke 13:5, which reads, "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish". Plainly, then, the tragic alternative to repentance is eternal perdition.

In view of this fact, it is extremely important that everyone knows what repentance is and how it is accomplished.

Repentance Is More Than Reformation

To reform is to "improve one's character or conduct; to become better; to behave better; to give up misconduct; to make better by removing faults or defects." One who genuinely reforms will, from that moment on, live a better life. And certainly this is to be desired.

However, reformation falls short in at least one vital particular - it does nothing about the past. It leaves upon the pages of God's record all the sins that a person has committed. Consequently, it leaves the sinner still under the sentence of death.

Suppose that a criminal who has been guilty of many and various offenses against the law decides to reform. From that moment on, he determines to be a law-abiding citizen. This would be commendable, but it would not absolve him from the guilt of his past crimes. If he is apprehended, or if he surrenders himself, he will still be called upon to pay for his past crimes, unless he is given a pardon.

The same is true of the sinner in relation to his past sins.

What Is Repentance?

Repentance is, first of all, a turning away from all sin. And, so far as this first aspect is concerned, it closely resembles reformation.

But repentance further involves turning to God, in believing prayer, for forgiveness and cleansing from all sin. Such prayer is not necessarily vocal, but it usually is. The repentant person confesses to God that he is a sinner and asks for forgiveness. If he obeys the gospel, he can rest assured that God will forgive, for His Word promises, "If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins" (1 John 1:9).

The Basis of Repentance

How is genuine repentance brought about? Paul explained, "For godly sorrow worketh repentance to salvation" (2 Corinthians 7:10). Before a person can repent, he must feel sorrow for his sins. And this must be godly sorrow. For someone to be sorry merely because they have brought trouble upon him, is not enough. He must be sorry because he has broken the commandments of God, spurned His gospel, and thereby grieved Him days without number.

Such godly sorrow is the only motivating force for real repentance.

Repentance and the Holy Ghost Baptism

A person cannot receive the Holy Ghost before repentance. Jesus said that the "world" could not receive this experience (John 14:17). He meant that those who were unwilling to give up the carnal things of the world, through repentance, could not receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.

Peter made this plain in Acts 2:38 - "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". It was no accident that he mentioned repentance first. In God's divine order, repentance must precede water baptism and receiving the Holy Ghost.

The requirements for receiving the Holy Spirit are repentance and faith. In many cases, those who tarry for this spiritual experience without receiving it simply have not repented. If and when this is true, it is useless for such a one to praise God with the expectation of receiving the Holy Ghost. He should first repent and claim God's promise of forgiveness. As his burdens lift because of confession of sin and as he feels God's love and mercy, he will naturally begin to worship God. And God will pour out His Spirit upon this repentant, believing, worshipping soul!

Time for Repentance is Limited

The time to repent is strictly limited by the extent of earthly life. There can be no repentance after death. Since in the normal course of events no one knows how long he will live, it is perilous indeed to procrastinate. The Bible declares, "It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment" (Hebrews 9:27).

The time of repentance is further limited by the duration of a person's capability of being impressed by conviction. A continued refusal to repent when called by God's Spirit brings hardness of heart. Paul spoke of people who were "past feeling" (Ephesians 4:19). Such people no longer feel God's Spirit leading them to serve them. They have lost all desire for repentance.

The apostle also asked this question: "Despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?" (Romans 2:4). Think of the goodness of God to you, and surely your heart will be inclined toward repentance.

The Lord is "not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

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