

# THE DUTY OF REPENTANCE

By J. L. Dagg

“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 3:2) “The times of this ignorance God winked at, but now commandeth all men everywhere to repent.” (Acts 7:30)

We have seen that religion is not confined to the intellect, but brings into exercise the strongest feelings of the heart. Love to God, and delight in his will and works, have been shown to be essential elements; and these are affections which do not play on the surface, but move the soul from its lowest depths. If, in our study of religious truth, we have proceeded thus far without feeling, without strong feeling, our labor has been unprofitable, and we would do well to begin anew.

No time should be lost in securing the main end for which God’s truth should be studied; and if heretofore we have treated it as we do the truths of other science, we should persevere in this course no longer, lest the profane use of sacred things become habitual, and provoke God to deny us his illuminating grace.

Love to God, and delight in his will and works, are holy and pleasurable exercises of the mind, but religion in a sinful being is necessarily attended with pain. To be at ease in sin, is a proof that the heart is dead, “dead in trespasses and sins.” (Ephesians 2:1)

Every one whom the spirit of God quickens, becomes sensible of sin, and feels the pang of a broken heart on account of it. The anguish of remorse may be alleviated by a sense of pardoning mercy, but the joy of pardon cannot stop the flow of penitence. Like the woman to whom much had been forgiven, the believer, while receiving his pardon with overflowing joy, does not lose his sense of sin, but is ready to wash the feet of his Lord with tears. These tears have their sweetness.

The necessity of repentance is abundantly taught in the sacred volume. The language of Christ is explicit, “Except ye repent ye shall all likewise perish.” (Luke 13:3) We have no right to consider ourselves in the way to eternal life, if we are strangers to repentance. Nor will it suffice to have been at some time alarmed about our sin. A false repentance, which needs to be repented of, satisfies many a deluded soul.

Genuine repentance is a deep-felt and abiding sense of sin, a condemnation of ourselves before God on account of it, a turning away from it with abhorrence and loathing, and a fixed purpose of soul never again to commit it, or be at peace with it. This sense of sin drives the soul to Christ, and unites with the exercise of faith in Christ, to distinguish genuine religion from the counterfeits with which the world abounds.

Reason teaches that it is the duty of men, as sinners, to repent of their sins. When one man has given just occasion of offense to another, by the common consent of mankind it is his duty to be sorry for his offense. If we have no sorrow for having offended God, we treat him with less respect than is due to a fellow-worm. Not to be sorry is to justify the offense, and virtually to repeat it. God searches our hearts, and knows our inmost thoughts, and if we remain impenitent after having sinned against him, it is as if we told him to his face that we did right to treat his authority with contempt. Our impenitence insults the majesty of heaven, and defies his wrath.

But the duty of repentance is not left to be inferred from the common sense of mankind. It is true, that no command to repent is found in the Decalogue. That summary of duty was given to men as men, and not as sinners. It was not designed to restore men to the favor of God, and therefore, did not treat with them as sinners. But when the gospel began to be preached, its first proclamation was, "Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." (Matthew 3:3)

In all the ministry of the gospel, this is the first duty required of men. Without it, not a step can be taken in the way of return to God, and without it, there is no possibility of obtaining the divine favor. "Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." It is, therefore, of the very highest importance to understand what repentance is, and to have such views of truth as will tend to produce it in our hearts.

When we approach a fellow-man whom we have offended, to offer to him our confessions, and seek his pardon, it is expected that we shall be sensible of having done wrong, shall regret the deed, blame ourselves for it, acknowledge his right to be displeased, and resolve, perhaps promise, to do so no more. All this must exist in repentance toward God, if we do not mean to repeat our insults to the Searcher of hearts. We may deceive a man like ourselves with professions of penitence that are insincere, and designed merely to propitiate him, but God cannot be deceived, and to attempt it is to mock him.

In order to sincere repentance toward God, it is indispensable that we should understand that we have sinned against him. Men do not usually compare their actions with his righteous law, but with the actions of other men. We walk according to the course of this world, and are satisfied if we conform to such rules of conduct as are esteemed reputable among men. Multitudes pass through life without any proper conviction of sin, and die impenitent, and who have never examined and tried their conduct by a higher rule. To undeceive such persons, and to strip them of such false and delusive pleas, it is necessary to convince them that the course of this world is downward and wicked, and that their conformity to it should alarm rather than satisfy them.

We do not truly repent of an offense to a fellow-man, and sincerely ask pardon, unless we believe that he has just cause to be offended. If his displeasure has arisen from mere mistake, we expect to appease him by giving such information as will correct his mistake. If he has become displeased through mere captiousness, we may justify ourselves before him, and convict him of the wrong. In order to the exercise of genuine repentance towards God, we must know that he has a right to be displeased with us, that he has made no mistake in the matter, and that every attempt of ours to convict him of wrong in the case, will be abortive. To impress all this deeply on our minds, it is only necessary we should be fully convinced that we are under just condemnation from God, and that all our pleas in self-justification are without foundation.

Good men have been accustomed to draw motives to penitence from the doctrines that have been mentioned. David humbled himself before God, with a confession of his natural depravity. "Behold, I was shapen in iniquity; and in sin did my mother conceive me." (Psalm 51:5) He viewed his sin with the greater abhorrence, as he saw and confessed the justice of the condemnation which it received from his Judge. "That thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest." (Psalm 51:4)

True repentance is rendered more deep and pungent by a view of the wretchedness and helplessness which sin has brought upon us. So Paul exclaimed, "O wretched man that I am; who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Romans 7:24)

—The Baptist Pillar

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