

Don't Expect a Perfect Repentance

Paul Washer | heartcrymissionary.com

Question: One of the responses we get to a lot of people who have never heard biblical preaching before - maybe you could say "hard" preaching that causes you to examine yourself, they'll send us an email saying: I'm trying to be saved, but I can't. I'm trying to repent, but I can't. I'm trying to believe, but I can't. How would you counsel them?

Paul: Well, first of all, there is also another fad out there that I have seen. You know, in America, basically, the offering of salvation is very superficial and people superficially, they pray this little prayer - I'm saved. Well, there is this whole other group of people that are rising up that are reacting against that. And what they are, I've come in contact with them - it's amazing. They're almost saying: I'm seeking God. I've been seeking God for months or even a year. There's just no genuine repentance. There's no faith. And they're almost, it's as though they're seeking to brag and boast and point out that they're not like all these superficial people; that they're completely different and their testimony for some reason will be heightened because of all of this.

Listen, I would tell them that they've moved out of the context of evangelical Christianity. The Bible commands you to repent. I would go through text after text saying this is what the Bible commands you to do.

But then, I would also help them with the Scriptures to discern what is biblical repentance. I would tell them all the Scriptures that command us to believe, but then I would help them understand biblical faith.

Now what do I mean by that? If I go through all the characteristics of repentance in the Scriptures, and I give someone: this is a perfect biblical definition and these are the perfect expounded biblical characteristics of repentance, and this is what you must have to truly repent unto salvation, no one's going to be saved.

You see, repentance, when it is portrayed in the Bible, we have all of these characteristics of what genuine biblical repentance is. When a person comes to Christ, we can't expect them to have a full-blown mature repentance. They will have the kernels of repenting. They will be understanding something of their sin. They will be broken over their sin to a certain degree. But even after they're saved, they're going to grow in repentance. Their repentance is going to become deeper. Those characteristics are going to manifest themselves in a greater way. So we shouldn't be telling converts that they must have this exquisite, perfect biblical repentance in their life in order to have repented unto salvation... because you don't even have that. You are growing in repentance. It's the same way with faith. Their faith isn't going to match this pristine biblical picture of what faith is. They won't have this exceedingly deep faith because I'm even growing in that after 26 years of following Christ.

So we don't want to make it too hard for people to come into the Kingdom. We go through repentance and we go through the characteristics and we help them see: Are there the seeds of genuine repentance? Are there the buds, the characteristics of genuine repentance? Are you believing as a child in Christ? Have you thrown yourself upon Him? And I think a lot of these people are struggling because they actually believe they have to have this perfect manifestation of these two things to be saved and it's not true.

(From a sermon) Now, let's talk about this for a moment because there's something that's been bothering me in the last year or so with the uprise of so much good theology and people taking true conversion seriously. I think there's also a problem. I have so many people who come to me and they doubt the assurance of their salvation because in their scrutiny of their own repentance, they're expecting - they're almost demanding that the saving repentance be the repentance of a mature believer of 30 years. They scrutinize every aspect of their life and if they don't look like a Puritan, they say I can't be converted. What you need to understand is repentance in its initial seed is simply a changing of the mind. God is all. I need Him. You say, that's it? It can be. I can't save myself. I'm lost. I need a Savior. You say, but the Bible describes repentance in so many ways. Yes, it does, but are you expecting a full-blown repentance the very second God begins to work in your heart? As I study repentance in Scripture, I look back at the moment I was converted and my repentance was a very singular thing. I need to be saved. But now after 25 years as I grow in Scripture, the repentance matures and deepens. But you err, young person, when you scrutinize your life to wonder whether or not you're saved, and you're looking for repentance that can only be found in someone who has walked with God for decades.

I hope I'm making myself clear. I believe in repentance. But repentance can merely mean: I'm falling! And I can't save myself! It's turning from self-worth. It is turning from ability. And giving up, as Brother Charles once told me. It's just giving up. I can't! I collapse! I'm gone.

I have a thing that I worked through several years ago on the doctrine of repentance. If you take everything the Bible teaches about repentance, you will have a very big book. Amazing things are said. And they all should be learned. We should grow into them. But to take the entire full-orbed biblical course of repentance and demand it before someone can have assurance of salvation is absolutely preposterous! We have a lot of young people and a lot of other people who are not assured of their salvation because they're expecting to see in their wee years as a babe in Christ a full-blown sanctification of a man 40 years in the faith. We need to be careful. Save me! I'm lost!

And even a great deal of that clamoring for salvation? Don't expect it or demand it to be absolutely pure. Some of it will just simply be self-preservation. Remember, God saves men who repent; not men who repent perfectly. God saves brokenhearted people over even the ones who are brokenhearted over the fact that they're not brokenhearted enough. And even those

who think they're brokenhearted enough, when God knows they're not hardly brokenhearted at all.

This will add fuel to the fire to my enemies, but in my conversion experience, to be honest with you, sin was not the foremost thing in my mind the day I was converted. The foremost thing in my mind was: He loves me. He's everywhere. He's everything. Now you say, okay, what are you saying? But, even though I was a heinous sinner, I was a horrible man - at that moment, the only thing that was really real to me for several weeks was the love of God. But then as I began to study the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit began to work, He began to work repentance that He continues on till this day.

So see, let's be careful here. You can define people out of the Kingdom of God. You can demand so much of a man, of salvation, more than even what God demands at first. A simply: I can't. I can't. And then faith. Faith. We are saved by faith. Of a mustard seed. Believe! Well, how do I believe? Alright, you've already just said you can't. Now, go one step further: He can. And will. And desires to. Do you believe that? You say, is that it? No, it's the beginning. But it is real. Well, how will I know it's real? Because it will keep going and growing. In the same way your repentance will grow and grow and grow, your faith and the reality of it will grow and grow. But I am not going to expect from my ten-month-old daughter what I expect from my 6 1/2 year old son.

Also, I want to talk about pride. You know I love the Puritans. You know that I love all that kind of stuff. I want to talk to you about a root of pride I see springing up among people who embrace this kind of lovely truth. It's almost like a badge of spirituality when they will so-called struggle of whether or not they're saved. And what they're just trying to prove to people is my version of conversion is not as superficial as everyone else's. I'm going to wrestle and I'm going to fight and I'm going to do all this stuff. And I don't even know if I'm saved after that. And you can think you're bringing glory to God. There is a sense when some men are awakened to their sin and they must break through and they must struggle and so and so forth. I agree with all of that, but be very careful that we're not just reacting against the superficial gospel of others. God is glorified when a heart is open and they say I'm falling, but He can! And they stand on that. Oh, it's so glorious! You are saved by faith, but it is not the quality of this faith, the greatness of this faith. It's the quality, the greatness, and the character of One in Whom you believe. This is so important. Look unto Jesus! Look! Just look unto Jesus.

And what terrifies me so much, you talk to people on the streets: Are you going to heaven? Yes, I'm going to heaven. Why? I prayed and asked Jesus to come into my heart. Now, look what they're doing. They are trusting in a transaction they made. They are trusting in the sincerity of a prayer. But then again, we must be careful. Doctor, heal thyself. Because others are trusting in the magnitude of their repentance. And others are trusting in the magnitude of their faith. When what I love to hear is: I'm looking unto Him. I'm looking unto Him. And I would be terrified to take my eyes off of Him. I'm looking unto Jesus.