

Have we forgotten to warn? (Part 4)

“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Lu 13:5b)

By Jay Wegter

“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (Luke 13:3-5). Do these words sound severe to you? Consider that because they have come from the Lord who is *love incarnate*, they must be words of love. It is loving for Him to tell us to repent. It is indifference not to. An inescapable day of accounting is coming in which men shall answer for every idle word (Mt 12:36).

I. The nature of repentance

Biblical repentance toward God is a main foundation stone throughout Scripture (Mk 1:15; 6:12; Lu 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 11:18; 20:21; 26:20). It is a most dangerous thing to be mistaken about repentance—especially about its nature and necessity. The elements of repentance can be summarized as follows:

A. Repentance is a thorough change in a man’s heart. Sensuality, pride, and selfishness come naturally to us, but when there is repentance, a man takes God’s side against his own sin. The natural love of sin is cast out by the Spirit, enabling a man to repent. The knowledge of sin causes the eyes to be opened wherein a man sees the breadth and the unbending rigor of God’s holy law. He sees himself as guilty and corrupt; his pride is crushed; he is devastated by the fact that his sin is against God Almighty.¹

B. Repentance works sorrow for sin, a deep remorse which cuts to the heart (Acts 2:37). The penitent man knows for a fact that God is dishonored by his sin and that the man has injured his own soul by sinning (1 Pet 2:11).

C. True repentance produces confession of sin in which a man speaks to God, praying about the state of his own soul. He acknowledges his specific iniquities to God (Lu 18:9-4; 19:1-10).

D. True repentance is a thorough breaking off from sin. It is not merely sorrow for sin; it is a forsaking of sin. A new ‘king’ now reigns in the heart. The old man, the *‘imposter king’* has been put off. What follows is a daily fight to get victory. The penitent man learns to glorify God in his labors, and his breaking off with sin means he is living a new life (Rom 6).

E. Repentance shows itself as a settled habit of a deep hatred of all sin—it cleaves to the good, and abhors the evil; it does not make a provision for the flesh. The penitent man is deeply conscious of his own infirmities. And, because he has a new bias against sin, he now walks to please Christ (2 Cor 5:9), he hates every false way (Ps 119:128).

II. The necessity of Repentance

A. True repentance is never alone in the heart of the believer, but is always joined to a lively faith in the Person of Christ. Make no mistake, repentance will be the experience of every true believer. This needs to be shouted from the rooftops because there is a widespread counterfeit

gospel today which suggests that no repentance is required for salvation. Repentance cannot be equated with an outward adherence to religious forms, for it is the business of the heart. True repentance is ongoing; the believing sinner clings to God as his best Friend.

B. Countless churchgoers come short of true repentance by bringing their troubles to ministers and counselors and stopping there, but not going to the Savior. True repentance is Spirit-given; enabling the sinner to '*close*' with Christ'. This means that no repentance ever lasts that looks more at Sinai (the Law) than at Calvary. In other words, the terror of the law on the conscience and depth of remorse alone cannot produce a saved soul and a changed life. Repentance *toward God* (Acts 20:21) and *an appeal to Christ* for a cleansed conscience is the gospel response of saving faith (1 Pet 3:21).

C. Every person needs repentance; for all are the sinful seed of Adam (Rom 5:12). The necessity of repentance is imbued upon us by our Lord who warns that without it, we will perish (Mt 18:3; Lu 13:5). Why is repentance so needful? Why can there be no forgiveness without repentance? Again, lest one should make a savior of his repentance, we reiterate, it's the blood of the Lamb that atones, not the depth of one's contrition. But, in order to taste divine pardon, God requires that the rebel throw down his arms (his weapons). For, sin is open war waged against God. How can a man be forgiven and justified if he does not hate the sins that are to be forgiven? For, to remain a companion of those sins would be to remain an enemy of God who is yet armed against God (Jas 4:4). My friends, it is not legalistic to say these things, but they will sound foreign to an *antinomian ear* that has been soothed and tickled by years of hyper-grace teaching.

D. True repentance takes God's side against sin, especially acknowledging what sin deserves from God (i.e. His eternal wrath). Without repentance, there can be no true happiness for the disciple. For, the conscience must be satisfied in Christ's Person and finished work, and in the deliverance from sin the Lord grants to genuine believers. Living with a *détente* (a treaty) with sin cannot produce peace of conscience. Sin not repented of is a great burden; there can be no real comfort. Scripture states that repentance is *Godward*. ". . . solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of *repentance toward God* and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). In false repentance, a man may leave off certain sins in an attempt to reduce the accusations of conscience. But, that is not repentance toward God. Godward repentance is occupied with God's holiness. In genuine repentance there is a 180 degree change in direction, the believer now walks resolutely with his back to sin and his face toward God. And because the Christian has been given a new prejudice against sin (by means of the Spirit), the 'house' of the inward man is ordered so that sin is cast out, and God alone is on the throne. There is no other divine plan for peace, safety, and salvation.

E. Repentance prepares the heart for the employments of heaven, for there will be no activity in heaven for a heart that loves sin and has never prayed to the Lamb for His redeeming holy love. Oh, my friend do you feel intensely the necessity of repentance toward God? No one ever reached heaven without repentance. There is no true gospel without repentance, only manmade earthly counterfeits and antinomian substitutes. Be warned, those who have relied upon a gospel without repentance (a gospel that allows one to keep his sin), will hear from the

Lord, “Depart from me, I never knew you” (Mt 7:23).

F. The genuine believer knows all too well that there can be no happiness without a vigorous quarrel with sin; a fight unto death. But, by way of contrast, the false Christian finds that his conscience makes him a coward—he flees its accusations and judgments. He fills his life with busyness and diversions, for He hates to be alone with his troubled conscience. Countless false believers have been lulled to sleep beneath pulpits that offer safety and comfort by insulating the conscience from conviction, but do not call for self-examination and repentance. What a day of reckoning it will be for pastors who have been complicit with their hearers’ practice of ‘bribing’ of the conscience. Much of Evangelicalism has become mute about *the destiny of the impenitent, the cumulative nature of sin, and the iron chains formed by delayed repentance.*

G. Because we are made in God’s moral image, the more impenitent a man is, the more miserable he will be despite his accomplishments or his upbeat exterior. The impenitent man seeks to hush his conscience by the praise of man (Jn 5:44; 12:43), by the humdrum routine of his labors, and by his pastimes and diversions. But, the solemn clock of conscience will ultimately chime, bringing everlasting wretchedness. Without repentance, there is no peace and no heaven. Do not let anyone delude you proclaims the apostle Paul.

But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and *there must be no* filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (Eph 5:3-6).

Do not be deluded, not even by your pastors, for ministers frequently omit the necessity of repentance. Countless pulpits (by what is not said) will seek to persuade you that it is possible to go to heaven without repentance.

H. Only those prepared by the holy Spirit go to heaven. Let the solemnity of this thought weigh upon you: the impenitent man is unfit for heaven. And, because he does not love God and hate sin, there’s not a single thing for him to do in heaven. Every truly saved person has hated his sin, confessed it, and forsaken it. Thus, by the grace of God he can therefore say, “By the grace of God, I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10).

III. The encouragement to repent

A. Now, in regard to encouragement to repent, we have a merciful High Priest who is at the right hand of the Father (Heb 4:15-16). We must go to Him with our old sinful habits, our darling sins that we are slow to give up. For, sin is not static, when it is left alone, it grows almost imperceptibly from cobwebs into iron chains. You have a personal enemy the devil; be sure you know the Lord, who is the ‘destroyer of the works of the devil’ (1 Jn 3:8). For, the evil one will not part with his *lawful captives* without an immense fight.

B. Repentance is by the grace of God (2 Tim 2:25). Christ Jesus has purchased repentance for His people. Thus, the great argument to repent is that Christ is able to save to the uttermost

and grant remission of sins (Heb 7:25). He came to seek and to save lost sinners (Lu 19:10). He promises that those who come to Him will not be cast out (Jn 1:12; 6:37). It is those who confess and forsake their sin who will find mercy (Prov 28:13). God delights in the sacrifices of a broken and contrite heart (Ps 51:17). The accounts in Scripture of men being forgiven of great wickedness are intended to lead us to repentance (consider the pardon received by wicked king Manasseh, by the thief on the cross, etc.).

C. Countless churchgoers have never repented, they remain in a halting, double-minded, lingering state of indecision concerning their sin. Be warned! The impenitent are traveling toward hell and getting closer every day. There is no greater folly than remaining an impenitent man. God's wrath will be poured out without mercy upon those who have been exposed to the light, but have spurned divine mercy. To the churchgoer, the biblical message of repentance ought to be filled with urgency: *Where is your trust laid? By your hand, or by the Person and work of Christ? Where is your hope? What is the foundation of your soul? Is it that you regard your pastor to be superior to other ministers? Or, perhaps that you trust that your church holds certain views truer to Scripture than other assemblies?* Do not imagine that relying upon these sentiments will save you, for false trust and false faith are rampant today.

D. You must act! Come out from the world; forsake your sin; take up your cross. Tell God the wants of your soul. Tell God you are a poor, weak creature, a defiled sinner. Bring your sin sickness, your malady of soul to the Jesus, the Great Physician. There is no repentance without that. He will save your soul, the Lord will not refuse or despise you; go to Him with the resolve to break off all forms of sin. Do not be ashamed and afraid to repent of your personal sin.

E. True repentance is supported by two pillars. The first is *repentance toward God* and the second is *faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21)*. He will not crush a bruised reed or extinguish smoking flax (Is 42:3). He is friend of sinners—He demonstrates His friendship in granting them repentance and pardon. “Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom 2:4). Those who are truly saved, keep up their repentance until glory. They are very careful, lest through neglect of repenting of “little sins” those transgressions should grow into bonds that corrupt the soul and hold it fast. True believers are lively in repentance, they keep up their repentance until the last day of their life. They seek daily absolution and, as the Passover was eaten with bitter herbs, they rejoice in the freeness of Christ's forgiveness, but hate sin in its vileness and bitterness.

IV. Evidence of Scriptural faith and repentance

A. Have you applied the Scriptural test to your repentance faith? According to James 2:14-26, there is a kind of faith that cannot save a man. There is a ‘species’ of faith that is dead and useless. It will not suffice to bring a man to heaven. It does not do the will of God the Father (Mt 7:21). The book of James is addressing the disturbing fact that not all who profess faith in Christ have a living faith, for it is possible to be self-deceived.ⁱⁱ It is possible to listen to the Word of God on Sunday, nodding in agreement, and yet be self-deceived concerning the state

of one's soul. For, Scripture states, "For just as the body without *the* spirit is dead, so also faith without works is dead" (Jas 2:26).

B. The criterion for true faith described in James chapter two (faith evidenced by works), is further expanded by a 'test' of genuine faith in chapter one: "If anyone thinks himself to be religious (professes to be so), and yet does not bridle his tongue but deceives his *own* heart, this man's religion is worthless" (Jas 1:26). Thus, if a person professes to have genuine religion, yet does not control his tongue, or have a compassionate heart (Jas 2:14-17), or a clean life (Jas 1:27), he is deceived. "But prove yourselves doers of the word, and not merely hearers who delude (*deceive*) themselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks at his natural face in a mirror; for *once* he has looked at himself and gone away, he has immediately forgotten what kind of person he was" (Jas 1:23-24).

C. James is utterly clear, those who are righteous by faith (justified by believing the gospel) will also be righteous in practice (see also 1 Jn 2:3-6). If a person has life in God, that life will be worked out in the community; in his or her relationships. So if a person claims to have faith, and has no deeds, can such a faith save him? No, it cannot because it is a professed faith that is false; it is bereft of works. There is great danger attached to a profession of faith that closely resembles the real thing, but is dead, spurious, and counterfeit. This is precisely what James is addressing, namely that it is common for church-goers to assume that a mere *statement of faith* is one's entryway to heaven. That is the real danger.

D. We are not talking about the error of thinking that salvation is merited by one's works, no, the real danger is to take refuge in a faith that is false. Over 350 years ago Puritan Thomas Manton confronted the same problem in churches. He saw that many pulpits offered sermons which affirmed personal worth and which soothed consciences, but did not warn the impenitent. Manton notes that it is easy to fill arenas when warnings are absent and the message is: *you are important, and not in any real danger*. Not much has changed in three and one half centuries! How timely is the message in the book of James.

E. James urges us to 'take the test' of genuine faith. Do you know what species of faith you possess, do you know what kind of faith the test reveals? Can the faith you claim to have save you from hell? My friends, do not take this next statement in a wrong manner: *what James is imbuing upon us is that there is a certain danger in being in a place where the Word of God is taught!* And, why is it dangerous? Answer: because if ministers do not press upon their hearers the absolute necessity of repentance, the congregants will assume that their profession of faith is genuine, and that no test or examination of one's *faith claim* is needed. Now here is the 'rub', to preach that God requires repentance and holiness is an irritant to many of the church. And why? Because it is highly disturbing to their carnal security. And, as a case in point, the faithful minister who preaches self-examination and repentance, and who frequently warns of the error of presumption may face more opposition from the person who sits under the gospel, than from an outright pagan! Here's a sample scenario, *church attender to minister:* "Pastor, what do you mean, Scripture advises a biblical 'test' of my faith?" "Shouldn't a profession of faith be sufficient in itself?"

F. Puritan Thomas Manton's words ring true in every generation, namely that vast numbers in

churches with an inflated membership have no interest in testifying works, no interest in the salvation of their neighbors, and no response to the call to a holy life. You'd better make sure of your salvation, for we live in an age in which the word 'faith' is tossed about, completely divorced from its biblical definition. For, there are 'faith-based' organizations, faith-based values, faith journeys. This ubiquitous 'generic faith' is not saving faith, it is not the kind of faith that James is talking about. Only faith as defined by Scripture is the basis for acceptance with God. And, the faith which truly saves always has a lifestyle which gives evidence of its existence (Jas 2:20-25). It is faith and repentance alone that saves, but the faith that saves is never alone. It will always produce a changed life characterized by a zeal for good works (Titus 2:14).

G. In churches across America, it is common for counterfeit faith to be passed off as genuine.

For, a false professor will use the same words, and sing the same songs, and approve of the same sermons as a true believer. The false Christian *presumes* that he has real faith. But, the question before us in James' epistle is this, *what is the nature of saving faith? What are the undeniable fruits of saving faith?* Saving faith is not the intellectual acceptance of certain propositions about Jesus. No, saving faith is the entrustment of our lives to Christ as Lord and Savior. Saving faith is not believing we are saved, or even believing that Christ died for us, nor is saving faith a general acknowledgement of God's existence, nor is it the acceptance of the uniqueness of the historical Jesus taken alone by assent. No, saving faith is to be utterly undone, it is a palpable desperation in our lostness, condemnation, and helplessness, cognizant we are held by the cords of our sin and legal guilt. No wonder Luther stated that no one can be saved who does not first *damn himself*—that is, in the abandonment of all self-righteousness, regard himself as justly deserving of eternal hell.

H. When saving faith comes, the Holy Spirit comes to indwell the person. The Holy Spirit in the believer produces a changed life (2 Cor 5:17ff.), He produces the works of which James speaks. Where saving faith is real, there will be evidence manifested which gives indication of spiritual life (Jas 2:18). The great danger in this world is that men do not naturally fear God, therefore they deny, or think too lightly of the truth that every sinner deserves eternal hell. "Do not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the soul; but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt 10:28).

V. There is a great danger of making false professors comfortable and secure in the church

A. Notes pastor Alistair Begg, *church can be a dangerous place.* For, countless pulpits are too timid to disturb the false convert who is asleep on his feather pillow of presumption. How rare it has become in our age to hear the truth carefully unfolded and declared that God intends to punish impenitent sinners comprehensively and eternally. During the Great Awakening revival (1720 to 1740), Gilbert Tennent, son of William Tennent wrote, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry.* Tennent elaborated incisively the text of Jeremiah 5:30-31, applying it to unconverted pastors of American churches.

An appalling and horrible thing

Has happened in the land:
The prophets prophesy falsely,
And the priests rule on their *own* authority;
And My people love it so!
But what will you do at the end of it?

Tennent voiced the great danger of following ministers that kept their congregants a safe distance from their conscience. He called upon these people to forsake their churches and to follow after truly converted ministers.ⁱⁱⁱ

B. Anyone may lose his own soul is the title of a sermon by 19th Century divine, J. C. Ryle.

States Ryle, ministers, in order to be faithful, you must cry aloud that anyone may lose his eternal soul.^{iv} To lose one's soul is a loss beyond calculation. We cannot see our own souls, but we certainly can feel them in the continual messages communicated to us by the conscience. Your eternal soul is your greatest possession. J.C. Ryle chides pastors who are disinclined to warn their flocks, stating that, *he has no respect for those preachers who keep back from men that everyone may lose his own soul. We must bring the whole truth to our hearers. It is charity to do so. We must proclaim to the congregation that men may lose their own souls.*

C. Since to the unregenerate man, sin is far more dear than the value of his soul, the natural man has no desire to have his soul saved. There are many ways a man may lose his own soul:

1) By yielding oneself to open sin by which disobedience is practiced (Gal 5:19-21; Eph 5:3-6; Col 3:5-6; 1 Cor 6:9-10; 1 Jn 3:4-6). **2)** By believing a false gospel that requires no repentance and by entrusting oneself to blind guides and hiring ministers instead of to Christ the Lord. **3)** By trifling with religion, remaining indecisive, tasting only, but never denying oneself, taking up one's cross, and becoming a true disciple (Mt 13:21-22). Do any of these three ways to lose your soul describe you?

D. It is incredibly easy to ruin your own soul. All you have to do is nothing. Apart from divine grace, what we are by nature will ineffably drag us to perdition. Our Lord has declared that the way of life is very narrow indeed, and that those who find it are very few (Mt 7:13-14). If we lose our own souls, we only have ourselves, and our pathetic excuses to blame. Therefore, *fear Him who is able to destroy body and soul in hell*, as Christ says in Matthew 10:28. And, as the author of Hebrews says in Hebrews chapter four: "Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it. For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard" (Heb 4:1-2).

E. The lost soul goes to hell, a place of wretchedness, torment, isolation, and black darkness (Jude 13). If a soul is not made for heaven, it will not arrive there. *Dear minister, are you at all exercised over the fact that there are many in the congregation that are impenitent, and therefore, false professors? That many church members are living in their sinful habits and relying on external religion? And that by this they demonstrate that they have no heart religion?* We live in an age of great temptation. The slightest bit of religion in our apostate culture of practical atheism looks as if it might be genuine. But, as John MacArthur says, "If the

entire escalator of this present world is descending into perdition, then being a step above the lost person next to you does not change your eternal destiny.”

F. The loss of one’s soul is the heaviest loss of all, but most people put off the examination of their soul’s condition until their ultimate decline when strength and health are failing. In the hour of death, a man gets suddenly serious about his soul. When the grave is in sight, his soul’s eternal destiny becomes a matter of urgency. We think of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man in agony is convinced that his brothers still alive on earth have not been adequately warned about the eternal damnation which awaits them. And, so the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers about the horror of hell (Lu 16:19-31). What a testament this parable is concerning the need to adequately warn our hearers.

Conclusion: in closing, a final note about the second way that people lose their souls: by putting one’s soul in the hands of a hireling minister who is indifferent about warning the flock. For, by the conspicuous absence of warnings from the pulpit, *hireling pastors* infer, or imply every Sunday that their listeners are saved, and safe, and thus have nothing to worry about—no self-examination or repentance from sin are required for heaven. Gone are the days in which the faithful attended church in order to hear what sins they were to repent of. Where are the days when sermons produced crushing remorse and a sense of desperation in the lost about their sin and their soul’s condition? Let us remember that the Lord of love excelled at warning and imploring His hearers to repent (Mk 1:15). If we are to imitate our Lord, we must preach repentance without gloss or apology. Let us recover the holy boldness that God requires of His servants, for it is love to do so.

End Notes:

ⁱ Pages 1-5 of this article are adapted from chapter 16 of the book, *Old Paths*, by J. C. Ryle.

ⁱⁱ Pages 6-8 of this article are adapted from a sermon by Alastair Begg, “True or False Faith,” October 6, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pastor Tom Nelson, “The First Great Awakening,” # 9 of *The History of the Christian Church*, Denton Bible Church, Denton, TX.

^{iv} Pages 8-10 of this article are adapted from chapter 2 of the book, *Old Paths*, by J. C. Ryle.