

The Negative Side of a Positive Subject – Acts 20:16-21

I. Introduction:

- A. When Paul was making what he thought was his final trip past the Roman province of Asia, he stopped in Miletus, and from there he invited the elders of the church in Ephesus to meet with him.
1. In the few hours they had together, they talked about some of the ministerial ups and downs they had experienced.
 2. Paul reminded his friends that *“he kept back nothing that was profitable”* to them, showing and teaching, from the scriptures, the important truths of God.
 3. At that point he summarized those *“profitable doctrines”* by pointing to two things: *“repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ.”*
 - a. During his two years in Ephesus, I’m sure that He had taught the nature of the Lord’s church, about the return of Christ and about the upcoming Millennial kingdom.
 - b. But he didn’t mention ecclesiology or eschatology in his summary.
 - c. He probably preached on the great faith of Abraham and David.
 - d. He undoubtedly taught them about Heaven, Hell, the six-day creation, Satan and the Fall of Adam.
 - e. And he had explained the details of justification, reconciliation with God, and regeneration.
 4. But at this point, looking back on a very successful ministry, Paul referred to only two highlights saying, *“I preached to you repentance and faith – the most important of all subjects.”*
 5. Of all Biblical truth, salvation by God’s grace received with humble faith, was to Paul **the** most important.
- B. I would like to pick up one of Paul’s points to bring you a lesson on the negative side of a very positive subject.
1. If forgiveness of sin is important to you, then you need to understand **repentance**.
 2. If you’d like to be assured of Heaven after your death, then it is necessary that you repent before God.
 3. Would you like to meet the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ? Then you must approach Him in the only way He has laid down – in humble submission as a sinner in His sight.
 4. This is an **extremely** important subject, so I will **try** to make it **as interesting** as it is **important**.
 5. Pray for me, because, as I am no genius, I need the help of Holy Spirit this morning.
 6. And besides, this is a subject for the heart and not the mind.

II. How do we KNOW that repentance is so IMPORTANT?

- A. Because the Bible tells us so. Because the Lord Jesus and His apostles tell us so.
1. We can find the subject of repentance in the Word of God from the days of Enoch and Noah through John the Baptist and into the **Book of Acts** and the **Epistles**.
 2. **John**, a man whom Jesus highly praised, came *“preaching in the wilderness of Judea, and saying, Repent ye: for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand”* – **Matthew 3:2**.
 3. In one conversation the Lord Jesus twice said, *“Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish”* – **Luke 13**.
 - a. Our Lord wasn’t referring to dying of old age or from cancer.
 - b. He was talking about dying under the judgment of God.
 4. As we read earlier, Peter told a crowd of his own countrymen, *“repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...”*
 - a. Clearly, his meaning was that, without repentance, their **sins** would **NOT** be **blotted** out.
 - b. Without repentance, God will not grant forgiveness of sin – not to the Jews and not to you or me.
 5. This makes the subject of repentance extremely important.
- B. Has there been a time in your life, when you acknowledged to God that you are a horrible sinner?
1. Are you currently living in the admission that you are totally and eternally unworthy of the Lord and the least of His blessings, let alone the greatest of His blessings – salvation from sin?
 2. If you have not repented before the Lord, and if you are not now living in a state of humble repentance, then you can forget about Heaven and peace with God; you will spend eternity in Hell.
 3. That may sound harsh, but it is the truth.

4. *“Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto the Lord, and he will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon” – (Isaiah 55:7).*
5. Without that forsaking of our sin and our humble return to the Lord, there will be no mercy and there will be no pardon. This is **extremely important**.

- C. The story is told about a French Admiral who, after his defeat, was brought aboard the flag ship of Admiral Horatio Nelson. It was during the Napoleonic wars, perhaps at the conclusion of the Battle of Trafalgar.
1. The French commander approached putting out his left hand to shake the hand of Nelson, who lost an arm in an earlier battle. Nelson quickly turned away and said, *“Sir, I want your sword first.”*
 2. He had seen at the Frenchman’s side the military symbol of defiance and war.
 3. Until that sword was laid aside, there could be no civility between the two naval officers.
 4. And until **we** repent of our rebellion and sin against God, there can be no reconciliation & no peace God.

III. That means that we must understand the meaning of the word “REPENTANCE.”

- A. This is a subject which is so foreign to modern thought that most people have little idea what it entails.
1. For example, a few years ago, we had a man attending our services who initially said that he loved what he found here.
 2. He professed to have been saved by grace through faith in Christ Jesus, trusting Jesus’ death on the cross.
 3. However, when he left, one of his parting shots was to declare that repentance was an unscriptural doctrine.
 4. He never gave me an explanation of what he meant, and now he is dead, but I **think** he must have been confused by the false teaching of one particular branch of Christendom.
- B. The **Vatican** claims that there are 1.3 **billion** Catholics in the world.
1. There are more than 70 **million** registered Roman Catholics in the United States.
 2. And generally speaking they believe that **“PENANCE”** & *“repentance.”* are the same thing. They are **not**.
 3. If that man I just mentioned thought I was referring to *“penance”* when speaking about *“repentance,”* then I can see why he’d be upset.
 4. In all of the scriptures that I quoted earlier, every single one of them in the Douay-Rheims, Roman Catholic Bible have replaced *“repentance”* with *“penance.”*
 - a. They say that John exhorted people to *“do penance, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*
 - b. Jesus said, *“except you do penance, you shall all likewise perish.”*
 - c. And Paul *“testified both to Jews and Gentiles penance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.”*
- C. Now, someone may be thinking that this is only a matter of semantics – playing with words. But it is not.
1. And Catholicism acknowledges that fact.
 2. At least one edition of that Douay Bible comments on John’s words in **Matthew 3:2** saying:
 3. Penance... *“according to the use of the scriptures, and the holy fathers, does not only signify repentance and amendment of life, but also punishing past sins by fasting, and such like penitential exercises.”*
- D. I have three things to say about that statement:
1. First: the Greek word which records John’s statement speaks of an **inward** change.
 - a. Repentance consists of **spiritual EMOTIONS** and not **outward** self-imposed, physical **chastisements**.
 - b. A godly life and devotion to the Lord are described in the Bible as the **fruits** of repentance and not repentance itself.
 - c. They flow out of God’s salvation and our desire please the Lord; they don’t bring about salvation.
 2. Second, *“penance,”* as defined by the Vatican, denies the sufficiency of Christ’s sacrifice for our sins.
 - a. The Bible tells us that Jesus’ death on the cross paid the penalty for sin – every aspect of that penalty.
 - b. As a result, there is no punishment left for us to endure.
 - c. God may Himself **chastize** His children to correct and train them, but He doesn’t **punish** them, and He certainly doesn’t tell us to punish ourselves.
 - d. He tells us, *“If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” – I John 1:9.*

3. And third, penance implies that **temporal** or **physical** action can deal with the **spiritual** effects of sin.
 - a. But again, the Bible teaches that Christ alone can make an atonement for sin.
 - b. Not even a century of judgment in the Lake of Fire can pay for one sin, and so for that reason judgment will be eternal.
 - c. And with that being true, what sort of temporary, self-inflicted torture can cover our sin-debt today?
 4. As the hymn says: *“Could my tears forever flow; Could my zeal no respite know;
a. These for sin could not atone, Thou must save and thou alone.”*
- E. Besides the **religious corruption** called *“penance,”* there are at least two other forms of human repentance.
1. It is important that we all know the difference between the true and the false.
 2. First there is **legal repentance**, which boils down to something we might call *“the mental variety.”*
 3. This is the Judas’ kind of repentance.
- F. Please turn to **Matthew 27** – After Jesus’ arrest, *“When the morning was come, all the chief priests and elders of the people took counsel against Jesus to put him to death:*
1. *And when they had bound him, they led him away, and delivered him to Pontius Pilate the governor.*
 - a. *Then Judas, which had betrayed him, when he saw that he was condemned, **REPENTED** himself, and brought again the thirty pieces of silver to the chief priests and elders,*
 - b. *Saying, I have sinned in that I have betrayed the innocent blood. And they said, What is that to us? see thou to that.*
 - c. *And he cast down the pieces of silver in the temple, and departed, and went and hanged himself.”*
 2. Judas *“repented himself,”* which is quite different from the repentance which God gives.
 3. And you could say that when he killed himself, Judas carried out the highest form of penance.
 4. But it did him no good, because other scriptures tell us that Judas did not go to Heaven.
- G. We don’t know what was in his mind when he led God’s enemies to where Jesus could be easily arrested.
1. But whatever it was, after the arrest, Judas was sorry for his thoughts and his part in it.
 - a. He acknowledged that he had sinned. *“I have betrayed innocent blood.”*
 2. But notice to whom the confession and repentance was made.
 - a. It was to the Jewish priests and in the light of the Jewish law. It was not to God.
 - b. He had broken the law by betraying an innocent man.
 - c. It wasn’t exactly the same as lying under oath, but it came close.
 3. However, afterwards, Judas did not bow before **God** confessing his foolish stupidity.
 4. It was not a **spiritual surrender**; it was **legal**. It wasn’t **complete**; it was **superficial**. It was not out of his **heart**; it was out of his **head**.
 5. It doesn’t appear that his repentance came out of Holy Spirit conviction.
 6. It came merely from his acknowledgment that he had been unjust to the only sinless man to have ever lived
- H. Charles Spurgeon once put it this way:
1. *“A man may hate sin just as a murderer hates the gallows, but this does not prove repentance.*
 2. *If I hate sin because of the punishment, I have not repented of sin. I merely regret that God is just.*
 3. *But if I can see sin as an offense against Jesus Christ, and loathe myself because I have wounded **HIM**, then I have a true brokenness of heart”* – repentance.
- I. I wish that Judas, when he had come to his senses, had sought out John or Peter or one of the other disciples.
1. I wish that he had confessed to them what he confessed to the chief priests and elders.
 2. I would hope that disciple under the leadership of the Spirit, would have taken Judas to his knees, encouraging him to beseech God for forgiveness and cleansing.
 3. Judas was close to true repentance, but he fell short, and he killed himself while still in his sins.
 4. He is in hell today.

IV. In contrast to secular repentance stands the most important variety – **EVANGELICAL REPENTANCE.**

- A. From a hundred year old Baptist theology I jotted down the following outline:
1. *“True evangelical repentance includes: sin admitted, sin abhorred and sin abandoned.”*
 2. In this day when people are urged to find their internal, hidden divinity, in reality we must realize and **admit** it doesn't exist, and our sinful humanity is unfit to stand in the presence of true divinity. **Admit** it.
 3. We are **more UNLIKE God** than a rock is unlike a rose, or a **snow FLAKE** is different than a **snow goose**.
 4. By nature, each and every individual needs to acknowledge that we are all rebels against God.
 5. We are like the people who drowned in Noah's flood.
 6. We don't want to be on the Ark, unless it's in the executive suite, it has a pool & if we get to steer the ship.
 7. No natural man wants the God of the Bible to rule over him, until the Lord himself plants that desire in him.
 8. Not only are we **NOT holy**, we have no more desire for holiness than the murderer wants to see the CSI technician come to where he committed his crime.
- B. Biblical repentance involves **admission** of sin, which the Holy Spirit has brought us to understand.
1. And before we can be saved, we must see that **God abhors** our sinful condition.
 2. Is there a stronger word than *“abhor”*? Is *“loathe”* a better word? God loathes the sinner in his sin.
 3. The recognition of sin, which is a part of true repentance, is not just about the fact we have broken God's law and therefore we deserve to be punished for eternity.
 4. No, this evangelical repentance involves a recognition that we have offended the God behind that law.
 5. Of course, we may know about Hell and the Lake of Fire, but evangelical repentance is not simple sorrow that we are condemned sinners.
 6. Rather it is the understanding that we have attacked the very heart of our Creator, the One who has blessed us every day of our lives.
 7. We might say that this is the **intellectual element** in repentance.
- C. Following that **admission** comes our own **abhorrence** of that sin; our **contrition**.
1. This the **emotional aspect** of repentance.
 2. Repentance involves the mysterious working of God, by which we come to **loathe** sin as much as He does.
 3. Two Jewish men walked into Jerusalem's temple one day, under the watchful eye of the Lord Jesus.
 - a. *“The one (was) a Pharisee, and the other a publican.*
 - b. *The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself, God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican.*
 - c. *I fast twice in the week, I give tithes of all that I possess.*
 - d. *And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner.”*
 4. The publican had been brought to the place where he saw himself as God saw him, and he hated himself.
 5. All that he could do was **beat** on his **chest** – **not** in *“penance,”* but **contrition**, begging for God's mercy.
 6. The Lord Jesus went on to say, *“I tell you, THIS man went down to his house justified rather than the other: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.”*
- D. The third aspect of scriptural repentance is something we might call **conversion**; it is where **sin is abandoned**
1. I believe, with scriptural authority, that true repentance is a divine gift; something which God does in us.
 - a. Ultimately **we cannot boast** of our repentance, because even if we see our evil deeds as crimes, we will never see them as wretchedly sinful, unless the Lord reveals that to us. It is all of God.
 - b. And ultimately, if we successfully forsake our sins, it is because God enables us.
 2. Of course, there are some sins which might be easy to quit.
 - a. Saul of Tarsus was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians and to destroy the church there.
 - b. When the Lord stepped in to reveal himself, giving Saul faith to believe that Jesus was the Christ, it was easy for the man to stop persecuting the saints.
 - c. But it may have been much harder to stop using Jesus' name in vain, cursing and swearing.

- d. And it may have been difficult to get over his fear of the Jewish leadership.
 - e. He was undoubtedly proud of his heritage and education, and he may have found that difficult to drop.
3. But when true repentance is involved, there will be a willingness to cut away all the sinful cancers of our lives.
- E. As John the Baptist said to the Pharisees, *“Both God, and I, want to see the fruit and evidence of repentance.”*
1. When there is real repentance there are changes in our lives, because there is a new heart inside.
 2. And in this we see the power of God. Repentance is God’s gift.
 - a. *“The servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men, apt to teach, patient,*
 - b. *In meekness instructing those that oppose themselves; of God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth. And that they may recover themselves out of the snare of the devil, who are taken captive by him at his will.”*
 3. When God grants repentance to a person like Saul of Tarsus – or to us – we will acknowledge the truth.
 - a. We will admit to our utter wretchedness, **finally seeing** we have been living in rebellion against God.
 - b. And we will **acknowledge** the truth that only in the sacrifice of Christ is the forgiveness of sin, forever casting aside our endeavors of self-salvation.
 - c. And with the blessing of the Lord we begin the work of stepping out of the sinful snare the devil has had us in.
- F. Early in the 1989 college basketball season, highly favored Michigan was playing lowly Wisconsin.
1. Late in the second half, trailing by one point, Michigan’s Rumeal Robinson, stepped to the foul line for two shots.
 2. If he made these shots his team would likely win the game. But he missed both, and Wisconsin won.
 3. Robinson felt awful about costing his team that game, but his remorse didn’t stop at the emotional level, as Judas’ had done.
 4. For the rest of the season, after every practice, he shot a hundred extra foul shots.
 5. A couple months later, Michigan was playing Seton Hall for the NCAA national championship.
 6. With three seconds left in overtime, Rumeal Robinson was fouled, and he stepped to the free throw line.
 7. He raised the ball and fired; it swished through the hoop. After that his second shot went in as well.
 8. Those shots won Michigan the national championship.
 9. That man’s repentance had been genuine, and his sorrow motivated him to clean up his shot.
- G. When God leads someone to see his awful sinfulness, breaking his heart and breaking his wilful rebellion, three things take place.
1. First he may see himself as the worst person on the face of the earth. He **should** see himself that way.
 2. But then the Spirit will also take him to the cross to look at the Saviour, who gave His life and blood to cover those sins – to make an atonement for them.
 3. And following that, the Holy Spirit will convict him, and enable him, to produce the fruit of repentance – cleaning up his shot.
- H. Does your life express, or give evidence, of repentance – true evangelical repentance?
1. Remember the words of the Lord Jesus, *“Except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”*
 2. Remember the words of the Apostle Peter, *“Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out...”* And remember the words with which we started:
 3. Paul summarized his ministry with two points: *“repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ.”*
- I. Have you ever humbly come to the Saviour with repentance and faith?