

CHAPTER 15

OF REPENTANCE UNTO LIFE

The importance of repentance

“1. Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.”

True repentance must go along with true salvation. Saving faith without repentance is an impossibility. The Bible often refers to our salvation as repentance, as in Acts 11:18. Repentance was preached by Christ (Mark 1:15), and he commanded his apostles to preach it too (Luke 24:47).

In our day we especially need this doctrine, since so many evangelists try to make salvation “easy.” Many people think they are saved, even though they never have repented for their sins and their sinfulness; such people may be deceiving themselves. To come to Christ, we must at the same time forsake the world.

The definition of repentance

“2. By it a sinner, out of the sight and sense, not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature and righteous law of God, and upon the apprehension of his mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavoring to walk with him in all the ways of his commandments.”

We are to be truly sorry for our sins—not just for our punishment, but for the sins themselves. God wants us to hate our own sinfulness (Ezek 18:30-31; 36:31; Joel 2:12-15; 2 Cor 7:11). This hatred for our sins naturally leads us to desire to forsake them and obey all of God’s commandments. Such is the spirit of Ps 119.

Repentance is necessary for salvation

“3. Although repentance be not to be rested in as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God’s free grace in Christ; yet is it of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.”

While repentance by itself cannot save us (we must accept Christ), it is a necessary part of our salvation (Luke 13:3, 5 [for Jews]; Acts 17:30-31 [for Gentiles]).

Repentance can cover all sins

“4. As there is no sin so small but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.”

Even the “smallest” sin ruins us and condemns us to God’s righteous judgment (Jas 2:10). But God’s grace is such that when we truly repent, he will forgive even the most terrible sins imaginable (Ps 51:4-5, 7, 9, 14; Isa 1:18; Acts 2:23, 37-38; 1 Cor 15:8-10).

Repentance to God

“5. Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man’s duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins, particularly.”

In our private prayers to God, we should name specifically our sins and express our sorrow for them. Just as a parent makes a child tell what he did wrong for his own good, so our Father desires to hear from our lips what our sins have been, as indicated by 1 John 1:9.

Confession to man

“6. As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof; upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy; so he that scandalizeth his brother, or the Church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended; who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.”

We do not need to confess our sins to a priest. But if we harm or scandalize someone, we should confess to that person. Or if we harm the church as a whole, we should confess to the entire church and ask for forgiveness. Sometimes it is hard to confess to each other, but it is necessary for true repentance (Ps 51; Josh 7:19; Jas 5:16). It is then the duty of those sinned against to forgive that one (Luke 17:3-4; 2 Cor 2:6-8).