

**Acts 20: 20 & 21; “Helpfulness in Paul’s Ministry”, Sermon # 73 in the series –
“Laying the Foundations”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall
on May 15th, 2022, in the Morning Worship Service.**

We have seen that Paul’s ministry was conducted among the elders and the believers in the church of Ephesus with all humility and with many tears. He ministered to them in this way because he wanted to establish every good spiritual thing to them, in truth; everything that would be profitable for them both doctrinally and practically, for Christ’s sake. If a man is going to be a faithful minister of Christ Jesus in our own day, he must live with this same perspective on ministry that Paul had. That is, he must keep nothing back from them that will be helpful. So we want to take a more careful look at what this means. 1st of all – We will consider the helpfulness of Paul’s teaching repentance toward God. And 2nd – We will consider that Paul thought it was helpful to teach that faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is necessary to be joined with repentance. I pray that you will receive these truths now, so that in living them out, you might have a closer walk with our Lord.

1st of all – The helpfulness of Paul’s teaching repentance toward God.

In verse 20 Paul says – How I kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Now, Paul’s keeping back nothing helpful did not relate to telling them things which would simply help them out in a worldly sense. In this case his preaching and teaching was related to the very practical spiritual matters of repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. Since this was the case with Paul, let it also be the case with me, and also with you. Let’s first of all think about repentance.

Repentance is both a grace and an act. It is a grace that produces the act of turning away from sin and turning to God for grace and help to do what is right. The Greek word is metanoia, and it means a changing of the mind and heart to turn from all sin. It was a repentance toward God which Paul continually testified to. It says in Acts chapter 11, verse 18, after Peter preached to Cornelius the Gentile, and all his household, that they believed and received the Holy Spirit. And those Jews who were hearing Peter relate these things said – “Then God has also granted to the Gentiles repentance to life.” We should remember that Cornelius, even as a Gentile unbeliever, was a devout man. He fasted often and he prayed often, and gave alms to the poor.

But his repentance in a large part, consisted in his not trusting in these works of righteousness which he had done, but in Christ alone for salvation. Paul was the apostle to the Gentiles, and it says here that he was continually testifying concerning the need for men to repent. Not only unbelievers, but believers also. Sin, as most of us know, is any transgression of God’s law. There are, no doubt, many sins in any given unbelieving person’s life, sins which are related to their not keeping the 10 commandments outwardly. They have other gods, other things which are more important to them than serving and worshiping God, and learning to obey His word.

Before a person comes to Christ, there are outward sins in their speech, their taking God’s name in vain, or their swearing, or using coarse and foul language. There are the sins of breaking the Sabbath day; of profaning it, and being more interested in pursuing some selfish or worldly activity on that day, rather than coming to church and giving the day to God. There are sins of not honoring their father or mother; that they will not listen to them, or do what they are asking them to do. There are sins they commit of getting angry and yelling, or speaking hurtful words to people. There are sins of sexual uncleanness and adultery, or fornication, which many people

think are hurting no one. And they may take pleasure in these things in secret, or even sometimes in public, and they will dishonor their body in the sight of God and men, by engaging in these sins.

A person may be guilty of the sin of stealing things when no one is around to observe them, either great amounts of money in robbery, or small amounts of money in pilphering . Unbelievers are sometimes guilty of sins of lying, or of bearing false witness concerning something they have done, or something they have said which was supposedly done by them, but it was not true. Many people are guilty of the sins of covetousness, of wanting something which God has said is not good for them; someone else's house or their wife or anything that they own. Or even greed, loving to gamble, where they hope that they might win money which they have not worked for. Passion, evil desire, covetousness, and greed, are forms of idolatry it says in Colossians 3: 5.

And all of these are sins must be repented of, if any person would be saved. You cannot hold on to any sin and practice it, and be saved. These sins that I have mentioned, are often mentioned in the Bible as related to a person's outward actions, and the outward actions do need to be repented of. But you cannot be saved by simply repenting of sins that other people see. That is, by turning over a new leaf, and telling other people you've changed. You say that you are going to stop doing these things, and you are going to become a morally better person. You will keep God's commandments so that people can see.

In fact, the apostle Paul says in 1st Timothy 1: 9 – “The law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and in subordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murders of fathers and murderers of mother, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for kidnappers, for liars, for perjurers, and if the is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine, according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God which was committed to my trust.” Now, why does Paul say that the law is not for a righteous man? Is it because the law is not good and righteous, and true?

No, every Christian who understands what the Bible is teaching will confess that the law is good. The Ten Commandments were written by the finger of God. It can be nothing other than good. But it is not for the righteous man in the sense of his thinking that the knowledge of what God requires outwardly is enough for you to make progress in holiness, and righteousness in your heart. An unbeliever needs to be convicted of their sins, and to repent of them, but what every person must take care to understand is that their repentance is toward God, and not that they feel sorry that they have hurt themselves by their sins. A person must be awakened by grace to see that they have sinned against God, and that they have offended God. The Prodigal Son says – Father I have sinned against heaven and in your sight.

The unbeliever does not see how great a sinner they are, until they are awakened by the Holy Spirit's convicting work, to see how great and extensive the sins of their heart and mind really are. But what is just as problematic is that sometimes even the believer in Christ, who has been forgiven of all of their sins, does not see the sins of their heart very well either. Especially their sins of not loving the Lord their God with all of their heart, mind, and soul, as they should. Or their loving your neighbor as yourself. These sins are sins of the heart, and they are sins which you, the Christian, must learn to do battle with, and to overcome, and to forsake them in regard to your sanctification, your growing in regard to holiness and righteousness in God's sight.

That is what repentance towards God always leads to. And so, you must ask yourself as a Christian person – Do I regularly confess my heart sins to God? Has it led me to a genuine sorrow for sin, or is your heart still hard? When you come to Christ, you will be praying that the Lord would change your heart and make you tender to the least sin. There will be new and strong desires to put away all sin and to forsake it. “Those who belong to Christ have crucified the flesh

with its passions and desires. So when a person wants to know God, they must repent. And there will be sorrow over sins committed in the past. But it must be a godly sorrow for sin. That is, once you become a Christian by faith in Jesus Christ, there will be a mourning over whatever sins that you find; that thoughts and passions which for years have been habits in your heart. These thoughts and passions will try to remain your heart and life because of the strength of your flesh.

A wise Christian person is one who examines their own heart regularly. They ask God to search their heart to see if there might be any evil way in them. They then ask the Lord in prayer to lead them in the way everlasting. Perhaps, even you, as a Christian person, you may not see how many sins there are, which are lurking there in your heart. And you may be justifying them. You may be trying to continue on in them. And you may think that because you have now believed in Jesus, that these sins are not really such great sins, that they do not need to be confessed, or repented of.

These thoughts of pride and selfish ambition that are in your mind. These unloving angry thoughts when someone tries to tell you what the Bible says is the right thing for you to do. What are we Christians to do with all of our sensual thoughts, or our envious thoughts, or our covetous thoughts, or our unbelieving thoughts? We must repent of them all, and we must strive to put them to death by the Spirit as it says in Romans chapter 8, verse 13 – “For if you live according to the flesh you will die (that is, spiritually die forever); but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.” That is repentance, and that is what it means to mortify sin.

2nd – Paul thought it was helpful to teach that faith in our Lord Jesus Christ is absolutely necessary to be joined with repentance.

Evidently Paul proclaimed these things in his public ministry, but he also explained them more thoroughly to them in his private ministry. He speaks in our text of his going from house to house when he felt he the need to, to explain some of these truths on how to live the Christian life of repentance and faith. His testimony, it says in our text, was that all believers should understand the need that they have, that these acts of repentance and faith should continue on, all during their life, until they reached the Celestial City of heaven. It was Paul’s testimony in his teaching and preaching that every Christian would learn to bring forth fruits of righteousness that go along with repentance, following their conversion to Christ. What was begun in repentance and faith, continues on to bear fruit to God in righteousness and good works.

What is most helpful to understand is that your faith in our Lord Jesus Christ will establish the truth and the reality of your genuine repentance and your sincere obedience. Your repentance should lead you to increasing obedience to God’s holy word. But you must have Christ’s wisdom and strength to come to a thorough repentance of your sins. I mean in terms of how you address the remaining corruption of your heart in repentance. You should pray and ask the Lord to show you where you are sinful in the attitudes of your heart, either towards Him, or towards other people.

I am saying that your repentance is designed to lead you to study how your obedience can be improved, not how your sin can be tolerated. This is something that every one of us needs to take notice of as a Christian. It will be very helpful to your becoming more mature in the faith. Your faith, in every step of your obedience, must be taken in the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ and not in your own strength. What should you do when you find some particular sin is active in the thoughts of your heart, and perhaps it is even coming out in your speech or actions? Well, you should repent of it, most certainly. You should confess that sin, but I want you to see that you also have the great need also to believe in Christ, that He by His Spirit will change you more and more towards thinking and doing what is right.

In other words, you will continually trust that Lord Jesus Christ will help you so that you will be changed and transformed by His grace into a more and more righteous person in your thoughts, words and deeds. As you confess your sins and pray for grace in this way, it will be, as you exercise faith, it will become apparent to you in your mind, and conscience that you have been forgiven. It will become apparent that you have been cleansed, and that Christ is giving you power to lead this wonderful righteous life. As it says in Philippians 1: 11 – You will be “being filled with the fruits of righteousness which are by Jesus Christ to glory and praise of God.

Christ and His Holy Spirit will give you this sweet assurance that He will you not allow you to continue on in any sin, for he will help you to know the evil of it, and He will give you grace to forsake it. If this is what you truly want, it will be granted to you. 1st John 1: 8 and 9 says this: “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Now, I want you to notice that the word “sin” is in the singular in verse 8. If we say that we have no sin.

He is addressing the Christian. And here in this verse, Sin, singular refers to the indwelling remaining corruption of the flesh that is still in us as a believer. You cannot repent of the flesh itself. It remains with you. If I say that I have no sin, no indwelling remaining corruption in myself as a Christian, I have deceived myself, and the truth is not in me. But in your renewed mind, which has been changed by grace, you no longer are no longer willing to practice any sin. Sometimes, however, you may find yourself doing the very thing that you hate, Paul says in Romans 7: 15. You find within yourself this law, the law of the flesh, that evil is with you, the one who wills to do good.

You are delighting in the law of God according to the inward man. But you see this other law in your members waging war against the law of your mind, and bringing you into captivity to the law of sin which in your members. You cry out – O wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death? I thank God – through Jesus Christ our Lord! What a bothersome thing is the flesh to living the Christian life. The heart is deceitful above all things and who can know it? But how necessary it is to learn, my beloved brethren, to overcome the flesh and the Old Adam, the Old Man.

Perhaps you remember Faithful, Christian’s traveling companion in Pilgrim’s Progress? When they first met, they had some conversation on this subject, and this is how it went. Faithful said – When I came to the foot of the hill called Difficulty, I met with a very age man, who asked me what I was and wither bound. I told him that I was a pilgrim, going to the Celestial City. Then said the old man, “Thou lookest like an honest fellow: wilt thou be content to dwell with me, for the wages that I shall give thee? Then I asked him his name, and where he dwelt. He said his name was Adam the First, and that he dwelt in the town of Deceit.

I asked him then what was his work, and what the wages that he would give. He told me that his work was many delights; and his wages, that I should be his heir at last. I further asked what house he kept, and what other servants he had. So he told me that his house was maintained with all the dainties of the world, and that his servants were those of his own begetting. Then I asked him how many children he had. He said that he had but three daughters, the Lust of the Flesh, the Lust of the Eyes, and the Pride of Life, and that I should marry them if I would.

Then I asked, how long time he would have me live with him? And he told me, as long as he lived himself. Christian – Well, what conclusion came the old man and you to, at last? Why, at first I found myself somewhat inclinable to go with the man, for I thought he spoke very fair; but looking at his forehead, as I talked with him, I saw there written, Put off the old man with his

deeds. Christian – And how then? Faithful – Then it came burning hot into my mind, whatever he said, and however he flattered, when he got me home to his house he would sell me for a slave. So I bid him forbear to talk, for I would not come near the door of his house. Then he reviled me and told me that he should send such a one after me that should make my way bitter to my soul. So I turned to go away from him; but just as I turned myself to go thence, I felt him take hold of my flesh, and give me such a deadly twitch back, that I thought he had pulled part of me after himself; this made me cry, O wretched man! (Rom. 7:24.) So I went on my way up the hill.

So you see, my brethren, that it is hard to put off the Old Man with his deeds. He does not want to let you go. This is why you need to examine your own heart and your life frequently for sins (plural); that is, the thoughts and actions which come from the flesh and the Old Man. You have put him off at your conversion, but there are points in your Christian life and experience where you will need to put him off again and again. This relates to habits of sin in your thoughts. You must repent of all that proceeds from the flesh in the thoughts of your heart, and all that comes out in your actions if your sin proceeds that far.

The flesh lusts against the Holy Spirit within you, as a believer, and the Spirit against your flesh. And there is a continual irreconcilable war between them in your heart as long as you live. We are in a spiritual battle, dear brethren. And this battle is taking place frequently in the thoughts of your heart. The flesh has its many troops of thoughts that it tries to put forward in the battle for your heart and mind every day. Your flesh will try to keep you at many points from denying yourself and picking up your cross and following Christ. He will try to keep you from the loving sincere and faithful obedience that Christ would have you to render to Him. You may defeat those troops on a given day, and then the next day, you may find that you have not done so well at all.

This is why the military language of Proverbs 4: 23 is given to us to heed. Guard your heart with all diligence, for from it flow, or spring, the issues of life. But I want you to see what the apostle Paul always preached and taught; that by faith in our Lord Jesus Christ you will win this battle every day, as long as you exercise faith in Him. Your sufficiency is from Christ. And so, you must learn to take up the full armor of God; the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God. You must be strong in the Lord, and do all that you do, in the strength of His mighty power. The life that you now live, you live by faith in the Son of God who loved you and has given His life for you.

Faith and repentance go hand in hand. You do not have one without the other. They are like two sides of a coin. You will find that in repenting that your faith will be confirmed as true and saving faith. When you come to Christ as your great High Priest, mercy and grace will always be found coming to you by faith in what He has done for you. He ever lives to make intercession for you. When you come to Christ, you do not put your faith in yourself, but in what He has done for you the sinner. You trust in His perfect obedience on your behalf, and you trust in His sacrifice for your sins. You remember that He said – “For the Son of Man did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” And He is a great Savior, and the Friend of Sinners, and will be to you, the Christian.