

~Other Speakers G-L: Harry Ironside:

While repentance is distinctly an individual exercise, yet we have in the Word of God, as we have already seen, churches called upon to repent, and we learn from our Lord's words, in Matthew 12:41 and Luke 11:32, of the repentance of a city: "The men of Nineveh shall rise in judgment with this generation, and shall condemn it; because they repented at the preaching of Jonas; and, behold, a greater than Jonas is here."

This is most suggestive, particularly in view of the failure of the cities wherein Christ had done most of His wondrous miracles, to turn to God. "If," He declared, "the mighty works which have been done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented in sackcloth and ashes." This was one of the passages that caused great distress of mind and absolute bewilderment to the sensitive souls of Charlotte Bronte and her gifted sisters. If Tyre and Sidon would have repented under such circumstances, why did not a loving God give them a similar testimony in order that they might have been saved from destruction? One answer of course is, that the men and women of these ancient cities will be judged at last only for rejecting the light they had, and not on the ground of knowledge they did not possess.

But from these Scriptures we learn that a city in God's sight is a responsible entity, and that He holds it accountable to obey His word and walk in His truth. This raises a question as to how far ministers of Christ ought to concern themselves about the sins of the cities wherein they labor, and to what extent they should lift up their voices against the evils of the day, when tolerated by those in authority. Many preachers take the ground that the servant of God is to confine himself wholly to explaining the Gospel and to calling individual sinners to repentance. The Lord will deal with civic unrighteousness in His own way and time, we are told, and it is best that pastors and evangelists ignore what it is not in their province or power to correct.

And yet God has unquestionably set His seal in a remarkable manner upon the efforts of some of His honored servants who in their day and generation battled against entrenched wickedness in civic and national affairs. Think of the influence exerted for righteousness by Savonarola in Florence, Calvin in Geneva, Luther in Erfurt, Knox in Edinburgh, Wesley in London and all England, and a host of like-minded men who cried out unflinchingly against the iniquities of the times in which they lived. It is written, "The wicked flee when no man pursueth." But our own Dr. Charles H. Parkhurst, whose name was a terror to privileged sin, well exclaimed, "But they go a lot faster when the righteous get after them."

The prophets of old were set by God over cities and peoples and nations to call them to account for their evil-doing and to summon them to prepare to meet their God. The Saviour, as we have noted, dealt with cities as such, and nothing is more pathetic than His lament over unrepentant Jerusalem: "And when he was come near, he beheld the city, and wept over it, saying, If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes. For the days shall come upon thee, that thine enemies shall cast a trench about thee, and compass thee round, and keep thee in on every side, and shall lay thee even with the ground, and thy children within thee; and they shall not leave in thee one stone upon another; because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation" (Luke 19:41-44). Link with this His impassioned cry as recorded in Matthew 23:37-39: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate. For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." Surely none can read such passages as these without recognizing the civic consciousness of Jesus. He yearned over men, not only as individuals needing personal salvation, but as community groups which would be blest on earth if they would only heed God's Word and repent.

To many of us the story of the repentance of Nineveh is far more wonderful than that of the miracle of Jonah and the sea monster. People object to the latter as being unheard of elsewhere and so contrary to ordinary human knowledge that it is unbelievable. But where else in all human history do we find a great, godless, pleasure-loving city brought to its knees as in the case of Nineveh? If it were not written in the Word of God and so definitely authenticated by our Lord Himself (as also the instance of the experience of Jonah) we might hesitate to credit it. But here it is, solemnly recorded on the pages of Holy Writ.

A great city containing "six score thousand souls that knew not their right hand from their left" -- that is, little children -- must have had a very large adult population indeed. This vast throng were given over to impiety and wickedness of such gross nature that God could tolerate it no longer and sent His prophet to announce its summary destruction. As in the case of the cities of the plain, whose stench had reached to heaven, He would blot Nineveh from the face of the earth. But the Word of the Lord came home so convincingly to the hearts of

the King and his councillors of state that they not only repented themselves, but called upon all in the city to do the same. The results were unparalleled in the history of religious revivals. The entire populace fell down before the Lord in sackcloth and ashes bemoaning their sins and crying for mercy. And God heard and pardoned -- much to the disgust of Jonah, who was more concerned about his own prophetic reputation than about the salvation of an entire people.

Perhaps the nearest thing to this in secular history is the story of Savonarola and Florence, Italy. The impassioned monk, moved to deepest concern by the lasciviousness, the licentiousness, and the godless luxury of the Florentines, inveighed against the city, threatening dire judgment from heaven if there were no repentance, and moved the populace almost as one man. Drawing his messages largely from the last solemn book of the Bible, he preached in the Duomo month after month expository addresses on the Apocalypse. The awful figures of judgment depicted therein he declared to be about to find their fulfillment upon the Florentines and all Italy unless the people repeated and turned from their corrupt behavior.

Nobles, merchants, and laborers alike felt the power of his words and at his call they brought their treasures of gold, jewels, and objects of art and piled them in the public square at his feet, to be sold or distributed for the relief of the poor and needy. The churches were crowded with penitent suppliants confessing their sins and seeking divine forgiveness. For a time at least the city was largely purged from its iniquity and men realized their responsibility to seek to glorify God in their lives and with their means instead of living in lusts and pleasures on the earth.

It is true Savonarola was burned at the stake in the end, because of the hatred of a corrupt clergy; in that he but shared the baptism of his Lord and participated in His cup of sorrow. He was, undoubtedly, the most Christlike man of his generation, and he suffered as his Master suffered because he was a witness to the truth. His own words were really prophetic: "A Christian's life consists in doing good and suffering evil." After the lapse of centuries the church that decreed his martyrdom honored him as one of its outstanding apostles. Like Israel of old, the fathers slew him and the children built his sepulcher. So it ever is in this inconstant world.

Calvin's outward regeneration of Geneva is another marked instance of the power of the Word -- when faithfully proclaimed -- to influence civic life. Unhappily there was a great deal of Old Testament legality about it all, and like most men "who really amount to anything, Calvin made some stupendous blunders, as in the case of Servetus, for which the world has never forgiven him. But his influence throughout was on the side of righteousness and truth, and for this he will be remembered forever and shine as the stars eternally.

Macaulay declared that the Wesleyan revival saved England from the horrors of anarchy and revolution. Yet Wesley's great work was preaching the Gospel and calling sinners to repentance. That message stirred London and the other great cities of Britain to their depths, and even where it did not result in actual conversion to God it made people ashamed of the enormities they had condoned in church and state and led to a national renovation that was an untold blessing to millions.

Jonathan Edwards' clarion call to repentance and faith in God meant more to the young American nation than can now be computed. He put the fear of the Lord in men's hearts and this largely molded the character of the fathers of the republic.

After the terrible war between the states the voice of D. L. Moody was heard throughout the land, and across the seas, arousing, heartening, and bringing spiritual deliverance to many thousands who had lost all that life held dear. Accounted Chicago's most prominent and most valued citizen for a generation, his influence for good in that great city was simply marvellous and, though more than another generation has passed since his voice was hushed in death, "he being dead yet speaketh" and his influence is perhaps greater today than when he was alive. His favorite text was, "He that doeth the will of God abideth for ever," and since his death the truth of this has been increasingly manifest.

Observe carefully that these men, and many others whose names might be added to the illustrious list, wrought their works of power, not by mixing in political squabbles, but by faithfully preaching the Word of God, denouncing sin fearlessly and persistently, enjoining men to repent or face high Heaven in judgment, exalting Christ Jesus as the only Saviour and the supreme example for all who professed to follow Him, and insisting that outward forms and ceremonies could never satisfy an offended God. There must be true self-judgment, a turning to God from idols to serve Him wholly and to wait for His Son from heaven.

Such preaching inevitably produces results in reformation of life and purification of civic relationship. When the conscience is reached and the will is so captivated by grace that men turn to the Lord and cleave to Him with

purpose of heart, all other desirable results will soon manifest themselves.

What is needed in every city of every land is, not a mere "new deal" or a political reformation, but preachers of righteousness who will proclaim the Word of God, crying, "Thus saith the Lord," without fear or favor, faithfully dealing with the problems of the day in the light of the cross of Christ.

So long as ministers are afraid to expose the vices of the rich lest their collections shrink, or fear to cry aloud and spare not regarding such entrenched evils as the ruthless exploitation of labor, the horrors of prostitution, and the abominations of the liquor traffic, lest they offend some who perhaps directly or indirectly derive a part of their income from these very sources, the world will only despise them and think of them as what they really are, conscienceless sycophants toadying to the wealthy while they attempt superciliously to patronize the poor for outward effect.

On the other hand the clerical demagogue, blatantly advocating godless schemes for the renovation of society that involve, if successful, the very destruction of the church of God itself, is beneath contempt. These men, as a rule, are unsaved and do not even pretend to be born again. Their place, if anywhere, is on the lecture platform, not in the pulpit which they degrade by their utterances. It is one of the amazing signs of our times that in many churches communistic propaganda and similar unscriptural plans for overturning the present unsatisfactory order of society are not only tolerated but applauded. Yet Sovietism is the avowed enemy of God and His Christ, and churches that nurture these enemies of the cross are sheltering in their bosoms vipers that if not sternly dealt with will sting them to death in the end.

Real Christianity is the truest friend the laboring man will ever know. It provides for happiness, not only in this life, but in the life that is to come. It respects sacredly the natural rights of all men, exhorting the rich to use their wealth for the blessing of their fellows and guiding the poor into paths of contentment and peace. The Gospel received makes the only real brotherhood that the world has ever seen. Tolstoi, disappointed to find how powerless his plausible theories were to move the hearts of men, exclaimed sadly, "I found out that there could never be a brotherhood without brothers." This is the great secret many of our Christless social reformers have never yet learned. Did ministers everywhere realize it, they would cease trying to work from the outside in, and would begin at once to work from the inside out. There will never be a regenerated society without regenerated individuals. Hence our Lord's stress on the heavenly birth: "Except a man be born again he cannot see [nor enter] the kingdom of God."

This Kingdom is not, as many religious leaders would have us believe, simply an idealistic state of human society. It is the aggregate of those who have humbled themselves before God as repentant sinners and received the Lord Jesus Christ as their own personal Saviour: "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever. For all flesh is as grass, and all the glory of man as the flower of grass. The grass withereth, and the flower thereof falleth away: but the word of the Lord endureth for ever. And this is the word which by the gospel is preached unto you" (I Pet. 1:23-25).

Let all God-anointed preachers proclaim anew what Spurgeon called "the three R's," Ruin, Regeneration, and Redemption, and we may hope to see again, not only individuals, but whole communities brought to repentance.

To this end we need to get back to our Bibles and back to our knees. Let prayer meetings be re-established in churches where for years there has not been spiritual fervor sufficient to maintain them, and all kinds of entertainments have been substituted in their place. Let the Word of God be given its rightful place, and let ministers and people cease criticizing and sitting in judgment upon it; but, instead, let them study it carefully in dependence on the Holy Spirit for divine illumination. In the light of that Word let our manner of life be sternly judged, putting away every known evil and confessing our past sin and failure. Then may we expect God to be gracious, to grant repentance unto life to cities long given over to our modern paganism, and so to bring again times of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.

The days are dark. The need is urgent. Men are dying all about us in their sins. The Gospel is still the power of God unto salvation. Let it be faithfully preached, and it will do its work as of old. Nothing else has the same attractive power or will appeal so winsomely to the weary hearts and troubled souls of the men, women, and children, who make up our great, godless cities, whose appalling need should be a challenge to every preacher of the Word.