

God's Inescapable Command

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Edited transcript of [message](#) preached November 6, 2000

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The setting is Paul's missionary visit to the city of Athens. While he is there, he beholds a city given over to idolatry; he enters into dissertation and discussion with men. And in this particular setting, he's on Mars Hill discoursing concerning the nature and character of God. And bringing his sermon to a conclusion, he says in Acts 17:30-31,

"The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now He commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as He hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom He hath ordained; whereof He hath given assurance unto all men, in that He hath raised Him from the dead."

We're going to consider this text this morning under the general heading "God's Inescapable Command". Now the Scriptures are full of commandments. Some of those commands are directed to specific segments of society, certain facets of the total fabric of humanity to whom God speaks with peculiar and with special reference. When God says, for instance, in the Ten Commandments, "Children obey your parents" or "Honor thy father and thy mother", this is a direct commandment directed particularly to sons and daughters. When God speaks, as He does in many parts of the Epistles, that is, the various letters to the churches in the New Testament, He speaks on the one hand to servants and to masters, to fathers, to mothers, to husbands, to wives. And so there are many commandments which zero in upon a particular segment of God's creation. But here we have a text which applies to all men without discrimination.

There are fathers here this morning, there are mothers, there are wives, there are employees, there are employers. And if I were to treat a text which applies particularly to one of those segments, though there might be something there for all of us (and I would seek to show the relevance of that command to everyone in a general sense), I don't care who you are this morning, this text comes directly to you as an individual. Regardless of your present status as son or daughter, husband, wife, father, mother, employer, employee, none of these distinctions enter in whatsoever. For this text is an inescapable, a universal command to all of us. And so then, let us study this text under the general heading "The Inescapable Command".

First of all, consider with me who gives this inescapable command? When somebody starts throwing commandments around, especially when they start throwing them in my direction, the first question I ask is, "What right do you have to issue commands and throw them in my direction?" In other words, all of us have a built in safety mechanism that learns to disregard commands when they come from a source which has no authority over us.

If someone in the process of my driving home today should step off the curb down there on Westville Avenue on Bloomfield dressed in a summer short sleeve shirt and tie as I am dressed and stick up his hand and say, "Hey, pull over", I would probably promptly ignore him because, though he's giving me a commend, I do not recognize in him any basis of authority for that command. But should that same individual appear tonight when I make my way home by the same route, the same individual dressed in a blue uniform and a badge and a cap and a whistle and made the same gestures and said, "Pull over", I venture to say I would promptly obey his command. Now the difference, you see, is not in his words or his whistle. But the difference is that I recognize in him the symbols of proper authority to give that command.

Now here is a command in our text. Someone is commanding all men everywhere to do something. That means somebody is commanding you to do something. And so you have the right to ask the question, "Who is giving the command? Should I obey on the basis of the source from which the command comes?" And the Apostle Paul clearly indicates in this text that it is nothing other or no one lesser than the Living God Himself who gives this command. Look at the text: "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now He commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent." It is God who issues this command.

Now when Paul said "God", what did he mean? Was he just using some kind of a religious symbol and said, "God", and by that, you just make it anything you want it to mean? Of course not. Packed into that little 3-letter word that we use, "God" (it is a 4-letter word in the language Paul was speaking, in the Greek language), Paul was packing everything that he himself understood of the nature and character of that God, everything that he had already been preaching in the bulk of his sermon.

You see, the idea that men instinctively know who God is and we've just got to know the way to God and how to know God is entirely erroneous. Sin has so darkened our minds that we do not know who God is. Sin has so perverted our thinking that we have made God after our own image. And so the Apostle Paul was very careful in the first part of this sermon to buttress this command that God gives by describing who God is. And I want to follow the same pattern that Paul did. So look with me very quickly at the fundamental facets of the character of God that Paul has already set before his hearers so that when he says to them "God commands you to repent", they might bring before their minds this great God of whom Paul has been speaking.

Notice then, he starts by saying in verses 24 and 25, "The God that made the world and all things therein, He, being Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands; neither is He served by men's hands, as though he needed anything, seeing He Himself giveth to all life, and breath, and all things." Where does Paul start? He starts with the fact that the God who gives this command that is inescapable, this command that comes to all of us--that God is the creator of heaven and earth ("God that made the world").

Now you see, this cuts right across the grain of what these particular Athenian people thought. Their philosophical frame of reference was either that of Epicureans or that of the Pantheists. The Pantheist is the man who believes everything is God and God is everything. We received in our church mail sometime this week a mimeograph sheet inviting us to come and hear some Indian holy man who's coming to Passaic. And we were informed that he's going to teach us that God is everything and everything is God and God is within us. And until we discover the God within us, we

never discover God. That's just plain old pantheism that has plagued the world since the fall of man.

But you see where Paul starts? He says "God that made the world and all things therein." Well, if He made it, He is before it, He is above it, He is separate from it. The world is no more God than God is no more the world in this context. It cannot be. And he gives these people to understand at the outset, that if God made the world, He is eternal. He existed before the world. He is transcendent, that is, He is above this world. He is independent of it. He doesn't need this world to make Him complete and to make Him fulfilled. That's the first thing you and I need to understand about God. He is creator. And if He is creator, He is eternal, He is almighty, He is independent.

Paul goes on to say He is not only creator of the world, but He is creator of mankind. Verse 26: "He made of one every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth." He is man's creator. Man is not God; God is not man. Man is not simply a product of the inescapable forces of the evolutionary process. "[God] made of one [that is, of one blood] every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth." Man's life comes from God; man's life is sustained by God. Look at verse 25: "He Himself giveth to all life, and breath, and all things." Here these people are breathing God's air, and Paul wants them to know it. He gives life, and He gives breath. He not only imparts life, but sustains life.

Now you see how this command is beginning to take on new overtones. Who is uttering the command of verse 30 that men should repent? Is this some command that comes from some ecclesiastical court, a group of bishops or priests, or reverends that get together and they decide they ought to have something to preach about. And so they come from their convocation and say, "We've got an idea. Everybody ought to repent." Of course not, this command comes from the God who made you, the God who not only made you, but holds your life in His own sovereign hand, who gives you breath and who can take that breath. Now when that God starts talking to you, you better listen. When that God starts telling you what to do, you better pick up those ears, and you better listen because you're not trifling with some God who's simply everything that is, and you're God, and God is you and all this other foolishness. You're dealing with that living and true God, that person who is creator of the world, who is your creator.

But Paul not only preaches Him as creator. Look what he does later on in verse 24. It says, "He being Lord of heaven and earth...." He not only made His world; He's the sovereign and the King over His world. He is Lord of heaven and earth. He is the Master and the sovereign of the world that He has made. And what a difference this makes when we begin to realize this. Who is speaking to me? Not only the God who brought me into being, but the God who governs and controls me and all my actions and all the actions of all of His created universe.

Then Paul goes on to tell these people that that God is not served by men's hands as though He needed anything (v. 25). He's the totally independent, self-sufficient God. The idea that you ought to accommodate God because He'll sort of be frustrated if you don't--that's rubbish! God will go on for eternity being the blessed God, even if you never acknowledge who His is and bow before the claims of His commands. He is God who is not served by men's hands as though He needed anything. He is creator, He is sovereign, He is independent. Paul says He doesn't dwell in temples made with men's hands (v. 24). He is spiritual in nature.

These Athenians had a clever concept of God. They've got their god boxed up in a temple somewhere at an altar so they could go once a week, twice a week, no matter how many times they were supposed to go, bring their little offering, satisfy their little deity, leave their god where they left their offering, and then go on out and be scot-free to do what they pleased. You see, a God who dwells in a temple somewhere, who is only present in your religious exercises is a very convenient kind of god. He doesn't bother you what you do on your dates, what you do in your social life, what you do with your money, what you do with your time, what you do with your thoughts. That kind of god is very convenient to live with when men are in a state of impenitence. And Paul wants them to know right at the outset, "Look, you Athenians, you thought that when you brought your little offering and laid it there in front of your little god and went your way, your god was there, and he didn't see you in your crooked business dealing. He didn't see you in your immoral social relationships. He wasn't around to know what you said when you spoke angrily to your wife, and you churlishly treated your children. Paul said, "I've got news for you. The most high dwells not in temples made by hands. He fills heaven and earth." "The eyes of the Lord are in everyplace beholding the evil and the good."

Now you see how this command again takes on new overtones. Who is commanding you to repent? The God who made you, the God who sustains your life, and the God who knows you, the God who has been present in the midst of every thought and every attitude and every deed you have done contrary to His holy Law and has beheld it with His all-knowing eye.

Then he goes on to proclaim Him as the God who is eminent. He hasn't washed His hands of His creation. This was the philosophy in the thinking of the Epicureans (the world's here; God's out there). Ah, he goes on to say in verses 26-28, "[He hath set] the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek God, if haply they might feel after Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us: for in Him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain even of your own poets have said." He says that though this God is creator, He is above us and beyond us in might and power and majesty. He has not abandoned us. We are His creatures made in His image. And though we've sinned against Him and turned our backs upon Him, and though our sins have separated us from this God, He has not abandoned us. He has moved to us in grace, common grace and special grace.

Then he goes on to conclude his sermon proclaiming that this God is the God who will be judge of the world. We'll look at that in more detail later on, but just notice it now for a moment. Verse 31: "He [this God] hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world..." And so I say to everyone one of you who have gathered here this morning, the God who utters this inescapable command is no less a being than the God revealed here in this very passage. He is creator, He is sovereign, He is Spirit, He is sustainer of the world and the universe, He is near us in His grace and in His mercy. And it's that God with whom you and I have to do.

So much, then, for the God who gives this inescapable command. Consider in the second place, to whom does the command come? And the word of the text is very clear: "The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked; but now He commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent." That is, this command comes to all men in every place. Now words cannot be more general, more all-inclusive than these. All men in every place: Jew, Gentile, cultured, uncultured, in New Guinea, Africa, U.S., Europe. "It does not matter", Paul says. This command comes from this Living and

True God upon all men and to all men in all places. Now why? Well, for the simple reason that whatever sets us apart and makes us different, whether we think of it racially, culturally, economically, temperamentally, our inclinations. No matter what changes or differences there are in men that set them apart, cause them to dwell in different lands with different cultures, different colors of skin, and different attitudes, everyone of these changes (put them all together) are very surface differences. Essentially, what makes us men, there is no difference between us whatsoever. Everyone of us was made in the image of God. "He hath made of one blood all nations of the earth for to dwell upon the face of the earth." We have this in common, that we are the creatures of God made in His image.

Secondly, we all fell in our first father Adam. Romans 5:12: "Therefore, as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin; and so death passed unto all men, for that all sinned." When? In Adam. So whatever cultural, racial, economic differences there are, these are surface differences. We are part of Adam's fallen race. 1 Corinthians 15:22: "For as in Adam, all die [no superiority]." All of us leveled in that great leveling experience of the garden of Eden. And there is no explanation for the history of mankind if you deny the fall of man in Adam. Look at the complexity of our present generation: all of the different cultures, all of the different perspectives, all of the various influences that have led to these perspectives and cultures and attitudes. But what is the common denominator of every culture, every perspective, every racial and ethnic group? Here is the common denominator: man has a heart wedded to his sin. He is alienated from God, and he can't find his way out. And what's the explanation for that? There is no explanation but the Bible explanation: "As in Adam, all die. By one man sin entered and passed upon all men." That's why this command is addressed to all men in every place, because basically, there is no real essential difference between men in any place. Created in the image of God, fallen in Adam.

Thirdly, we are all by nature rebels against God and helpless to recover ourselves. The Apostle Paul treats this subject formally in the epistle to the Romans. And he comes to his conclusion in verses 10 through 13 of chapter 3: "As it is written, There is none righteous, no, not one; there is none that understandeth, there is none that seeketh after God; they have all turned aside, they are together become unprofitable; there is none that doeth good, no, not so much as one." And then he goes on to describe the effects of sin, and then his concluding statement: "Now we know that what things soever the law saith, it speaketh to them that are under the law; that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may be brought under the judgment of God."

Now you see, the Apostle Paul was not ignorant of the various differences that separate men in their common experience as far as culture and the rest. He was conscious of this. He said, "When I'm amongst the Jews, I adopt, as it were, a Jewish faith. I submit to Jewish custom and tradition that I might not unnecessarily prejudice the Gospel. To the Jews, I become as a Jew." He was conscious of their cultural and religious heritage. He said, "To the Gentiles, I become as a Gentile. I don't carry into my Gentile contacts all of my Jewish scruples." He was not ignorant of racial and cultural and religious differences. No, he was very conscious of it. But he said those differences are surface. Jew and Gentile alike created in the image of God, fallen in Adam, rebels against God, under the wrath of God, hopeless and helpless to recover themselves.

So I say to you here present in this place this morning, many of whom I've never met before, but one thing I know beyond a shadow of a doubt about everyone of you, whether you're people whom I would call intimate friends or total strangers, you were made in God's image, you fell in Adam, and by nature, unless grace recovers you, you're a hopeless rebel under the wrath of God, and you can't do a thing to rescue yourself. That's what God says about you. And you'll either bow to that indictment and seek the remedy or go to an everlasting hell as a monument of the folly of rejecting God's assessment of what you are.

This command comes to all men in every place because we are essentially the same in our creaturehood and in our sinfulness. And so God is speaking to you without exception this morning. This great God whom we have looked at, the God who gives this inescapable command.

Secondly, we've considered to whom that command comes. Now in the third place, consider with me what is the essence or the true meaning of this command. This great God speaks to all men everywhere. And this is what He says: "[God] commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent." Now what did the Apostle Paul mean when he said God commands you to repent? Well, sometimes this word "repent" is used in a very limited sense. It is the negative part of a saving turning to God through Christ. It's set in parallelism with faith. Paul says in Acts 20:21 he preached repentance toward God and faith toward the Lord Jesus Christ. Repentance: turning from sin. Faith: turning to God through Jesus Christ. Together, repentance and faith comprise the totality of a saving response to the Gospel. Sometimes the word "repentance" describes grief and sorrow for sin and that turning from sin involved in true Godly sorrow. Sometimes it is used to describe the whole of our turning unto God through Christ. And that's the sense in which Paul uses it here, the same way you have it in 2 Peter 3:9: "God is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance [that is, that they should come into a saving relationship with the Living God through Christ]."

Now what is involved in that repentance which is unto life? When Paul says, "[God] commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent", what is the irreducible minimum of what's involved in that repentance? Let me give you three very simple thoughts. And I'm greatly indebted to one of the masters of the past for the frame in which they come to you. And I'm quoting him as I give them to you.

First of all, repentance involves a painful sense of sin and its deserved wrath. Jesus said in Matthew 9:13, "I am not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance." Well, we know that no one is righteous absolutely. So Christ cannot mean that there's some people who don't need to repent. What He's saying is, "I am not come to call the righteous to repentance, that is, those who are righteous in their own eyes, those who say, 'Adam's race may have fallen, but I'm the one exception.'" No, no, He's said, "I am not come to call the righteous, those who say, 'I've got a few kinks and chinks in my armor, but I'll make it alright on my own.'" He's said, "I am not come to call those who don't feel their helplessness and their hopelessness. But I am come to call sinners to repentance, those who have painful sense of their sin and deserved wrath." That's why repentance is described as fleeing the wrath to come. In Matthew 3:7, John said, "Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?" You don't flee from a wrath that you don't believe is coming upon you. You don't just flee from nothing. You flee from something that you feel is a very real danger and a very real danger to you.

You don't find people in the middle of the plain and prairie states up in central Canada running from the lava that may pour down from some active volcano in the Philippines. It's the people who live under the shadow of the sparks and the constant reminders of the activity of that volcano, which when they begin to see it bellowing up skywards, they flee. Why? It's a real danger to them. People in the plain and prairie states of Manitoba don't do it.

So, you see, a Christian is one who does not take the doctrine of sin in a general sense: "O yes, all men are sinners." No, no, he sees himself standing beneath that mountain of God's holiness and justice and wrath against human sin. And he feels the lava of divine judgment is flowing down upon his own back, and he flees from the wrath to come. And until you have that painful sense of your own sin and deserved wrath, you'll never repent. You're living in a fool's paradise. You've made your bed on the lip of the volcano of divine wrath and anger, and you're sound asleep. God have mercy on you to see that your sin cries out to heaven for vengeance. It cries out to Almighty God for judgment. And so the first facet of true repentance is that painful sense of sin and deserved wrath.

What a beautiful example you have in that story of the publican who went up to the temple to pray. It's recorded in the Gospel of Luke, chapter 18. And we read in verse 13 concerning this man: "But the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God, be Thou merciful to me a sinner." He smote upon his breast. Why? Were there television cameras there in the boom of the microphone doing this for some religious broadcast to come over channel 4 Sunday night? Was this some kind of playacting? No. He wasn't conscious that any eye was upon him. The eye of God was upon Him. This man had been brought to the place where he realized what I've been trying to expound to you simply and clearly this morning:

"God is my creator; I was made in His image. But in Adam I fell and I have, as it were, ratified that fall by my own choice a thousand times over. I've chosen to live my own way; I've chosen to do my own thing. I've chosen to turn my back upon God, to live independent of God. And I have nothing I can claim from God. I deserve nothing but His wrath. I deserve His judgment. I deserve His anger. But I see revealed in God mercy and grace by means of sacrifice."

And probably with his eye upon the very altar of sacrifice, he does not so much as lift up his eyes to heaven. I personally believe his eyes were upon that sacrifice. And he says, "God, [God my creator, God in whose image I was made, God against whom I have sinned] be Thou merciful to me a sinner." And he felt the pain where he beat even upon his breast. He wasn't just going through some ritual mouthing some words ("I'm a sinner. Christ died...."), going through the motions. He felt the pain of his alienation from God.

Have you ever felt it? I'm not asking if somebody dragged you into a little room somewhere and you prayed a little prayer, "God be merciful to me a sinner. Save me for Jesus' sake." I'm asking if the Holy Spirit has wounded you in your breast, in your heart, in your bosom, and you felt the pain of your sin and your alienation from God. I'm asking if you've felt the pain of your sin, not what it's done to you, but what it's done to God, what it did to His Son.

The first part of true repentance: a painful sense of sin and deserved wrath. But secondly, it involves a sight and confidence of mercy in Jesus Christ. When the Apostle Paul preached that men should repent, he went on then to say that this repentance is in the light of that day in which Christ shall judge the world, even the Christ whom God has raised from the dead. So our response to this God must be in terms of His Son whom He sent to die and whom He raised from the dead and set at His own right hand. There will be no true repentance unless there is that sight and confidence that there is mercy in Jesus Christ alone.

So when Christ Himself authorized His apostles to preach and commanded them to preach to all the nations, He said in Luke 24:47, "that repentance and remission of sins should be preached in His name unto all the nations...." And what does it mean to preach repentance in His name? To preach it in the setting of verse 46: "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer, and rise again from the dead the third day; and that repentance and remission should be preached...."

O, what a wonderful proclamation to make! I have declared to you on the authority of the Word of God that you fell in Adam, that you are helpless and hopeless to recover yourself. What a wonderful thing to declare on the same basis of authority that "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God sent not the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him." And it's that sight of God's mercy in Christ, Christ coming to bridge the gap between a holy God and sinful man by taking upon Himself our nature, and in our nature, living a perfect life, in our nature, dying upon the cross, swallowing up to Himself all the billows of divine wrath against the sins of His people. And it's when we behold in Christ the way of mercy, the way of forgiveness, the way of acceptance, then and only then can there be true repentance, that repentance which is joined to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then in third place, that repentance which God commands all men not only involves that painful sense of sin and deserved wrath, a sight and confidence of the mercy of God in Christ, but it will always involve a sincere grieving for and a forsaking of sin and giving ourselves up to the Lord. In 2 Corinthians 7:10, the Apostle says, "Godly sorrow worketh repentance." In other words, there is no path into true repentance but the path of Godly sorrow. I see what my sins have done to the God who made me. I've lived in indifferent to His commands all my life. He made me to glorify Him, and I've prostituted, I've squandered all that He has invested in me as a creature made in His image. Sin has turned all of this inward upon myself and handed it over to the service of the devil. What a tragedy! Made to glorify God, and I've been doing everything but that. And when I see that, it produces grief that I've sinned against my Sovereign. I've sinned against the privileges that He's showered upon me. This is why Robert Murray M'Cheyne, a Godly Scottish preacher of several generations ago, said these very simple words, "A broken heart alone can receive a crucified Savior." If your heart's not been broken at the thought of your sin against God, sin that opened up the wounds of Christ, there's never been a saving embrace of Christ.

But it must not only be a sincere grieving for, but a forsaking of sin. Proverbs 28:13: "He that covereth his transgressions shall not prosper; but whoso confesseth and forsaketh them shall obtain mercy." There's all the difference in the world between the mere slobbering of self pity and telling Delilah to get off your lap and kiss her goodbye forever. See what I mean. O, it's easy because conscience, that little

monitor within our own minds and hearts condemns us. It's a hellish thing to live with a nagging conscience. And some people allow the terror of that conscience to build up until they have some kind of inner catharsis. And they have a good week and a little slobbering party amongst themselves, and then they feel better. And they leave their sin alone until conscience, as it were, goes back to sleep. Then they go right back to the sin until conscience starts thundering so loud until there's that awful burning, hellish fire of gnawing within. And then they lay off the sin long enough until conscience goes back to sleep.

That's not repentance. Repentance is saying to that sin what Jesus described in Matthew 5: "Ye shall be cut off. Ye shall be plucked out." It's saying no to the sin. It's abandoning the sin. It's turning from the sin. That's why when that woman at the well--she was already to make a decision in common parlance. The Lord's been talking to her in John 4 about living water. She said, "Lord, I'd like to get in on this. This sounds great. I'd like some of that living water." Well, Jesus didn't put His hand on her shoulder and say, "Let's have a word of prayer, and you pray after Me the following words." He said, "Go call your husband." And I can just see the look on her face. She went from white to red to purple. "Well, I don't have husband." He said, "That's right, you don't have a husband, and that's not the whole story. I know all about your checkered past. And when I offered you the water of life, I offered it to you in grace. I know all about you. Knowing all that I know, I still say you can have a well of water in you springing up to everlasting life." What an offer of grace. But He says,

"Woman, that grace will come in a way in which I am going to impose my government over you. You want living water? Then you face the demands of my government. Call your husband. You have living water only so far as you're ready to face your past, your present, your sin, God's Law, My demands over you. Call your husband. You want grace? It will come with government."

That's repentance, a grieving for and a forsaking of sin. Listen to the words of Paul in 1 Thessalonians 1. He says, "For they themselves report concerning us what manner of entering in we had unto you; and how ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God." They turned to serve. There's no idea, "Well, I'm going to snatch a few benefits from the Lord and then I'll go scot-free without any fear of punishment." They turned from their idols to find pardon and mercy, but also to become the willing subjects and servants of that God.

All of this is put together so beautifully in such vivid pictorial language in the description of the prodigal son. Though the main purpose of that story of the prodigal is to magnify the grace of the God who receives sinners, there are many secondary lessons. And you have one of the clearest examples of these elements of true repentance in that parable. I want to you consider with me briefly what those elements are.

First of all, You remember what happened to that young prodigal in Luke 15. He's left home; he's squandered his money, given himself over to sin. And then we read in verses 17-19: "But when he came to himself he said, How many hired servants of my father's have bread enough and to spare, and I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say unto him, Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight: I am no more worthy to be called thy son." Here is this young man coming to a sensible and painful awareness of his sin: "I have sinned against heaven. Father, I did not simply cast off the restraints and the mores of society when

I bolted the restraint of your government, and when I broke the traces of the government of the Law of God, I wasn't sinning against you, Dad. I was sinning against heaven. My problem is not primarily horizontal. It's vertical."

And I say to everyone in this place this morning, your basic problems are not horizontal, but vertical. You become aware of your problems at the horizontal level, and because you become aware of them there, you think that's where they lie. No, no, they are simply the manifestation of the real problem which is vertical. The ruptured relationship with God is the person whose marriage goes on the rocks, and they say, "Something's fundamentally wrong with me. I can't live with this woman. My problem is here." No, no, that's simply a manifestation of what your problem is. You can't live with that woman or that man because there's something wrong between you and your God. That's the problem. You say, "My problem is that I can't relate to other people in this society." Ah, but that's not the problem. That's just the symptom. The problem is this way.

That's what this prodigal came to see. He came to see, "I've sinned against heaven", this sight of his sin and deserved wrath. But then he knew that there was something back in that household called mercy and grace, and he says, "I will arise and go to my father." And though he says, "I will confess my unworthiness", there's no question that the father will be there in mercy. And that's what gave him encouragement in the midst of all the living reality of his sin to return because he knew there was mercy back at that home.

And so with us, it is not enough that we see ourselves alienated from God, deserving of His wrath. If we get no further than that, we'll either kill ourselves or die in hopeless despair. If I speak to some this morning who are in that first category--you see yourself alienated from God, deserving of His wrath, but there's that despair. O, I preach to you this morning, despair no more. Christ died, Christ, rose, Christ lives. He's mighty, He's able, He's willing to save.

Then there was this sincere grieving for his sin and forsaking it. He didn't run around and find some of his old girlfriends and say, "Look, I'm going back home. Do you want to come along with me?" When he left the hog pens, he left everything connected with them: the harlots upon whom he wasted his living, the old associations. He left the whole business and went back to the government of his father's home in which righteousness reigned. And there we see true and Biblical repentance.

I ask you as you sit here this morning, have you and do you experience the things I'm describing? Do you know what it is to have been brought to a painful awareness of sin and deserved wrath. Has the Holy Spirit brought you through the Word to a sight of Christ and His mercy and His grace? Have you been brought to that place of a sincere grieving and forsaking of your sin and a giving of yourself over to the Lord Jesus Christ to be His, to be saved by Him, to be kept by Him, to be governed by Him simply to be His?

Well, the Apostle closes His sermon where I want to close it this morning by buttressing this command with this great reason why men ought to seriously regard that command. And you may sit there this morning and wonder in your mind, "Why in the world should I take this command seriously?" Well, I'll tell you why you should. For the same reason Paul told these people why they should take this command

seriously. Look at verse 31: "[God] commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent [why?]: inasmuch as [or because] He hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world...." God commands you to repent because He's appointed a day of judgment. In other words, this command comes to us couched in the context of the final day of judgment. And in that day, no other issue will be important but this: did you repent? Nothing else will matter.

In that day, it won't matter a hill of beans how much money you made. Can you imagine the folly of a man, a woman, fellow or girl coming into the presence of the Living God against whom they've sinned and lived in rebellion, and the books are opened, and the record of all their thoughts and words and deeds are spread before them--can you imagine them reaching in their pockets and flashing a few hundred dollar bills and saying, "God, maybe this will help me out a little bit. While I was there on earth, I lived for money and things, and that's all I've got, God. Take these. Maybe that will help me." What stupidity. The folly of it is evident to the youngest here this morning. What good will your money do? What good will your cars and your homes and your things do when you come to judgment and your sins are not forgiven? What about the person who has lived for pleasure? How are you going to capture those moments of sensual pleasure and put them in a box or a bottle and stir them in the judgment and say, "Here Lord, here are all my pinnacle moments of ecstatic pleasure. Maybe they'll help me out." You see how stupid it is. You see how foolish it is. O my friend, the day is coming when one thing will matter. Did you repent? Not how much money you made, not what pleasures you had, not what church you belonged to or didn't belong to. One thing will matter: did you experience repentance unto life?

Now look at what Paul says about that day. He says it is an appointed day: "inasmuch as [this God] hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world...." If men could get together, say on July 1, all around the world in every little hamlet and village and tribe as well as the great centers of the world, Paris and New York and London and Cairo, Egypt and Peking and all the rest and say, "We're going to have a worldwide referendum, and here is the issue at stake: shall there or shall there not be a day of judgment? Yes or No?" I have no question as to what the outcome of the ballot would be. Apart from God's elect, His salt sprinkled throughout the earth, it would be an overwhelming vote: no day of judgment. Because even in the mind and heart of the most careless sinner in this place, whoever he be this morning, there is that gnawing awareness, "My sins one day are going to stare me in the face when I stand before God."

O, how men would love to blot out the reality of that day. They can't do it in their own conscience let alone in reality. And the reason they can't do it in their conscience is because Almighty God Himself has appointed that day, and nobody's going to change His appointment book. No secretaries can take God's appointment book and scribble out His appointments and write in others. The God who made the world is the God who determined to judge the world, and no one will alter that determination. It's an appointed day.

The second thing Paul says about it is that there will be an appointed Judge taking charge in that day: "He hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom He hath ordained." If men couldn't pass their referendum to cancel out the judgment day, they'd love to do the second best thing: pick their own judge, one that they could pay off, one they could bribe, one they could

threaten, one who could be cajoled into altering the standard of inflexible judgment. But God's already made the choice of His Judge, and He's not going to alter it. He's not only appointed the day, He's appointed the Judge. And He says it's that person whom He has raised from the dead in order to give assurance of His appointment. In other words, the resurrection of Christ is God's validation upon His appointment to judgment. He didn't look like the judge of the world when He was hanging on a cross. He himself was judged by the creatures of that world, condemned to be worthy of death, hung upon a cross. In weakness He died. But He now lives, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ is God's irrefutable argument for the fact that this appointment will be kept.

When I hear men trying to talk themselves into the conviction that Christ is not risen, I have to laugh under my breath. So indelibly impressed upon men is the reality of Christ's death and resurrection and His appointment to judgment that they marshal all their energies to try to scrub that concept from the minds of men so they can live so much more comfortably. And all the so called intellectual arguments against the Gospel are nothing but man's futile attempts to scrub from his mind the awful haunting realization of an empty tomb in Palestine is the certain pledge of Somebody who's going to sit on a throne and judge me. "All judgment has been given unto the Son" (John 5). And part of the Gospel, according to Acts 10 and Romans 2, is the preaching that Christ is Judge.

Then in the third place, He's going to judge by an inflexible standard. Look at text: "He hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness [that is, by the inflexible standard of His own holy Law]...." O, how we love a sliding scale of judgment. Let somebody else say what they say and that's gossip. But then we adjust the scale, and to us it is just criticism. Let somebody else do something and we can judge it as lie, untruth. But we slide and adjust the scale and call it with reference to what we say that's in the same ball park diplomacy. Let somebody else do something and it's this, and we slide the scale and adjust it and squeeze it and stretch it, but not this Judge. He judges in righteousness. He has a standard of absolute inflexibility: the holy Law of God. And every thought, word, and deed that is not mathematically parallel to that law, if it is not covered by the blood and mediation and righteousness of Christ, will be met with justice--pure, simple, and unmixed. "He will judge the world in righteousness."

And if anybody here is foolish enough to want to enter into discussion with God about your life when it's faced with the Law of God, then God have mercy on you. I for one want to be found hiding beneath the righteousness of Christ, hiding beneath the covering of His blood. "For I know that in me, that is in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing." And all my righteousness are as filthy rags. I do not want to face a standard of inflexible righteousness unless I meet that standard. And I cannot meet it in myself. But blessed be God, I meet it in Jesus Christ. "He is made unto us wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption." And so if you're in Christ, you may not fear that day. If you're out of Christ, you should tremble.

And then that day will be consummated with an irrevocable sentence. "He will judge the world in righteousness." He will not only bring in the evidence and issue the sentence, but He will pronounce that sentence as irreversible and irrevocable: "Depart from Me ye cursed into everlasting fire."

Well, you read at your leisure what Paul preached along these lines. Some people mocked. They said, "That's a bunch of stupid religious railings." Some other people were a little more polite and said, "We'll hear You another time." But thank God, it said some clave to Him and believed. O, may God grant that this morning, as this inescapable command of the Living God has come to us from the Scriptures, that we shall not destroy ourselves by the mocking born of human pride or by the evasion borne of human diplomacy. ("Well, that's alright if that's your cup of tea.") But O, that we may be subject to the authority of the Word of God. Hear this God who made us saying, "I command you to repent, acknowledge your sin, flee to My Son, flee from your sin, give yourself unto Him."

God grant that in that awesome day, I may be found clear of the blood of everyone of you. Some of you may never darken the doors of this place again, but you will never escape what you've heard this morning. As much as you would love to, you cannot escape the haunting conviction that what I've told is true. Because being made in God's image, though sin has defaced that image, whenever God's voice is heard through the Scriptures, there is an echo to that voice, an amen in the depth of our own hearts. And we try to stifle, we try to squelch it, drown it out. But O, blessed is the man to whom that amen becomes so thunderously overpowering, and he says, "O God, I can fight against You and Your truth no longer. Here I am naked before You in my sin and uncleanness. But O God, if there's hope for creatures like me, be pleased to receive me and pardon me and forgive me for the sake of Your dear and only begotten Son."

"[God] commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent: inasmuch as He hath appointed a day in which He will judge the world...."

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