

# I Can't Repent!

Ichabod Spencer

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One of the most solemn assemblies that I have ever seen, was convened on the evening of the Sabbath, in a private house. It was an inquiry meeting; at which more than a hundred persons were present, the most of them young or in middle life. The structure of the house was rather peculiar. There was a spacious hall, about ten feet wide and about forty feet long, extending from the front door along the side of three parlors which opened into it, as well as into each other; and at the rear part of this hall was a staircase extending to the second story of the house. Movable benches were introduced into this hall, and placed along each side of it, to afford seats for those who attended this meeting, and who could not all be accommodated in the parlors. After the meetings had been continued in this place for a few weeks; it became manifest, that the hall was the preferred place. As the different persons came in and took their seats 'where they pleased, the seats in the hall would be filled, and then the stairs would be used as seats entirely to the top, and then the upper hall would be occupied, and finally the parlors. I was accustomed to stand, while addressing the assembly, in one of the doors opening from the hall into the parlor, where my eye had a full view of all those in the hall, on the stairs and in one of the parlors. Besides a general exhortation, it was my ordinary custom to speak to each individual, passing from one to another. And all those in the hall and on the stairs could hear every word, which I uttered in this conversation, and the most of what any one said to me. And for these reasons, as I supposed, the persons who resorted there would choose the hall or the stairs. This listening of others, to what passed in conversation betwixt any one individual and myself, was never very pleasant to me. I should greatly have preferred to converse with each one alone; as there would have been less restraint on their part, and on my own, more certainty, that what I was saying would be truly applicable and would not be applied by any one, for whom it was not intended. And besides this, individuals would sometimes make expressions to me so erroneous, that I was unwilling others should hear them, lest they might be injured by it. To avoid this, I used to speak in a low tone of voice; and if the expressions of any individual were becoming such, as I feared might be injurious; I usually broke off the conversation suddenly, by saying, I will call and see you tomorrow.

On the evening, to which I now allude; all the seats were filled, and three persons were seated on each stair entirely to the top, and many had found their place in the hall above. It was a calm and mild summer evening; and perfect stillness reigned over the crowd assembled there, unbroken except by the long breathing or the deep sigh of some pensive soul. I thought I had never seen so still, so solemn, and thoughtful an assembly. I closed the front door, after all had entered, and took my stand in my accustomed place. I hesitated to speak. I was afraid to utter a word. It seemed to me, that anything I could say would be less solemn, impressive, instructive, than that tomb-like silence in an assembly of so many immortal souls, each visited by the Holy Spirit. I stood, for some time, in perfect silence. The power of that silence was painful. The people sat before me, like statues of marble, — not a movement, — not a sound. It appeared as if they had all ceased to breathe. I broke the silence by saying slowly and in a low

voice: — “Each one of you is thinking of his own immortal soul and of his God.” Again I paused for the space of an entire minute; for I was overawed, and knew not what to say. Then falling on my knees, I commenced prayer. They all spontaneously knelt. After a short prayer, I proposed to speak a few words to each one of them, as far as it was possible; and requested all of them, except the individual with whom I should be conversing, to be engaged in reflection or in silent prayer to God. Passing rapidly from one to another, I had spoken to all those in the parlors and in the hall, till I had reached about the middle of it, where every word spoken could be heard, by the whole assembly. Coming to a man, about thirty years of age, whom I had seen there three times before, I said to him: — “I did not expect to see you here tonight. I thought you would have come to repentance, before this time; and would have no occasion any longer to ask, what shall I do to be saved?”

“I can’t repent,” said he, with a sort of determined and despairing accent, and so loudly as to startle us all. Instantly, I felt sorry for this expression. But I thought it would not do to avoid noticing it, and leave it sounding in the ears of so many impenitent sinners. I immediately answered, as I stood before him, as gently and yet solemnly as I could: — “What an awfully wicked heart you must have! You can’t repent! You love sin so well; that you cannot be sorry for it — you cannot forsake it — you cannot hate it! — You must be in an awful condition indeed! You are so much the enemy of God; that you cannot be sorry for having offended him — you cannot cease to contend against him — and even now, while you are sensible of the impropriety and unhappiness of it, you cannot cease to resist the Holy Spirit, who strives with you to bring you to repentance! — You must have an awfully depraved heart!”

“I can’t repent,” said he again, with an accent of grief and intolerable vexation — “I can’t repent, with such a heart!”

“That means,” said I, “that you have become too wicked to desire to become any better; for nothing but wickedness makes repentance difficult. And then, you just plead one sin, as an excuse for another — the sin of your heart, as an excuse for the continued sin of your heart!”

Still he insisted. “I can’t repent! I should if I could!” and the tears rolled down his cheeks, of which he seemed to go utterly unconscious, as well as unconscious of the presence of any one but myself.

“You would if you could,” said I, “is only a self-righteous and self-justifying excuse. Your deceitful heart means by it, that you are not so wicked as to continue in your impenitence willingly. It means that you are willing to repent, but you cannot. You are deceived. You are not willing. You think you are, but you are in an error. You never will be willing, unless God shall verify in you the promise, ‘My people shall be willing in the day of my power.’ In that power lies your only hope, as I have told you before, when I urged you to pray. If you are willing to repent, what hinders you? I am willing you should repent. All of us here are willing. Every angel in heaven is willing you should repent. Christ who died to redeem you is willing. God the Father is willing. The Holy Spirit is willing, who, at this moment strives with you to bring you to repentance. What hinders you, then? Yourself only! And when you say you can’t repent, you mean that you are not to be blamed for coming here tonight with an impenitent heart. You are woefully deceived! God blames you! The whole Bible blames you! Your own conscience, though you strive to

silence it, blames you! — This excuse will not stand!”

“I can’t repent!” said he again, in a harsh, vociferating voice, as if in anger.

“Then God can’t save you,” said I; “for he cannot lie, and he has said the impenitent shall be destroyed! You say you cannot repent. He has not said so. He commands you to repent.”

He replied, with much agitation, but in a subdued tone: — “I am sure I have tried long; and my mind has been greatly tormented. All has done no good. I do not see as I can repent!”

“Other people have repented,” said I. “There are a great many penitents in the world. I find there are some here tonight, who think they have come to repentance, since they were here last Sabbath evening. One of them told me then, very much the same thing you tell me now, that it did not seem to him he ever could turn from sin; but he has found out he can. As to your having tried so long, the length of time will not save you if a man has got his face turned the wrong way, the longer he goes on, the worse off he becomes. He would do well to stop, and turn about. Such is the call of the Bible: ‘Turn ye, turn ye, for why will ye die? Repent, and turn yourselves from all your transgressions, so iniquity shall not be your ruin. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the Lord.’ Other people have turned to God, and you ought to. But your mind has seized on the idea of your trying and your trouble, and you make an excuse and a self-righteousness of them.”

“Do you think I am self-righteous?” said he.

“I know you are. That is your grand difficulty. You have been trying to save yourself. You are trying now. When you tried to repent, your heart aimed after repentance, as something to recommend you to God, and constitute a reason why he should forgive and save you. It was just an operation of a self-righteous spirit. It was just an attempt to save yourself, to have your religion save you, instead of relying by faith upon Jesus Christ, to be saved from wrath through him. This is precisely the case with every impenitent sinner. The error is one. The forms of it may be various; but in all cases it is substantially the same thing. St. Paul has given a perfect description of it: ‘going about,’ from one thing to another, from one device or attempt to another, — ‘going about to establish a righteousness of their own, they have not submitted themselves to the righteousness of God; for Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth.’ One man tries to establish a righteousness of his own, out of his reformations; another one, out of his duties; another, out of his painful attempts or painful convictions; as you just now mentioned your own torments of mind. It is evident, that you are trying to be righteous before God, through your pain — and your attempted penitence. And if you should find any peace of mind in that way; it would only be a deception, not an item of religion in it. You ought to betake yourself to the Lord Jesus Christ, a poor, guilty, undone sinner, to be saved by him alone — saved by grace. You ought to go to him, just as you are, to be washed in his blood, to be clothed in his righteousness, to be sheltered from the thunders of God’s eternal law, in the security of his all-sufficient atonement. You ought to flee to Christ, like the man-slayer to the city of refuge, before he is

cut down by the sword of the avenger of blood. You ought to go instantly, like the prodigal to his father, in all his poverty, starvation, and rags, as well as guilt. You ought to cry, like Peter sinking in the waves, “Lord, save me.” But instead of this, you are just looking to yourself, striving to find something, or make something in your own heart, which shall recommend you to God. And in this miserable way, you are making salvation a far more difficult matter, than God has made it. You have forgotten the free grace of the gospel, the full atonement of Jesus Christ, by the sacrifice of himself.”

“But,” said he, “I can’t repent and come to Christ, of myself.”

“I certainly never said you could; and never wished you to think you could. In my opinion, God does not wish you to think so. And if you have found out, that you cannot repent of yourself, aside from divine aid, I am glad of it — you have found out an important truth. Most certainly God does not tell you to repent of yourself. He tells you, that ‘Christ is exalted to give repentance.’ He says to every sinner, ‘Thou hast destroyed thyself, in me is thy help: let him take hold on my strength that he may make peace with me, and he shall make peace with me.’ On the ground that they need it, he has promised ‘the Holy Spirit to them that ask him.’ God never expects you to repent, without divine aid, but with it. He knows you are too wicked to do it, that you are without strength, helpless, undone, a lost sinner! — And here lies the very heart of your error. You have been trying to repent, in a way that God never told you, just by your own powers, instead of trying to get God to have mercy upon you, and save you by his help. You have been looking to the powers within you, instead of looking to the aid above you. You have trusted to yourself, instead of trusting yourself to the grace of Christ. And that is the very reason why you have failed; and now you complain, that you cannot repent; while, in reality, you have exactly the same sufficiency, as the penitent all around you. What has been their help, may be your help. And the sooner you are driven off from all that self-seeking and self-reliance, the better it will be for you. You are in the double error of undervaluing the character of God, and over-valuing your own. God is more merciful and more gracious, than you think him to be. He is more ready to save you. And when he commands you to repent, he does not wish you to forget, that all your hope lies in the immediate aid of his Holy Spirit. Nor does he wish you to attempt to dispense with that proffered assistance, by your not believing, that you are as utterly helpless as you really are. He does not tell you to rely upon your own shattered strength; but you have done so. And when you have failed, you then turn round and complain, that you ‘can’t repent.’ You reject his offered help — the help of the omnipotent Spirit. And for this reason, you will be the more criminal, if you do not repent. That Divine Spirit is your only hope. If he leaves you to yourself, you are lost — eternally lost! Tread softly, my dear friend! The ground whereon thou standest is holy ground! Let not the Holy Spirit, who presides over the souls here this evening, bear witness against you in the day of the final judgment, — ‘because I have called and ye refused!’ You can repent; just in the way that others repent; just because God is your help. Trust him; and rely upon yourself no longer.”

As I was saying these things, he appeared to become much less affected, but much more thoughtful. His tears and his agitations ceased; and he seemed to hang upon my lips, as if he was listening to some new wonder. When I had done, all was hushed as death; and in a deliberate, subdued, and solemn tone, he broke that expressive silence, say-

ing: — “I hope, my God will help me.”

“Let us pray,” said I; — and a short prayer, pleading for God’s help, closed the exercises of the evening.

I afterwards found numerous reasons for believing, that that was one of the most profitable religious exercises, that I ever attended. Among others was the case of my friend, whose expression had drawn me somewhat out of my proposed mode of conducting the exercises of the evening. He became, as he hoped, a true believer. He stated to me the exercises of his mind, his repentance, his faith in Christ, his peace and hope, and his reliance upon the Holy Spirit. His mind appeared to seize upon the great truths of the gospel, almost without emotion. He had no ecstasy, no exultation, no joy. He had only peace and hope. He told me, that his agitations had all been useless to him; that they were not faith and did not lead to faith; and that he thought “sinners ought to attend to the calls of God, in a believing and business manner.” And when I asked him what had kept him from Christ so long, he replied: “I was trying to make myself better — to have a religion instead of trusting in Christ. What you said to me that night, showed me my mistake; and I went home with a deeper sense of my dependence, and a clear view of the free grace of God to sinners, through the redemption of Christ.”

About six months after this he united with the church, and has continued to manifest an established and uniform faith.

To cut off the sinner from all reliance upon himself, his merits and his powers; and throw him, naked and helpless, into the hands of the Holy Spirit to lead him to Christ in faith; should be the one great aim of the ministry.

Sinners certainly ought to repent, for God commands them to repent. But in my opinion, he does not design to have them understand his command, as having respect only to their own ability to repent, and not having respect to the proffered aids of the Holy Spirit. Such aids constitute one grand ground on which his command is obligatory, and sweep away every possible excuse. No man ever did repent without the Holy Spirit, or ever will; and this is no small amount of proof that no man ever can. Nothing seems to be gained by making a sinner believe that he is able to repent without divine assistance. Such a belief will be very likely to mislead him to a reliance upon his own shattered strength. And as to his conviction of criminality for not coming to repentance, surely there is strong ground for such conviction, since God offers him all the ability he needs, — in me is thy help, — let him take hold on my strength that he may make peace with me.

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*Ichabod Smith Spencer (1798-1854) was born in Rupert, Vermont. The Lord called him to preach, and he was called to serve as a colleague-pastor of the Congregational Church in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1828—the church made famous by Jonathan Edwards. His ministry at Northampton from 1828-1832 was remarkably blessed with conversions. Later in 1832 he accepted the call to the Second Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, New York where he remained for 22 years. By the time of his death the church had grown to be one of the largest and most influential in all of New York State. His biographer states that he was one of the greatest preachers the American Pulpit produced during that era. At the same time, his greatest gift and legacy was in the pastoral ministry. This can clearly be seen in this justly*

*famous A Pastor's Sketches which became one of the best selling titles in North America. Solid Ground is honored to have his three volumes of sermons also available under the title The Bunyan of Brooklyn.*