

Steps to Repentance

Happy Sabbath to all.

After the Church's meeting for New Moon this past Wednesday, I sent a short email to the members explaining an aspect of repentance that may not be mentioned as often as it should be. After considering it, however, I think it's something from which this group as a whole may benefit. One of the reasons why I think it may be overlooked by Churches in general is because it is very "practical," and sometimes those who are religious-minded believe that the most practical thing they can do is pray.

Certainly, prayer is one of the most powerful things we can do; however, the Scriptures, and perhaps the New Testament most directly, warn against the danger of using prayer as a substitute for obedience.

Now, this may be a new idea to some of us, that "prayer" can be (mis) used by those who are not truly faithful as a replacement for obedience to the steps that Yah would have them take, but certainly those who have attempted to share the Victory message with others have seen a form of it.

When we come to those who claim to be Christ's, and we speak to them about the Bible's teaching of perfect victory over sin in the life of those who are born again, we get a variety of responses. Some of the more common ones are denial, a lack of interest, and argument. Occasionally, we will find some who say that we "should" have victory – after all, Christ is more powerful than sin, they will concede. There are some who say we will have it someday, but when we follow this up with questions designed to lead them to life right at that moment, we will sometimes hear, "You are right, I will need to pray about this."

It isn't only limited to the Victory message either. I recall some years ago when I was in high school; I had just recently become a mainstream Seventh-day Adventist, and I was eager to share the truth of the day of rest with those I knew to be Bible students. In particular, there was a classmate of mine, whose father was a Baptist pastor, and whom I had heard speaking about the Bible to some others.

Naturally, I thought this was a wonderful opportunity, and so I would look for him during the breaks between classes, and we began to discuss the Sabbath. Now, this was a while ago, so I don't remember exactly what arguments he used against it, but I don't recall anything unusual, so I am certain it was among the standard ones – that Christ was raised on the first day of the week, that the apostles had a meeting on one particular Sunday, that the Sabbath was for the Jews, etc.

To his credit, my classmate was never dishonest during our discussion. He never tried to manipulate the Word to say something it didn't; it seems to me that he had simply never considered the seventh day in the light I was providing it. However, when he saw that he was not "winning the debate," he began to deflate a little, to speak less, and to think more. Now, looking back, I understand that there were some things I could have done better. Certainly, I was not a born-again believer. Yes, I was excited about my faith. Yes, I loved what I knew of the Father and Son. I was happy to be an Adventist. And yet, without a true concept of victory over sin, and a commitment to live my life according to that principle, I really did not know what it meant to evangelize people, to reach their hearts and not only their heads. It was a matter more of getting people to "believe the truth," rather than "live the truth."

Of course, having the right doctrine is a central pillar of the CSDA faith. But doctrine is really a means to an end. It is a pathway to the goal, which is the character of Yahshua. These are things I would have said

back then, had I known. Instead, I was content to merely convince him that the seventh day was to be treated with respect, and that Sunday-sacredness was an invention of fallen minds.

Doctrinally, scripturally, I had the truth on my side. Even the most nominal Adventist is generally better educated on the commandments than the average Sunday-keeping protestant (at least, that was the case back then). After a few days of conversation, he really didn't have anything new to add, and he was clearly unable to defend his position in light of my evidence. I suspect he had, at some point, also asked others (perhaps his father) for help, and didn't receive anything he didn't already know. And so, he said, "Ok, you have fulfilled your responsibility and told me about this. I will pray about it."

It was clear from his tone and his wording that he was under conviction. Even someone who is not fully converted (as we teach it) can fall under conviction when they realize that they are not faithfully fulfilling the commitments they have made. Even the worldly can feel guilty over wrongdoing, and it seemed that my classmate had begun to believe that by neglecting the Sabbath day, he was doing wrong. But this is where he made a mistake. He weighed the cost of becoming a Sabbath keeper against his current standing – friends, family, his community – and came up with the only defense he had left.

This is a bit of a paradox, but sometimes Satan wants those who claim to be Christ's to pray. He doesn't mind at all if the faithful are praying, as long as they go no further than that. Of course, the Scriptures tell us, "The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much." (James 5:16)

However, most people probably read that verse and, stripping it of all its holy power, read it as, "Prayer works."

This is not what James says! The apostle lays not one, not two, but three conditions on prayer, before he considers it of the quality that "availeth much."

Prayer must be "effectual." This means it must be "working." It must have power in it, and those that are used as a way to "give up," to avoid making a change, or to stall for time, these are not effectual prayers.

Prayer must be fervent. We know what this means. It must be offered from a heart that truly desires the result, and that is committed to seeking Yah's will through sincere requests, earnest, and sometimes repeated requests.

Prayer must be offered by the righteous. Now, what are the qualities of a "righteous man?" We have seen, in previous studies, that the Psalms have a most relevant list of qualities including (from Psalm 15) one who "swareth to his own hurt." This means, is willing to suffer loss in order to maintain integrity, and that includes accepting the response of Yah to prayer, even if it is not the answer we would – at that time – want to hear.

If someone is presented with a duty from Yah, an instruction or guidance from the Most High, and his response is, "Let me pray about it," this is one of the most effective and powerful defenses they can give against righteousness. Yes, even prayer can be a barrier to righteousness, if it is not offered according to those three characteristics listed by James. And furthermore, how can we help them to see their error? It is a most subtle one. We cannot easily say, "No, you should not pray." They will say (for Satan will inspire the one who resists righteousness this way) that we do not respect prayer. We cannot convince them by saying, "Obedience is better than prayer," for they will take the position that we are legalists.

We can certainly pray with them, and for them, but it has been my experience that those who see a righteous path before them, and say that they will have to “pray before taking it,” tend not to end up following it at all.

Now, I want to be clear here. Many things cannot be planned in an instant. Many things needs much prayer in order to accomplish properly; that isn't what I am talking about here.

A true prayer will say, “Father, show me a righteous path.” And if one is seen, will say, “Show me the best way to walk it.” It does not say, when faced with what is already known to be a righteous path, “Father, should I take this path?” This is really resistance, but it is difficult for those who have taken such a position to recognize it, because they are convinced that by simply praying, they fulfill their duty toward the Most High. Like Cain, they substitute their own work (the prayer) for the sacrifice that Yahweh desires of them.

But as the Scriptures tell us – because there was a need for people to be told – “If a brother or sister be naked, and destitute of daily food, and one of you say unto them, ‘Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled,’ notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit?” (James 2:15, 16)

Clearly, the use of prayer as a substitute for the fulfillment of righteous duty is not a new problem. I am certain that we could also find examples from the Old Testament, where those charged with a ministry have said, “I would rather pray,” or something to that effect. Without devaluing the importance of prayer in the slightest, however, Yahweh has pointed out through His word that prayer is only one aspect of our spiritual lives. It may be a vital one, but the human body needs (for example) both water and air. If we have no air, we cannot substitute “more water” and expect to survive. Similarly, we must pray, it is necessary for our spiritual survival, but we also need to walk faithfully before Yah, or death quickly follows.

Now, what does all this have to do with repentance?

Actually, this has much to do with repentance – if the word is rightly understood in the context of proper Christianity. As we know, repentance is not merely feeling sorrow for wrongdoing. It is not merely feeling guilt, or making promises to “do better next time.” Repentance is not punishing one's self for error, or even admitting the error in the first place (admitting it is confession).

Repentance has to do with turning away from unrighteousness with all that we are: mind, body and spirit. And as I started out by saying, this kind of repentance is viewed by some as being entirely too “practical” to worth serious spiritual discussion. Even those who are beginning to have a good concept of repentance may say, “I must reject the thought of the temptation in my mind,” but then they find, to their dismay, that some time later they have slipped back into old habits. This, of course, is disastrous to their faith, and discouraging, for they will be tempted to think, “My faith was insufficient to win me the victory.”

But the reason for this is often very easy to identify and remedy. They have not turned away from wickedness fully... they have not truly “repented.” They may have turned away mentally. They may have prayed to avoid it again, thus showing a spiritual distancing from the temptation. However, if they have made no practical steps to ensure that they do not commit the same error again, then they have not fully turned away with their entire being. Repentance is a matter that involves the entire soul; and as

Adventists know like few others, this means even the eye that may be plucked out, or the hand that may be cut off, in order to enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. (Mat 5:29, 30)

Adventists know, in other words, that the soul includes this flesh, and in order to stand before Yah in peace, we must master this flesh, consider it “dead” in terms of its power to control us, and subdue it through temperance and faith.

When we have discovered an error, the faithful believer will reject that thing, and turn away from it. Certainly, they may feel guilt. Certainly, they will pray for forgiveness, and accept that the Father has received us unto Himself in love. But then, we are charged with a duty to go forth and “sin no more,” as Yahshua said to those whom He healed.

Now, suppose I had been able to convince my friend that he should begin to keep the Sabbath holy. Suppose he had not said, “Let me pray about that,” but rather, “I see that I have been in error. I will begin to keep the Sabbath holy.” Certainly, he will have agreed mentally with the Biblical doctrine. No doubt, he would have prayed for forgiveness of past wrongs, and for strength to be faithful going forward. But then, what if he had made no other change? What if he continued to go to Church with his family, to participate in religious observances with other Sunday-keepers and (perhaps more significantly) to avoid gatherings of like-minded Sabbath keepers?

I can confidently state that even that good beginning would not have ended well. Those who are starting out on the path of righteousness need support from the community of believers. That is why, speaking now of true conversion, Yah has given us a Church, a community of saints for the facilitation of the path of sanctification, and the perfection of one another’s character. We are told to draw near to one another in love, to break down walls of separation, and to truly be as “one” even with the same closeness that the Father shares with the Son.

This is why, if one who is of the Family errs, we do not only say, “We will pray for you,” but we also minister to them. We seek to restore them fully to the path of righteousness, in spirit, mind and in body also. We will, in the course of that ministry, offer practical steps to keep them from straying even into the “country” of that temptation in the future, to remain as far from it as Yah has separated them from it.

Sometimes these steps are not easy. Sometimes they require a sacrifice. We have not advised anyone to cut off their right hands, as Yahshua mentioned in Matthew 5, but sometimes they do require making a change in the life that leads them outside their zone of comfort. We say, “Remove yourself from that temptation entirely, for that is how you will succeed.” These suggestions are not made lightly, and are often proportional to the degree of the error. A slight error might require just a few changes to ensure that it does not arise again. A large error might require something more, something to render the individual dead, alien, to the possibility of it taking place at any point in the future.

This is how Yah would have it, for it is better to sacrifice, and even be broken at the cross, than it is to fall into transgression and be entirely destroyed by the brightness of that which is truly Holy.

Yah desires the happiness of His people. He desires that our lives, even on this earth, are joyful, and that they will become endless when His Son comes to receive us to Himself. But in order for that to happen, we must be free from blemishes, from the stains of sin. We pray, as we are discussing prayer, that Yah will “keep us from falling,” however, this prayer by itself must be supported by our choices, our

decisions, our obedience to stay out of the path of temptation, for Yah does not use force, and our Father cannot manipulate us beyond the degree to which we are willing to change. We must be willing to change from an earthly creature to a heavenly one. We must be willing to be considered a Child of Yah and a Citizen of Heaven, rather than a child of this world, and a prisoner of Satan.

Therefore, let us not resist the changes that Yah is bringing to our lives. Let us see the blessing in them and, as we grow and find more errors to put away, let us be glad, even rejoicing, that the Spirit is guiding us, and leading us – in body as well as in mind and spirit – to a place where we “cannot sin,” not in the face of the most powerful and clever temptations. When we surrender all to Yahshua, all that is ours is Yah’s, and all that is our Father’s is given to us as a grand inheritance. This is how we are “one,” and how we shall be preserved, perfectly, unto the day of our visible salvation.

Are there any questions or comments on this study as we close?