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Online

Cyril of Jerusalem:

Catechetical Lecture (Lecture 2) (397-400 A.D.)

On Repentance and Remission of Sins, and Concerning the Adversary.

Ezekiel 18:20-23

The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. But if the wicked will turn from all his sins, etc.

1. A fearful thing is sin, and the sorest disease of the soul is transgression, secretly cutting its sinews, and becoming also the cause of eternal fire; an evil of a man's own choosing, an offspring of the will. For that we sin of our own free will the Prophet says plainly in a certain place: Yet I planted you a fruitful vine, wholly true: how are you turned to bitterness, (and become) the strange vine Jeremiah 2:21? The planting was good, the fruit coming from the will is evil; and therefore the planter is blameless, but the vine shall be burnt with fire since it was planted for good, and bore fruit unto evil of its own will. For God, according to the Preacher, made man upright, and they have themselves sought out many inventions. Ecclesiastes 7:29 For we are His workmanship, says the Apostle, created unto good works, which God afore prepared, that we should walk in them. Ephesians 2:10 So then the Creator, being good, created for good works; but the creature turned of its own free will to wickedness. Sin then is, as we have said, a fearful evil, but not incurable; fearful for him who clings to it, but easy of cure for him who by repentance puts it from him. For suppose that a man is holding fire in his hand; as long as he holds fast the live coal he is sure to be burned, but should he put away the coal, he would have cast away the flame also with it. If however any one thinks that he is not being burned when sinning, to him the Scripture says, Shall a man wrap up fire in his bosom, and not burn his clothes Proverbs 6:27? For sin burns the sinews of the soul, [and breaks the spiritual bones of the mind, and darkens the light of the heart].

2. But some one will say, What can sin be? Is it a living thing? Is it an angel? Is it a demon? What is this which works within us? It is not an enemy, O man, that assails you from without, but an evil shoot growing up out of yourself. Look right on with your eyes Proverbs 4:25, and there is no lust. [Keep your own, and] seize not the things of others, and robbery has ceased. Remember the Judgment, and neither fornication, nor adultery, nor murder, nor any transgression of the law shall prevail with you. But whenever you forget God, immediately you begin to devise wickedness and to commit iniquity.

3. Yet you are not the sole author of the evil, but there is also another most wicked prompter, the devil. He

indeed suggests, but does not get the mastery by force over those who do not consent. Therefore says the Preacher, If the spirit of him that has power rise up against you, quit not your place. Shut your door, and put him far from you, and he shall not hurt you. But if you indifferently admit the thought of lust, it strikes root in you by its suggestions, and enthrals your mind, and drags you down into a pit of evils.

But perhaps you say, I am a believer, and lust does not gain the ascendant over me, even if I think upon it frequently. Do you not know that a root breaks even a rock by long persistence? Admit not the seed, since it will rend your faith asunder: tear out the evil by the root before it blossom, lest from being careless at the beginning thou have afterwards to seek for axes and fire. When your eyes begin to be diseased, get them cured in good time, lest you become blind, and then have to seek the physician.

4. The devil then is the first author of sin, and the father of the wicked: and this is the Lord's saying, not mine, that the devil sins from the beginning : none sinned before him. But he sinned, not as having received necessarily from nature the propensity to sin, since then the cause of sin is traced back again to Him that made him so; but having been created good, he has of his own free will become a devil, and received that name from his action. For being an Archangel he was afterwards called a devil from his slandering: from being a good servant of God he has become rightly named Satan; for Satan is interpreted the adversary. And this is not my teaching, but that of the inspired prophet Ezekiel: for he takes up a lamentation over him and says, You were a seal of likeness, and a crown of beauty; in the Paradise of God were you born : and soon after, You were born blameless in your days, from the day in which you were created, until your iniquities were found in you. Very rightly has he said, were found in you; for they were not brought in from without, but you yourself begot the evil. The cause also he mentions immediately: Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty: for the multitude of your sins were you wounded, and I did cast you to the ground. In agreement with this the Lord says again in the Gospels: I beheld Satan as lightning fall from heaven. Luke 10:18 You see the harmony of the Old Testament with the New. He when cast out drew many away with him. It is he that puts lusts into them that listen to him: from him come adultery, fornication, and every kind of evil. Through him our forefather Adam was cast out for disobedience, and exchanged a Paradise bringing forth wondrous fruits of its own accord for the ground which brings forth thorns.

5. What then? Some one will say. We have been beguiled and are lost. Is there then no salvation left? We have fallen: Is it not possible to rise again? We have been blinded: May we not recover our sight? We have become crippled: Can we never walk upright? In a word, we are dead: May we not rise again? He that woke Lazarus who was four days dead and already stank, shall He not, O man, much more easily raise you who art alive? He who shed His precious blood for us, shall Himself deliver us from sin. Let us not despair of ourselves, brethren; let us not abandon ourselves to a hopeless condition. For it is a fearful thing not to believe in a hope of repentance. For he that looks not for salvation spares not to add evil to evil: but to him that hopes for cure, it is henceforth easy to be careful over himself. The robber who looks not for pardon grows desperate; but, if he hopes for forgiveness, often comes to repentance. What then, does the serpent cast its slough , and shall not we cast off our sin? Thorny ground also, if cultivated well, is turned into fruitful; and is salvation to us irrecoverable? Nay rather, our nature admits of salvation, but

the will also is required.

6. God is loving to man, and loving in no small measure. For say not, I have committed fornication and adultery: I have done dreadful things, and not once only, but often: will He forgive? Will He grant pardon? Hear what the Psalmist says: How great is the multitude of Your goodness, O Lord! Your accumulated offenses surpass not the multitude of God's mercies: your wounds surpass not the great Physician's skill. Only give yourself up in faith: tell the Physician your ailment: say thou also, like David: I said, I will confess me my sin unto the Lord: and the same shall be done in your case, which he says immediately: And you forgave the wickedness of my heart.

7. Would you see the loving-kindness of God, O thou that art lately come to the catechising? Would you see the loving-kindness of God, and the abundance of His long-suffering? Hear about Adam. Adam, God's first-formed man, transgressed: could He not at once have brought death upon him? But see what the Lord does, in His great love towards man. He casts him out from Paradise, for because of sin he was unworthy to live there; but He puts him to dwell over against Paradise : that seeing whence he had fallen, and from what and into what a state he was brought down, he might afterwards be saved by repentance. Cain the first-born man became his brother's murderer, the inventor of evils, the first author of murders, and the first envious man. Yet after slaying his brother to what is he condemned? Groaning and trembling shall you be upon the earth. How great the offense, the sentence how light!

8. Even this then was truly loving-kindness in God, but little as yet in comparison with what follows. For consider what happened in the days of Noe. The giants sinned, and much wickedness was then spread over the earth, and because of this the flood was to come upon them: and in the five hundredth year God utters His threatening; but in the six hundredth He brought the flood upon the earth. Do you see the breadth of God's loving-kindness extending to a hundred years? Could He not have done immediately what He did then after the hundred years? But He extended (the time) on purpose, granting a respite for repentance. Do you see God's goodness? And if the men of that time had repented, they would not have missed the loving-kindness of God.

9. Come with me now to the other class, those who were saved by repentance. But perhaps even among women some one will say, I have committed fornication, and adultery, I have defiled my body by excesses of all kinds: is there salvation for me? Turn your eyes, O woman, upon Rahab, and look thou also for salvation; for if she who had been openly and publicly a harlot was saved by repentance, is not she who on some one occasion before receiving grace committed fornication to be saved by repentance and fasting? For inquire how she was saved: this only she said: For your God is God in heaven and upon earth. Joshua 2:11 Your God; for her own she did not dare to say, because of her wanton life. And if you wish to receive Scriptural testimony of her having been saved, you have it written in the Psalms: I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon among them that know me . O the greatness of God's loving-kindness, making mention even of harlots in the Scriptures: nay, not simply I will make mention of Rahab and Babylon, but with the addition, among them that know me. There is then in the case both of men and of women alike

the salvation which is ushered in by repentance.

10. Nay more, if a whole people sin, this surpasses not the loving-kindness of God. The people made a calf, yet God ceased not from His loving-kindness. Men denied God, but God denied not Himself. 2 Timothy 2:13 These be your gods, O Israel Exodus 32:4, they said: yet again, as He was wont, the God of Israel became their Saviour. And not only the people sinned, but also Aaron the High Priest. For it is Moses that says: And the anger of the Lord came upon Aaron: and I prayed for him, says he, and God forgave him. Deuteronomy 9:20 What then, did Moses praying for a High Priest that sinned prevail with God, and shall not Jesus, His Only-begotten, prevail with God when He prays for us? And if He did not hinder Aaron, because of his offense, from entering upon the High Priesthood, will He hinder you, who has come out from the Gentiles, from entering into salvation? Only, O man, repent thou also in like manner, and grace is not forbidden you. Render your way of life henceforth unblameable; for God is truly loving unto man, nor can all time worthily tell out His loving kindness; nay, not if all the tongues of men unite together will they be able even so to declare any considerable part of His loving-kindness. For we tell some part of what is written concerning His loving-kindness to men, but how much He forgave the Angels we know not: for them also He forgives, since One alone is without sin, even Jesus who purges our sins. And of them we have said enough.

11. But if concerning us men you will have other examples also set before you, come on to the blessed David, and take him for an example of repentance. Great as he was, he fell: after his sleep, walking in the eventide on the housetop, he cast a careless look, and felt a human passion. His sin was completed, but there died not with it his candour concerning the confession of his fault. Nathan the Prophet came, a swift accuser, and a healer of the wound. The Lord is angry, he says, and you have sinned. 2 Samuel 12 So spoke the subject to the reigning king. But David the king was not indignant, for he regarded not the speaker, but God who had sent him. He was not puffed up by the array of soldiers standing round: for he had seen in thought the angel-host of the Lord, and he trembled as seeing Him who is invisible Hebrews 11:27; and to the messenger, or rather by him in answer to God who sent him, he said, I have sinned against the Lord. 2 Samuel 12:13 Do you see the humility of the king? Do you see his confession? For had he been convicted by any one? Were many privy to the matter? The deed was quickly done, and straightway the Prophet appeared as accuser, and the offender confesses the fault. And because he candidly confessed, he received a most speedy cure. For Nathan the Prophet who had uttered the threat, said immediately, The Lord also has put away your sin. You see the swift relenting of a merciful God. He says, however, You have greatly provoked the enemies of the Lord. Though you had many enemies because of your righteousness, your self-control protected you; but now that you have surrendered your strongest armour, your enemies are risen up, and stand ready against you.

12. Thus then did the Prophet comfort him, but the blessed David, for all he heard it said, The Lord has put away your sin, did not cease from repentance, king though he was, but put on sackcloth instead of purple, and instead of a golden throne, he sat, a king, in ashes on the ground; nay, not only sat in ashes, but also had ashes for his food, even as he says himself, I have eaten ashes as it were bread. His lustful eye he wasted away with tears saying, Every night will I wash my couch, and water my bed with my tears.

When his officers besought him to eat bread he would not listen. He prolonged his fast unto seven whole days. If a king thus made confession ought not thou, a private person, to confess? Again, after Absalom's insurrection, though there were many roads for him to escape, he chose to flee by the Mount of Olives, in thought, as it were, invoking the Redeemer who was to go up thence into the heavens. 2 Samuel 16:10-11 And when Shimei cursed him bitterly, he said, Let him alone, for he knew that to him that forgives it shall be forgiven.

13. You see that it is good to make confession. You see that there is salvation for them that repent. Solomon also fell but what says he? Afterwards I repented. Ahab, too, the King of Samaria, became a most wicked idolater, an outrageous man, the murderer of the Prophets 1 Kings 18:4, a stranger to godliness, a coveter of other men's fields and vineyards. Yet when by Jezebel's means he had slain Naboth, and the Prophet Elias came and merely threatened him, he rent his garments, and put on sackcloth. And what says the merciful God to Elias? Hast thou seen how Ahab is pricked in the heart before Me? As if almost He would persuade the fiery zeal of the Prophet to condescend to the penitent. For He says, I will not bring the evil in his days. And though after this forgiveness he was sure not to depart from his wickedness, nevertheless the forgiving God forgave him, not as being ignorant of the future, but as granting a forgiveness corresponding to his present season of repentance. For it is the part of a righteous judge to give sentence according to each case that has occurred.

14. Again, Jeroboam was standing at the altar sacrificing to the idols: his hand became withered, because he commanded the Prophet who reproved him to be seized: but having by experience learned the power of the man before him, he says, Entreat the face of the Lord your God 1 Kings 13:6; and because of this saying his hand was restored again. If the Prophet healed Jeroboam, is Christ not able to heal and deliver you from your sins? Manasses also was utterly wicked, who sawed Isaiah asunder, and was defiled with all kinds of idolatries, and filled Jerusalem with innocent blood 2 Chronicles 33:12-13; but having been led captive to Babylon he used his experience of misfortune for a healing course of repentance: for the Scripture says that Manasses humbled himself before the Lord, and prayed, and the Lord heard him, and brought him back to his kingdom. If He who sawed the Prophet asunder was saved by repentance, shall not thou then, having done no such great wickedness, be saved?

15. Take heed lest without reason you mistrust the power of repentance. Would you know what power repentance has? Would you know the strong weapon of salvation, and learn what the force of confession is? Hezekiah by means of confession routed a hundred and fourscore and five thousand of his enemies. A great thing verily was this, but still small in comparison with what remains to be told: the same king by repentance obtained the recall of a divine sentence which had already gone forth. For when he had fallen sick, Esaias said to him, Set your house in order; for you shall die, and not live. 2 Kings 20:1 What expectation remained, what hope of recovery, when the Prophet said, for you shall die? Yet Hezekiah did not desist from repentance; but remembering what is written, When you shall turn and lament, then shall you be saved Isaiah 30:15, he turned to the wall, and from his bed lifting his mind to heaven (for thickness of walls is no hindrance to prayers sent up with devotion), he said, Remember me, O Lord, for it is sufficient for my healing that You remember me. You are not subject to times, but art Yourself the giver

of the law of life. For our life depends not on a nativity, nor on a conjunction of stars, as some idly talk; but both of life and its duration. Then art Yourself the Lawgiver according to Your Will. And he, who could not hope to live because of the prophetic sentence, had fifteen years added to his life, and for the sign the sun ran backward in his course. Well then, for Ezekias' sake the sun turned back but for Christ the sun was eclipsed, not retracing his steps, but suffering eclipse Isaiah 38:8, and therefore showing the difference between them, I mean between Ezekias and Jesus. The former prevailed to the cancelling of God's decree, and cannot Jesus grant remission of sins? Turn and bewail yourself, shut your door, and pray to be forgiven, pray that He may remove from you the burning flames. For confession has power to quench even fire, power to tame even lions.

16. But if you disbelieve, consider what befell Ananias and his companions. What streams did they pour out ? How many vessels of water could quench the flame that rose up forty-nine cubits high ? Nay, but where the flame mounted up a little too high, faith was there poured out as a river, and there spoke they the spell against all ills : Righteous are You, O Lord, in all the things that You have done to us: for we have sinned, and transgressed Your law. And their repentance quelled the flames. If you believe not that repentance is able to quench the fire of hell, learn it from what happened in regard to Ananias. But some keen hearer will say, Those men God rescued justly in that case: because they refused to commit idolatry, God gave them that power. And since this thought has occurred, I come next to a different example of penitence.

17. What do you think of Nebuchadnezzar? Have you not heard out of the Scriptures that he was bloodthirsty, fierce , lion-like in disposition? Have you not heard that he brought out the bones of the kings from their graves into the light ? Have you not heard that he carried the people away captive? Have you not heard that he put out the eyes of the king, after he had already seen his children slain 2 Kings 25:7? Have you not heard that he broke in pieces the Cherubim? I do not mean the invisible beings — away with such a thought, O man — but the sculptured images, and the mercy-seat, in the midst of which God spoke with His voice. The veil of the Sanctuary he trampled under foot: the altar of incense he took and carried away to an idol-temple 2 Chronicles 36:7: all the offerings he took away: the Temple he burned from the foundations. How great punishments did he deserve, for slaying kings, for setting fire to the Sanctuary, for taking the people captive, for setting the sacred vessels in the house of idols? Did he not deserve ten thousand deaths?

18. You have seen the greatness of his evil deeds: come now to God's loving-kindness. He was turned into a wild beast , he abode in the wilderness, he was scourged, that he might be saved. He had claws as a lion ; for he was a ravager of the Sanctuary. He had a lion's mane: for he was a ravaging and a roaring lion. He ate grass like an ox: for a brute beast he was, not knowing Him who had given him the kingdom. His body was wet from the dew; because after seeing the fire quenched by the dew he believed not. And what happened ? After this, says he, I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted up my eyes unto heaven, and I blessed the Most High, and to Him that lives for ever I gave praise and glory. Daniel 4:34 When, therefore, he recognised the Most High , and sent up these words of thankfulness to God, and repented himself for what he had done, and recognised his own weakness, then God gave back to him the honour of the kingdom.

19. What then ? When Nebuchadnezzar, after having done such deeds, had made confession, did God give him pardon and the kingdom, and when you repent shall He not give you the remission of sins, and the kingdom of heaven, if you live a worthy life? The Lord is loving unto man, and swift to pardon, but slow to punish. Let no man therefore despair of his own salvation. Peter, the chiefest and foremost of the Apostles, denied the Lord thrice before a little maid: but he repented himself, and wept bitterly. Now weeping shows the repentance of the heart: and therefore he not only received forgiveness for his denial, but also held his Apostolic dignity unforfeited.

20. Having therefore, brethren, many examples of those who have sinned and repented and been saved, do ye also heartily make confession unto the Lord, that you may both receive the forgiveness of your former sins, and be counted worthy of the heavenly gift, and inherit the heavenly kingdom with all the saints in Christ Jesus; to Whom is the glory for ever and ever. Amen.

Source: Edwin Hamilton Gifford, Trans. *From Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 7. Ed. by Philip Schaff and Harry Wace. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1894.)