

Rev. Richard Baxter - Puritan Preacher & Pastor (Famous Saints #4)

by Stephen Hamilton

The sermon explores the life and ministry of Richard Baxter, highlighting his conversion, compassion for souls, and significant contributions to the church.

Duration: 37:25

Scripture: Psalm 51:17, Matthew 6:33, Luke 18:13, John 3:16, Romans 3:23, Hebrews 1:3, 2 Peter 3:10

Topics: "Richard Baxter"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the state of the church and the need for repentance. He describes a chaotic scene in which an old woman begs for forgiveness and promises to never return to the church if she is kept safe. Amidst the confusion, Richard Baxter remains calm and delivers a powerful message about the impending judgment of God. He emphasizes the importance of sharing the gospel and saving souls from the fires of hell. Baxter's dedication to preaching the mercy of God is highlighted, and his impact on the Puritan movement is acknowledged. The sermon concludes with a reference to Luke 18:13, emphasizing the need for humility and repentance.

Transcript

For the message in song, for the hymns of Zion that we have been singing, we thank thee for thy presence and we ask Lord that as we consider now the life of this eminent servant of thine and as we consider the Word of God that was such a blessing in his own heart and life, we do pray that the power of the Lord will be present amongst us. O God, I pray, give me the Holy Ghost. Give me power to preach thy Word and may that Word bring glory to thy name.

For we ask for Jesus' sake. Amen and amen. In this series of studies that we've been conducting on favorite scriptures of faithful or famous saints of the Lord, we have been examining the biographies of outstanding Christians and those Bible verses which were most precious to them.

I want to look with you tonight at a text of scripture which greatly moved the heart of one of England's mightiest men, one who was considered by J.C. Ryle as the greatest preacher England ever produced. He was a Puritan, one of those in the Anglican Church of his day, given that title because they sought a simpler faith and form of service. Some of the more illustrious names from that era of the 17th century are known to students of church history, perhaps known even to yourself.

Men such as John Owen, John Bunyan, Richard Sibbes, Thomas Goodwin, Thomas Manton and many others besides. Stephen Sharnock, John Flavell, Jeremiah Burroughs, Thomas Hooker, Thomas Brooks, Archbishop Leighton, etc, etc, etc. The Puritans were mighty men.

They were the salt of English society in their day and they gave to the world some of the best of evangelical literature. In that regard I think of John Bunyan alone who was responsible for Pilgrim's Progress. That was and is a classic work, a spiritual allegory dealing with the pilgrimage of a sinner who became a sinner saved by grace who eventually went into the New Jerusalem, into heaven itself.

Bunyan wrote that book when he was incarcerated in Bedford prison for 12 years. The country in which I now minister, the United States of America, along with other countries owes a great debt to the Puritans. For many of the Puritans emigrated to these shores and made the nation what it became under God.

But one of the galaxy of Puritan stars was Richard Baxter of Kidderminster in the county of Worcester in England. Baxter has been described as the most outstanding pastor, evangelist, and writer on practical and devotional themes that Puritanism produced. While another biographer records, it is no exaggeration to affirm that this one man drew more hearts to the great broken heart than any single Englishman of any age.

That's quite a statement. He was therefore a gospel preacher. And the great verse of Scripture, the text which seems to have been the favorite of Richard Baxter, was the latter part of Luke chapter 18 verse 13.

God be merciful to me a sinner. Like many others, Richard Baxter was not sound in everything he taught. For example, on the doctrine of the atonement, he came up with a novel idea which actually was given the name Baxterianism or sometimes Neo-Nomianism.

You don't need to worry about what it is, but it was a somewhat novel view of the atonement, not in keeping with a truly reformed position. Yet nevertheless, despite that, Richard Baxter was undoubtedly a giant of the faith and a true revival preacher. His favorite text, at least it appears to have been his favorite, is a great text.

It is a text which is great in its gospel emphasis. What a prayer this is. What a statement of supplication this is.

The publican, smiting upon his breast, said God be merciful to me a sinner. I want this evening, with the Lord's help, to look at this text as it relates to the life of Richard Baxter. And as we've been doing in these meetings, I want really to weave his life around this text of the Word of God.

And first of all, I want us to think about this text in relation to the conversion of Baxter. Richard Baxter was born into a good home on the 12th of November 1615. In his later writings, he didn't really speak much about himself, but he did often refer to the goings of God in his soul.

It is a fact that he had a godly father. And that does appear to be a strain running through even some of the men that we've been studying. Robert Murray McShane, David Brainerd, certainly it was true of the Lord's servant whom we considered last night, John G. Patton, the missionary to the New Hebrides.

They had godly parents and particularly fathers who loved God, and Baxter was no exception. His father was a lover of the Savior. But as a boy in his teens, God began to have mercy upon Richard Baxter by using a circumstance in his life, in fact a severe illness, to focus his attention and his heart upon eternal

things.

It was another Puritan, Thomas Watson, one of my favorite Puritan writers, who said, God often puts us on our backs that we might learn to look up to him. And that's sometimes what God does, even with his people. He may send some affliction, but it will but make us long for home.

For in love and not in anger, all his chastenings will come. He places us on our back the times that we might learn to look up to him. Baxter became ill, he recovered of course, but he had been dangerously sick.

And the illness had awakened in his mind the solemn thought of where will I be in eternity. There were questions like these that arose in his heart. Where is God? Who is God? Is there such a thing as a future life? Is the soul immortal? Are the scriptures really true? And at the time when these thoughts were coming into his mind, young Baxter found the Bible on his father's table.

Not only that, but he read three Puritan volumes. One book by a Puritan man called Bunny. It wasn't a rabbit, but his name was Bunny.

Another was the Bruised Reed by Richard Sibbes, the Puritan. And the third book was a great work on repentance by William Perkins. Somebody wrote about the effect that these three books had upon Richard Baxter's young heart.

This is how he put it. Bunny showed him the majesty of God. Sibbes showed him the loveliness of Christ.

And Perkins showed him all his own heart. By faith Richard Baxter was enabled to lay hold on the mercy of God in Christ, just like the publican in the parable. God be merciful to me, a sinner.

Baxter realized that he was a condemned sinner in need of the cleansing of the atoning blood of Christ. When you think of this text, when you look at it, it actually literally could be rendered be propitious or be appeased toward me, the sinner. The thought is of the Pharisee and the publican going to the temple at the hour of prayer, because that is what it says in Luke 18 verse 10.

And of course during that time there was the offering up of the evening sacrifice. And it would have been on that basis that the publican, the condemned sinner prayed. And he was saying, Lord be propitious or be merciful to me, a sinner.

Look upon me as when thou didst look upon the blood on the altar. That's what he was thinking about. That is the import of this text.

God be propitiated, be appeased by the blood of the sacrifice. And the turning away of God's wrath therefore is in view in this text. Lord look upon me as when you look upon the blood.

And on that basis, save me. Leviticus chapter 17 and verse 11 has this to say concerning the blood of the altar. Leviticus 17 and verse 11.

For the life of the flesh is in the blood. And I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls. For it is the blood that maketh an atonement for the soul.

And that day in the temple the blood was upon the altar. And that blood was blood that spoke of richer blood. Even the blood of Christ that would be shed not on the altar but upon the cross.

And that sacrifice is the sacrifice on the ground of which God forgives sinners. My Bible teaches me that God is angry with sin. The Lord is angry with the wicked every day.

That God is not only a God of love. He is a God of wrath. He is a God of infinite justice.

That wrath of His must be appeased by sacrifice. And the Word of God teaches us in Hebrews chapter 2 and the verse 12. I'm sorry, Hebrews 2 verse 17.

That the Lord Jesus is a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. And if you look at that in the original, you'll find that the making of reconciliation for the sins of the people actually refers to the making of propitiation. It refers to the turning away of wrath on the basis of the bloodshed.

This same thought is found in Hebrews chapter 8 and verse 12. Hebrews 8 verse 12, God says, for I will be merciful. You see, there's the word again.

The same word that's used in Luke chapter 18 verse 13. I will be merciful to their unrighteousness and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more. In other words, I will be appeased.

I will be appeased toward their unrighteousness. Satisfaction is made for their unrighteousness. Therefore, on the basis of the sacrificial blood, their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more.

Because those sins have been atoned for by the blood of the Lamb. That's the thought. If you think about these two men that the Lord spoke of in the parable, the difference between those two men is that one was full of self-righteousness.

You read these words and you find that he sees nothing wrong with himself at all, but the other sees nothing right with himself. He sees himself full of sin, full of unrighteousness and says, Lord, God be merciful to me, a sinner. He approaches God humbly on the ground of the shed blood.

That's what Richard Baxter did as a young man. He was brought to see himself as a vile sinner in need of mercy. And it is interesting that in a classic confession, Baxter closes with these words, and I quote, I mention all these distempers in order that my faults may be a warning to others.

As for myself, these faults, they call me to repentance and watchfulness. Because of the merits and sacrifice and intercession of Christ, God be merciful to me, a sinner, and forgive my known and unknown sins. I ask you this evening, are you converted? Have you looked to Christ for salvation? Have you said, God, look upon me as when thou dost look upon the blood? Have you said, Lord, be propitiated, be appeased by the blood of the sacrifice? Have you looked to Christ alone for salvation as all the ground of your forgiveness? For I tell you that God cannot show you mercy except in Jesus Christ.

The idea that God is just a God who willy-nilly forgives people without regard to any sacrifice or any atonement for sin is a false notion. God doesn't just forgive people because He feels like forgiving them. God forgives sinners on the basis of sacrifice.

God always punishes sin. He either punishes sin in the sinner himself, and that's why there's a hell, or He punishes sinners and the sinners substitute even Jesus Christ, and on the basis of His sacrifice, allows them to go free. That's the gospel.

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him, or trusts in Him, or abandons himself to Him, or rests upon Him, or looks upon Him, should not perish but have everlasting life. God cannot show you mercy except in the person of Jesus Christ. There is no salvation anywhere else.

God be propitiated, be merciful to me a sinner. Lord look upon me as when you look upon the blood of the sacrifice. That is the confession of Richard Baxter as well as of the publican.

But not only can we think of this text in relation to his conversion, but also in relation to the commissioning of Baxter. He was commissioned by the Lord. He was called by the Lord to be a preacher of the glorious gospel, and it was the profound recognition of divine mercy to him as a sinner that drove Richard Baxter into the ministry.

For having obtained mercy himself, he became a herald of God's mercy, began to preach to others the gospel that had redeemed his own soul. But it was his father's ambition, though he was a godly man, it was his ambition that young Richard become a courtier at London. And so at the age of 18, young Richard set out for Whitehall with a letter of introduction.

But one month at the court of Charles I, one of the line of the ungodly stewards, the infamous rulers, one month at that court was sufficient to fill him with disgust and loathing, and at Christmas time he returned home. The story is that the weather was severe at that time. The roads were deep with frozen snow, and as he rode through the country and through the county of Shropshire, he met a loaded wagon coming the other way.

To make room for the wagon, Baxter spurred his horse up the bank, but the horse slipped, the girth broke, and Richard was immediately thrown under the wheel of that wagon. And he testified himself that when the wheel was all but touching him, the horses unaccountably stopped, and he escaped with his life. He ever afterwards looked upon this as a miraculous deliverance, and it deeply impressed him at the time.

Baxter felt that truly he had been preserved by God, that his life might be devoted to a higher end. The God who had been merciful to him in salvation had shown mercy to him for his service. And so when he got home, he was seeking to go about his daily life, but it was only a short time till his mother died, and those emotions that had been stirred when he fell from his horse were further awakened by his mother's death.

And so a desire to become a minister of Jesus Christ welled up within his heart. He felt that it was his duty now to live to tell others of the mercy of God, and he became an eminent minister of Christ. It was said of him as a pastor that his study walls were stained with his praying breath.

That's a tremendous testimony, isn't it? The walls of the study were stained with his praying breath. Oh, that that could be said of us all. But from the commissioning of Baxter, and it was really through tragedy that the Lord called him to the ministry, we want to move on to the compassion of Baxter.

For as a minister of the gospel, Richard Baxter was a man of great compassion. If you were to go with me in your mind's eye to the town of Kidderminster in England, you'll see that there stands there in the center of the town a noble statue. It is the representation of the famous pastor who spent 19 years there preaching the gospel.

Richard Baxter is depicted there standing with upraised hand and pointing to the skies. And somebody said that in that mute gesture there's a subtle touch of spiritual genius, because it was to the skies that Baxter pointed as he preached, preaching the mercy of God in Christ. And through him, many found the way to heaven.

Pointing the way to heaven in his preaching, Baxter was a winner of souls. He was a man of great passion, tremendously and desperately in earnest as he preached. I don't know if you've ever read any books or sermons by Baxter, but if you do, you will see and feel the passion of the man as you read.

He loved the souls of men. One of Richard Baxter's famous quotes is, I preached as never sure to preach again, and as a dying man to dying men. He was in earnest.

He was in earnest as he preached. He had great compassion. Why? Because God had had mercy on him.

God was merciful to him, a sinner. And through his earnest labors, many others were to experience that same mercy. On one occasion, Richard Baxter wrote, Oh, if you have the hearts of Christians or of men in you, let them yearn toward your poor, ignorant, ungodly neighbors.

Alas, there is but a step betwixt them and death and hell. If they die unregenerate, they are lost forever. Have you hearts of rock that cannot pity men in such a case as this? If you believe not the word of God and the danger of sinners, why are you Christians yourselves? If you do believe it, why do you not bestow yourself to the helping of others? Do you not care who is damned, just so long as you be saved? If so, you have sufficient cause to pity yourselves, for it is a frame of spirit utterly inconsistent with grace.

Dost thou live close by them, or meet them in the streets, or labor with them, or travel with them, or sit and talk with them, and yet say nothing to them of their souls or of the life to come? If their houses were on fire, thou wouldst run and help them. And wilt thou not help them when their souls are almost at the fire of hell? And what challenging words those are. Baxter not only preached like that to others, but he practiced that himself.

He was one who loved the souls of men and sought to pluck them as brands from the burning. The Lord had mercy on Baxter, and he felt that it was his life's work to preach the mercy of God to others. God be merciful to me, a sinner.

We've spoken of the conversion of Baxter. We've mentioned the commissioning of Baxter and the compassion of Baxter. I want to spend a little time now on the contribution of Richard Baxter.

It would, of course, be very difficult for me, as it is with all of these eminent saints of God, to tell you everything that I need to tell you about the contribution of Richard Baxter to church history and to the cause of Christ. How could we sum up the contribution of this man to the cause of the Lord Jesus Christ and to the history of the church? Well, I think we could do so in a couple of ways. We must refer, when thinking about his contribution, to the power of his preached words.

The power of his preached words. I said earlier that J.C. Ryle, who himself was a great preacher and one whom we will consider later in the week, said that it was his belief that Richard Baxter was the greatest of English preachers. And that's high praise indeed.

But there's a reason why Ryle believed that. If you think about the power of the preached words of Baxter, you will refer to his own testimony in Kidderminster days, because there you will find evidence of the

power of his preached words. Baxter used to say, it must be serious preaching which will make men serious in hearing and obeying it.

And he was in deadly earnest. A contemporary of his, a Dr. Bates, said of Baxter, there was a noble negligence in his style. His great mind could not stoop to the affected eloquence of words.

He despised flashy oratory. But his expressions were so clear and powerful, so convincing to the understanding, so entering into the soul, so engaging the affections, that those were as deaf as an adder who were not charmed by so wise a charmer. His preaching was effective.

It was said that at Kidderminster it became necessary to build five new galleries in the church in order to accommodate the congregations who came to hear him. In London, the crowds that attended his ministry were so large that it was sometimes dangerous and often impossible to be one of his hearers. There was one occasion when he was about to preach at a place called St. Lawrence Jewry.

He sent word to Mr. Vines, the minister, that there were two eminent noblemen who were going to come to hear him preach, the Earl of Suffolk and Lord Broadhill. They were going to come in a coach with Baxter and they would be glad to have seats in the auditory to hear him preach. But when Baxter and his noble companions reached the door of the church, the crowd that was there had so little respect for persons that the two peers had to turn around and go home again because they could not get within hearing.

Mr. Vines himself, the minister, was obliged to get up into the pulpit and sit behind the preacher because there was no room for him anywhere else in the building. And Baxter actually preached standing between Mr. Vines' feet. No room but standing room only.

He was a powerful preacher. On another occasion when he was preaching to an enormous crowd at St. Dunstan's in Fleet Street, London, he made striking use of an incident that took place during the sermon. While he was preaching, there was a piece of masonry, a piece of brick, that fell down in the steeple.

And there was an alarm raised in the church that the old and rotten building was falling down. Well, scarcely was the alarm allayed when a bench on which some of the people were standing broke with their weight and the confusion was worse than ever. People really began to panic and they crowded to the doors to get out.

They were in a terrible state. One old woman was heard loudly asking God's forgiveness for having come to the church at all and promising that if she would only get out safe, she would never come there again. And in the midst of that confusion, Baxter alone of all the people was calm and unmoved.

And as soon as order was restored, he rose up and he said this, we are in the service of God to prepare ourselves that we may be fearless at the great noise of the dissolving world when the heavens shall pass away and the elements shall melt with fervent heat. He used the occasion to urge upon men and women how the judgment was coming and how that which they saw in the building that day was as nothing compared to the wrath of God that would fall upon them. He was an earnest preacher.

He, it was said, always spoke like one who saw God and felt death at his back. Such a man will seldom fail to preach well. Baxter was not only a faithful preacher, he was a fruitful preacher.

When he came to Kinnerminster, it was to a dark, ignorant, immoral and irreligious place with about 3,000 inhabitants. And as I read this, it encouraged my heart. Because though he found it in such a state, when

he left it, at the end of some 14 years of preaching, he had completely turned the parish upside down.

It was said by his contemporary, Dr. Bates, that the place before his coming was like a piece of dry and barren earth, but by the blessing of heaven upon his labor, the face of paradise appeared there. The bad were changed to good and the good to better. Baxter, talking about his own ministry in that place, said that when he first came to Kinnerminster, listen to this, there was about one family per street which worshipped God at home.

But when he went away, there were some streets in which there was not more than one family on a side that did not worship the Lord. And this was the case even with inns and public houses and taverns. Even of the irreligious families, he said, there were very few which had not some converted relations.

God moved in mighty power, changing the place through the preaching of the mercy of God in Christ. We've spoken about the power of his preached words, but there's also the power of his printed works. Baxter's three greatest volumes, I suppose, were *The Saints' Everlasting Rest*, which is a treatise concerning heaven, his *Call to the Unconverted*, and his book directed particularly at ministers called *The Reformed Pastor*.

The Reformed Pastor, one of the first books that I ever read when I was going to be a student for the ministry. These books and others are a heritage to all ages. There was one called Boswell who asked another man by the name of Dr. Johnson, which of Richard Baxter's books should a man read? And the reply was, read any of them, they're all good.

So if you can get a hold of anything by Richard Baxter, you'll find that it's worth reading. Incidentally, C.H. Spurgeon frequently had his own wife to read aloud to him, *The Reformed Pastor*, on the Lord's Day evenings when his day's preaching was done. Baxter left a great spiritual legacy when he went to heaven in 1691.

Some 52 years later, another famous preacher, George Whitfield, a Methodist evangelist, visited the town of Kidderminster and he wrote to a friend at that time, I was greatly refreshed to find what a sweet savor of good Mr. Baxter's doctrine, works, and discipline remain to this day. God's mercy continued to follow Baxter until death and mercy continued to bless others after his death. Others, through reading the works of Baxter even, have come to know the God of Baxter.

Tonight, I would say to you, as Baxter once said, actually in the year 1657, on the basis of the text that I've given you tonight as his favorite, God be merciful to me a sinner. I charge thee to hear and obey the call of God and turn that thou mayest live. You know, one of the sweetest stories that I ever heard concerning Richard Baxter was the one about how Baxter, talking about his own testimony, said that he was glad that John 3 verse 16 was written the way it was.

For he said, the Bible actually says, for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life. He said, often times he thought it would have been nice if the Lord had made it more personal to him, so that the Bible might have said, for God so loved Richard Baxter, that he gave his only begotten son, that if Richard Baxter would believe in him, Richard Baxter would not perish but have everlasting life. But he said he began to think that if God had written the text in that way, he would have thought that God meant some other Richard Baxter.

That the text may not have been for him. And so the comfort of the text would have been lost to him, for he would have been ever thinking and wondering to himself, well is it me or is it some other Richard Baxter of a former day or of a future day, or who lives in the same time as me? He said, I'm glad the Lord put it the way he did, because when he said, whosoever believeth in him, he said that takes in not only me, Richard Baxter, but all the Richard Baxter's who ever lived or who ever will live. What an invitation.

That whosoever, and that means you, whosoever believeth in Christ will not perish but have everlasting life. Have you ever come to the place where you've said indeed and in truth, God be merciful to me a sinner. I don't mean that you've merely taken these words out of the scripture and used them as a prayer, but have you come as a sinner to lean upon and to rest upon the atoning work of Christ? Because you see this is all our hope and peace, nothing but the blood of Jesus.

This is all our righteousness, nothing but the blood of Jesus. Oh precious is the flow that makes me white as snow. No other fount I know, nothing but the blood of Jesus.

I say again as Baxter himself would have preached, there is mercy for you nowhere else but in Jesus Christ. And I trust that even under the sound of my voice, there will be those who will cry as the publican cried and as Baxter cried, God be propitiated, be appeased. Look upon me as when thou dost look upon the blood.

Have mercy on me for the sake of Christ's blood. And if you say that, God will save you. If you trust in that, God will save you and he'll bring you at last to heaven saved by his precious blood.

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