

Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost/September 27, 2020  
Ezekiel 18:1-4 & 25-32/The Promise of Repentance  
Holy Spirit Lutheran Church  
Pastor Jerry Stobaugh

“...so turn, and live.”

The readings we recently heard from the Old Testament and from Matthew’s account of the Gospel both have something to teach us about repentance. God spoke through the mouth of His servant Ezekiel and invited the exiles in Babylon to repent. Jesus, who is God in human flesh, told a parable about repentance. In both cases we learn repentance is a gift God gives to us for our salvation.

God spoke through the mouth of the prophet Ezekiel to people who refused to take responsibility for their own sins. That is the meaning of the proverb: The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge. The image is fathers eating sour grapes, but it is the children who have to put up with the bad taste in their mouths. The sour grapes represent the sins of the fathers. The bad taste is the consequence of the father’s sins being visited on the children. Israel was trying to blame its circumstances on the previous generation. This proverb is just another way of saying, “It’s not our fault!”

God is speaking to Israel in exile in Babylon. The exiles were trying to blame others for the fact Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, and carried off the survivors as slaves. They refused to take responsibility for their predicament. They did not understand their own rebellion led to this separation from God. They were actually arrogant enough to charge God with injustice. They were trying to pass the buck.

Mankind has been doing this ever since Eden. When God called Adam to account for his sin; Adam blamed Eve. By blaming Eve, Adam was also blaming God for creating Eve in the first place.

Not much has changed down through the millennia. When something goes wrong, our first instinct is not to find a solution, but to blame somebody else for the problem. Of course, the blame never falls on us. It is not our fault. The problem with saying, “It’s not our fault,” is that this is one more way of denying our own sin. If it’s not our fault, then it is someone else’s and we are without sin. If we say this often and loud enough, we start to believe it. Maintaining the illusion we are without sin makes us feel better. Of course, this feeling is based on a lie.

God spoke through the mouth of His prophet Ezekiel. He called on Israel to repent, to confess their sin, turn from their own ways, and return to the grace of God. God did not give up on them. He invited them to return to Him.

In the Gospel, Jesus used a parable to illustrate the benefit of repentance. A father asked his sons to work in the vineyard. The first son refused, but then he repented and went to work. The second son agreed, but then he changed his mind and didn’t work. It was obvious to the listeners the first son did his father’s will.

Jesus then compared the tax collectors and the prostitutes to the first son. They obviously refused God’s will, but, when they heard John the Baptizer, they listened to his message and repented. On the other hand, the chief priests and the elders of the people appeared to agree with God’s will, but, when they heard John the Baptizer, they criticized his message and did not repent. Jesus proclaimed the result and said to them, “Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you.”

Note the key here is repentance, which means turn around. Some people point to a passage like this and argue when Jesus forgave the

sin of the tax collectors and prostitutes, He was saying cheating on your taxes and renting your body out for intimate, physical pleasure is OK. Nothing could be further from the truth. These people would not need to repent or receive forgiveness if they were OK. Jesus was saying it is important to repent of such activities. It is important to confess these sins before God and ask for forgiveness.

This is the difference between the true religion and all false religions. The whole point of false religion is to make yourself look good. It is your job to save yourself. It is your job to earn salvation. It is your job to make yourself fit for heaven. A false religion may have a personal god or it just might be a collection of teachings. In all cases, it is up to you to make yourself look good.

The true religion is about repentance. Get your sins out in the open. Admit your failure. Understand you are truly bad. Come before God and admit you deserve eternal punishment. Then trust Him to keep His promise and forgive you. Trust Him to keep His promise and bring the Kingdom of Heaven to you. It is just as the Apostle John wrote in His letter: [1 John 1:9] “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

The simple truth is, there will be a day for each and every one of us when we will stand before Almighty God and give an account for ourselves. Then, there will be no hiding and no rationalization. Your will, your desires, your feelings will not count. Only God’s law will count. God’s law will examine every crevice, nook, and cubby hole. There will be no hiding place. The law will seek out and find every sin. Every blemish, every fault and every failure will come to light.

If you refused to repent, you will suffer the revelation of any and all sin. You will stand before the Lord in utter guilt. You will recognize

your utter depravity. Then you will repent, but it will be too late. You will suffer under the eternal judgment of God.

For you who repent in this life, every blemish, fault and failure already has been brought to the light, you already recognize your utter guilt, you already admit your utter depravity, you already bring your sin before God, you already confess you deserve God's eternal judgment. But God beheld your wretched state before He even created the world. He promised a way of salvation and He is faithful to His promise. The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son has washed away all your unrighteousness. You are clean.

When you stand before God on that final day, the harsh light of the law will still shine on you, but it will find no sin. You will be utterly clean. The blood of Jesus Christ will have washed away all your sin. God's law will examine you and find you righteous because you will wear the righteousness of Jesus Christ. You will enter the eternal joy of God's mercy and grace.

When you repent, you rely on the work of a third son who is not in the parable. Instead, He is the one who told the parable. Unlike the two sons in the parable, Jesus never changed His mind. When God the Father sent Him to save us, His answer was always, "Yes sir!" Even when God the Father told Him to take up the sin of the world and carry it to the cross, Jesus said, "Yes sir!" In the greatest and most unfair exchange of all time, Jesus, the Son of God, took up our sin and offered His righteousness to take its place.

By His suffering and death, Jesus defeated sin. Because Jesus defeated sin, death could not hold Him. He rose from the dead and proclaimed His victory to His disciples.

We are often like the sons in the parable. Sometimes, we fight God's will until His love brings the Kingdom of Heaven to us. Other times we say yes quickly with no intention of keeping our promise. Jesus is not like either son. He agreed immediately and obeyed perfectly. He has done all things well and in Him we have forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life.

Your sin is gone. Jesus Christ, God's Son, in perfect obedience to His Father has taken it away. It is left behind in the grave. It will forever remain dead and buried. You, on the other hand, will rise from the dead just as our older brother rose and live with your Heavenly Father, your Older Brother Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit forever in the new heavens and the new earth.