

REPENT AND LIVE!

Ezekiel 18:1-4, 30-32

The word of the LORD came to me: “What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: “‘The parents eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? “As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die... “Therefore, you Israelites, I will judge each of you according to your own ways, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, people of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!

Psalm 12

¹ Help, LORD, for no one is faithful anymore;
those who are loyal have vanished from the human race.
² Everyone lies to their neighbor;
they flatter with their lips
but harbor deception in their hearts.
³ May the LORD silence all flattering lips
and every boastful tongue—
⁴ those who say,
“By our tongues we will prevail;
our own lips will defend us—who is lord over us?”

⁵ “Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan,
I will now arise,” says the LORD.
“I will protect them from those who malign them.”
⁶ And the words of the LORD are flawless,
like silver purified in a crucible,
like gold^[a] refined seven times.
⁷ You, LORD, will keep the needy safe
and will protect us forever from the wicked,
⁸ who freely strut about
when what is vile is honored by the human race.

Matthew 21:28-32

“What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’ “ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went. “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. “Which of the two did what his father wanted?” “The first,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.

MESSAGE:

The house I grew up in in Missouri was out in the country. It was on a busy, two-lane highway—Highway 57—which ran north from Joplin to Kansas City. We had a six-foot tall wall that ran across the front of our property and our driveway opened up through a gate in the wall.

After I learned to ride a bike I wanted in the worst way to take it out on the highway, but my parents said, “Absolutely not. You stay in the driveway.” Well, one day my desire to get on the highway got the better of me and I devised a brilliant plan as to how I would do it. I would get at the head of our driveway, tear down it as fast as I could go, burst out through the gateway onto the road, turn around and go back in. I gave no thought whatsoever to the possibility of a car coming along. My older brother, whose life I specialized in making miserable, saw me doing it and warned me that I was going to get in trouble, but I didn’t heed his warning.

As you might expect, one time there was a car coming, going probably 50 or 60 mph. As I turned to go back in the driveway, I heard the tires screeching as the car swerved to avoid hitting me. I immediately parked my bike and hid behind the garage. After a few moments I peeked out and saw a woman talking to my mother on the front patio. So I walked up, innocent as a dove, and asked what was going on. My mother looked at me and asked the woman, “Was it him?” The woman looked at me and said, “No—I don’t think so.” So my mother asked me where my older brother was and I said, “I don’t know—he was riding my bike.” Guess who got in trouble? Guess who got beaten up later?

When I think back on my youth, I am appalled at the things I would do to avoid taking responsibility for my misbehavior. I wouldn’t admit that I was wrong even when I was caught red-handed in a lie. As I grew up I learned that I wasn’t the only one who hated taking responsibility for their sins—that other people had some of “me” in them.

And after I became a believer, I learned that if we don’t take responsibility for our sins, we won’t repent of them, and if we don’t repent of them, we bind them to ourselves instead of turning them over to Christ. That being set free from our sins begins with repentance.

In today’s *Old Testament* lesson. God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel: *“Repent! Turn away from all your offenses; then sin will not be your downfall. Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit. Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!”*

Repentance is the gateway to new life. To come spiritually alive and to stay spiritually alive, we have to acknowledge our sins and repent of them, and the first step toward repenting of our sins is to accept responsibility for them.

The Israelites didn’t like taking responsibility for their sins either. God spoke to his people through the prophet Ezekiel, saying: *“What do you people mean by quoting this proverb about the land of Israel: ‘The fathers eat sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on*

edge'? As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me, the father as well as the son—both alike belong to me. **The soul who sins is the one who will die.**"

Apparently, the ancient Israelites were doing the same thing that we do nowadays: they were blaming their parents for their sins! *"The reason I have all these problems is because of how I was raised."* (There really IS nothing new under the sun, is there!)

A man can commit the most heinous crime imaginable and there will be someone who will argue that he shouldn't be held responsible because he was the victim of forces that were beyond his control—forces that drove him to do what he did. We shouldn't think of him as immoral or sinful, but as dysfunctional. Perhaps he was abused as a child or economically deprived or bullied at school. The bottom line is that someone else is responsible for him being like he is and doing what he does.

The idea that a person isn't responsible for his own actions has been carried to extremes in some cases. You may recall a woman some years back who was awarded half a million dollars by a jury for spilling coffee in her own lap. Another case involved a man who had lung cancer and was suing a tobacco company for causing it, even though he admitted under oath that he had always known that smoking causes lung cancer. Members of his own family testified that he had frequently said that he knew smoking caused lung cancer but he continued to smoke anyway. A jury awarded him over a million dollars for doing something that he knew he shouldn't do.

None of this should surprise us: people like the idea that they're not responsible for their own actions because it enables them to avoid feeling guilty for what they've done. It's a relief to think that someone else is to blame for OUR mistakes. *"My father ate sour grapes; that must be why my teeth are set on edge."* But God says "NO!" Each person is responsible for his own sins.

When we deny responsibility for our sins, we hinder the work of the Holy Spirit Who tries to convict us of our sins so that we will repent of them. If we continue down that path, our consciences become anesthetized and we lose our ability to clearly distinguish between right and wrong. Paul was referring to people like that when he wrote that, "...their consciences have been seared as with a hot iron."

We console ourselves with the thought the choices we make are pre-determined by forces beyond our control and there is no need to bring in the moral dimension. This idea is pandered under various names—situational ethics, moral pragmatism, postmodernism. The message they all have in common is that antiquated ideas of morality are no longer useful, or as the actress Shirley McClain once said, "The Ten Commandments have had their day and it's time to move on."

The net effect of it is that the moral framework provided by God's Law is ignored and people set themselves up as monarchs of their own lives. They become like the Israelites during the period of the judges, when, we are told, *"There was no king in Israel in those days and each man did what was right in his own eyes."*

But the God of heaven and earth says: *“The soul who sins is the one who will die.”* We are accountable for our sins and whatever we like to think, in the end we will be judged by God’s standards—not our own. If we refuse to accept responsibility for our sins we cannot continue in a relationship with God who commands us to repent of them.

Today’s Gospel lesson provides us with an interesting example of how repentance works. What do we have in the story of the two brothers? A father asks his two sons to go out and work in his vineyard. The first son says *“I won’t,”* but then he changes his mind and goes to work. The other one says *“I will”*—but then he doesn’t.

Jesus asks the Pharisees, *“Which one did the father’s will?”* and they respond *“The first.”* The Pharisees have it half right: obedience to the Father is a good thing but obedient actions by themselves are not enough: obedient actions must flow from an obedient heart. Initially the first son’s heart was unwilling—yet Jesus says he did the father’s will. How? The key phrase is *“he changed his mind.”* The Greek word used here means “felt remorse.” The son felt guilty over having defied his father and so he went to work in the vineyard. Acknowledging his sin freed him up to want to do the father’s will.

Here again, we see how in the kingdom of God, everything is turned upside down. The Greeks of Jesus’ time considered remorse to be a character defect, since they prized consistency and remorse indicated inconsistency. But Jesus says that remorse has value: it frees us up to amend our behavior.

Now is there anyone here today who doesn’t need to feel remorse over his sins? Who hasn’t come to the inescapable conclusion that in spite of all the gifts his heavenly Father has showered down upon him, he still willfully persists in sinning? Who has not stubbornly clung to his anger or pride and refused to admit he was wrong and to repent of it? Who has not been brought close to despair when he contemplates the hardness of his own heart?

Well, the good news I have for you today is that it is precisely when you are in that kind of despair that you are the closest to God’s grace. God didn’t send His Son to heal the righteous and the self-sufficient; He sent Him to heal the guilty and the brokenhearted.

But you’ve got to realize you’re sick before you know you need a physician, a Divine Physician who understands your sickness and offers healing. And the healing begins with remorse, for in remorse alone we can taste the bitterness of sin. Remorse makes us fit for repentance, which is the God-given desire to turn away from our sins.

If we look carefully at the two sons, we can see two parts of ourselves. One part of us intends to obey our heavenly Father but then founders on the shoals of rebellion and self-indulgence and says: *“You know? I’d rather not and I’m not going to.”* The other part says, “OK, I’ll do it”—and then decides not to.

I’ll never forget something a friend of mine back in the business world once said to me. He was describing something a co-worker had asked him to do for him and he said, “He

asked me to do it and I didn't want to but I said that I would and then I didn't." Sound familiar?

And so we cave into to anger, or lust, or lying, or vanity or gossip one more time. Then remorse sets in and we taste the bitter fruit of sin and we have the opportunity to repent. And after we repent, we find that forgiveness and healing are freely and immediately ours. Having changed our minds, God can change our hearts and with changed hearts we can change our actions: we can do the father's will. Luther called this dynamic of Christian living "a joyous duel" between Law and Gospel, judgment and forgiveness, Divine wrath and Divine mercy.

As St. Paul wrote: "God has bound all men over to disobedience so that he may have mercy on them all." He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted. We find new life by walking through the Valley of the shadow of death.

The Bible is full of accounts of how God tears down the mighty and builds up the weak. As David wrote: *"Your glory, O Israel, lies fallen upon your heights!"*

It's not the bold and self-sufficient and strong who rejoice in the Kingdom of Heaven, but the meek, the poor and the grieving. God humbles the proud and consoles the brokenhearted. We reach paradise by way of the cross. We are declared righteous by acknowledging our own unrighteousness. We are saved when we realize that we are lost.

Amen.