

Repent And Live!

Flip Wilson used to tell a story about how when he and his brother were children they got into a pillow fight one night after they had gone to bed.

One of the pillows hit a lamp and it crashed to the floor and shattered.

Their father came storming into the room and demanded to know who broke it.

They cried, "It wasn't us!

A strange man came in through the window and threw the lamp against the wall and then ran away laughing!"

I identify with that story.

When I was in high school, I was taking a friend for a ride in my father's brand new Volkswagen.

I was telling him how well built Volkswagens were and to show him I hit the inside of the windshield with my fist.

Cracks appeared in every direction on the glass

Turns out it was tough to the outside; not so tough on the inside.

I wasn't about to tell my father that I had broken the windshield on his brand new car with my fist, so I made up a story about some kid throwing a hedgeapple at the car and it hitting the windshield.

After my father examined the windshield, he said if that was the case, how come the windshield was bowed outward instead of inward?

Scrambling for an answer I told him the hedgeapple had come in through the side window and hit the windshield from inside.

He just walked away, shaking his head.

He did a lot of that when I was a teenager.

I messed up and tried to blame it on someone else.

It wasn't the last time I did it either.

In time of course I discovered that other people do the same thing, and I suppose that made me feel a little better about myself.

But there are two big problems with that practice.

In the first place everybody knows what you're doing so they don't believe you.

In the second place, it keeps you from accepting responsibility for what you did so you are cheating yourself since repentance is a gift from God that enables you to get rid of your sins.

When we repent of our sins they are forgiven and forgotten by God and we are freed up to get on with our lives

When we don't repent, we bind our sins to ourselves rather than turn them over to the Christ.

The result is that our sins remain stuck to us and accumulate and we live our lives under the ever-growing burden of our sins.

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!"*

To remain spiritually free and clean we have to repent of our sins.

But in order to repent, we have to "own up" to our sins and take responsibility for them.

And we would rather not.

We'd rather try to lay them on someone else or something else.

The Israelites had the same problem. God says: *"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: 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 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 bullied by other children.

The bottom line is that someone else is responsible for him being like he is and for doing what he has done.

I had a sociology teacher in high school who used to say that the prisons were full of people whom society had failed.

It was gratifying to hear what the judge in the Murdoch case in South Carolina said when he sentenced Murdoch to life in prison: "There is an evil man inside you."

This 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 for spilling coffee in her own lap.

In another case a man who had lung cancer was suing a tobacco company because he claimed cigarettes had caused his lung cancer.

He admitted under oath that he had always known that smoking cigarettes caused lung cancer.

Members of his own family testified that he had frequently said that he knew smoking caused lung cancer and laughed about it and continued to smoke.

A jury awarded him over a million dollars for getting lung cancer.

None of this should surprise us: people are strongly drawn to the idea that they're not responsible for their sins because it enables them to avoid feeling guilty.

"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, our hearts become hardened against the Holy Spirit, whose primary work is to **convict us** of our sins.

When we reject the counsel of the Holy Spirit our consciences are dulled and we lose our moral compass.

We end up believing that there is no such thing as right or wrong—only individual experiences which frame personal choices.

This idea is pandered under different names—situational ethics, pragmatism, postmodernism.

The net effect of it is that the moral framework provided by God's Law is eroded and people set themselves up as monarchs of their own lives.

They become like the Israelites during the period of the judges, when, *"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."*

God says that we are accountable for our sins and in the end we will be judged by God's standards and not our own.

We have to repent in order to remain alive in God's sight.

Today's Gospel lesson provides us an interesting lesson in repentance.

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 will not,"* but then he changes his mind and goes to work.

The other one says *"I will"*—but then he doesn't go.

Jesus asks the Pharisees, *"Which one did the father's will?"* and they respond *"The first."*

The Pharisees have it only half right.

Deeds of righteousness only please God when they come from a willing 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 word used here means "felt remorse."

In other words, he repented over having defied his father and went to work.

Acknowledging his sin freed him to do the father's will.

The other son said he would but then didn't do it.

His heart remained set against his father's will.

Here again, we see how in the kingdom of God, everything is turned upside down.

The Greeks of Jesus' time considered repentance to be a character defect, since they prized consistency and repenting constituted inconsistency.

But Jesus says that repenting frees us up to amend our behavior and do the father's will.

Is there anyone here today who doesn't feel the need to repent of his sins?

Who hasn't come to the conclusion that in spite of all the gifts which his heavenly Father has showered down upon him, he continues to sin?

Who has not stubbornly clung to his anger or pride and refused to admit he was wrong and repent of it?

Who has not been brought close to despair when he acknowledges the hardness of his 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 healthy and self-sufficient; He sent Him to heal the sick and the brokenhearted.

But you've got to realize that you're sick before you realize that you need a physician, and if you are morally sick, you need the Divine Physician who understands your sickness and offers healing.

In repenting we can taste the bitter end of sin and that gives birth in us to 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 plans to obey, but then founders on the shoals of rebellion and self-indulgence and says: *"You know? I'd rather not. I like my sin and I'm going to enjoy it."*

Then we cave into to anger, or lust, or lying, or vanity or gossip one more time.

And having fallen, we employ our pride and our anger to rationalize our sin and convince ourselves that it wasn't that big of a deal anyway.

But then, repentance sets in, and we find that forgiveness and healing are freely and immediately ours.

Having changed our minds, we can change our hearts, and having changed our hearts, we can change our actions: we can do the father's will.

Luther called this dynamic of Christian living "a very joyous duel" between Law and Gospel, between judgment and forgiveness, between divine wrath and divine mercy.

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 enter the Kingdom of Heaven through the gateway of repentance.

The Bible is a commentary on the building up of the weak and the tearing down of the mighty.

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 repentant.

God rejects the proud, but draws near to the brokenhearted.

We reach paradise by way of the cross.

We are justified by acknowledging our bondage to sin.

We are set free by owning up to our slavery.

We become righteous by recognizing that we are unrighteous.

And it is by dying to ourselves that we come alive in Christ.

Amen.