

## Repent, O House Of Israel!

When I was in the second grade, I decided that I was in love with Jayne Seymore.

Jayne was a serious girl, she made straight A's and she was pretty.

I was the silliest kid in the class, I didn't care what kind of grades I made and I wasn't pretty.

It was obviously not a match made in heaven.

Still, I was in love, so I began to court Jayne.

As you might imagine, my initial attempts to impress her by doing silly tricks during recess didn't work.

When I asked one of Jayne's friends what she thought of me, she told me that Jayne thought I was the silliest kid in the class.

(I told you she was smart,)

But undeterred, I decided to take another approach.

I called her one night on the phone, having made a list of serious topics to discuss, in order to show her I had a serious side.

She wasn't impressed with that side either.

So as a final resort, I decided to woo her with gifts.

I snuck into my mother's jewelry box and loaded up my jeans with everything that would fit in the pockets—necklaces, bracelets, rings and pins—all of which I planned to give to Jayne during recess the next day.

Thankfully, my mother noticed that my pockets were bulging and retrieved her jewelry before I could take it to school.

She was not amused by my plan and told me that what I had done was stealing.

But instead of admitting I was a thief and asking for forgiveness, I got in a huff and said: *"Maybe if you trusted me more I wouldn't do things like that."*

You might say that I had the cart before the horse.

***It's hard for us to admit that we're wrong!***

Even when we're caught red-handed in an outright sin, we'll say or do almost anything to avoid admitting that we're guilty, because WE HATE FEELING GUILTY!

But if we don't face up to our guilt we won't repent of our sins, and if we don't repent of our sins, we bind them to ourselves rather than turn them over to Christ, who died for them on the cross.

So the first step in getting rid of our sins is to admit that we have them.

Once we've faced up to our sins we can repent of them and ask God to forgive them.

And God **will** forgive them and then we can rejoice.

This is why the Scriptures—both *Old Testament and New*—emphasize the importance of **repentance**.

In today's *Old Testament* lesson, God speaks through the prophet Ezekiel and says: "*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 doorway to forgiveness.

God has commanded all of us who worship Him to repent of our sins and turn them over to Jesus.

Now if the first step toward repenting of our sins is to acknowledge that we have them, the second step is to admit that we and we alone are responsible for them.

This isn't always easy because it's always tempting to try to pin the blame for our sins on someone or something else.

The ancient Israelites had that problem.

In the *Book of Ezekiel*, 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 Israelites were doing the same thing we do nowadays: they were blaming their parents for their sins.

*“No wonder I’m a mess: look at how I was raised!”*

(There really is nothing new under the sun, is there!)

A man can commit the most heinous crime imaginable and still insist that he should not be held responsible because forces beyond his control drove him to do what he did.

He was abused as a child.

He was raised in poverty.

He is mentally unsound.

Someone or something else is responsible for how he has turned out and for why he did what he did.

We should think of him as a victim of forces beyond his control

Not as evil but as dysfunctional.

This idea—that a person isn’t responsible for their own actions—has become widely accepted in our society.

A woman is awarded half a million dollars for spilling coffee in her lap.

A man who smoked for forty years testifies under oath that he always knew that smoking cigarettes caused lung cancer and then is awarded millions of dollars for getting lung cancer.

This shouldn’t surprise us: we like the idea that we’re not responsible for our sins because it allows us to avoid feeling guilty for what we’ve done.

We'd like 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 or her own sins.

This is not because God is harsh or vengeful, but because he knows that when we don't take responsibility for our sins, we not only won't repent of them, we can actually begin to feel entitled to them.

When this happens, our hearts begin to harden against the accusations of the Law and the ministry of the Holy Spirit, whose primary work is to convict us of our sins so that we will repent of them and turn to God for forgiveness.

In time our consciences become anaesthetized, deadened and we lose our sense of moral direction.

We can even end up believing that there is no such thing as moral responsibility, only individual choices that are pro-determined by the genes we inherited or outside forces that shaped us.

When this happens, the moral framework provided by God's law crumbles and we set ourselves up as judges of what is right and what is wrong.

And then, like the Israelites during the period of the Judges, *"Everyone does what is right in his own eyes."*

The result? the social order dissolves into chaos.

If this sounds alarmist or extreme to you, consider the following.

A recent survey revealed that 82% of Catholics between the ages of 18 and 29 agreed with this statement: *"Morals are relative; there is no definite right and wrong for everybody."*

80% of young Catholics believe that it is not immoral to have sex before marriage.

Catholics are no exceptions: the views of young Christians in other denominations are similar.

Much of what the Bible calls sin has been normalized and mainstreamed in our society.

What would have been shocking and unthinkable fifty years ago is now commonplace.

Hollywood routinely spews out vulgarity and what not that long ago would have been called pornography.

They call it "art" or "entertainment" and nobody bats an eye

But the God of heaven and earth says, *"The soul who sins is the one who will die."*

God holds us accountable for our sins, however much we would like to believe otherwise, and in the end we will be judged by God's standards and not by our own.

And unless we want to stand before Him and claim that we led sinless lives, we need to repent of our sins in order to get rid of them.

Today's Gospel lesson can teach us a few things about repentance.

The owner of a garden has his gardener plant a fig tree.

When the season comes, he expects it to produce figs.

When it fails to do so, he instructs the gardener to cut it down.

But the gardener intercedes with the owner of the garden and asks for permission to dig around the roots and fertilize the tree in hopes that it will bear fruit the following season.

If none appears then, he promises to cut it down.

Jesus told this story to drive home a point he had just made with his disciples, that, *"...unless you repent, you too will perish."*

The owner of the garden is God, the gardener is Jesus, and we are the fig tree.

God wants us to produce what John the Baptist called, *"...the fruits of repentance."*

Unless we do, we will be *"cut down,"* and *"...burn in unquenchable fire."*

The first thing the parable teaches us is that Jesus will help us repent.

He will loosen the hard-baked soil of our pride that binds our sins and give us strength to confess our sins and repent of them.

Like all good things, repentance is a gift of God—but it is a gift we have to use.

*“Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved.”*

The second thing the parable teaches us is that there is a limit to Jesus’ patience.

*“If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, cut it down.”*

These words should send a lightning bolt of fear into our pride-hardened hearts.

If we make a habit of discounting the importance of our sins and fail to repent of them, the time will come when there will be no time left.

When even the Lord of Life will say to the Father: *“Cut it down.”*

If that doesn’t scare you into repentance, nothing will.

This isn’t just abstract theology: this is an issue that bears upon our daily lives.

Living in a permissive society as we do, it’s easy to get comfortable with our sins.

The mentality of *“I haven’t done anything all THAT bad,”* can creep into our minds and we can start to think, *“What, me repent? Repent of what?”*

My friends, let’s be very honest with each other: **We vastly underestimate our sinfulness.**

We may not rob banks and kill people, but we are selfish to the core of our sinful nature and we do not love each other as we have been commanded to do.

Without even realizing it, we deal the death of a thousand cuts to each other day by day.

Sometimes we even do this to the people we love the most.

We become so comfortable with our “minor” sins, that we cease even being aware of them.

And when we end up thinking that we don't have all that much to be forgiven, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us.

But if we examine our thoughts and words and actions carefully in the light of God's standards, with the help of the Holy Spirit we can begin to see our sins more clearly.

And then, if we confess our sins and repent of them God is faithful and just and He will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

And that is the Gospel truth. Amen.