

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
Pentecost 18  
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Sermon by Pastor Gary A. Pufahl  
***Sincere repentance leads to true obedience***

When Jesus went into the temple courts, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to him while he was teaching and said, “By what authority are you doing these things?” and “Who gave you this authority?”

<sup>24</sup> Jesus answered them, “I will also ask you one question. If you answer it, I will tell you by what authority I do these things. <sup>25</sup> The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?”

They discussed it among themselves, saying, “If we say, ‘From heaven,’ he will say to us, ‘Then why did you not believe him?’ <sup>26</sup> But if we say, ‘From men,’ we are afraid of the crowd, since they all regard John as a prophet.” <sup>27</sup> So they answered Jesus, “We do not know.”

He said to them, “Then I will not tell you by what authority I do these things.”

<sup>28</sup> “What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go work today in my vineyard.’ <sup>29</sup> He answered, ‘I will not,’ but later he changed his mind and went. <sup>30</sup> He came to the second and said the same thing. The second son answered, ‘I will go, sir,’ but he did not go. <sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?”

They said to him, “The first.”

Jesus said to them, “Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. <sup>32</sup> For John came to you in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. However, the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw this, you did not change your mind and believe him.

—Matthew 21:23-32

In our current sermon series, we are looking at some of Jesus’ parables, or stories, that he told to teach us some very important and impactful truths about our lives. *Tell us a story, Jesus.* In order to fully understand and apply the story that is before us today, I think it’s important for us to remember a very important concept in God’s Word. That concept is repentance.

1 John 1:8,9 is perhaps one of the clearest passages of Scripture that shows us what repentance is. The apostle John writes, **“If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”**

So, repentance has two parts. The first is that we confess our sins. We acknowledge that we are guilty and deserve God’s judgment. We are sorry or contrite. That’s the first part of repentance.

And the second part is that we receive the forgiveness Jesus has won for us. We believe that God forgives our sins for Jesus’ sake. We are comforted. God leads us to Jesus. He shows us what our Savior has done for us. That’s what repentance is.

In the Augsburg Confession, the Lutheran church fathers summarized it this way: **“Now properly speaking, true repentance is nothing else than to have contrition and sorrow, or terror about sin, and yet at the same time to believe in the gospel and absolution that sin is forgiven and grace is obtained through Christ. Such faith, in turn, comforts the heart and puts it at peace”** (*The Book of Concord*, p. 44). That’s repentance. That is a sincere repentance. Not a fake, go-through-the-motions repentance, but one that genuinely is sorrowful over sin and believes that Jesus has set us free from those sins.

Now, I remind you of this because I believe it’s important for us to remember what repentance is as we look at Jesus’ parable today. It’s also important to see the context in which Jesus tells this story. So, it’s Holy Week. It’s Tuesday of Holy Week. Palm Sunday has come and gone. It’s two days later. Jesus has entered the temple courts in order to teach. And while he is teaching, the religious leaders came up to Jesus and asked, **“By what authority are you doing these things?”** They were questioning Jesus’ authority to teach God’s Word. **“Who gave you this authority?”** The religious leaders hated Jesus. They didn’t see Jesus as the promised Messiah. They saw him as a false teacher. They were blind. So, they press him on where he got his authority to teach.

Well, notice what Jesus does *not* say in response to their question. They asked, **“Who gave you this authority?”** Jesus does *not* say, “God did.” He doesn’t say, “My Father in heaven gave me this authority.” That would be true, but Jesus doesn’t say that.

Instead, he says, **“I will also ask you one question. If you answer it, I will tell you by what authority I do these things. The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?”** Brilliant! You remember John – John the Baptist. He was the forerunner of Jesus. He was the one who went ahead in order to prepare the way for the

coming of the Messiah. John's message was very simple. And this is key to understanding Jesus' story. John simply gave this message: **"Repent! For the kingdom of heaven is near!"** John's message was one of repentance, but so was his baptism. It was a baptism that consisted of repentance. God sent John to lead people to see their sin and to receive the forgiveness of their sins. God gave John the way to forgive sins. John's ministry was all about repentance. John convicted people of their sin and pointed them to **"Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."** That's what John's entire ministry was about.

Do you see that? That's repentance. But the religious leaders were questioning *Jesus'* authority. **"Who gave you the authority to teach, Jesus?"** So, Jesus asks them a question, **"The baptism of John, where was it from? From heaven or from men?"**

Well, this is what Matthew writes for us. **"They discussed it among themselves, saying, 'If we say, 'From heaven,' he will say to us, 'Then why did you not believe him?' But if we say, 'From men,' we are afraid of the crowd, since they all regard John as a prophet.' So they answered Jesus, 'We do not know.'" So, Jesus says to them, "Then I will not tell you by what authority I do these things."**

What did the religious leaders fail to see? The religious leaders failed to see that they too needed to repent. They failed to see that they too needed John's baptism. They failed to see that they were sinners who needed God's forgiveness. They failed to repent. Everybody with me so far? Okay.

Well, immediately after that interaction, Jesus tells this story. *Tell us a story, Jesus.* He says, **"What do you think? A man had two sons. He went to the first and said, 'Son, go work today in my vineyard.'<sup>29</sup> He answered, 'I will not,' but later he changed his mind and went.<sup>30</sup> He came to the second and said the same thing. The second son answered, 'I will go, sir,' but he did not go.<sup>31</sup> Which of the two did the will of his father?"** They said to him, **"The first."** Jesus said to them, **"Amen I tell you: The tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.<sup>32</sup> For John came to you in the way of righteousness, but you did not believe him. However, the tax collectors and prostitutes did believe him. Even when you saw this, you did not change your mind and believe him."**

I just marvel at the heart of Jesus here. He knew what these religious leaders wanted to do. It's Holy Week. They wanted to trap him, catch him in some trap, make him slip up so that they had a reason to rid him from the earth. And what does Jesus do? He keeps reaching out to them to lead them *to repent*. Jesus spoke this parable to people who were self-confident that they were bound for heaven. Unfortunately, their confidence was not rooted in God's promises but based on how good they thought they were. The religious leaders to whom Jesus spoke thought they were so holy that when John the Baptist called them to repent of their sins, they ignored him. And at the same time, while they ignored John's call to repent, tax collectors and prostitutes, people many considered to be beyond saving, confessed their sins and believed in Jesus. They repented. They received a baptism that consisted of repentance.

Now, as you compare these two sons in Jesus' story, is one attitude worse than the other? Oh, certainly both are sinners. Both sons sinned. But there is one that is worse than the other. Do you see which one? The second one is worse. You see, empty words are worse because they mislead us into thinking we are God-fearing people when we're not. The Apostle James said that if we don't live God's Word, then all our pious words are meaningless and our faith is dead (James 2:17). That's a scary thought, isn't it?

I can put on a good outward show that I follow God with all my life. I can make it look like I am pious and righteous. I can make it look as though I am better than other people. But do I see that I daily, if not every minute, need *repentance*? What about you?

How many times have you looked down your noses at someone else because you thought you were more pious than someone else? How many times have you made your life look good on the outside, saying to God, "Yes, I will do what you want" only to find yourself stumble and fall into another sin? How many times have you given promises that you will follow God and then you sinned again. And you got away with it, covered it up, and didn't even think about falling before your God with a broken and contrite spirit, seeking his forgiveness. How often have you sinned and justified it before God instead of repenting of it, and then turning away from it?

If you find that you can at times relate to this, then please take heart. You see, Jesus actually tells this story, not to shame us, but to give us comfort and hope. And here's how. Look at the third Son in his story. Do you see him? Do you see the third Son? He's the one telling the story. Jesus is the third Son.

Just think about this. His heavenly Father said: *"Son, I have a very hard chore for you. I want you to save sinful people. You'll need to go work on earth. You'll need to take on flesh and blood, spending nine months in a woman's womb and then be born in a barn. You'll need to live with these sinful people – healing and teaching them. In return you'll be mocked, beaten with whips, and finally crucified. My Son, will you do it?"*

Jesus, God's Son said: *"Yes. Father, I will do everything you ask of me."* There was no arguing, no complaining, only complete submission. And Jesus didn't just say "yes." He lived his "yes" in perfect obedience, never veering from the

mission. He did it all. His actions backed up and underscored his words from the time of his birth until his death on Calvary's cross.

Why did he consistently live for his Father even in midst of being unpopular? Why did he speak words of love and tenderness and compassion even when soldiers were pounding nails in his body? Why did he care for his mother and his disciple when he was bleeding to death on the cross? Why did he speak words of confidence and promise to a thief who deserved to die? Why did Jesus speak and do the will of his Father in this world?

He did it *for you*. He did it *for me*. And because Jesus has completed his mission of saving sinners, whenever we have said "no" to God, by grace he heard "yes" because he heard his Son's voice over ours. And whenever we have said "yes" only to show we really meant "no" by our inaction, the Father saw his Son's perfect life in place of ours. *That's what repentance gives us.*

So here you are, standing before this third Son. You come to him with every evil thought, with every evil word spoken, with every evil action taken, and he has claimed those evil desires and deeds as his own. They are no longer yours. You stand before this third Son, and he gives you a gift. Every loving thought, every compassionate word, every faithful deed that he has done becomes yours. God, the Father, looks at you, and he sees the perfect third Son. Jesus has made you worthy. Jesus has given you peace. Jesus has opened heaven to you. You are entering the kingdom of God. You are God's son, his daughter.

And now the Father comes to you, and he tells you, "**Son, daughter, go work today in my vineyard.**" And you and I say, "Yes. Father. Yes. We will." And then we do it. What does that look like? Well, it looks like parents who see that the most important job of your life is to sit at the feet of your Savior together with your children, learning and sharing God's Word with each other. It looks like God's children, you and me, living our lives in honor to God, recognizing that our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit. It looks like us, God's people, having love and compassion for people, all people. It looks like Christians who open their mouths and gently, but firmly, call people to repentance. It looks like God's children who seek to glorify and honor God in everything we do. That's how we follow through on our "Yes, Father, yes."

And because of Jesus, you and I can identify with Jesus, the one telling the story. We are the blood-bought children of Christ. We are his. And when our Father comes to us through his Word and says, "Son, daughter, live for me" we actually say "Yes, Father, I will" and we can actually go and do it. *Sincere repentance leads to true obedience. Amen.*