

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Pentecost 19
October 11, 2020
Sermon by Pastor Justin Gran
Repent and believe

—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?”

That’s the simple story that Jesus told in today’s lesson. It was Tuesday of Holy Week and while Jesus was teaching in the temple, the chief priests and the elders of the people questioned Jesus asking, “Who gave you this authority?” Jesus did not answer that question but he told them the parable about two sons.

Then Jesus told them what the parable means: ***“I tell you the truth, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you.”*** Prostitutes and tax collectors were surpassing the “righteousness” of the chief priests and Pharisees and teachers of the law and entering the kingdom of God. They are like the first son. Initially they bucked against the will of the Father. They lived a life estranged from God and often in a very visible way. But there was a pivotal change. They repented and believed.

But those who rejected Jesus are like the second son. Jesus said, ***“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.”*** They claimed, “We do what God says. We keep the law of Moses,” and yet when God’s messenger, John the Baptist, came they refused to change their way of thinking. They *did not* repent and believe.

So do you see what the parable is all about? If all we get from the parable is, “Just do your chores then God will reward you,” then we’re missing the point. The first son is exemplified in the parable not merely because his behavior changed. His behavior did change but first his heart and mind had to be changed. The Lord calls for a change of heart and mind in our lives too. The Lord calls us to repent and believe.

Repent or repentance is a word we use a lot, but what does it mean? The word is used in today’s gospel when Jesus tells the Jewish leaders, “You did not repent.” In Greek it’s the same word he used to describe what the first son did—he changed his mind. Repentance is literally a change of mind. Our mind changes in two ways. I can’t keep thinking that sin is ok. Rather I recognize and I am truly sorry for my sin. But then I can’t think that God will forgive me because of something I have to do. Rather I simply trust that Jesus has forgiven my sin. In short, repentance is sorrow over sin but also trust that Christ has forgiven all sin. Repentance was the essences of Jesus’ message—“repent and believe the good news.”

So what did repentance mean for the prostitutes and the tax collectors that Jesus mentions? Remember, it’s not merely a change in behavior. A prostitute could change her way of life and a tax collector who cheated people could stop cheating people but remain impenitent. Changing the course of action doesn’t take away the sin. Only Jesus has taken away sin. These sinners came to Jesus because they recognized their sin and they recognized that only Jesus offered a solution to their sin. In their life of sin, they only found regret and guilt and shame. They found no relief from the religious leader of their day, only more guilt and rules and shame. But in Jesus they found unconditional love and complete forgiveness by grace, not by works. They repented and believed. A woman who had a very immoral reputation came to a dinner in the home of Simon the Pharisee, and she fell at Jesus’ feet and drenched his feet with her tears. And the one who could read her heart, “your faith has saved you.” No doubt her life and behavior would change as fruit of repentance, but first her heart was changed. Another example is a tax collector named Zacchaeus. He climbed a sycamore tree just to lay eyes on his Savior. After Jesus came to his home, Zacchaeus promised to change his ways and he did as a fruit of repentance but first his heart was changed by the message of salvation. He repented and believed the good news.

Or what about the so-called religious people of Jesus day? What would repentance mean for them? One particular man comes to mind—a Pharisee named Saul. Although he wasn’t among the chief priests and elders whom Jesus rebuked that day, he rejected Jesus all the same. He persecuted Christians. But all that changed. Jesus appeared to Saul, or Paul, and brought about the most pivotal change. When Paul was struck with physical blindness he could clearly see how wrong he was. He despaired of his own righteousness and clung to the

righteousness of Jesus. And naturally he stopped persecuting Christians. But first, his heart and mind were changed by the grace of God. He repented and believed the good news.

What about you? What does repentance mean for you? Maybe in a way you identify with the many sinners that came to Jesus. Maybe there was a time in your life, or even currently, where you've bucked against the will of God. Maybe you carry the guilt and regret of an open and public sin. We find no relief from those sins by making excuses. We don't find forgiveness merely by changing our behavior. Certain the sinful behavior has to change. If the sin is stealing I must steal no longer. If it is adultery, I must commit adultery no longer, other wise I'd be like the second Son—saying one thing but doing another. But first my heart and mind must be changed. I recognize the sin for what it is, but I rely that Jesus died to pay for that very sin and all my sin. In repentance we fall at Jesus feet like and trust solely in him. That's repentance. Or maybe the sins we struggle with are not so open and public. Maybe we struggle more like some of the religious people in Jesus' day. We might project pious a life and that's what gives us a false sense of security. If that's the case, our way of thinking needs to change. But forgiveness for that sinful pride doesn't come through false humility and beating yourself up. In true repentance we recognize that sin for what it is but ultimately we trust that Jesus died to pay for that sin and all our sin. We despair of our own works and rely on the work of Jesus Christ.

So that you don't burn your self out trying to bring about this change in your life, let me also emphasize this: The Lord is the one who brings about this change! Repentance is not a work that the believer does to appease God. God doesn't forgive me because of how sorry I am or how much I beat myself up. The Lord works repentance in people's hearts. Jesus gave an example of how he does that. ***"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."*** What exactly is the way of righteousness that John came to show? It wasn't like a self-help seminar—"Five essential steps to get on the right path." It wasn't a system of works and steps bring about change. That's what the Pharisees were all about. They heaped rules and burdens on people that not even they could carry. The way of righteousness John came to reveal was Jesus Christ. One day John pointed to Jesus and said, ***"Look the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!"*** Jesus came with the same goal. He came calling sinners to repent and believe. And his call to repent wasn't meant to bring about shame. His call to repent and believe was about offering a solution. He offered himself as a sacrifice for all your sins and for the sins of the world. He proclaims that forgiveness to you today. I proclaim that forgiveness to you today. In name of Jesus Christ, your sins are forgiven. That's the message that truly works change in our hearts and lives.

The final thing I want to drive home about repentance is this: It's not a one-time deal and it's not simply going through some formal motions. Rather, it characterizes the very life of a Christian. I suppose those prostitutes and the tax collectors and people like Paul thought back to their former lives with regret and shame on many occasions. I know that we naturally do the same—we think back to yesterday or earlier today or years ago with regret. We still struggle with sin today. But by the grace of God, he works repentance in us. Repentance isn't about dwelling in our own shame and regret. It's about resting in Jesus and his forgiveness. Each day, hear the loving call of you Savior. Rest in his forgiveness. Repent and believe the good news. Amen.