

Luke 18:9-14 + Living a Life of Repentance + Series: What Does This Mean?
Cross of Christ Ev. Lutheran Church – Liverpool, NY + 18th Sunday after Pentecost + 8 October 2017

Without fanfare or fuss, the German monk walked through the crowd with a rolled up broadsheet under his arm. No one really noticed as he attached it to the door of All Saints Church that fall day. It was just another set of theses for debate like those that the other university professors posted along with student requests for roommates and animals for sale. Once the monk walked away, people looked to see what he had posted—95 statements written in Latin for an academic debate over the practice of indulgences—a popular pay-for-forgiveness practice peddled by the church.

The first thesis cut to the heart of the matter. ***“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent,’ he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.”*** Repentance? Why would Jesus want believers to live lives of repentance? Why did Martin Luther care so much that the Christian life is one of repentance? To repent means to turn away from your sin in sorrow and to trust in God’s forgiveness.

Besides being a monk and a professor, Luther was also a pastor. As a shepherd of souls, he wanted people to turn from their sins and live, to leave their sins with Christ and trust in Christ’s forgiveness. Yet when the indulgence sellers came to his region, the people fell all over themselves trying to buy their way out of purgatory, trying to buy God’s forgiveness, but there was a problem. There was no way they could buy forgiveness. There was no way to earn God’s forgiveness. So Luther urged them to turn from their sins and live as Christ willed.

Why did Jesus call for a life of repentance? Back then, there was a leading group of Jews called the Pharisees who prided themselves on how well they followed God’s commands. They even added hundreds of commands to God’s Ten Commandments to prove their righteousness. They looked down their noses at “sinners” in their society, but failed to see their own sin and their own need to repent. So Jesus told them a story about repentance.

Two men went to church one day. Both went there to pray. Both were sinners in desperate need of a Savior, but only one left the church that day forgiven and declared innocent in God’s sight.

One of the men was a Pharisee, well-respected as a follower of the true God. He zealously followed the teachings of the Law and the instruction of the rabbis. He carefully followed the kosher laws when it came to food. He carefully avoided any appearance of working on the Sabbath. He knew his Old Testament front to back. He fasted twice a week. He almost always gave a tenth of what he received back to the Lord. He prayed to the Lord often and studied the Torah. By all appearances, this man was a righteous follower of Yahweh.

...But appearances can be deceiving. For all his outward piety, that man was nothing more than a white-washed tomb—clean and beautiful on the outside, dead and decaying on the inside. What appeared to be holiness was nothing more than a cover for the deadly self-righteousness he harbored in his heart.

He was a sinner, but felt no need to admit or repent of his sin. After all, he was doing what was right in God’s sight, even going beyond what the rabbis commanded. If God wasn’t sure, the man went to church to make sure God knew how holy and faithful he was. When he walked into the temple, the Pharisee found the most prominent spot, stood up tall, lifted his hands and eyes to the heavens, and told God all about himself. ***“God, I thank you that I am not like other men—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get...”***

What a righteous man he was...in his own eyes. “Yes, Lord, I’ve been pretty good. I haven’t robbed or swindled anyone, even if I haven’t always been honest with my money. I haven’t been unjust to anyone. Unlike the unrighteous, I’ve faithfully walked in your paths. I haven’t had an affair with anyone, even if I have allowed my eye to wander on occasion. At least I’m not like the robber or the unjust or the adulterer, and especially not like that tax collector standing back there in the corner. He doesn’t even deserve to set foot in this temple among the holy after all that he and others like him have done to your people. Lord, just so you’re sure how faithful and righteous and pious I am, don’t forget what I’ve done for you. I give up food twice a week for you. I give up a full tenth of everything I receive and everything I earn. That has to mean something to you, God!”

That man didn’t really come to church to pray. He came to boast about himself. He was a sinner in desperate need of a Savior, but wasn’t about to turn away from what God wanted him to turn away from—his sinful self-righteousness. He saw no need for a Savior when he was his own Savior. That man left church that day justified in his own eyes, but not in God’s.

The other man was a tax collector. Tax collectors back in Jesus’ day weren’t the honorable IRS agents of the government. They were a seedy lot—the very definition of corruption. The Roman government hired locals to

gather taxes. In turn, the authorities allowed them to overcharge the required taxes, taking their own cut as commission. Tax collectors of higher ranking also took a cut. Of course, such a set-up led to all kinds of corruption. If someone didn't pay their taxes, violent force could be brought in to take your last cent.

So you can understand why tax collectors were so very hated. Taxpayers spit in their faces and cursed them. Being so hated, a tax collector's only friends were usually the lowlifes and outcasts of society—criminals, prostitutes, thieves, and other “sinners.” At the same time, they were keenly aware of their own sin and guilt, even of the eternal judgment they would face. How could a tax collector possibly stand before the holy God and survive his judgment? Surely that guilt robbed them of sleep, peace, and any hope.

So the tax collector did his best to quietly slip into the darkest back corner of the temple. Getting pointed out by the Pharisee didn't help the troubled man hiding in the shadows. The man **“would not even look up to heaven...”** “How can I possibly look towards heaven when I know I deserve the depths of hell?” Instead, the man stared at the floor and **“beat his breast.”** If he could've covered himself in the rough, burlap material called sackcloth with ashes poured over his head to express his sorrow, he would've done it. Before the holy God, he was nothing more than dust and ashes, and one day he would return to the dust in death because his sins so separated him from God.

The gaping abyss of hell lay before him, but rather than plunge into despair, the tax collector mumbled, **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”** The man recalled the words of King David, when he was confronted with his own adultery and murder and deceit. **“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin.”**

The only way that tax collector could receive forgiveness would be through God's mercy. So he took his burden of guilt and dumped it at the feet of his Savior. He didn't want to hold onto it any longer. He knew that God could do something about all that sin—and that's what God did! The man left church that day declared innocent and forgiven in God's sight

You came to church this morning for worship, but you also came as a sinner in desperate need of a Savior. Will you leave this place living a life of self-righteousness like the Pharisee or a life of repentance like the tax collector? What sins will you leave behind that you might live in God's forgiveness or do you fail to see why you need to leave your sins with Jesus at all?

I'm sure every one of us would be quick to side with the tax collector. His prayer, **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner,”** rolls off the tongue easily, but in reality, it's difficult to admit. Deep down we all know that there's a Pharisee living inside every one of us. Self-righteousness comes all too easily to us as Christians. None of us wants to admit that there are times when you really want to remind God of how faithful you've been, even as you look down your nose at others.

By nature, you and I are much more inclined to stand front and center proclaiming, “Oh Lord, look at how faithful I've been for you. Look at how hard I've worked for you when no one else would get the job done. Look at how willing I've been to sacrifice my time, my money, and my talents for you. At least, I'm not a false teacher or an adulterer or a ‘sinner’ like others I know who claim to be Christians.”

How hypocritical! When you come to church, do you come to partake of God's gracious forgiveness or to do your duty because that's what Christians do? Do you ever catch yourself pre-judging others who walk in the door with you? Do you ever fail to take someone's words and actions in the kindest possible way and instead cut them down to their face or behind their back? Do you ever fail to see who you really are—a sinner headed for hell or do you think you're doing alright in God's sight because you're so faithful? Oh, how that Pharisee inside just loves to boast before the Lord!

When you take a long, hard look at the glaring mirror of God's holy Law, when you see how far you've fallen short of his holiness, when you realize that you are nothing more than a white-washed tomb, what else can you do than despair of your misguided efforts to please God? What else can you do than cry out, **“God, have mercy on me, a sinner”**? That's where a life of repentance starts, but it doesn't end with you falling into the depths of hell.

You see, repentance ends in the open arms of Jesus. It ends at the foot of the cross where you dump all that guilt you've been hiding and all that weakness you've failed to admit and all that death you know you deserve.

Jesus doesn't want you to cover up or ignore or deny your sin. He wants you to daily dump it on him. Jesus humbled himself to exalt you with his forgiveness and mercy and grace. Jesus picked up your load of guilt and weakness and death and carried it to the cross. That's where repentance ends—in Jesus, who took your deserved punishment, who endured your deserved death, who takes the rough sackcloth and ashes of your mourning and replaces them with the white garment of his holiness and his mercy.

...And we do that every day. Every morning you look in the mirror of God's holy Law and see the ugliness of your sins. Then you take your sins and dump them again at the foot of the cross. From that cross, then, you go into your day confident and joyful in the forgiveness you have in your only Savior. When you go to bed at night, you again leave all your sin with Jesus. That's what Luther meant when he said that Jesus ***"willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."*** You daily go back to your baptism and recall how Christ has cleansed you. In Jesus, you are innocent. In Jesus, you are forgiven. In Jesus, you can leave here living a life of repentance because God has shown you mercy and remembers your sins no more. Amen.