

To God Alone Be The Glory

Jesus regularly preached, “*Repent for the kingdom of God is near.*” But what does ‘repent’ mean? Here in today’s Gospel we have a parable to help us understand. In the New Testament the Greek word for ‘repent’ (*metanoew*) literally means ‘to have a change of mind,’ ‘to think otherwise,’ ‘to have a mind next to the one you used to have.’ So when the Lord tells us to repent, he wants us to think differently about those activities we like, if he happens to say such activities are wrong, sinful, evil. And if we don’t like doing things that God approves of, he wants us to have a change of mind about them too. As true God he gets to decide what’s right and what’s wrong.

But we have this thing inside us, a part we were born with, which hates God so much that as soon as it finds out what God wants, it wants to do the exact opposite (see Romans 8:7). There are a number of names for this evil part of us: the old Adam, the old self, the sinful nature, the sinful flesh. Whatever you want to call it, it’s here inside us humans our whole lives long. You can’t make nice with it. It won’t sign any peace treaties with God. It wants to be in control, and that’s that. It’s like a Pharisee in that, no matter how arrogant or disdainful or corrupt it becomes, it still thinks it’s in the right, and it looks down on others who don’t share its values.

When the Holy Spirit brings us to faith in Jesus, he puts something new inside us, a part we are reborn with. This ‘something new’ loves God so much that, as soon as it finds out what God wants, it wants to do exactly that. There are a number of names for this good part of us: the new self, the new nature, the image of God. Whatever you want to call it, it’s here inside us believers from the moment we are reborn until... well, forever—unless we push it out of our hearts. But if you had pushed it out of your heart already, you wouldn’t be listening now. So you still have a new self.

Because these two parts inside us are diametrically opposed, a battle (a spiritual battle) rages in our hearts. Sometimes the sinful flesh is in control. This leads to misery. Sometimes the new self is in control. That’s when we have joy and peace and contentment and harmony and love and faithfulness and patience and self-control and gentleness.

Have you heard the little poem which describes the spiritual war inside us?

Two natures lie within my chest,
The one is evil, the other blest.
The one I love, the other I hate.
The one I feed will dominate.

In order to feed your new nature, you read the Bible, listen to God’s Word, attend Holy Communion, review what your baptism means. And then your new nature dominates, and everyone in your life wins. | In order to feed your sinful flesh, all you have to do is give in to sin.

Any kind of sin will do. It often starts small. God draws a line on the ground and says, “Don’t cross this line.” But you’re curious. So you look across the line. Soon you’re standing at the line. Before you know it, the line is behind you. You repent, of course. You’re forgiven because of Jesus, of course. But now you’ve crossed the line. Now it’s easier for your sinful flesh to lead you across the line into the same sin again. | But let’s say you know a certain activity is wrong, and you knowingly choose to do it anyway. This time you aren’t just feeding your sinful flesh, you’re pumping it full of steroids. When you do this, your sinful flesh can bulk up quickly and become more powerful than your new self. In fact, you can become so spiritually weak that you lose your ability to resist that particular temptation. And then the only way to escape from repeating that sin is for God to intervene, for God to rescue you from falling again, for God to put up a roadblock between you and that sin, for God to make it difficult for you to find the time or the opportunity to do that sin. More about this later.

This willful crossing of the line, this trespassing, is what the tax-collector did. Jesus gives few details about the tax collector. In that culture, people knew what a tax collector was about. But you don’t. So let me share what I imagine to be true about this man. He had learned the Ten Commandments as a boy. He knew that the Lord commanded in the

Seventh, “*You shall not steal.*” He understood this to mean, “If it’s not yours, don’t take it.” This man had experienced his own economic downturn. He needed a job to provide for his family. And the Roman occupiers of the Holy Land needed some of the locals to serve as tax collectors. It’s not that tax collection is wrong. But you know human beings. If there’s a way to turn power into personal profit, the sinful flesh is going to figure out how. If the Romans wanted \$1000, the tax collectors were going to collect \$2000 and keep half for themselves. I imagine that this particular tax collector, for the first month or two, collected only as much as he was supposed to collect. But then his creditors kept pressing him to pay off his personal debts, and if he held on to his principles—God’s values—it would take him years to get out of debt. So he did the math and decided that, if he collected more taxes than he was supposed to, he could be out of debt in eight months. He promised himself that he’d stop when his debts were paid. Besides, all his colleagues were overcharging, so the people were used to paying “the going rate” for taxes. He reasoned that he would feel better about himself if he charged only 75% of what the rest of the tax collectors were charging. Well, that lasted two months, until he reckoned, “What’s the difference? If I’m going to take too much, I might as well take what everyone else is taking. Maybe I can stop overcharging after six months instead of eight.”

Five years later, he was still charging people double. Now he was a rich man. But in his heart he had no peace. The Pharisees, the most upstanding and blameless citizens in the land, hissed at him whenever he walked by. Poor people spat at him and threw the legally extorted coins at his head. His neighbors talked about him in the same sentence as the prostitutes on the street corner. This especially galled him—he had never been unfaithful to his wife, even during these last five years when they had been distant from each other and some of the people offered to pay off their tax bill with sexual favors. He was not like those prostitutes!

Even so, oh, his poor wife! At first she felt guilty about what her husband was doing. She lost all her friends. Her relatives wouldn't talk to her anymore. The wives of the other tax collectors became her new friends. They seemed happy on the outside. After those first six months she was happy on the outside too. Why shouldn't they all be happy? Their husbands were able to buy them anything they wanted. They had servants to do all the cooking and cleaning. But they weren't happy in their hearts. They had no peace. Impenitence steals peace.

This morning the tax collector just couldn't stand it anymore. So he went to the temple. Oh, how he had missed being in God's house. But he felt so dirty. He clung to the back wall because, any closer to the altar—he was sure would

defile it. He couldn't even look up to the heavens because the Lord lived somewhere up there beyond the clouds and the stars. He wanted to give God an offering of money in hopes of buying the Lord's favor, but most of the gold and silver coins in his money pouch were stolen, proof of his unworthiness even to pass through the gates into the temple area. He felt the stares of people nearby who had paid what he demanded. He felt the glare of that Pharisee over there standing near the altar. Oh, he was rotten, and he knew it.

If his money was no good, what else could he offer God? Ooo, he could buy a spotless lamb as a sin offering! Ach—he would have to pay for it with stolen money. What could he say to the Lord? He sort of remembered the Psalm King David had written after committing adultery with Bathsheba. How did it go? Only a few words came to mind, and they didn't even seem to be in the right order: "*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*" With that he turned and left the temple.

Do you think the tax collector meant what he said? Oh, yes. Jesus says the tax collector went home justified before God, declared not-guilty, forgiven. What peace he now had! The tax collector had repented from a genuine heart.

Do you think the tax collector went back to work the next day and charged the same rates as before? I hope not. But it may have taken him a week or a month of daily

praying and fighting the spiritual battle within his heart before the Holy Spirit delivered him of falling into that sin.

Whenever you repent and decided to give up a sin (Lent is a good time to start), recognize that you may have to repent of that sin again and again, after falling back into it. This does not mean that your repentance was not genuine. We can get so weak toward a particular sin, that we can't stop without help from above. Our sins do not like to let us go once they have their hooks in our heart (see Proverbs 5:22, Ecclesiastes 8:8b, Hosea 5:4). Besides, if you have kept that sin as a pet for a long time, it's family. How do you just put a member of the family out of your home?

But wait. That sin not really part of your family. It's a parasite, sucking the life out of the blessings God wants you to have as you follow his will. Give it up. Kick it out. Plead with the Lord to deliver you from it. Ask God to be an exterminator and rip the vermin from your heart. Ask God to take away your opportunities to let the sin back in. The Lord loves to deliver his people. He already paid the penalty for all our sins through Jesus' death on the cross. It delights the Lord to help us live more holy lives, to sanctify us.

How long do you think it was until the tax collector talked to his wife? Can you imagine his words? "Honey, I can't keep charging more than I'm supposed to. ...

Yes, it's going to mean a change in our lifestyle. No more servants. We'll have to do everything ourselves from now on. ... Yes, I know. Our old friends and our relatives are not going to welcome us back into their homes—I'm still a tax collector. And, no, our current friends won't want us around anymore either because we'll be a constant reminder to them that they are cheating the people. But what I've been doing is wrong. I have to stop no matter what the consequences. I don't care what people think, as long as I'm doing what is right in God's sight."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, do you acknowledge that Jesus has already paid the penalty for all sins, including all of yours? If so, then thank God for having mercy on us sinners. We are saved through faith in Jesus.

Are you ready, dear friends, to REPENT and mean it? Are you ready to rely on the Lord for deliverance from the sins that have their hooks in you? Are you willing to make use of the tools God has given us? We have his Word and the Sacraments to strengthen our new self daily. We have prayer to communicate daily with God our earnest desire to be done with our sins. Are you ready to thank God when he blocks your path so you can't easily fall back into a sin? Are you ready to acknowledge that, when you no longer crave that sin, you did not rescue yourself, but God has delivered you from that sin? If so, then you have ample evidence that God has given you the gift of repentance. He's changed your mind. May he have

all the glory for his goodness. Because
of Jesus GO HOME JUSTIFIED
BEFORE GOD.