

2016-17-13 Luke 18:9-14 **Repent: Turn to Jesus and Not to Yourself** Ash Wednesday
By Pastor Kenneth Mellon, Trinity Lutheran Church and School, Pleasant Valley Rd., West Bend, WI
Grace and peace are yours from God our Father through Jesus' sacrifice to take away your sins. Amen.
Our verses for tonight's meditation are written in Luke 18:9-14

⁹*To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable: ¹⁰"Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹The Pharisee stood up and prayed about himself: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men -- robbers, evildoers, adulterers--or even like this tax collector. ¹²I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.'*
¹³*"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.'* ¹⁴*"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Dear Sinners, forgiven in Christ,

Almost 500 years ago, the world was turned upside down—not with a weapon of destruction but by a man's pen. A monk named Martin Luther wrote 95 theses or propositions to debate among scholars. At the heart of those theses was this question: What does it mean to repent? Luther wrote, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' (*Matthew 4:17*), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." (95 Theses, No. 1)

Almost 500 years later, we are here on Ash Wednesday, not to debate his theses but to confess our sins. Repentance should especially be on our minds during the season of Lent. It was on Jesus' mind too. Today, He teaches us about repentance using a well-known parable about two people who prayed. As we listen to their prayers, we will understand what it means to repent and to have a life of repentance.

Turn to Jesus and Not to Yourself!

Picture the temple and all the courtyards around it. See a sacrifice burning on the altar outside the temple. As you stand in crowded temple courts, your focus narrows to a man in the crowd. He is in the temple often and is well dressed in flowing robes. He stands in front of a crowd to be clearly seen and heard. Then you see another man, off in the corner. He's a tax collector; probably a tax cheater! No one would ever accuse him of being a saint. He is alone and quietly praying. Can you see that picture? *Jesus said: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: '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.'*

The Pharisee had plenty to pray about. What word did he use the most? Lord? Help? Forgive? No, he said, *I thank you. . . . I'm not like other men. . . . I fast twice a week. . . . I give a tenth of all I get.* The Pharisee prayed the most about himself. He didn't ask God for a single thing, because he knew that he himself was all he needed! He wasn't a robber; he was a giver! He wasn't a party reveler; he fasted! He wasn't a common sinner. No, he was a spiritual giant above the rest! The Pharisee was doing just fine in his own opinion. Why bother turning to God in repentance when he could save himself?

"But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, 'God, have mercy on me, a sinner.' *I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God."* The tax collector; not a man full of himself but a empty man; not a man seeking praise, but a man seeking forgiveness; not a man bragging but a man repenting; a man turning—not to himself but to his God for mercy! His prayer was short: "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." He knew that praying, paying, and fasting could never make him "right" before God. God would have to appease His own anger for sin! Isaiah wrote, "[The Lord] saw that there was no one . . . to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him." (Isaiah 59:16). We have come here tonight to remember God's work through His Son.

When you look in a mirror, who do you see? Do you identify more with the Pharisee or the tax collector? We might not fast twice a week like him, but we're not getting drunk all the time. We might not give a tenth of all we have, but we give offerings. Doesn't God know that we're trying to do our best! What more could he want?

Dear believers in Christ, this Ash Wednesday, join me in trading in your soft comfortable security blanket of self-righteousness for the rough cloth of repentance. Why? Because turning to ourselves isn't only sinful; it's useless! Do we really think the favor of God has been won by our works? Is God impressed with only a portion of our income or does he want 100% of our hearts, minds, and lives? How often do we still think that we have earned praise from God instead of being saved by His grace alone? Mercifully, the Lord rips self-righteousness from our hearts saying *"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."* (v.14)

The Pharisee thanked God that he wasn't a robber. But Jesus said earlier: *"You Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness"* (Luke 11:39). The Pharisee pictured himself as righteous. Jesus said, *"I tell you that this [sinner], rather than the other, went home justified before God."* (v.14) The Pharisee considered himself faithful to God. But he was having a love affair with himself. Man at his "best" is a sinner! Trusting in ourselves to be saved will end in hell forever.

Why was the tax collector saved? Was it only because he was sorry? Was it that he would later vow to return money to the people he had cheated? No! His actions did not save him. The Holy Spirit had worked true humility in him by faith. The tax collector knew his sin. He turned to God's mercy in Christ and was forgiven! Jesus took the place of that cheating tax collector. The Lord of glory became the Suffering Servant so that the Father's anger against sin was turned away from us. God did not ignore sin, but He punished His Son on the cross so that sinners like you and me can become sons and daughters of God. Listen and be amazed at Jesus' love: *"Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!"* (Philippians 2:5-8)

Underneath Rome there are caves called catacombs, where ancient Christians secretly worshiped during periods of persecution. In those catacombs is likely the most ancient depiction of Jesus' crucifixion -- as anti-Christian graffiti. Scratched into a wall is a picture of a man kneeling before a cross with his arms raised in worship. Hanging on the cross is the figure of a man with a donkey's head. Scratched underneath that picture are the words "Alexamenos worships his God." What did it mean? Someone thought that Alexamenos was a fool to worship a crucified man! But Alexamenos is now in heaven. The man pictured with the donkey head now rules over all things. Alexamenos' God, your God, has been appeased by the death of His Son. With repentant hearts we turn to Him who sacrificed Himself for us! With grateful hearts, we receive His mercy daily. With expectant hearts, we look forward to eternal victory with Jesus!

Jesus taught, and Luther believed, that a Christian's entire life is a life of repentance—a daily turning from ourselves and our works to Christ and his work. Repentance is simply the goodness of our works. We are not saved by our prayers, by our zeal for the Lord's work or the love that we have for our family, church, or God. Christ saves us! Like the tax collector in the back of the temple court, the cross doesn't look like much. But look closer, because on the cross we will find Him who took away the anger of a righteous God. We'll find full forgiveness and God's love. Turn to Christ and remain in Him! Amen.