

Sermon Series – Reformation 500 Themes

Repentance, the Heartbeat of the Christian

Text: Ezekiel 18:1–4, 25–32

¹The word of the LORD came to me: ²“What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? ³As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. ⁴Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die.

²⁵“Yet you say, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ Hear now, O house of Israel: Is my way not just? Is it not your ways that are not just? ²⁶When a righteous person turns away from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it; for the injustice that he has done he shall die. ²⁷Again, when a wicked person turns away from the wickedness he has committed and does what is just and right, he shall save his life. ²⁸Because he considered and turned away from all the transgressions that he had committed, he shall surely live; he shall not die. ²⁹Yet the house of Israel says, ‘The way of the Lord is not just.’ O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?

³⁰“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, every one according to his ways, declares the Lord GOD. Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest iniquity be your ruin. ³¹Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! Why will you die, O house of Israel? ³²For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live.”

Theme: Repentance, a Turn to the Grace of our Lord

As Martin Luther studied the Scriptures, he had several important insights, but possibly none of them was as important as when he learned what it means to repent. He came to learn that repentance is not an outward act, but a change of heart, when Christians turn from our sins to God’s grace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

I. How was repentance viewed at that time?

It was the church’s job to get people into a situation in which they would receive God’s grace and spend eternity in heaven rather than in hell. The Catholic Church set up a system of 7 sacraments. Through participation in these rites a person would receive the grace of God. The seven Roman sacraments are baptism, communion, penance, confirmation, marriage, ordination, and last rites. The sacrament that was most important with regard to repentance was penance. People were to go to the priest to confess their sins, receive forgiveness from them, and also receive satisfactions that they were to perform to atone for their sins. These were things like fasting, pilgrimages or offerings. The satisfaction part was important because it was believed that while Jesus took away the guilt of a person’s sins, he still had to be punished for them. Whatever sins a person had not atoned for in this life, would need to be cleansed in purgatory before he could enter heaven. People

would make offerings, fast, go on pilgrimages, view relics, and purchase indulgences to lessen their time in purgatory.

II. Martin Luther came to a completely different view of repentance.

As Lutherans we often speak of three parts of repentance. The first is that we are contrite about what we have done. The second is that we trust that our sins are completely forgiven for the sake of Jesus Christ. The third is the desire that God gives to us to do what is good. Luther's contribution was to put the emphasis on the 2nd part – faith in Christ. I read an excellent sermon of his on Matthew 9:1-8. It is the story about the man who is lowered through the roof to Jesus. You might remember that Jesus' first words to the man are, *"Take heart, son, your sins are forgiven."* In one part of the sermon Luther makes the point that when we sin, it is not how sorry that we are that matters or what good works we will do in the future. What matters is that we find Christ and believe His words, *"Take heart, your sins are forgiven."* (SL, vol 13, page 921 ff) That is an important point. We do not expect God's mercy because of how remorseful we are or what we promise to do to make amends, but because of His grace and mercy through Jesus Christ our Savior.

That is also the point of our text. God pleaded with Israel to turn from their sins. He says in verse 30, *"Repent and turn from all your transgressions, lest your iniquity be your ruin."* He says in verse 32, *"I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, so turn, and live."* The words for "repentance" in Greek and Hebrew mean "to turn." God was pleading with the people to turn from their sins to His grace and mercy. If they would just trust in Him, everything would be forgiven. This reminds me of the Parable of the prodigal son. It is when the son remembers the goodness and grace of his father, that he turns from his miserable way of life to go home to his father. Or the man who was lowered through the roof to Jesus, found any way possible to make it to Jesus. Why do we turn from our sins and come running back to God? It is because we love Him, and we know that He loves us. We trust in His grace through our Savior Jesus Christ. Repentance is to turn from our sins and run into the waiting, gracious arms of our Savior, who loved us so much that He gave His life for the forgiveness of all of our sins.

III. Repentance is something that continues throughout our Christian life.

Luther coined a phrase called, "simil Justus et Peccator" which means "At the same time saint and sinner." His point is even as Christians we are sinners. None of us is perfect. We all still fall into sin. At the same time we are saints, not because we are so good or contrite, but because our sins have been washed away through the blood of Jesus Christ. This brings conflict into our lives between the sinful nature and our new nature in Christ. There is a part of each of us that loves to sin and another part of us that is reborn in Christ which wants to live good and holy lives. How do we keep our sinful nature at bay and raise our new nature in Christ. The answer is through repentance. Repentance is like our heartbeat as Christians. God's Word reveals our sins. We confess them and trust in God's forgiveness in Christ. And we have the desire to do good.

But again we see where we fail, and so the process goes on and on. If any part of repentance stops, our faith in Christ has died. When we refuse to see that we are sinners, when we don't believe that

God can forgive us or when we give ourselves totally to temptation, we have lost our salvation. But as we daily turn from our sin to Jesus, our faith and life in Him are going strong.

It is significant how central daily repentance is in Luther's discussion of baptism and the Lord's Supper in the *Small Catechism*. With regard to baptism he writes, "What does such baptizing with water indicate?" **It indicates that the Old Adam in us should by daily contrition and repentance be drowned and die with all sins and evil desires, and that a new man should daily emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.** In that section he says that daily repentance is a daily reliving of our baptism. Repentance drowns our sins and evil desires, and brings forth a new person in Christ. With regard to communion he asks who is prepared to receive the Sacrament. The answer again is repentance. He writes, **"Fasting and bodily preparation are certainly fine outward training. But that person is truly worthy and well prepared, who has faith in these words: "Given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." But anyone who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, for the word "for you" require all hearts to believe.** It is those who come to receive our body and blood for their forgiveness who are prepared to receive this meal. It is that faith that Jesus shed His blood for me, which makes us worthy.

The first of Martin Luther's 95 Theses was, **"When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ``Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."** That is what it means to be a Christian. We turn from our sins to the gracious arms of our Heavenly Father. May the Lord grant each of us such repentant hearts that long for the grace and mercy of our Savior.

Amen.

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