

REPENT AND LIVE!

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Psalm of the Day; Psalm 25

Epistle Lesson; Philippians 2:1-11

Gospel Lesson; Matthew 21:28-32

Sermon Text; Ezekiel 18:1-4

18:25-32

Grace, mercy, and peace are yours from God, our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Amen

God's Word for our consideration today is our Old Testament Lesson from Ezekiel, chapter eighteen, verses one through four, and then verses twenty-five through thirty-two.

The Word of the Lord came to me. What do you mean, you who keep repeating this proverb concerning the soil of Israel, “Fathers eat sour grapes, and their sons' teeth are set on edge”? As surely as I live, declares the Lord God, you will never again use this proverb in Israel. Indeed, all souls are mine. The soul of the father is mine just like the soul of the son. The soul who sins is the one who will die... But you say, “The Lord's way is not fair.” Listen now, house of Israel. Is it my way that is not fair? Is it not your ways that are not fair? If a righteous man turns away from his righteousness and practices unrighteousness, he will die because of it. Because of the unrighteousness that he has practiced, he will die. But if a wicked man turns from his wickedness that he has done and practices justice

and righteousness, he will preserve his life. Because he has seen and turned away from all the rebellious acts that he had committed, he will surely live, and he will not die. But the house of Israel says, "The Lord's way is not fair." Is it really my ways that are not fair, O house of Israel? Is it not your ways that are not fair? Therefore, I will judge each one of you according to his ways, O house of Israel, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn away from all your rebellious acts, so that you will not set out a stumbling block that makes you guilty. Throw off from yourselves all your rebellious actions by which you have rebelled, and obtain a new heart and a new spirit for yourselves. Why should you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies, declares the Lord God. So repent and live!

So far the Word of our God. These are your words, Heavenly Father. Make us holy by Your truth. Your Word is truth.
Amen

In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, dear fellow redeemed.

It was a terrible tragedy, back in the spring of 2006, in the midst of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the battle of Ramadi, against the Al-Qaeda Insurgency. During the battle, a Navy sniper team had mistakenly shot at Iraqi soldiers, mistaking them to be insurgents. When it was all said and done, one Iraqi soldier was dead, and one Navy SEAL was dead. They call it a "Blue-on-Blue Incident" - friendly fire. It is the worst possible thing that can happen in a battle.

John Willink, the commander of the SEAL Team that was there, the man who was entrusted with running the operation was called to account by his superiors. It was told he was to figure out what happened, and come with explanations. And so, he investigated, and sure enough he found multiple failures by several different people.

And yet, something just did not sit right with him about laying the blame on everyone else who failed. And so, when it came time for that meeting with his superiors, and with his troops, he stood up in front of all of his troops, and asked the question, *“Whose fault is this?”*

Slowly, his Navy Seals raised their hands, one by one, and said, *“Well, it is my fault, because this happened.”* *“It was my fault, because I let this happen.”* *“It is my fault, because I am the guy who pulled the trigger that killed that Iraqi soldier.”*

Each time, John said to his troops, *“Nope, not your fault.”*

When it was all said and done, he asked the question, again, *“Whose fault is this? It is my fault. I am in command. I am ultimately responsible for every mishap, and mistake that everybody else makes.”*

He promised that day, as he took full responsibility for everything that happened, he promised he would do everything in his power to make sure that an incident like this would never happen again, under his watch. But, to think about the fact that he goes before all of his superiors, and all of his own troops, and says, in response to this tragedy, he says, *“It is my fault.”*

That is a difficult truth to face, isn't it? In the aftermath of the tragedy, and the aftermath of the trouble we go through, it is easy to always see the faults, and failures of other people. But, it is not always so easy for us to see our own faults, and failures. It is not always so easy to see our own responsibilities, and to see what we contributed to the problem.

That is why, here in our lesson, we hear the Lord going to great lengths to call His people, the people of The Kingdom of Judah to repent, because they, themselves, were struggling with this very thing, this very matter of being able to see their own sins, and faults. And yet, as we hear the Word of the Lord in our reading today, as we just heard the words of prophet Ezekiel, we hear our Lord

speaking to us the same promise He made to His people thousands of years ago.

Repent and live.

When we think about that word '*repent*', it is a word we hear an awful lot, but we don't always think about what it really means. When we think about '*repentance*', we usually think of repentance as consisting of two parts.

-The first part of that '*repentance*' is '*when we come before God in contrition, and sorrow over our sins*'. Or, as we think about our reading for today, '*to repent*' is really '*to think about, and to turn away from believing God is the problem*'. That word '*repent*' itself is a word that is very simple in Hebrew. In the Greek version of the word, it is a word that actually refers to '*a change of mind and heart, a change of understanding*'. But, in Hebrew it is just a simple word that comes from the word '*return, to turn back*'. The picture you have is somebody walking down a road, and realizing they are going the wrong direction down that road, and literally turning around, and walking back the other way. We hear the Lord calling His children to repent, especially turn away from that path of believing God is the problem.

We have that proverb at the beginning of our reading. It is a very interesting proverb, isn't it?

**“Fathers eat sour grapes,
and their sons' teeth are set on edge.”**

What in the world does that even mean? When is the last time you ate sour grapes, or put a lemon in your mouth? You realize how sour it is, and you kind of clench your teeth, because it is so sour. The Children of Israel were basically saying they were 'tasting' in their own lives the sour punishment that should have been dished out to their fathers. They are talking specifically about the circumstances they were facing in their lives. You see, the people Ezekiel is talking to are people who are in captivity. In 597 BC,

Nebuchadnezzar, the ruler of the Babylonian Empire, decided he wanted to solidify his power over the Kingdom of Judah. So, he removed the king who was there, King Jehoiakin, and then he replaced that king with his own puppet king named Zedekiah. Finally, he basically kidnapped, or captured all of the upper class, upper crust people in the society of Jerusalem, and hauled them away in captivity into Babylonian.

It was during this first round of captivities that the prophet Ezekiel was taken along with them. You think about people like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego. They all were in this big group of people from Jerusalem, who were taken captive. They were sitting there in Babylon, and were watching, as their kingdom was failing. They were watching, as people who were God's promised people. This was the nation through whom all nations on earth would be blessed.

And now, this nation is doomed to be no more, especially as King Zedekiah continues in the path of his father, and tries to raise a rebellion against Nebuchadnezzar. (*You know that is not going to end well.*) Eventually, it ends in 586 BC, with the entire destruction of Jerusalem, including the temple.

And so, in the aftermath of all of this, as these people are sitting in Babylon now in captivity, they are thinking about their situation. They realize, *“There is a lot of blame to go around. There is a lot of blame to go around, so why we are suffering the things we are suffering right now? Those former evil rulers led our nation, led the people of our nation in a downward spiral to idolatry, and moral depravity. That is the reason why we are suffering all of this. That is the reason why we are captive.”*

The people of the Kingdom of Judah, who were in captivity saw themselves simply as innocent victims. They never once looked for their own responsibility in the situation they were facing. They never once looked at their own lives, or saw their own sins that led

to this moment.

That is our problem, too, isn't it? It is so easy to look at our situation in life, and say, "*Well, I can't be the problem. I am innocent. I don't have anything I need to repent of.*"

Pastor and author Jonathan Fisk wrote about the time he visited an elderly parishioner in the hospital. She was an elderly woman in her eighties, who had smoked her entire life, multiple packs a day for decade, upon decade, **upon decade**. She had never quit. And when he saw her in the hospital, she was frail, weak, with an oxygen cannula on her nose, and the ravages of disease in her body. After the pleasantries were exchanged, after greetings were exchanged, the first words out of her mouth were, "*Pastor, I just for the life of me can't understand why God is allowing this to happen.*"

She did not want to put two and two together, when it came to her own choices, and the things that followed.

That is true for a lot of us. It is true for all of us, when it comes to our sins, when it comes to the consequences of sins we experience. We like to think, "*It is not my fault.*" We like to blame others. But in so doing, when you put the blame on everybody else, or on everything else in life, when you blame your parents, when you blame society, when you blame government, when you blame the economy, who are we really saying is the problem? We are making God the problem, aren't we?

The people stuck in Babylon, said, "*The Lord's way is not fair.*"

That is what they were doing, too. They were making God the problem. As they looked at their circumstances, as they looked at themselves, and said, "*I have nothing to repent of. Well then, God must be doing this to us.*" Really that is sin. That is sin in a nutshell, isn't it?

Go back to the Garden of Eden, and how the devil, how the serpent tempted Eve in to disobeying God's command. It was making God into the problem, wasn't it? "*You know, if you eat of that fruit, God*

knows you will be like Him. God is keeping you from reaching your full potential, Eve.”

Then, after they disobeyed, after Eve disobeyed, and then Adam disobeyed, God came to them in the garden. Adam made God the problem, too didn't he? When God confronted him, He said, *“What did you do?”*

Adam said, *“This woman who YOU put with me gave it to me, and I ate.”*

We make it God's fault. *“It is not my fault I disobeyed you, God. It is your fault.”*

And yet, God is not the problem, right? We know God is not the problem. That is what God tells us in His Word, here in Ezekiel. The Lord says,

“Indeed, all souls are mine.”

“The soul who sins is the one who will die...”

**“If a righteous man turns away from his righteousness,
and practices unrighteousness,
he will die because of it.**

**Because of the unrighteousness he has practiced,
he will die.”**

You see, what God is saying there is, *“You are not suffering because of your parents' sin. You are suffering because of your own. God's justice and fairness is perfect. Nobody on earth suffers, or dies, or goes to Hell for another person.”*

Now, does this mean that everything in your life, that happens is your fault personally? No. There are plenty of things that happen to us that we did not cause. But, in the end, in the end, the soul that sins is the one that will die. Or as the Apostle Paul puts it in Romans, chapter six,

“The wages of sin is death.”

And so, if you die, or if you are dying, that means you are a sinner. That means you have things in your life that are not pleasing to God.

It means God is not the problem. It means, *“I am the problem”*. So, the Lord calls His people to repent with that recognition that He is not the problem, but we are the problem. He says, “Therefore, I will judge each one of you according to his ways, O house of Israel...”

**“Repent and turn away from yourselves
all of your rebellious acts,
so that you will not set out a stumbling block
that makes you guilty.”**

“Why should you die, O house of Israel?”

“So repent and live!”

When you think about what is more rebellious for us to do than to think and believe that God is not our helper, God is a problem, God is a cause of everything bad in our lives, what is more rebellious than that?

Repent.

Turn away from that self-righteousness that will cause you to stumble in your walk with the Lord. Turn away from the self-righteousness.

Repent.

Turn away from believing God is the problem.
Why should you die?

Repent and live.

In the end, repentance is more than just turning away from sin. Repentance is more than just turning away from that idea that God is the problem. Repentance also includes faith. As we turn away from sin, the second part of repentance is to turn toward God's mercy and forgiveness in faith, and trust in Him. Faith clings to God's mercy. To repent and live is really to turn toward God's grace with a new heart, a new heart that sees the depth of God's love.

You know, when Lieutenant Commander John Willink took the blame for everything that happened with that friendly fire in Ramadi,

he was sure he was going to lose his job. He was sure his superiors were going to fire him and send him home. The exact opposite happened. He was commended for his honesty, his forthrightness, and his sense of responsibility. The trust he has with his superiors, and with the soldiers underneath him grew by leaps and bounds that day. He was allowed to continue to serve, and keep that promise to fix everything that had failed before.

In the end, if you think about it, when John confessed, he was shown grace. He was shown forgiveness.

You think about how powerful that human forgiveness can be, when we, as human beings, forgive one another. And yet, how much greater, and how much more powerful is the forgiveness you and I experience from the grace of our Lord, the way God calls His people to repent, and shows us some of that grace and mercy. He invites His people to repent. He doesn't just call them. He invites them. He says,

**“Throw off from yourselves all your rebellious actions
by which you have rebelled,
and obtain a new heart,
and a new spirit for yourselves.”**

**Why should you die, O house of Israel?
For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies”,
declares the Lord God.
“So, repent and live.”**

You know, when our Lord God calls us to repentance, when He calls us to turn away from our sins, and to come to Him in faith and trust, it is not, *“Repent, or else”*. It is **“Repent and live”**. Our God is a God, as He says, who takes **“no pleasure in the death of anyone...”** Our God is a God who loves people so much that He wants to save them from sin and death. He wants to rescue them from the punishment they deserve. That is why He calls again, and again, and **again**.

Why were those people held captive in Babylon? Why were they taken from their homes, and sent to this foreign land to live, while their kingdom was going down the tubes? It was because God loves them. It was because God wanted them to find their hope in Him. He wanted them to repent of their own self-righteousness, to repent of their sins, and live, not under their own moral security, but to live under His gracious promises, and to live putting all of their hope and trust in Him.

It is in the depth of His love that God makes His people a wonderful promise here. He says,

**“But if a wicked man turns from his wickedness...
and practices justice and righteousness,
he will preserve his life.”**

In other words, if someone who has been living a sinful life, and turns away from their sins, in sorrow over their sins, recognizes the depravity of their sins before God, and turns to God in faith, there is forgiveness. God will forgive that person. The reason God forgives that person is because of His own grace and mercy He has shown to the whole world, through His Son Jesus Christ. If you think about what God has done for us in His Son Jesus, Jesus is the One who, as true Man and true God, came in to this world, and actually stepped in to our place. You know the Lord says,

“The soul that sins is the one that will die.”

And yet, in this case, in the case of Jesus, Jesus who had no sin and who should have never died, became sin for us. You and I can then have the righteousness of God. He became sin for us. And because He took the guilt of our sins on Himself, even though He Himself had no sin, He became the One who died in our place, who bore in His body the punishment for all of the sins of the world. Our crucified, and risen Lord Jesus now declares to you, and to me the forgiveness He won on that Friday afternoon. His nail pierced hands bare the scars of our redemption.

When you and I turn away from sin, when you and I are led to that conclusion by the powerful Word of God, when we hear His call to repent, and turn to Him, forgiveness and mercy is always there. You can have the assurance that your sins are forgiven.

And so, you and I can turn toward the grace of God with a new heart that is committed to live under His rule, as our Lord and Savior, each and every day.

True repentance is hard isn't it? It is hard, because we have that sinful nature that doesn't want to accept any blame for ourselves, that does not want to take responsibility for what we have done. We struggle, as believers. And yet, the only reason you and I can even repent, the only reason you and I can turn toward God is because we have received from God a new heart, and a new spirit. Through the power of the Gospel, the Holy Spirit has come to you. He has removed your cold, spiritually dead heart, and replaced it with a living heart of flesh,

-a heart that beats with the love of God in Christ,

-a heart that trusts in God's promises of mercy and forgiveness for sinners,

-a heart that lives, enjoying all of God's gifts, even now, as we look forward to life eternal.

You and I have received that heart, and that heart is strengthened every time we hear God's promises, every time we are reminded that God is gracious, every time you are assured your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake.

So, repent and live.

It is not just a one-time thing, is it? At the end of this month we will be celebrating Reformation Day, the day Martin Luther nailed the ninety-five theses to the church door in Wittenberg. If you ever take the time to read through those theses, you will notice something about them. You will notice a lot of them talk about repentance.

The very first thesis Luther writes is this. He says, **“When the Lord**

Jesus commanded His people to repent, He willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” In other words, repentance is just a part of who you are, as a Christian. We are always repenting, all of the time.

If you are a Christian, you repent.

We are constantly in that battle of turning away from sin, and trusting all the more in our Lord and Savior, constantly striving to live before God as His child. We face the truth of our sins, and are in repentance every day, even though it is difficult. It is not because we are afraid of God. But, it is because we know how much God loves us. We know how much God has sacrificed for us to be with Him. We know His love for us in Jesus is something we always want to have, now and forever.

So, repent and live!

Amen.