

Almost 500 years ago, the world was turned upside down—not with a weapon of mass destruction but with an instrument of mass instruction—a man’s pen. A monk (technically a friar) by the name of Martin Luther penned 95 theses, or propositions, and nailed them to the university bulletin board of his day—the Castle Church door. Luther penned these theses for debate among the professional theologians of his day. At the heart of these theses was this practical question: What does it mean to repent? Luther wrote (*95 Theses, No. 1*):

In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.

Almost 500 years later, we are here on Ash Wednesday, not to debate theses but to confess our sins in true repentance; not to nail words to a door but to hear words preached from a pulpit. And as another Lenten season begins *the beauty of repentance* is on our minds. But certainly the beauty of repentance is on Jesus’ mind, too. For tonight, he teaches us a key truth about repentance, not by debating 95 theses but by teaching us a parable about two men who went up to the temple to pray. As we listen in on their prayers, we come to a better understanding of what it means to repent so that we can make our entire lives, beautiful lives of repentance. May the Holy Spirit bless every one of you with a repentant heart tonight—a heart that *Turns to Jesus and Not to Yourself*. And as we...

Listen to Jesus’ parable once again. Picture a lamb burning on the temple altar as the sun is sinking low in the sky. Can you smell the incense wafting in the breeze? As you elbow your way through the mass of humanity in the temple courts, your focus narrows to a single man in that crowd. He spends plenty of time in the temple. He is well dressed in flowing robes. He’s all business—a religious professional from

head to toe. He stands up, perhaps in the middle of the crowd, so that he can be clearly seen and heard. Then your eye catches another man over in the corner. He’s a tax collector—probably a tax cheat! No one would ever accuse him of being a saint. He is all alone. He is in rough shape. Can you see that picture? Listen!

To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everyone else, Jesus told this parable: “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 people—robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I get.’ 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. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

The Pharisee had plenty to pray about. But did you notice what the Pharisee’s favorite word was? Lord? Heal? Help? Forgive? No, it was an ugly, all-consuming **I. I thank you. . . . I’m not like other men. . . . I fast twice a week. . . . I give a tenth of all I get. . . .** The Pharisee is celebrating his own little “thanksgiving day” in the temple courts! He is most thorough when it comes to thanking God for *himself*, but he is absolutely amnesic when it comes to remembering *God’s* blessings.

And you notice, he doesn’t ask for a single thing from the heavenly Father. You see, he figures that he pretty much has everything; even more, he IS EVERYTHING God could possibly want! Oh, how lucky God was to have a guy like the Pharisee on his side, huh? He wasn’t a robber. He was a big giver! He wasn’t a glutton. He was a disciplined faster! He wasn’t a man of the sinful masses. No, he was a spiritual cut above the rest! Oh yes, the Pharisee was doing just fine in his own estimation. Why bother turning to God in repentance when one can turn to himself and his own holiness for salvation?!

Ah, but then there is the other man in the parable: not a Pharisee but a publican; not a man full of himself but a man running on empty; not a man praying to be praised but a man praying to be forgiven; not a man bragging but a man repenting; a man turning—not toward himself but toward God!

In a time when most praying took place with heads held up toward heaven, the tax collector looked down in shame. At a time when most praying took place with hands held out, this man's hands were clenched into fists that beat his chest in grief. His prayer? Short and simple: ***“God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”*** Literally, the tax collector was praying: *“God be appeased . . .”* He knew there was nothing he could do to appease the wrath of God against his sin—praying and paying, fasting and washing could never make his sin “right” in God's sight. Clearly, *he* wasn't his own solution. No, he would have to turn toward another.

Yes, God himself would have to appease his wrath toward sin! And that's precisely what Isaiah wrote: ***“He [the Lord] saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him”*** (Isa 59:16). Tonight, we come to commemorate our Lord's work of appeasing himself—through the suffering and death of his own dear Son. Ash Wednesday—Christ's great Lenten suffering and sacrifice—is a yearly answer, no, the ETERNAL answer, to the tax collector's prayer!

You see, the Pharisee fancied himself righteous. He wasn't. In fact, Jesus said, ***“I tell you that this man*** (the tax collector), ***rather than the other*** (the Pharisee), ***went home justified before God.”*** The Pharisee considered himself faithful and free of all adultery. Sadly, he had cheated, not on his wife but on his God as he carried on a long, passionate love affair with himself. In reality, man seeing himself at his “best” is man at his most dishonest!

Not so, the tax collector. He looked through Jesus and was first honest about himself . . . and the Lord saw him, through Jesus, as the best. The tax collector was

humble. The Lord exalted him. The tax collector knew his sin. The Lord forgave him. In turning to Jesus rather than himself, the tax collector was exalted!

What a reversal! Yet it was possible only by Jesus' own reversal. The Lord of heaven became the criminal on the cross. The God who fills the universe filled a tomb. The Lord of glory became the Suffering Servant so that the Father's wrath against sin could be appeased. Appeased, not by ignoring sin, but by punishing our sin in his Son. Sinless Jesus became the Chief of sinners upon the cross so that you and I—chiefs of sinners—could become sinless sons and daughters of our heavenly Father. Paul describes it:

Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Php 2:5-11)

Jesus taught that a Christian's entire life is a life of repentance—a lifelong turning away from *ourselves* and *our* works and a turning toward *Christ* and *his* work. It is not in the *goodness* of your works; the *earnestness* of your prayers; the *zeal* that you have for the Lord's work; or the *love* and *commitment* that you have for your family, your church, or your country that saves you—not in the least.

No, it is the humble cross of Christ that saves you! Like the tax collector in the corner, the cross doesn't look like much. But look closer, because in the cross you find the Almighty appeased, a Father's forgiveness, your God's goodness, your Lord's love, and your repentant prayers answered! Be it throughout this Lenten journey or throughout this journey called life, turn not to yourself. Turn to him . . . only him . . . always him. Amen.