

Pentecost 18
Matthew 21:23-32
“Honest Assessment”

28 “What do you think? There was a man who had two sons. He went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work today in the vineyard.’

29 “ ‘I will not,’ he answered, but later he changed his mind and went.

30 “Then the father went to the other son and said the same thing. He answered, ‘I will, sir,’ but he did not go. 31 “Which of the two did what his father wanted?”

“The first,” they answered.

Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you. 32 For John came to you to show you the way of righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”

I grew up with an apple tree in my backyard. And this apple tree was notorious for having, as I like to call them, “danger apples.” If you’ve ever gone apple picking, you’ve had a run-in with a danger apple. The apple looks great. It’s firm and full of color. It’s ripe, and you take a big bite, and it immediately gives way, and the mouth falls open like a toddler as rotten mush falls out on the ground. It looked great, but that was a danger apple. Absolutely rancid and sandy. No good.

Jesus kind of hits on this concept in a perfect way that no human analogy could ever do; he does so in a brief parable. Two sons on the family farm are asked to go and work in the vineyard. One says: Without respect, No! Not gonna do it. But later, he has a change of heart and goes and does what is asked by his Father. The other son says: Yes, Father! With dignity and respect. But doesn’t actually do anything he said he would. Jesus, in this parable, is calling for honesty. Not an honesty about our tasks, but an honesty with ourselves. Jesus is calling for his direct hearers to be honest in their assessment of their spiritual condition and the implications of that condition. What Jesus is doing is tying this parable into the essential theological concept of repentance.

Jesus is speaking here during his last entry into Jerusalem to a group of Pharisees. Pharisees, as you might know, were the teachers of the Law. Knowledgeable of the Scriptures and doing their best to uphold morality for themselves and others. If we were going to use the apple analogy, Jesus is basically saying that you Pharisees are danger apples. You have this exterior veneer of righteousness, and you are portraying yourself as right before God, as deserving of eternal life, but in fact, you are rotten on the inside. He says you’re not being honest with yourself, and you’re certainly not being honest about your relationship with a perfect God.

Jesus makes it ever so clear to them with the closing statement: **“For John came to show you the way to righteousness, and you did not believe him, but the tax collectors and the prostitutes did. And even after you saw this, you did not repent and believe him.”** You Pharisees, who see yourself as good, are actually behind the tax collectors and the prostitutes, who you see as deplorable. You need to be honest. You need to be repentant.

And Jesus calls for an honest assessment, and repentance mattered to those Pharisees. Jesus call for repentance mattered to the tax collectors and the prostitutes. Repentance matters to every person who has ever fallen into sin. It mattered to the sexually immoral and the thieves as well as the self-righteous around Jesus.

And I bet it matters to you. Think of the joy of being able to look in the mirror even after some colossal moral failure and say, "God still loves me, even now." "God calls me righteous." Oh, the confidence of laying our head down on our pillow after falling into the same sin for the gazillionth time, knowing that if I should die in my sleep, I will wake up in heaven, not because sin doesn't matter, but because Jesus matters more.

But that joy and confidence can only be ours when we understand why God forgives us in the first place, which is centered on an honest assessment, which is central to repentance.

We don't use the word "contrite" much, but the Holy Spirit does. One example is in Psalm 51, **"a broken and contrite heart You, God, will not despise."** God expects us to come to Him with hearts that are "contrite." The word means something that is "ground down." Please pay attention to what I'm going to say next. Too often, being "contrite" is thought of as a feeling, feeling bad or feeling sorry. When we confuse feeling bad with being contrite, the question will forever be, do I feel bad enough? Am I sorry enough? The focus shifts from God to self: my feelings and my emotions.

But contrition isn't an emotion. Contrition is an understanding, an understanding of just how often I have chosen to do what God has forbidden, an understanding that I am unable to make things right with God. And worst of all, it's very likely (inevitably?) I will fall into the same sin again as a poor, wretched sinner. Contrition is, in terms of that apple is, an understanding that even though I might be able to fool everybody else, I know that I am rotten, rancid, no good, deserving of nothing but that garbage heap.

Ah but. When we get to that point, then we are ready for the message of forgiveness. The desire to be cured is predicated on knowing just how sick we truly are. Jesus says in Mark 2: **"Jesus said to them, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"**

Only the sick need a doctor. The Pharisee has no use for a Savior from sin since there is no sin from which he needs to be saved. He is a good man, a nice person, the respectful and agreeable son, and this is enough for him. As long as a person refuses to recognize the fury of God's justice or realize that Hell is real and that real people go there go, that person cannot understand how desperately they need Jesus.

Jesus does not leave a contrite heart unhealed. When Jesus told the Pharisees that the tax collectors and the prostitutes were righteous, he was as serious. When Jesus was met with a repentant prostitute, he told her plainly your sins are forgiven. When Jesus told the parable of the repentant tax collector, he said that he was justified before God in heaven.

God does the same for every retched and repentant sinner who has placed their trust in him, including you. Whatever you sin, however often it has happened. God has forgiven you and has declared you righteous. However undeserving of God's love you may feel, God has forgiven you for the sake of Christ. However long or short you have had faith, God has proclaimed that you stand justified before him in heaven.

Repentance isn't for God's benefit but for ours. Repentance doesn't earn God's forgiveness; rather, it places me in a position where I thirst for the living water found only in the Gospel. And once I have drunk deeply of the living water, I no longer focus on my feelings or, my desire to live a new life, or even my repentance. Gone are the days of thinking forgiveness is a reward for repenting. Gone are the days of thinking of repentance as something I must do so that God will love me. And gone, gone, are the days of fear. Gone are the days of insecurity in my salvation. Gone are the days of worry about my sin. As the hymn so beautifully states, "Nothing in my hand I bring, simply to the cross I cling." Amen.