

LUKE 18:9–14. (EHV)

Jesus told this parable to certain people who trusted in themselves (that they were righteous) and looked down on others: “Two men went up to the temple courts to pray. One was a Pharisee, and the other was a tax collector. The Pharisee stood and prayed about himself like this: ‘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. I give a tenth of all my income.’ However the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but was beating his chest and saying, ‘God, be merciful to me, a sinner!’ I tell you, this man went home justified rather than the other, because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.”

The theme for this year’s midweek Lent services is *Reflections on Repentance*. *Repentance* is a much-talked-about but often misunderstood word and concept in Christianity. So in the coming weeks we’re going to reflect on repentance by walking through Psalm 51, the psalm we sang a paraphrase of to open this service, a psalm in which King David expresses and exemplifies repentance.

But this evening we are going to look at Jesus’s parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector to introduce the biblical concept of repentance.

1. Repentance Means Being Honest Before God

One way we can illustrate how we live our lives is by thinking about how we use metaphorical masks. We all live our lives behind a mask to a certain extent. We don’t start out that way. We talk about how kids say and do the most peculiar things, because little children are probably the closest humans come to not living behind any mask. They simply speak what’s on their mind. If they notice something about someone, they’ll say it without caring whether it’s polite or not. I recently saw a commercial in which a little girl asked a pregnant woman about her baby, and then asked her somewhat rotund father about his baby. It wasn’t trying to make a political statement; it was just trying to be funny by showcasing the honesty of children. If children want something, they’ll ask for it, or tell you to get it, until they learn better. If they feel like doing something, they’ll do it without stopping to consider whether or not it’s weird or what anybody will think of them, until they learn better.

But as they grow older, they do learn better. They learn that people don’t always react nicely or care when you say or do exactly what’s on your mind. They learn that they are expected to talk and act a certain way when they’re around others. They learn that all of life is a play to a certain extent, and they need to play their part. You can call it different things—tact, manners, politeness, social skills, people skills. But let’s call it what it is—putting on a mask.

Putting on a mask this way isn’t necessarily sinful. It’s often good and godly. But it can become sinful when we don’t know how to distinguish between the mask and who we really are, when we begin to believe our own propaganda, when we begin to believe that we really are as we present ourselves on our social media accounts, and so we think that the thin veneer of righteousness we have put over our lives is also what God sees when he looks at us.

That is the sin the Pharisee committed in Jesus’s parable. He couldn’t distinguish between his mask and who he really was. We hear it in his words: “God, I thank you that I am not like

other people, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.” He has forgotten that coveting is robbing in God’s eyes. He has forgotten that lust is adultery in God’s eyes. He has forgotten that hatred, grudges, grumbling, complaining, gossip, slander, pride, arrogance, and a whole host of other things that no one may ever see are wickedness and injustice in God’s eyes.

What about us? Do we think that we’re not like other people? The Bible says that we are conceived and born spiritually dead in sin. Have we forgotten that there’s no such thing as somewhat dead or partially dead? You’re either dead or you’re not. Which means that by nature we are like all other people. The Islamic terrorists are no different than we are by nature. The drug lords are no different than we are by nature. The people who treat sexuality in ways that make us cringe are no different than we are by nature. We all do the evil that we are capable of doing to the extent that we are capable of doing it. Just because our sinfulness is less public or less revolting to us or others does not mean that it is hidden from or less revolting to God.

Sometimes we can’t distinguish between our masks and who we really are not just because we don’t fully grasp God’s law, but also because we establish our own laws, things that God hasn’t even commanded, and elevate them above God’s laws, so as to make ourselves look righteous. The Pharisee did that too: “I fast twice a week. I give a tenth of all my income.” He fasted twice a week thinking that he was earning God’s favor not only for himself, but for the whole Israelite nation. And he gave a tenth not only of what he earned, but of everything he got, even gifts, thinking that God would look on him with special favor for doing that.

But there was one problem: God had not commanded any fasting except on the Day of Atonement, much less fasting twice a week. And God had not commanded the Old Testament Israelites to give a tenth of all their income, just of what they earned. If the Pharisee wanted to do those things voluntarily to the glory of God, he was free to do so, but to establish righteousness on the basis of doing those things was to create his own self-righteous mask and expect God to view his mask as the real him.

Doing this also gives the impression that the commands that God has given are no big deal, and so we have to grow up from those and move on from those, like the rich young ruler who laughed when Jesus told him to keep the Ten Commandments and said, “Teacher! All these I have kept since I was a boy.” As if to say, “Teacher, those are child’s play. I’m past those. Tell me what *extra* thing I can do to become even more righteous.”

What about us? Many years I will hear about Lutherans who are giving up something for Lent. And that is a fine custom. During Lent we consider how Jesus had at his disposal all the power and glory of heaven, and how in spite of that, he gave it up, so to speak, in order to accomplish our salvation. So can giving up something for Lent help to give us just a little more appreciation for what Jesus did for us? Absolutely.

But let me ask you this: Where does God command us to give something up for Lent? He doesn’t.

And let me ask you this: Are we as diligent about keeping God’s commandments as we are about being faithful to giving up something for Lent? Or if we eat that chocolate bar that we were going to give up, do we get all ticked at ourselves, but when we curse in someone’s hearing, we just smile and say, “Pardon my French,” or don’t apologize at all because we think that everyone should just adapt to the crude way we talk?

Or even apart from Lent, are we more diligent about avoiding Red #40 and Yellow #5 in our foods than we are about avoiding disobedience, disrespect, sexual immorality, hatred, and greed?

When we come before God, it is time to distinguish between our masks and who we really are. It is time to take off all our masks. It is time to repent. It is time to be honest before God, like the tax collector, who stood at a distance and would not even lift his eyes up to heaven, but beat his chest and said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”

2. Repentance Means Trusting in God’s Mercy

But repentance isn’t *just* being honest before God about who we really are. It is also trusting in God to forgive us both our sinful condition and the sinful thoughts, words, and actions produced by our sinful condition.

Have you ever stopped to think about why we and others are tempted to put on all these masks and do our best to cover up our inner ugliness and sins and come up with our own self-imposed rules and laws? Because our conscience tells us that God won’t accept us as we really are.

But stop and consider this: The guy who comes clean in repentance by removing all his masks and admitting what a rotten guy he really is and what a rotten job he’s done of keeping God’s law—he is the one who goes home comforted and happy, righteous and innocent in God’s sight. But the Pharisee, who tries to present himself to God in a way better than he actually is, goes home condemned. That’s because, in spite of who he was, the tax collector trusted that God is a God full of mercy, a God abounding in love and forgiveness. That’s why he asked God to be merciful to him.

Do you think God planned to send his Son from eternity, bent over backwards to arrange the rise and fall of nations and the course of human events so that his Son could fulfill all his prophecies and promises, had him flogged, condemned, beaten, crucified, and forsaken so that humans could walk past and say, “Thanks, God, but I got this myself”?

God sent his Son to suffer and to die a horrible, wretched death, because that was the full price needed to pay for all of our horrible wretchedness. That was the price needed to save all the people under the masks. Including you and me.

So repentance doesn’t just involve taking an honest look at God’s law and realizing and confessing how horrible and wretched we are. It also means fleeing to the cross of Christ in faith and wrapping the arms of our faith around it and clinging to it for dear life, knowing that it is our only refuge from eternal death and hellfire, and a sure refuge. This is true repentance, because this is what gives God the greatest glory. We are essentially saying, “God, you knew what you were doing, and you did it out of undeserved love for me. Since you wish to give me forgiveness and eternal life as a gift, I gladly receive it, because you know even better than I that I desperately need it.”

And lo and behold! The burden of sin is removed. And our worthless masks are replaced with coverings that actually make a difference—coverings made of the righteousness of Christ instead of our own pitiful works and self-invented image.

What is a repentance? It is taking off the masks and being honest before God. It is trusting in God’s mercy for Jesus’s sake. It is this kind of repentance through which we are

innocent and exalted in God's eyes, both here on earth and in heaven for eternity. God grant that we may live in this kind of repentance for Jesus's sake. Amen.