

Theme: REAL REPENTANCE LOOKS DIFFERENT

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

There is an old saying: "Success has a thousand fathers, but failure is an orphan." Whenever things go right in our lives, we are all too eager to take full credit. "Look at my sharp decision-making! Look at how hard I worked!" But when things go wrong—when our choices backfire or our sin catches up to us—we suddenly become world-class finger-pointers and quickly find someone else to blame.

Adam started this trend back in the Garden of Eden. When God asked him if he had eaten from the forbidden tree, Adam didn't say, "Yes, Lord, I sinned." He looked at God and essentially said, "Well, God, this woman gave me the fruit, and honestly, it was your decision to put her here in the first place!" Eve, not wanting to be outdone, immediately pointed at the serpent. We've been playing the blame game ever since.

Think of the driver pulled over for speeding who tells the officer, "I wasn't actually speeding; I was just keeping up with traffic, and my speedometer must be calibrated wrong." Or consider the child caught with a messy room who says, "Mom, it's not clutter; it's an artistic arrangement of my belongings that reflects my inherited creative disposition." We laugh because we recognize the ridiculousness of it. We love to blame our genetics, our upbringing, our spouse, our culture, or the person sitting two pews down.

In our Old Testament lesson, God's people in ancient Israel were playing the exact same game. They had a popular proverb they loved to quote: **"The parents eat sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge."** In plain English, they were saying: "Our ancestors sinned, God is punishing us for *their* bad choices, and there's nothing we can do about it! We're just helpless victims of a bad family tree."

But God spoke through Ezekiel to shatter that comfortable delusion: **"As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign Lord, you will no longer quote this proverb in Israel. For every living soul belongs to me... The one who sins is the one who will die."** God stripped away their excuses and brought them face-to-face with their individual responsibility. Then he issued a clear call: **"Repent! Turn away from all your offenses...Rid yourselves of all the offenses you have committed, and get a new heart and a new spirit."** Today, God shows us that REAL REPENTANCE LOOKS DIFFERENT. It doesn't look like self-justification or pointing fingers. It is a complete, God-given turnaround of the heart.

Fake repentance is everywhere. It usually sounds like this: "I'm sorry, *but*..." The moment you add "but" to an apology, you aren't repenting—you're defending yourself.

- "I'm sorry I lost my temper, *but* you were driving me crazy."
- "I'm sorry I gossiped, *but* what they did was genuinely wrong."

That was Israel's attitude in Ezekiel 18. They complained, "The Lord's way is not fair!" They argued with God's justice and blamed their circumstances.

How often do we do the same? We look at our habitual sins—our anger, our selfishness, our neglect of God's Word—and say, "That's just how my family is," or "Everyone else does it." God says to us: **"Every living soul belongs to me."** You cannot hide behind your family tree, your culture, or your environment. Real repentance begins when the excuses stop. It happens when we drop the defense mechanisms and say with King David: **"Against you, you only, have I sinned and done what is evil**

in your sight" (Ps 51:4). No "buts." Just honest confession: "Lord, the problem isn't my circumstances — the problem is me."

Ezekiel shows us that real repentance involves real action. God says: **"Repent! Turn away from all your offenses."** There is a big difference between being sorry you got caught and actually hating the sin. Think of a toddler caught elbow-deep in the cookie jar before dinner. Tears stream down his face as he cries hysterically. Is he weeping because he deeply regrets breaking house rules? No! He's weeping because the cookie is gone and he's heading for time-out.

Too often, our repentance looks like that toddler. We feel bad about the consequences of our sin—the bad reputation, the damaged relationship, the embarrassment. But feeling bad about consequences isn't the same as turning away from sin. Judas felt overwhelming remorse for betraying Jesus, but he didn't turn to the Lord in faith. Peter wept bitterly over his denial, but he turned back to Christ for mercy. Perhaps a little Hebrew word study is in order here.

The Hebrew word for "repent" (*Shuv*) literally means to stop, turn around, and walk in the opposite direction. If you're driving north on the highway and realize you're heading toward Flagstaff when you want to go to Tucson, feeling terrible about your poor directions won't change your location. Yelling at your GPS won't help. The only logical response is to take the next exit, turn around, and drive south. That is what real repentance looks like in the Christian life:

- It's not just feeling guilty about harsh words; it's closing your mouth and speaking kindly.
 - It's not just regretting a short temper; it's seeking reconciliation.
 - It's not just feeling bad about skipping church; it's gathering around God's Word and Sacraments.
- But to do all that takes getting a new heart and a new spirit.

When God says, **"Get a new heart and a new spirit,"** our natural human instinct is to treat it like a DIY project. We think, "Starting Monday, I'll pull myself up by my bootstraps and reform my life!" If you've ever tried that, you know how fast it fails. It's like telling a drowning man, "Stop drowning and start swimming!" He knows he needs to swim; his problem is that he is helpless in the water.

By nature, we are spiritually helpless and dead in our sins. Dead people cannot create a new heart within themselves. Why, then, does God command it? To crush our self-righteousness. The Law holds up a mirror to show us that we desperately *need* a new heart but are utterly incapable of making one on our own. It drives us to cry out: "Lord, save me! Give me what You command!"

And this is where the Gospel shines brightly. Look at how God closes this passage: **"For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign Lord. Repent and live!"** God takes no delight in punishment. His heart desires life for you. And what God demands in his Law, he freely provides in his Gospel.

In our text, Ezekiel commanded the people to get a new heart, but later in Ezekiel 36:26, God promises: **"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh."** You cannot manufacture a clean heart, but Jesus Christ bought one for you on the cross. When Jesus died on Calvary, he took all our blame-shifting, excuses, and hard-hearted sin upon himself. The Law declares that the soul who sins shall die—and Jesus died in your place, as your Substitute. In Holy Baptism, God washed away your sin and gave you a new heart. In Holy Communion, he feeds and strengthens that new life with his very body and blood.

Dear friends, the old Israelite proverb is broken. You are not trapped by your past, your family history, or yesterday's failures. Your Heavenly Father looks at you today through the cross of Jesus and sees a redeemed child washed clean by Christ's blood. Stop making excuses. Hear the gracious voice of your Savior calling out to you today: **"Repent and live!"** Turn to him in faith, receive his forgiveness, and walk forward in the freedom of a new heart. Amen.