

In the name of ✠ Jesus.

It's not too difficult to understand Jesus' focus in today's Gospel. He's rather forthright: *"I tell you; ... unless you repent, you will all ... perish."* Jesus means it. In case you missed it, He repeats it: *"I tell you; ... unless you repent, you will all ... perish."*

Repentance ...; it's a big deal for Christians. John the Baptist preached it: *"he went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins"* (Luke 3:3). And from the beginning of His ministry, Jesus did the same: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand"* (Matt. 4:17).

In fact, so significant is this call of Christ that Luther points to it in the first of his Ninety-five Theses: "1. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, 'Repent' [Latin 'Do penance'], he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

Luther is calling attention to the fact that repentance really is not about doing as the Roman Catholics taught and still teach in this jubilee year. It's not about saying some Hail Marys and Our Fathers, or buying indulgences, or paying for Masses to reduce someone's time in purgatory, or going on pilgrimages to gain an indulgence and earn forgiveness. Luther addresses these errors in the rest of his theses. No, we confess in the Augsburg Confession (XII:10): "Our churches ... reject those who ... command us to merit grace through satisfactions of our own."

So, what then is repentance? What does Jesus mean when He calls us to *"repent"*? Repentance, we confess, consists of two parts: "One part is contrition, that is, terrors striking the conscience through the knowledge of sin" (AC XII:4). This happens when through the preaching of God's word, especially His Law, God works on our hearts — when He breaks them. "Through the preaching of the Law, a person comes to know his sins and God's wrath. He experiences in his heart true terrors, contrition, and sorrow" (FC SD II:54). Again, Luther said that true contrition is something passive in us — not our work but God's. God by His word works in us "true sorrow of heart, suffering, and the sensation of death" (SA III, iii:2).

How easy it is, however, to hear God's word of Law preached and not apply it to ourselves. This Law illuminates the darkness of our hearts, and we refuse to acknowledge it. It hammers on our stony hearts, and we shore up our defenses rather than let the Law's hammer crush our pride. We'd rather point the finger away from us. What about those Galilean sinners? What about those eighteen on whom the tower fell? Those are the real sinners, God. Not I!

This attitude is nothing but a self-righteousness that seeks to compare oneself to others. "I'm not as bad as that guy, God. Accept me on my own righteousness."

Here in the Gospel, Jesus calls the people out for this very thing because they thought the “*Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans*” and the eighteen “*were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem.*”

But the only standard that any of us are measured against is God’s exacting Law, and our keeping of it “*must be perfect*” (Matt. 5:48). Remember how James speaks of it? “[*W*]hoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). Or as we hear the LORD say today through the prophet Ezekiel: “[*t*]he righteousness of the righteous shall not deliver him when he transgresses ... I say to the righteous ... if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die.”

Jesus says this kind of attitude brings destruction. “Unless you repent, you will perish.” And we Lutherans have plenty of attitudes, especially of late, of which we need to repent, according to Carl Trueman, a conservative Presbyterian. This kind of Presbyterian acknowledges their own confessions and seeks to follow them. He calls himself a “confessional Christian.” Trueman wrote an article recently in *World* magazine lamenting the state of Christianity in the LCMS, troubling especially to him for, he says, “we look to the LCMS as a stronghold of traditional Protestant orthodoxy and [we] number LCMS Christians among our friends.”

Yet, he says, “[r]ecent Pew Research findings” indicate “that times might well be set to change.” They report “that 54% of members think abortion should be legal in all or most cases. Fifty percent say homosexuality should be accepted. ... Fifty percent now favor same-sex marriage.” These findings are saying that we Lutherans have adopted the world’s mindset over God’s truth. Perhaps we have been cowed by the world, taking on the attitude that calling abortion sin or calling homosexuality sin or opposing same-sex marriage is mean and unkind. It is nothing of the sort, unless you want to call God Himself mean and unkind — some people do, but surely LCMS Lutherans don’t. Nor does calling these things sin mean that we withhold God’s remedy for sin from those caught up in these sins any more than we do for our own sins. “Unless you repent, you will perish.”

For contrition is only the first part of repentance, and contrition alone leads only to despair (SA III, iii:7). But there is a Gospel side of repentance, to the joy of sinners, for “The other part [of repentance] is faith, which is born of the Gospel ... or the Absolution,” that is, the proclamation of the forgiveness of sins. This faith “believes that, for Christ’s sake, sins are forgiven. It comforts the conscience and delivers it from terror” (AC XII:5).

As Paul says, it’s why Jesus came: “*The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost*” (1 Tim. 1:15). Again, righteousness is “*counted to us who believe*

*in [God] who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification” (Rom. 4:24-25). “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him”* lifted up upon the tree of the cross, died, buried, but risen again. The *“Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as [an atoning sacrifice] for many”* (Matt. 20:28).

This forgiveness won by Christ and given by the word of absolution and by the mysteries of God that deliver forgiveness to contrite sinners, this is God’s proper work. *“If you, O LORD, should mark iniquities, O Lord, who could stand? But with you there is forgiveness, that you may be feared”* (Ps. 130:4-5). It’s what Christ’s church is given to preach by the command of Christ: *“repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in [Jesus’] name to all nations”* (Luke 24:47). It’s what Jesus Himself preached: *“repent and believe in the gospel”* (Mark 1:15), and this gospel is that we are forgiven of our sins for Christ’s sake.

Jesus continues his exhortation to repentance with His little parable of the fig tree. In this parable, the owner of the vineyard is looking for fruit from this tree, but it produced none. “Cut it down,” he said, but the vinedresser exhorted the man to let him dig around it and apply fertilizer, that it might bear fruit.

Here Jesus echoes John the Baptist’s preaching: *“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance”* (Luke 3:8). And we Lutherans don’t oppose making that a third part of repentance. Melancthon writes in the Apology: *“If anyone desires to add a third [part]—fruit worthy of repentance, that is, a change of the entire life and character for the better—we will not oppose it”* (Ap XII:28). In our conversion to Christ through baptism and faith, we have become new creations. We put to death the old sinful ways and seek to live a new life (Rom. 6:4). As St. Paul teaches: *“If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory.*

*“Put to death therefore what is earthly in you”* — that’s a call to repentance — *“you must put them all away ... you have put off the old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ...*

*Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony”* (Col. 3:1-5, 8-10, 12-14).

This, then, is the life of those who heed Jesus' call to "*repent,*" who live a life of repentance: contrition for the sins we commit; peace in the knowledge of sins forgiven through Christ; and being fruitful trees, setting our minds on the things that are above, ever putting to death the old Adam in us, and letting the new man emerge and arise to live before God in righteousness and purity. God grant this life to us all.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.