

Fruitful Repentance

“Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people producing its fruits” Matthew 21:43.

Every time you point a finger, there are three pointing back at you. I’m not sure when I first heard this saying, but it’s one that has stuck with me. This statement highlights the humbling switch that in the quickness and rashness to judge and point the finger at someone else, I’m often just as culpable, if not more, of the judgement that I’m so willing to pass, hence the three fingers pointing back at me. I don’t think I’m alone in this experience either.

Perhaps, if we look at this idea from another angle, we’ll see how widely this concept applies. Maybe you’ve heard it said that the thing you find so frustrating, annoying or irritating in someone else often is the very thing you’re guilty of too. For example, if we are annoyed that so and so is such a gossip, our annoyance is covering the fact that we are also willing to gossip more than we’d like to admit. Whether it’s finger pointing or that challenging characteristic, these examples serve to show us a humbling switch that the judgement calls we are willing to make about others very often condemn ourselves.

The Bible also has accounts where a similar thing happens. There are a few records where an individual or group of people is invited to pronouncement judgement on a made-up situation only to experience a switch later and find their judgement actually pronounced upon them and their actions. One of best examples in the Bible has to be with King David and the prophet Nathan. (Or if you’re Veggie Tale aficionados, as my family has become, then you might recognize this from the King George and the Rubber Ducky episode.) However, for everyone’s sake I’ll stick with the actual Biblical account to be clear. King David had committed adultery with Bathsheba and murdered Bathsheba’s husband Uriah to cover up his sin. So, the Lord sent the prophet Nathan to call David to repentance.

Instead of confronting King David directly, Nathan tells the king a story about a rich man and a poor man. The rich man had lots of sheep, the poor man had only one whom he treasured dearly. One day the rich man had a guest to entertain, but instead of using his own flock to prepare the meal, this rich man took the poor man’s sheep to use for the meal for his guest. When King David heard about this rich man’s actions, he was outraged. He condemned the rich man’s actions and vowed to make this heartless man pay to which the prophet Nathan responded with the switch, “You are that man!” With those words, the Lord called King David to repentance leading to one of the most beloved psalms of repentance in the Bible, Psalm 51.

Like the story the prophet Nathan tells King David, our readings from Isaiah and Matthew this weekend are designed to have a similar call to repentance. In both of these readings, the Lord uses the image of a vineyard to paint a picture of His relationship with His people. In Isaiah, the vineyard owner is the Lord and the vineyard is the people of Israel. Just as the vineyard owner took great care to prepare and protect the vineyard for the best possible production. So also, the Lord took great care to prepare and protect the people of Israel. Leading them from Egypt into the Promised Land and establishing them there to be a blessing to all the nations around them. However, just as the produce of the vineyard didn’t reflect the owner’s care. So also, the lives of the people of Israel failed to reflect the Lord’s care for them. And in verse four of this Isaiah reading, the people of Israel are invited to pass judgement on this vineyard only to learn of the switch later on in verse seven that this vineyard actually represented them!

Hundreds of years after Isaiah’s parable to the people of Israel, Jesus builds upon the details of this parable to make it even more pointed towards the leaders of Israel in His day. Again, we have the vineyard owner, the Lord, and the people of Israel as the vineyard. But there’s a twist this time, now there are tenants, caretakers, of the vineyard involved and they represent the leaders of Israel, the chief priests, elders and Pharisees, to whom Jesus was talking. These tenants are to steward the care the vineyard has

received from the owner and share the produce with the owner. But when the time came for the owner to collect, these tenants horribly disrespected the owner's servants and even had the audacity to kill the owner's son in their defiance.

It's at this point that Jesus invites the chief priests, elders and Pharisees to pronounce a sentence on those wicked tenants in the parable and these leaders of Israel willing do so. **"... put those wretches to a miserable death and let out the vineyard to other tenants who will give him the fruits in their seasons"**, (*Matthew 21:41*) they say. Immediately after they spoke these words, Jesus reveals the switch to them that they were really passing this sentence upon themselves. They had beaten and abused the Lord's servants, His prophets, the most recent being John the Baptist and they were well on their way to killing the son, none other than Jesus. As they had declared, the vineyard was being taken from them and given to others.

It's an awful position to be confronted by your own sin and its rightful punishment through your own words of judgment. It's awful being so close to your own sin that you don't recognize what you've become until someone else finally gets that message through your sinful heart and mind. And yet, this is the position we find ourselves. This is exactly the sort of switch the Lord does with us through His Word.

Whether it's the ancient people of Israel, its leaders, or more specifically someone like King David, or even Paul from our second reading, we hear of the rebellion and rejection of those people only to realize that we're no different! Then like some of those people, we compound our sin with rejection of Jesus and His ways; rejection of the very one who can actually deal with our sin. My fellow sinners, our own rebellion and rejection of the Lord needs to be confessed. Right now, the Lord's call to repentance extends to in this moment. No excuses. The wrongs we have done deserve temporal and eternal punishment. So, with repentant hearts, I invite you to open up a hymnal, turn to Psalm 51 in the front and join with me in speaking the words of this psalm of repentance. (Have mercy on me ...)

Dear friends in Christ, just as the Lord heard David for the sake of Jesus, so also, He hears our plea for mercy and forgiveness. Through Jesus' rejection, death and resurrection the judgement we rightfully earned for our sin has been paid. The sentence that should be ours, is the very sentence Jesus stepped into and endured. Where we should hear the conviction that we are the ones guilty of injustice, Jesus speaks up in our place and says, "I am that man." Through the mercy, grace and forgiveness of Jesus, our repentant lives experience a new switch as our judgement becomes His and His inheritance becomes ours.

In the waters of baptism, our God makes this switch concrete and clear. He makes this exchange real. The Lord removes the label of wretches from our sinful lives and actions and relabels us His beloved children. He takes our lives of rebellion and rejection and restores them to fruitful repentance in His kingdom. He establishes us on Christ the cornerstone so that our lives have foundation and confidence in Jesus and His work and not our own works. Here at the font, we are connected to Christ the vine so that we might daily produce the fruits of the Spirit by His grace.

Today the Lord takes our finger pointing and turns it upon Himself. In repentance, instead of judgement, we point to Him. He is our Savior and through Him alone we receive our salvation. We point to the judgement He took in our place and we receive the forgiveness and mercy He earned for us. We point to His work even as He produces fruitful labor in our own lives. In repentant faith, we point to Jesus as our Savior and Deliverer and every time we do the benefits and blessings of Jesus' death and resurrection point back to cover, restore and renew us. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Dan