

Almost 500 years ago, the world was turned upside down—not with a weapon of mass destruction but with an instrument of mass instruction—a man’s pen. A monk named Martin Luther penned 95 theses and nailed them to the university bulletin board of his day—a church door. He intended to debate them with the professional theologians of his day. The heart of the theses was this practical question: What does it mean to repent? Listen to the first thesis:

In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, “Repent” (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. (Luther, 95 Theses, No. 1)

500 years later, we are here not to debate theses but to confess our sins; not to nail words to a door but to hear words preached from a pulpit. Repentance is on our minds. Jesus taught about repentance using a parable about two men who went to the temple to pray. Listening to their prayers, we better understand what it means to repent. May the Holy Spirit bless every one of you with a repentant heart tonight—a heart that **Turns to Jesus and Not to Yourself**.

Listen again Jesus’ parable. Picture a lamb burning on the temple altar. Smell the incense wafting in the breeze. As you elbow your way through the mass of humanity in the temple courts, your focus narrows to a single man in that crowd. He spends plenty of time in the temple. He is well dressed in flowing robes. He’s all business—a religious professional from head to toe. He stands up so that he can be clearly seen and heard. Then your eye catches another man over in the corner. He’s a tax collector—probably a tax cheat! No one would ever accuse him of being a saint. He is all alone. He is in rough shape. Listen!

The Pharisee stood by himself and prayed: ‘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 and give a tenth of all I get.’ But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’ I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The Pharisee had plenty to pray about. But notice the Pharisee’s favorite word! Was it Lord? Help? Forgive? No, it was an ugly, all-consuming *I. I thank you. . . . I’m not like other men. . . . I fast twice a week. . . . I give a tenth of all I get. . . .* The Pharisee is celebrating his own personal ‘thanksgiving day’ in the temple courts! He most thoroughly thanks God for himself, but he comes down with amnesia when it comes to remembering God’s blessings. He doesn’t ask for a single thing from the heavenly Father, because he figures that he has everything he needs; even more, he IS EVERYTHING God wants! How lucky God was to have a guy like the Pharisee on his side! Not a robber, he was a big giver! Not a glutton, he was a disciplined faster! The Pharisee was doing just fine in his own estimation. Why bother turning to God in repentance when one can turn to himself and his own holiness for salvation?!

And then there is the other man in the parable: not a Pharisee but a publican; not a man full of himself but a man running on empty. He’s not praying to be praised but praying to be forgiven; not bragging but repenting. He’s turning—not toward himself but toward God!

In a time when most praying took place with heads held up toward heaven, the tax collector looked down in shame. He beat his chest in grief. His prayer was short and simple: “*God, have mercy on me, a sinner.*” Literally, the tax collector was praying: “*God be appeased . . .*” He knew there was nothing he could do to appease the wrath of God against his sin—praying and paying, fasting and washing could never make his sin “right” in God’s sight. He would have to turn toward another. God himself would have to appease his wrath toward sin! That’s precisely what Isaiah wrote: “*He [the Lord] saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him*” (Isa 59:16). We are here to commemorate our Lord’s work of appeasing himself—through the suffering and death of his dear Son. Ash Wednesday—Christ’s great Lenten suffering and sacrifice—is a yearly answer, no, the ETERNAL answer, to the tax collector’s prayer!

So let me ask you this: Whom do you see when you look in the mirror? In your deepest heart of hearts, do you identify more with the Pharisee or the tax collector? Think of it. We're Lutheran. I might not fast twice a week, but I wasn't down in New Orleans yesterday swilling cheap beer for beads either. I might not give a tenth of all I get, but I have my envelope with me for the plate. I know that I'm saved by grace alone . . . and God also knows that I'm doing my best! What more could he possibly want? If we are quick and confident in identifying with the tax collector, then be very careful of being too humble. The Pharisees were good at that, too.

Will you trade in your security blankets of self-righteousness for the sackcloth and ashes of genuine repentance? Why? Because turning toward ourselves isn't only sinful; it's nonsensical! Do you really think God is pleased that you are sitting in a pew right now? A potato can do that! Do you think God compares you to the Fat Tuesday drunks from last night? Isn't God, instead, comparing you with his holy self? Do you really think that God is impressed with offering envelopes? Why should he be impressed with an envelope in the offering plate when he wants 100% of the heart in your chest? Could it be that God has a right to be sick and tired of us turning toward ourselves for vindication rather than turning toward him for salvation? Mercifully, the Lord rips the security blanket of self-righteousness from our sinful fingers: *All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

The Pharisee thought he was God's right-hand man. He thanked God that he wasn't a robber; however, in his heart, he was. Jesus once told the Pharisees: *"Now then, you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and dish, but inside you are full of greed and wickedness"* (Lk 11:39). The Pharisee fancied himself righteous. He wasn't. Jesus said, *"I tell you that this man, rather than the other, went home justified before God."* The Pharisee considered himself faithful and free of all adultery. Sadly, he had cheated, not on his wife but on his God as he carried on a long, passionate love affair with himself. The point? Man at his "best" is man at his most dishonest! The Pharisee's self-confidence is nothing but a false security of peace (Luther, 95 Theses, No. 95). Turning toward yourself simply serves as a detour on the road to hell.

The tax collector? He was humble. The Lord exalted him. The tax collector knew his sin. The Lord forgave him. In turning to Jesus, the tax collector was exalted! How? By Jesus' own role reversal. The Lord of heaven became the criminal on the cross. The God who fills the universe filled a tomb. The Lord of glory became the Suffering Servant to appease the Father's wrath against sin. Appeased, not by ignoring sin, but by punishing our sin in his Son. Jesus became the Chief of sinners upon the cross so that you and I—chiefs of sinners—could become sons and daughters.

You may know that early Christians in Rome secretly worshiped in catacombs (caves) during periods of persecution. Rome also contains what is likely the oldest depiction of Jesus' crucifixion—in the form of some anti-Christian graffiti. Scratched into the plaster wall is the picture of a man kneeling before a cross with his arms raised in worship. Hanging on the cross is the figure of a man—with a donkey's head. Scratched underneath that picture are the words "Alexamenos Worships His God." The point? Alexamenos is a fool to worship a man who was crucified! But humble Alexamenos is now in heaven. The One pictured with the head of a donkey by a Roman heathen now sits on a throne. Alexamenos' God, the tax collector's God, YOUR God, has been appeased by the death of his Son in our place. So with repentant hearts, turn to him who sacrificed himself for you! With grateful hearts, receive his mercy anew every morning. With expectant hearts, look forward to Easter victory!

Jesus taught, and Luther believed, that a Christian's entire life is a life of repentance—a lifelong turning away from ourselves and our works and a turning toward Christ and his work. The goodness of your works; the earnestness of your prayers; your zeal for the Lord's work; or the love that you have for your family do not save you—not in the least. The humble cross of Christ saves you! Like the tax collector in the corner, the cross doesn't look like much. But look closer, because in the cross you find the Almighty appeased and your repentant prayers answered! Turn to him. And only him. Always him. Amen.