WHO ARE THE TRULY REPENTANT?
1. Hear God’s Word and believe it
2. Hear God’s Word and obey it

At the beginning of service you confessed: Holy and merciful Father, I confess that I am by nature sinful, and that I have disobeyed you in my thoughts, words, and actions...but I am truly sorry for my sins. Did you mean it? Or was it all just words?

Jesus sets before us an illustration which answers for us the following question: WHO ARE THE TRULY REPENTANT? A father had two sons. He asked both of them to go and work in the vineyard. The first said, I won’t go, but then he changed his mind and went. The other said, I will go, sir but then he did not.

Who do these two sons represent? The first represented those who were openly unrepentant - the tax collectors who stole from their countrymen and the prostitutes who gave their bodies to others for the sake of money. It is not hard to recognize the unrepentant. They are the people who openly and willingly despise preaching and God’s Word, who openly live a sinful life. They love their sins and have no intention of giving them up. Like the Pharaoh in Egypt they spit in God’s face and say: Who is the Lord that I should obey his voice? They dismiss religion and pride themselves in not being like so many godly people who go to church but then live like the world the rest of the week.

The second son represented those who were secretly unrepentant. Openly they say the right thing, I will go, sir, but their secret lives said the opposite. The Pharisees lived very good and righteous lives. They never strayed from the outward observances of God’s law but inwardly they felt no real love for God. They would be found in church when services were scheduled because this made them feel self-righteous and better than those who did not. I wonder how shocked those Pharisees were to hear Jesus say that the tax collectors and the prostitutes were more likely to enter the kingdom of God than they.

Who are the truly repentant? It is first of all those who hear God’s Word and believe it. Here is how the Pharisees came short. If someone had asked them, Do you know that you are a sinner? they might confess, Yes, sir, but they did not really believe it. As far as they were concerned, their relationship with God was just fine. They were living better than most. They were making sacrifices of their time and treasures when others were not. How could God not consider them to be the best of his children, the cream of the crop?

When Jesus revealed to them their sin and their need for a Savior, they hated Jesus. If you know you are sick, you go to the doctor. If you think you are healthy, you do not. If you truly do not believe that you are a lost and condemned sinner, you will have no real use for Jesus. If someone asked the Pharisee Christian, Do you know that Christ died for sinners? He would answer, Yes, sir. Or Do you know that it is faith alone that brings you God’s grace? the Pharisee Christian would answer, Yes, sir. If you would ask him just about any question about sin and grace, about the need for repentance and forgiveness, about Jesus being the one and only way to heaven, he would answer, Yes, sir. But he did not really mean it. At the same time that the Yes, sir was coming out of his mouth, the No, sir was coming out of his heart. In reality, in God’s eyes the Pharisee Christian is just as much an unbeliever as the person who lives an openly wicked and rebellious life.

But what did Jesus mean when he said that the thief and the prostitute were more likely to enter heaven than the self-righteous person who did not act in an openly immoral manner? Picture a house on fire. From a third story window sill there hung a child. The flames were pouring out of the window, threatening to consume the child. To let go of the window sill would likely result in the child’s death. To hang on to the window sill? The situation seemed hopeless.
But then the child heard the voice of a strong man standing directly underneath him. **Drop, boy, I will catch you.** The child believed the strong man and dropped safely into his arms.

Jesus knew the flames of hell were threatening to consume everyone. He also knew what he would do to become the world’s Savior. So Jesus was crying out to all who would listen, **Drop, sinner. I will catch you. Recognize and confess your sins and drop into my arms for forgiveness, spiritual life, and salvation.** The Pharisees would never have done so. They did not believe that they needed rescue from the fires of hell and were determined that they could save themselves.

However, the tax collectors and the prostitutes felt the condemnation of God’s law. They knew that the fires of hell were threatening to consume them. So when Jesus said to them, **Drop, sinner. I will catch you. Recognize and confess your sins and drop into my arms for forgiveness, spiritual life, and salvation,** some of them let go and gladly dropped into his saving arms.

Who are the truly repentant? They are those first of all who hear the truth about themselves as sinners and about Jesus as the Savior and believe it. They are secondly those who hear the truth of God’s Word and obey it.

One son in Jesus’ illustration at first told his father that he would not go into the vineyard to work but then changed his mind and went. He is Jesus’ example of the truly repentant. The Pharisees would never have been like that son for they never were willing to change their minds about themselves.

The Pharisees thought that their leading righteous lives gained for them the righteousness needed to enter heaven one day. They clung to this wrong conclusion through thick and thin. Nothing Jesus said or did changed their minds. Yes, outwardly they would continue to live righteous lives but inwardly they would also continue to harden their hearts against God’s Word and against Jesus Christ. They remained unrepentant.

But the tax collectors and prostitutes heard God’s Word, repented of their sins, fell into the arms of their Savior, and then worked to change their outward lives. The repentant tax collectors stopped cheating the people and became honest in their work for the government. The repentant prostitutes stopped selling their bodies to the highest bidders and started using their bodies in such a way that God was given glory. Their repentance was more than just words. Their repentance was sincere and could be seen by their striving to turn away from former sins.

And where did the repentant find the power to turn from open rebellion against God to obedience? It is found in God’s Word and the new spiritual natures the Holy Spirit created within them. Through the power of the Holy Spirit they heard and believed God’s Word. In Jesus Christ they stopped being children of the devil and had actually become children of God which was now being revealed by the manner in which they were struggling to live.

Today we began our service again confessing our sins and our faith in Jesus as our Savior. Was your confession truly sincere or were you only speaking words? Certainly you are not among the open sinners of our day who flaunt their sins and take pride in their rebellion against God and society. But at the same time there are many **Pharisee Christians** in our day whose lives outwardly are very good, but God can see the impenitence that lies within them. They may say, **Yes, sir,** but on the inside they continue to say **No, sir** and to secretly act accordingly.

So I ask you again. Are you among the truly repentant? If this question makes you a little uncomfortable, that is a good sign that you are among the truly repentant. The truly repentant want to hear and obey God’s will. But every day they are bothered by a sinful nature which leads them again and again into sin - and this truly bothers them. So what are the truly repentant to do?
The story is told about a little boy visiting his grandparents on their farm. He was given a slingshot to play with out in the woods. He practiced in the woods, but he could never hit the target. Getting discouraged, he headed back for dinner. As he was walking back he saw Grandma's pet duck. Just out of impulse, he let the slingshot fly, hit the duck square in the head and killed it. He was shocked and grieved. In a panic, he hid the dead duck in the wood pile, only to see his sister watching! Sally had seen it all but she said nothing.

After lunch the next day, Grandma said: Sally, let's wash the dishes. But Sally said: Grandma, Johnny told me he wanted to help in the kitchen. Then she whispered to him: Remember the duck? So Johnny did the dishes.

Later that day, Grandpa asked if the children wanted to go fishing and Grandma said: I'm sorry but I need Sally to help make supper. Sally just smiled and said: Well, that's all right because Johnny told me he wanted to help. She whispered again: Remember the duck? So Sally went fishing and Johnny stayed to help.

After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's, he could not stand it any longer. He went to Grandma and confessed that he had killed the duck. Grandma knelt down, gave him a hug, and said: Sweetheart, I know. You see, I was standing at the window and I saw the whole thing, but because I love you, I forgave you. I was just wondering how long you would let Sally make a slave of you.

Whatever is in your past, whatever you have done - and the devil keeps throwing it up in your face (lying, cheating, fear, bad habits, hatred, lust, anger, bitterness, etc.) - whatever it is - you need to know that God was standing at the window and he saw the whole thing. He has seen your whole life. Yet in Jesus he wants you to know that he loves you and forgives you. He is just wondering how long you will let the devil make a slave of you. The great thing about God is that when you ask for his forgiveness, he not only forgives, he also forgets. Yes, you are a sinner and God knows it. Even as a Christian you continue to struggle against your sinful nature and God knows it. But Jesus is just as real a Savior. He did not die for fake sins but for real, troubling sins.

Does this mean that you are now free to sin? No, true repentance includes hearing and obeying. But now that you have been set free from sin and from your slavery to Satan, you can now on a daily basis truly repent - hearing and believing God's Word, confessing your sin, looking to Jesus Christ for forgiveness. And now on a daily basis you can also truly repent by hearing and obeying God's Word.

Yes, living the Christian life will be a daily struggle. Thus your confession of sins in most of our weekly services. But having confessed your sins, be assured by Word and sacrament that your sins have been forgiven. Now leave God’s house committed to living the kind of life that you know glorifies and pleases the God of your salvation. Yes, go forth as one who is truly repentant, and may God bless your every effort to show it. Amen.

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