

Examples for You

In the name of him who makes intercession for us, dear friends in Christ: today I'd like to get personal with you. We're about midway through the penitential season of Lent. It's a time set aside for careful soul searching and introspection, a time in which we prepare ourselves through what should be painful self-examination as we consider enormity of our sins and our consequent desperate need for a Savior as great as the one God sent us in Jesus his Son. We do this in order to grow spiritually by putting to death the sinful nature that dwells within us. We do this also to heighten and renew our joy in the upcoming Easter celebration. Think of it this way: in a spiritual sense, during Lent we load ourselves like a spring. We push it down, down applying more pressure as the weeks go on, increasing the strain precisely so that we will feel that wonderful release when we go to the tomb on Easter morning and hear the angel say, "You're looking for Jesus who was crucified. He's not here. He has risen!" The idea is that the farther we push that spring down, the higher it will go when we release it. And its recoil is not just about being happy – no, it has to do even more with the new life and closer walk with the risen Lord we hope to have. The spiritual disciplines we apply to ourselves now during Lent while we are on our journey with Christ to the cross are for the purpose of making us better disciples of Jesus in the days, weeks, and years that we live in and with him after his resurrection.

So, like I said, here we are about halfway through Lent. And you are probably aware that there are some folks who take it very seriously. Indeed, you may know people who have temporarily adopted some kind of special discipline for themselves. Maybe they're fasting on certain days, or they've cut something from their diet or daily routine that they particularly enjoy. Whatever it is, the idea is to give up something so that they feel a hunger or craving – and by not satisfying it, they remind themselves of the much greater spiritual hunger they need to satisfy, which then redirects them to fill that need through time spent in meditation on Scripture and prayer and so on. There's also the idea of depriving the sinful flesh of something it craves in order to heighten the overall awareness of sin – which in turn should lead to more thorough repentance. Another way to observe Lent is to add something that's beneficial to the spiritual diet, like read a devotional book or review the catechism or attend midweek services. These are fine ways that people use to get into the spirit of the season.

Unfortunately, there are others who do the same sort of things; but they do them for the wrong reasons. Many think that giving up something for Lent earns them extra credit in the eyes of God. They think that their sacrifices somehow honor Christ. Actually when that's the mindset, what it they do is to devalue the sacrifice that Christ made and so it *dishonors* him. And then you've got the hypocrites. These are people who adopt some special discipline not for any spiritual reason, but simply so that they can talk about how they're suffering and thereby impress others with their "holiness".

And then there are others – probably a lot of others – who ignore Lent completely. For them it's, "Lent? *What*, are you kidding? Who needs all *that* nonsense?" Some ignore it based on moral principles: "After all, I don't need to do anything special or different to be a good Christian. Besides, the Bible doesn't say anything about Lent. It's just a silly man-made thing." They may even think of themselves as more holy for *not* observing Lent. Others are just too busy or apathetic to be bothered with it.

By now you get the overall picture: people are doing or not doing all kinds of different things for Lent for all kinds of different reasons. But I need to tell you something. Lent has

absolutely nothing to do with what all those people are doing or not doing. If that's what you think, you've missed the point entirely; because Lent isn't about *them*; it's about you. The question of Lent is: what are you doing?

Consider today's Gospel. The snippet of Jesus' teaching that we heard comes at the tail end of a much larger discussion he's having with his disciples gathered close around him while a much larger group of several thousand people crowd around them and listen in. And what Jesus has been talking about are themes related to the coming judgment. For instance he tells the parable of the rich fool, about a man who stored up earthly wealth but who had no time for matters of the spirit – so when the Day of Judgment came for him, that is, when he died, he lost everything including his soul. In view of this, Jesus tells his followers to always be ready and prepared for the Day of Judgment for you do not know when the Master will return for you individually or for everyone at once. Don't let him find you unprepared or frittering away your time in sinful pursuits when he comes. Read the signs of times, he says, and get the message: the time is short. The Judge is at the gate. *You* need to be ready.

It's in this context, then, that a listener pipes up with the case of some Galileans whose blood Pilate mixed with their sacrifices. It's a story torn fresh from the headlines of the day that everyone there was aware of; but other than what's said here, we don't know much about this incident. Most likely it involved a group of Jewish pilgrims from Galilee who went to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. For reasons that aren't clear while they were at the Temple sacrificing their lambs for the ritual Passover Feast Roman soldiers attacked and killed them. We don't why. Obviously the Romans suspected them of something. There were, after all, a lot of anti-Roman rebels in Galilee. And just as Israeli police watch out for Hezbollah terrorists and suicide bombers today, the Romans had to be active in guarding themselves against Jewish zealots back then. So it's easy to imagine how it might have unfolded: the Romans suspect these guys of something and figure they might be easiest to arrest and bring them in for questioning while they're in the middle of worship. But when they attempt this, there's an outrage: "the effrontery of these godless Gentiles to disturb our worship and foul the sacred courts with their unclean feet." Things escalate, get out of hand, and the soldiers resort to the sword to extract themselves from the now perilous confrontation. It was probably something like that – we don't know the specifics.

What we do know is how this would have been interpreted by the Jews in Jesus' day. For such a terrible fate to befall them – to be struck down while in the very act of offering their sacrifices to the Lord – it must be because they were especially wicked sinners. They must have really offended God that he would send such terrible judgment on them. It's as if he were saying, "How dare you bring your sacrifices to me. The blood of lambs can't cover *your* sin; I'm demanding your blood right now!" So, in light of all Jesus has been saying about being prepared for the coming judgment, you can imagine that when this comment about the Galileans is raised, everyone is thinking, "Yeah, those guys were really bad. They weren't ready when their time came."

It's to this accepted wisdom that Jesus replies, "What? Is that what think? No, you've missed the point entirely. The lesson you're supposed to learn from this incident is not that *they* were terrible sinners, but that *you* need to repent." He brings up another recent story from the news. The Tower of Siloam in the lower quarter of the city of Jerusalem collapsed suddenly and killed eighteen people. Again, the Jews would have interpreted this as the hand of God reaching down to slay particularly notorious sinners. Jesus says no. If you learn anything from these episodes, learn that *you* need to repent and be ready at all times—because *you* don't know when the Judge is coming for you. You can't judge people's hearts. You don't know what the state of their repentance was; but learn that the Day of Judgment comes for all, and it comes unexpectedly. It could come while you're worshipping, or going to work or to the market ... it could come as a

result of the action of evil men or of a freak accident – you don't know. One moment you're taking care of business as usual, and *boom*, your time's up. Therefore repent so that you are ready at all times.

With this in mind, I'd like to highlight two important aspects of the preparedness of repentance that Jesus is talking about. First that it is intensely personal – as personal as it gets. When you stand before God's judgment, you will stand there alone. It won't make any difference what other people think of you or what they say about you. Your record of performance won't be compared to anyone else's. It'll be just you and what you did or didn't do on one side, and the perfect Law of God on the other. It's in that light that you need to examine yourself so that you dig down deep, way past all the superficial stuff, and truthfully confront the sin, selfishness, and pride that are in your heart. We often make the mistake of measuring ourselves against others. We don't ask, "How am I doing with respect to God's perfect standard of love?" but rather, "How am I doing compared to everyone else?"

As a pastor I'm always getting questions about the other guy: What happens to the person who believes but isn't baptized? What happens to the person who has never had an opportunity to hear the Gospel? What happens to someone who comes to faith but can't quite master some secret sin? Now, these can be valid questions, but often they are asked because the questioner wants to know, "Where do I stand compared to them? Am I better or worse off?" If this is what's in mind, they're the wrong questions. The questions you should be asking are: "What are my sins? What am I doing or not doing that offends God? What evil thoughts and desires are in my heart? Am I sorry for them? Do I hate the way I am and want to turn to the right path? Am I trusting in the forgiveness Christ the Lord gave his life for me to win? Am I willing with his strength and Spirit to amend my life and try to do better?" Repentance needs to be *that kind* of personal.

The other thing that our repentance needs to be is continuous. It's not a one-time action but rather an entire way of life for the Christian. Each day our walk of faith involves critically analyzing our thoughts and actions, searching out sin, and finding it, denouncing it, and relying on the forgiveness God gives to us in Christ Jesus. Things to avoid here are giving up, growing weary, losing patience, or turning back the way we came and to the things we left behind.

In today's Epistle, St. Paul gives us the example of the Israelites in the desert with Moses on the way to the Promised Land. It's easy to read those stories and think, "Boy, they were they a bunch of ungrateful and unfaithful people. They were always complaining, always rebelling, constantly losing their confidence in the Lord – never trusting him to see them all the way through to the end." And while that's true, it's the wrong way to see those stories. I've often said that you don't understand a Bible story until you see Christ in it. The Scriptures are all about him; so if you don't see him in a passage, you're missing something. Similarly, even if you find Christ, you still don't understand the story unless you correctly identify yourself in it.

That's what Paul is saying about the Israelites. They are examples for you. If you look at them, you should see yourself. Then he shows the correlations: They were baptized in the Spirit and the cloud when they passed through the Red Sea, just like you were when you were baptized into Christ. They had their heavenly food: the manna that God gave them to sustain them on their journey. Just like you: you eat the true Bread of Life from Heaven, the body of Christ given for you on the cross. They had their spiritual drink: the water that flowed from the rock that Moses struck with his staff. And you too have in the Sacrament the blood that flowed from the Savior's side when he was pierced for you. They are just like you; except that they had the merely physical pictures of the greater spiritual realities that you now possess. But here's the kicker: Most of them didn't make it. They got tired. They grew impatient and irritable. They rebelled against Moses and God. They fell into idolatry and sexual sins. They stopped walking the path of repentance and

trust, and as a result their bodies fell in the desert on the way. They died short of the goal. What about you? What will you learn from these examples God has given you?

The Gospel lesson concludes with Jesus telling a parable. A land owner has an unfruitful fig tree in his vineyard. He tells his vinedresser, "For three years I've been looking for fruit on this lousy tree and it's produced nothing. Cut it down. It's just taking up space." The vinedresser pleads for a bit more time, "Let's give it another year. I'll prune and fertilize it – give it some tender loving care. And if next year it still yields no fruit, then we'll chop it down." It's not hard to figure out what Jesus means. You are the tree. The owner is the Lord God. He's looking for the fruit of repentance from you. Jesus is the vinedresser. He's devoting some extra loving care on you. Now is the day of grace. Now is the time to produce the fruit of repentance.

Therefore may our gracious Father, in his infinite mercy, grant to each of you the grace to persevere steadily in the way of sincere and personal repentance, that as you proceed you may continue to grow in both appreciation and trust of the Lord Jesus and the great sacrifice he made on your behalf. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!