

Making Amends vs. Being Made Amended

I guess it's just human nature, but there is that certain something in ***everyone*** that routinely feels the need to try and make amends when we do something wrong. It doesn't matter if it's a "big wrong" or a "little wrong." If we know we've done something wrong, it's only natural that we try and correct the situation and ***make things right***. Of course, there is one condition to this. **We need to feel sorry about the wrong we've committed.** If you're not sorry, then you're probably not going to care about making amends, are you? It's the ***grief*** that drives us. It's the ***fear and the guilt*** that weighs down on us, causing us to seek out ways we can "right our wrongs."

As we listen this morning to the Israelites in our Old Testament lesson, we get that all too familiar glimpse of people trying to "right their wrong." Think about that for a moment. All too often I think we tend to picture impenitent, thick-skulled Israel as ***not sorry for their sin***. "*Well isn't that what impenitent means? If you're not repentant of your sin, then you're not sorry for your sin.*" You are correct in saying this. However, you can be sorry for your sin and ***still*** be impenitent, just like these Israelites under Micah's care were. How? Remember what the word "repentance" means. It means "to turn around," as in turning back from your sin and turning to God and His Ways and His Will.

Look at the text, particularly at the ***Israelites' response*** when God lays out all that He has done for them and yet they still rejected Him. "*With what shall I come before the Lord? Shall I come before Him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old (perfect for sacrifice)? Will the Lord be please with a thousand rams and with ten thousand rivers of oil (once again, all for sacrifice)? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?*" Guys: That's the very depth of sorrow! The Israelites knew that they've made God angry, and they're ***truly sorry*** for this. They were willing to do whatever it took, ***including sacrificing their own kids***, in order to get back in the right with God. Unfortunately, their profound sorrow didn't translate into faithful repentance.

How can we say this? Consider what they turned to. They turned to ***personal sacrifice*** as a way of appeasing God and getting back in His good graces. Do you notice a problem here with all the stuff they wanted to do for God? ***God did!*** That's why Micah, the one whom God called to stand in His stead and by His command, tells the people point-blank: ***God's already told you what He wants!*** He's already told you what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God. **That's it!**

Okay...so what does this mean? We can understand the whole "walking humbly with God" part, ***but what does it mean to "do justice" or "love kindness?"***

That's sounds pretty "works-oriented," don't you think? Let's start with "doing justice." That Hebrew word—*mishpat*—that we translate as "justice," is a **judicial/legal** term that also carries with it the meaning of **"judgment" or "judging."** Case in point: The judges in the Old Testament were called "*mishpatēm*." They dealt with the Law—God's Law. To do justice is to simply do God's Law. ***"Yeah...simply do God's Law! If only it were that simple!"***

Ah-ha! With that retort you make the point for me! ***We can't do God's Law, at least not perfectly,*** which is what God commands, can we? In fact, there is **nothing** we can do that will make amends for our sin. It doesn't matter how "good" we are, how good our intentions, or hard we try. Unfortunately, that doesn't mean that we don't try to do just that—work/earn our forgiveness. Just like the Israelites, we try to make amends for the wrong in our lives by doing all kinds of things for God, ultimately playing a divine form of "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours." Maybe we don't try to present burnt offerings of livestock or oil or children, ***but we do try and make great sacrifices with our "stuff," as if that's what God is looking for.*** There's not one of us here who hasn't tried to win God over with, "God, I'm sorry. *If you get me through this and turn things around for me, I promise that I will do this, that, and the other thing for you.*" ***Is that what God wants to hear from us?***

You see, that's where the other side of "faithfully doing justice" comes into play. As faithful children of God who still wear fallen and sinful flesh, we ***rightly*** do the justice God commands when we stop trying to ***fool ourselves*** and instead turn to Him in true, humble repentance, acknowledging/confessing God's just judgment that our sin deserves nothing but temporal and eternal punishment. We acknowledge/confess the fact that we ***need*** a Savior; we ***need*** deliverance and mercy and forgiveness that can **only** come from Him. This is where the Israelites were off track. Remember: The Israelites ***were*** sorry for their sin, but they honestly thought that they could atone for those sins by offering up sacrifice.

Understand: God did institute the sacrificial/Temple system. The Israelites didn't come up with that on their own. However, rather than see these divinely commanded sacrifices for what they were—God's gift to them; real and tangible ***sacramental proofs*** that they were forgiven ***because of God's promise attached to those prescribed sacrifices,*** they began to look at the sacrifices as something they did for God to ***earn or merit forgiveness.*** Their faith in God's promise had been replaced with faith in their own deeds. This is why they couldn't understand why God was still mad with them. They were more than willing to make sacrifices of their time, talent, and treasures. They didn't understand that **God wanted their heart and their faith.** Without faith, all they did was present almighty God the theological equivalence of a dirty diaper.

This is where the other part of God's command comes into play: ***Love kindness***. Well...that seems like a no-brainer, right? Who doesn't love kindness shown to them? Folks: What God is saying here goes much deeper than simply being grateful for a ***little hospitality*** shown to you. The Hebrew word translated here as "kindness" (*hess-ed*) is actually translated, time and time again, as ***"steadfast/unconditional love/mercy."*** You'll recognize this same word in such beloved passages as *"O, give thanks unto the Lord, for He is good and His steadfast love endures forever."* *"God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."* *"God punishes the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate Him, but He promises to show steadfast love to a thousand generations of those who love Him and keep His commands."*

Think about that last passage as it ties into "doing justice." We fail to keep God's commands, and we confess that ***we're wrong and God's right***. In penitential faith, we call out to God to be merciful to us; to forgive us, not because of anything we've done, but because of Christ Jesus. In Christ, God has shown the ultimate love, kindness, and mercy. Because of Christ Jesus, our heavenly Father does forgive us—***completely and unconditionally***. This is what God asks of us. ***"Love His unconditional love."*** When you think about it, this is a very "Lutheran" reality being presented here in Old Testament Scripture. God is calling His people to salvation by faith alone in His unconditional grace and love alone, which is ours because of His loving and merciful Gospel promise alone—the promise who would become flesh for all mankind—Jesus Christ.

The problem with the Israelites was that ***this was nothing new or radical. They knew this***. In fact, God is very clear in saying that He told them, or as the Hebrew says, He "showed" them by sending them faithful prophets and priests like Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. Tragically, the people didn't listen. They didn't see, though God's truth was standing right in front of them the whole time, telling them exactly what God wants. ***They didn't listen. They refused to see***. In spite of all the gracious gifts of reconciliation and forgiveness God was holding out to them in His Word and sacraments, the people were hell-bent on doing what they wanted to do. They were going to make amends on their terms. It was a problem then, and it's a problem that persists today.

Okay... so what does all this mean for us today? It's all actually pretty simple, and for that reason I'll be brief. For starters, there's nothing new under the sun. I can't make you be truly repentant or faithful, just like you can't make anyone else be truly repentant or faithful. ***I can only point you to the justice and mercy of God***. Like Moses, Aaron, Miriam, Micah, and every other faithful preacher and teacher who has come before me, I tell you and show you God's Law and Gospel—***Law and Gospel which says you are dead in your sin but alive—unconditionally—in Christ, because of Christ***.

What does your Lord want from you? Excuses? Promises to try harder? The “sacrifice” of our money/material goods? **Nope, nope and nope.** What does He want from you? Simple. Look to and hold fast to God’s divine justice against sin, death, and devil, which was all poured out upon Christ. Look to and hold fast to—**love and cherish**—His steadfast and unconditional love for you; the undeserved kindness He has shown to you in Christ and because of Christ.

When all this, by His grace through the working of the Holy Spirit, is alive and taking place in the life of the Christian, walking humbly in repentant thanksgiving just comes naturally. ***It doesn’t have to be prescribed or commanded.*** When repentant faith is fixed on the cross of Christ and the unconditional, incomprehensible love God has shown to us here [*the cross*], ***walking humbly in repentance, love, and thanksgiving is just what those in Christ do.*** “*What shall I render to the Lord for all His benefits to me? I will offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving, and call upon the name of the Lord*” (Ps 116). This is what your Lord wants. This is what your Lord wants for all children of Adam. This is what your God and Father wants for you.

AMEN