

The Sins of the Fathers

Yes, you heard me right. God is faithful and just, compassionate and forgiving. But are we repentant? Are our hearts attuned to the Spirit, that is, to God's voice? Christians are a repentant people; 2 Peter 3:9 tells us, "*he (God) is faithful, not wanting anyone to perish but that all people should reach repentance.*" And with the Spirit's help it is very possible.

Martin Luther wrote: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), "he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance." Thesis 1, THE NINETY-FIVE THESES

But what about those sins of thought, word and deed you are to be quietly confessing in that moment of silence? What are you remembering? Do the deacons and I even give you enough time to consider them? Hmmm. The sins of thought, hold on to that idea.

Ezekiel was called to preach to the exiles in Babylon. The children of Israel are far from home and wonder if they will ever see their homeland again. They've taken to grumbling, complaining. It may just be that in exile some have taken up the all-too-human habit of passing the blame. "*Certainly, it's not our fault we are in this God-forsaken land. It was those northern tribes. The fault is Israel's, not Judah's.*" And just what did they do? They abandoned their fidelity to the Lord God, the only true God who freed them from slavery and brought them to the Promised Land. Idolatry was rampant in both kingdoms.

"*The word of the LORD came to me,*" writes Ezekiel. In other words, "God inspired me to preach, to declare to you his will. Hear this, O house of Israel..." And so he begins.

Ezekiel quotes a proverb heard among the exiles. "*The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge?*" They are complaining about what they perceive as God's injustice. It's not fair that the children have to suffer for the misdeeds of their parents. There is a sense of communal guilt and punishment here.

Community punishment, you remember that one. Your fourth grade teacher was in a mood that day. The room was to be silent, everyone

quietly/ silently working at his or her desk. Then some wise guy got of his seat to retrieve a book that fell on the floor. “That’s it!” the teacher said. “No recess for anyone today.” The whole class was punished because of one idiot. In a same way Judah blamed Israel for its plight. God was unfair.

Recall this episode from the conquest of Canaan; a certain man named Achan stole devotional items he found in the ruins of Jericho. Perhaps they were made of silver or gold. But such things, though they were the spoils of war, were off limits for the tribes of Israel; they had been warned not to touch, take nothing. In the next battle, Israel went up against Ai (Josh. 7) and lost. They were routed. The whole community suffered because of one man’s greed. With God’s help Joshua discerned who was at fault—Achan. His whole family was punished with him; they all died by stoning. “*The fathers eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.*” Children suffer for their parents’ sin.

Children suffer for their parents’ sin. We find this idea appended to the First Commandment, “*I am the Lord your God. You shall have no other gods.*” God is a jealous God, “*visiting the iniquity of fathers upon the children to the third and fourth generation of them that hate me.*” The children suffer for their parents’ failings. But there’s a but! “*But God will show steadfast love to thousands who love me and keep my commandments.*” (Exodus 20) God would rather be gracious than just.

God does not want to hear Israel grumbling about his perceived injustices. He’s tired of hearing the children blaming their parents. It’s not as though they are altogether without guilt. Ezekiel 18:3, “*As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used in Israel.*” Now understand this, “*the soul that sins shall die.*” Individuals are held responsible for what they do and for what they do not do: things done and left undone.

And the sinner, if he/ she repents, turning away from his evil. He shall save his life. The sinner who continues in his evil ways shall die. “God takes no pleasure in the death of anyone. So turn and live.” The principle laid down is quite simple. The path of repentance is the path of life.

We see it in the Prodigal Son. Realizing that his father’s servants have it better than he does, the wayward son does an about face; he turns around and heads home, the whole way rehearsing how he will demonstrate the sincerity of his change of heart.

The father was not concerned about the words. He has seen from afar the change of heart in the boy. And, the boy is welcomed home.

A criminal hung on the cross next to Jesus. He doesn't say much. In defending Jesus, he admitted, he confessed, that he deserved judgment and death. Would Jesus forgive him? Would Jesus remember him in the Kingdom?

We are comfortable with the General Confession of our liturgy. It is worded so that it covers all the bases; our sins in thought, word and deed—the things we do and the things we fail to do. But I ask you now, have you ever taken your seat and listed the thoughts of which you feel ashamed? Those sins of thought are tricky.

Caren sometimes tries to hold me accountable for what's going through my head. I protest. She can't read my mind. She can't say a thing, I insist, until the words spill over my lips, or my hands do something wrong. I reason to myself —“at least I didn't act on the thought.” TBTG.

But alas, I'm still guilty. My thoughts accuse me.

Sometimes the truth is that I am a man, a human, and as such it's not possible to live a pure, clean, holy life. Like Paul (Romans 7), the good I mean to do, I don't. And the evils I try to avoid, I think about them too. I am caught between the rock and the hard place. And it's the thoughts that get me—because I don't do what I'm thinking, scheming, plotting. And because I didn't do anything, I'm okay—so Satan says. In truth, however, just thinking, I am poor miserable sinner.

I need to repent of my thoughts maybe more than anything I've done or said. How about you? Repent. Turn back. Pay attention to the Spirit's guidance and God's Word. Consider the price Jesus paid for your ransom. Those sins of thought are tricky, and God holds you accountable for them too. Turn back, O man, forswear thy foolish way. Turn to God and live.