

“Apologize to your sister this instant!” “You give that toy back and say you're sorry!” “You're not leaving your room until I hear an apology!” This was the refrain of my childhood. Day after day, I was told to say I was sorry for something I had done wrong.

Was I actually sorry? Well, I was certainly sorry for getting caught. My actual level of remorse beyond that varied greatly. Sometimes I really was sorry for what I had done. I really didn't realize how I had hurt someone. I really wanted to express regret for my actions.

But sometimes I just wanted to get my mother off my back. I wanted to avoid a lengthy, more severe punishment. Sometime I said I was sorry because that's just what was expected of me.

I think we've all felt that at one time or another. We bump into someone in the crowd, we say, “I'm sorry,” and we move on, even as we secretly think, “Why did I just apologize? They ran into me!” We get into a fight with a spouse or another family member and we say, “I'm sorry.” Not because we are actually sorry, but because we lack the energy to argue.

Saying you're sorry is an expedient way to end an argument. Sometimes we mean it. Sometimes we don't. But we're so trained to say it in our childhood that, as adults, it just pops out of our mouths before we even have time to think about what we're saying.

Which is just one of several reasons why apologizing is not always the best way to begin reconciling with someone. We assume that it is. That any reconciliation we have with our brothers and sisters in Christ will include a healthy round of everyone involved saying, “I'm sorry.”

Now, apologizing is not necessarily a bad idea. I'm not trying to imply that saying you're sorry is sinful. Certainly not. But it's not always the best path forward. There's a better way. A more scriptural way. A more godly way.

Part of the reason why saying, “I'm sorry,” can be ineffective is for the very reason I just described. We don't know the heart of the person who's apologizing. Do they truly regret what they did? Do they actually understand the hurt they caused? Are they really going to avoid doing it in the future?

Or, to be blunt, are they just a good liar? A con artist, who can fool other people into believing their contrition is real? Short of a fool-proof lie detector or a magical truth serum, there's simply no way to know. Which always makes an apology just a little less valuable than we'd like.

The truth is that the old Adam can actually be very good at apologizing. He's not always outwardly rude and stubborn and hateful. We've been talking about that in our Thursday morning Bible Study: the sinful propensity in us to say one thing about a person and think something else. To say kind, gracious, apologetic words, even as a total lack of remorse, regret, or sorrow is actually in our hearts.

But this shouldn't surprise us. Because the old Adam learned it all from his father, the devil. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 11, “*Even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness.*” And as Jesus says in John 8, the devil is a liar and the father of lies. He teaches the old Adam to be a liar too.

And so when someone apologizes to us, it's always in the back of our minds, “Am I talking to the new man, who speaks with honesty and love for his neighbor? Or am I talking to the old Adam, who speaks with lies and hidden bitterness in his heart?”

It's in the back of our minds to wonder that because we know our own conflicted hearts. We know that sometimes we apologize with honesty and love for our neighbor. And sometimes we apologize with deceitfulness and hidden bitterness as well.

So what's the alternative? If apologizing is of limited value and the old Adam is always capable of shrouding our true motives in false sorrow, how do we reconcile with those we've wronged? Well, that is where our scripture readings for this evening come into play.

Because when you look at the scriptural guidance for this issue, you'll notice a trend emerge. A repeating theme. A repeating phrase. "Confess your sins."

OK, yeah, so what? Confess your sins. Apologize. Same thing, right? No. No, they are not. Confessing your sins and apologizing can be two completely different things.

Because the world can apologize. The old Adam can apologize. Theoretically, the devil can apologize. Because an apology is just words between two people. It's just a matter of etiquette and appearances.

But to confess your sins is a spiritual act. It is an action done between two brothers in Christ. It is done by the new man. And, maybe most important of all, it is done in the sight of God himself.

Because only God can define a sin and only God cares about sin... God and the holy things that God creates – like us in our baptism. To say, "I'm sorry," is to say, "I broke a social norm. I didn't meet some expectation that we had for my behavior." To say, "I sinned," is to say, "I broke God's Law. I deserve to be punished by God for what I did to you. I deserve to be condemned to hell for my actions."

And even if they are lying to you or you are lying to them, that doesn't change. Because God's Law is an objective truth, apart from your opinion, and God's judgement is an objective reality apart from any human consequences. And you can lie about your remorse, regret, or contrition until you're blue in the face and it won't change the fact that you did indeed sin and you are indeed under God's judgement for that sin, as you just confessed. You can lie to your neighbor about being sorry, but you can't lie to God about the sins you committed against your neighbor. He knows the truth.

To say you sinned against someone is to say that this isn't just an issue between you and them. This is an issue between you and them and God. It's a spiritual issue that needs a spiritual solution.

And, as I said, we see this all over our readings this evening. Our Old Testament lesson is an obscure little passage from Numbers 5, but really quite important. Because this was how ancient Israel pursued reconciliation.

"When a man or woman commits any of the sins that people commit by breaking faith with the Lord, and that person realizes his guilt, he shall confess his sin that he has committed. And he shall make full restitution for his wrong, adding a fifth to it and giving it to him to whom he did the wrong."

When you sin against someone you don't just hurt them. You break faith with the Lord. And when you confess to that action you confess it as a sin. A sin that has been committed against both God and them. And when you make restitution, yes, you make it to the person you have sinned against. But if there's no one you can give that restitution to, not even a next of kin, well, then you give it to the priest at the temple. Because even if that person you sinned against isn't around to receive your restitution, God is still around to receive your restitution. The sin still needs to be confessed and reconciled, no matter what.

Our Epistle from James 5 spells out the same thing. *"Therefore, confess your sins to one another."* Not, "therefore apologize to one another." Confess your sins. And along with confessing your sins, what else do you do? Oh, yeah, *"and pray for one another."* Why? Because confessing your sins is a spiritual act between 1)you, 2)the person you have sinned against... and 3)God.

And you'll notice the context here. This is not a passage about reconciliation. It's a passage about what to do when someone is sick and dying. Deathbeds are a time to confess your sins. They are a time to get yourself right with your neighbor and get yourself right with God. And who knows? Maybe this illness was about reconciling with your brother or sister in Christ all along. Maybe this reconciliation was exactly what God was trying to accomplish by letting you get sick in the first place.

And finally, we have our Gospel lesson. This wonderful parable. And, as Lutherans, we normally focus on the forgiveness of the Father, and rightly so. But tonight I want to look at what the son says to his father.

“Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.”
The son hadn't just sinned against his father. He had sinned against heaven. He had sinned against God as well.

He came to his father, contrite, remorseful, regretful, truly sorry for what he had done. He had drowned the old Adam. He was a new man. And he showed that he was a new man by confessing that his sin was not just wasting his father's money and bringing shame to his father's house. His sin was also in breaking God's Law.

For the past three weeks we have learned how to repent and receive God's forgiveness as baptized children of God. And we needed to start there, because repenting to your neighbor, confessing your sins to your brother or sister in Christ, it all must begin in repenting to your heavenly Father and confessing your sins to him. Once you have acknowledged that what you did to your neighbor was a sin that needs to be confessed to God, only then can you acknowledge that what you did to your neighbor was a sin that needs to be confessed to them.

Confessed... and forgiven. But that's for next week's sermon. Amen.