

A man borrowed a book from an acquaintance. As he read through it, he was intrigued to find parts of the book underlined with the letters YBH written in the margin. When he returned the book to the owner, he asked what the YBH meant. The owner replied that the underlined paragraphs were sections of the book that he basically agreed with. They gave him hints on how to improve himself and pointed out truths that he wished to incorporate into his life. However, the letters YBH stood for "**Yes, but how?**"

We utter these words in our lives. "I ought to take better care of myself, but how?" "I know I ought to spend more time in scripture reading and prayer, but how?" "I know I ought to be more sensitive to others, more loving of my spouse, more understanding of the weaknesses of others, Yes, but how?" These are all good qualities, and we know that, but how can we acquire them? As Christian people we know the kind of life we ought to live, and most of us have the best of intentions to do so, but how? We are afraid because we know where the road paved with only good intentions leads!

This morning we hear Jesus' parable of the fig tree, telling us to repent and bear good fruit. We know what the Christian life requires of us and yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we also know how far short we fall. So, the question that confronts us this morning is: "**Yes, but how?**" "Repent," Jesus says. "Acknowledge your sinfulness." That's the first step in beginning to live the Christian life.

But what is repentance? The English word has the rather unfortunate connotation of '*regret*', '*remorse*' and '*guilt feelings*' over something we did in the past. Such feelings can tend to lock us into the past rather than lead us towards future God wants us to embrace. To understand what Jesus means when he calls us to repent, we need to go back to the Hebrew word for repentance, which is '*teshuva*'. This word means '*to return*' and its focus is not on the past but on the future. *Teshuva* is not an emotion or feeling of regret, but a decision – a decision to turn away from where we are headed and move toward God. It is a turning away from the darkness toward the light. It is a joyous home-coming not a sad departure. It is allowing God to draw us toward Himself and transform us into '**children of light**'. For this to happen we must be willing to let go of the past and open our hearts to the new person God wants us to be. And we must believe that the God of compassion and love can transform and re-create us in the image of his beloved Son.

Confession is good for the soul -- yes, we know that -- but how can we develop a true sense of heartfelt remorse for our sinfulness and a real desire to change our ways? Most of us are willing to confess our sins so long as we don't have to change. None of us wants to admit that our sinfulness may require reconstructive surgery! After all, we like to think that God is happy with us the way we are and only wants to make us happy with ourselves.

Jesus' parable of the fig tree calls us to take responsibility for ourselves, for God gives us the key. Repent, Jesus says. Confess your sins and allow the power of God to live within you. Allow God to enable us to live as we ought. Let Jesus take possession of us and live in him.

We think this because most of us never take seriously the concept of sin. A Bible translator was having difficulty to translate the word "sin" for an African dialect. It seemed that the particular language had no suitable term for "sin." Apparently, the people who spoke that dialect lacked the concept. The closest the translator could come up with was a word that meant "**something bad to eat.**"

For a lot of people that's the extent of it. Sin is a matter of taste. Taste is an individual matter, and nobody has the right to tell another what to like or not like. And if sin is just a matter of taste, it certainly doesn't require the radical solution of repentance. Sin is not a matter of taste. It is tasting the forbidden fruit. It is taking poison into our lives, and the only antidote for sin is repentance and confession. We need to repent of our sinfulness, receive God's forgiveness, and produce the fruit that God desires. We need the spiritual strength and renewal the confession can give us.

Remember, Jesus is not demanding anything that we cannot produce. He doesn't ask the fig tree to produce bananas. He doesn't expect the fig tree to grow tall as an oak or be fragrant as a cedar. He is only asking it to be what it is, to do what it ought: produce figs. You and I have differing gifts. Each of us has our own unique gifts. And the miracle that happens is that through repentance and forgiveness, those gifts are released for the good of God and others around us.

A story is told of former world chess champion Bobby Fischer when he was a young boy. His mother took him to a museum, and he happened upon a painting that caught his eye. It depicted an exhausted older man dropped over a chessboard. Few of his pieces were left on the board, and he was conceding the game. On the other side of the board was his fresh and sharp opponent, Satan. The painting was entitled Checkmate. Already a chess prodigy, young Bobby Fischer stood looking at the painting for a long time. His mother soon tired of it called bobby, "Come now, Bobby, we have to go." Bobby Fischer did not stop staring, thinking. One more time his mother insisted, "Bobby, we have to go. Come now!" "But, Mom," he pleaded, "he has one more move!"

What the ordinary eye could not see the trained eye did. The painter had intentionally left an option open for the old man that he could not see. Fisher did. There is always an option open to us, even in the face of our fiercest opponent. Satan cannot checkmate God!

God Bless You.