

I was at a gathering of pastors once, and we were talking about all the challenges of ministry, and I'll never forget what one of the more experienced pastors said. "Brothers," he said, because pastors seem to talk to each other that way, "Brothers, we are trying to do the impossible." Ministry in Jesus' Name sometimes feels that way. I bring this up because today's Epistle Reading says something that is awesome, and true, yet it seems like an impossibility. Especially at this time of year.

Saint Paul writes in verse 14: "...make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Another translation (NCV) says it like this: "...forget about satisfying your sinful self." Wise words. Words that we believe were written by someone personally sent by Jesus and inspired by His Spirit. But all the same, words that seem impossible.

Each year, Thanksgiving immediately gives way to Black Friday, and then we are off to the races, caught in a sustained sprint through the end of December. And the message that is pumped into your life through every available screen and speaker is: "Make provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires. Remember to satisfy yourself."

What seems even more impossible is that you go to church and the pastor starts talking about Advent. And the more he talks about Advent it becomes clear that this isn't just a countdown to Christmas. Advent is supposed to be a time to prepare your heart. It's supposed to be a time to prepare your heart for what? For a Christmas that's actually about Christ. But that's not all. Advent means to prepare us for the next time Jesus comes, which will be as Judge and King. But see, that's the problem. It's a time to prepare your heart. It takes time to prepare your heart; time that we don't believe we have. We are trying to do the impossible.

The Church sends the message "forget about satisfying yourself," while everyone else says "satisfying yourself is the most important thing." We urge people, "Take time to prepare your heart for Jesus" while everyone else says "Are you kidding? Take time to get your lists done." Everyone else says, "Making yourself happy is the highest good." And the message of Advent is: "No. There is another highest good. Repent."

See what I mean about trying to do the impossible? Calling people to repentance during the Most Wonderful Time of the Year? Who does that? And what is repentance anyway?

I'm going to let you in on another conversation I had with a brother pastor. I had been a pastor for about ten years or so, and found myself pretty busy not only with life in the congregation, but also taking on more and more extracurricular activities, serving the district in a variety of ways, and it was beginning to take a toll on me. I had been asked to consider renewing my position as a circuit counselor and I really had mixed feelings about it, so I called a pastor whose opinion I valued, and started describing my situation. I didn't get very far into it before he said something that stopped me in my tracks. He said, "Listen, Mark. No is an answer." No is an answer. So simple but so helpful. By saying that, he helped me realize that I needed to give myself permission to say "no."

I share that with you in order to share this: Maybe, this year, Advent repentance will mean that you accept that "'No' is an answer." Do you know what I mean? Maybe it means you say 'no' to that one last demand on your time that will leave you without any

quiet time with God that day. Maybe it means you say ‘no’ to that one event that keeps you away from the safe harbor of worship. Please don’t misunderstand. I’m not trying to be Scrooge here. I love the traditions of Christmas as much as anyone, but the moment those traditions and expectations become burdensome and exhausting; the very second those traditions and expectations start pushing Jesus into the background I pray you will remember that “‘No’ is an answer.” If you’re looking for permission, like I was, there you have it. So simple. So helpful. It may change your Christmas if you take it to heart, and if you’re not careful, it might change your whole life as well.

Now, in the spirit of full disclosure, I did not tell you the whole story before. Remember the first pastor I told you about? The one who said, “Brothers, we are trying to do the impossible”? Well, that’s not all he said. His full statement was, “Brothers, we are trying to do the impossible. But nothing is impossible with God.” See how that changes things? Isn’t that interesting?

Now we can get somewhere. The Advent call to repentance is not only a call to say “no” to things. It is also a call to say “yes” to things; “yes” to better things; “yes” to the things of God. “Yes” to God’s gifts. Nothing is impossible with God, so if you ask for His guidance, and you say “yes” to Him in your December calendar, you will get more of Him. You will get more Jesus, whose birth is what all of the hubbub is about. You will get more Jesus, whose birth is worth celebrating, because we all get a new birth because of Him. If you say “yes” to Jesus in your December calendar, you will hear things you really need to hear: that your performance as a holiday host or hostess is not what defines you; God defines you as His child regardless of your performance. Your grief may be enhanced by the trappings of the season—that is normal and natural. But say “yes” to Jesus so that you don’t miss the news that the baby in the manger will become the man who steps out of his tomb, defeating death for us. Say “yes” to Jesus so that you will be able to navigate the get-togethers and family reunions with a tender and forgiving spirit. We are trying to do the impossible. But nothing is impossible with God.

No is an answer. Yes is too. So forget about satisfying your sinful self, and clothe yourself with the Lord Jesus Christ. Impossible? Not anymore.