

COMMENTARY ON READINGS FOR SUNDAY, SEPT. 25, 2005
(Twenty-sixth Sunday in Ordinary Time)
(Ezek 18:25-28; Ps 25; Phil 2:1-11; Matt 21:28-32)

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These readings have to do with reversals. Changing things around, experiencing unexpected turns, is one of the most important themes in the Bible. In the first reading from Ezekiel, the weary people in exile are complaining to the prophet in much the same way as the people in Malachi a more than century later. The prophet's message is: one can neither despair of God's mercy if one is a sinner, that is, one can change and be accepted back by God, or, conversely, if a righteous person backslides, he will be punished. Apparently these dynamics are too much for some people.

The psalm prays just for that: that God not remember past sins 'of one's youth', but that a new be made possible; it is a humble prayer for salvation. The second reading is a classic reversal passage. In order to move his beloved Philippians to do what is against human tendency if not nature, that is, to regard others as more important than oneself, Paul invokes the famous "Christological" hymn, which tells the story of Jesus Christ. His divine nature was far superior to Adam's being created in the image and likeness of God, but unlike Adam, who wanted to grab at divine status (Gen 3:5), Jesus humbled himself to the point of becoming a slave (or servant: one word means both in Hebrew and Greek; cf. Isa 52:13-53:12; John 13:1-16); what is more, he emptied himself (in Isa 53:12, the Hebrew verb means "to empty, pour out") to the point of death on the cross (scholars believe that this is Paul's own addition to the hymn; Paul was awestruck by Christ's sacrifice, Rom 5:6-8; Gal 2:20). Therefore, Christ, "the last Adam" (Rom 5:12-14; 1 Cor 15:45), reversed the first Adam's trespass, by doing the opposite (obeying humbly to an unheard of extreme), and has received unsurpassed glory and Lordship over the whole universe (cf. Isa 45:20-25, which calls the pagan nations to conversion).

The gospel reading illustrates the situation in Ezekiel. The bad son's words do not match his actions, but he "*changed* his mind" and obeyed, while the good son's words *remained* just that, lip-service. Jesus found that blatant sinners responded more sincerely and favorably to him than established people.