

March 23, 2025

Luke 13:1-9

Why do bad things happen to people? When atrocities happen in other countries or armies wipe out entire villages or innocent civilians, even Christians, are captured, tortured, or brutally murdered, people will always ask, “why does God allow that?” A young Christian couple tries and tries to have a baby, and they can’t. A Christian man suddenly dies, leaving behind a wife and children. A pastor’s three year-old son gets cancer and dies. Why? Every religion attempts to answer. Hinduism answers by saying, “if someone has misfortune, it’s karma at work repaying them for something bad that they have done, either in this life, or in the life before this one. In Islam, someone who suffers must have done something evil, or Allah is teaching them a lesson. Most people assume that it’s evidence of God’s anger or payback. We see this thinking in the Bible all the time. When Job lost his children, his friends came and said, “God only punishes the wicked, so you must have done something wrong!” In John 9, Jesus’ disciples see a man blind from birth, and they ask, “Who sinned, this man or his parents that God struck him with blindness”- assuming that’s the only reason God would do such a thing! In Acts, Paul is collecting firewood and a viper bites his arm, and the locals assume that he must be guilty of murder and the gods are making sure justice happens. This isn’t just an ancient problem! One of my professors at seminary told us about a woman he served- she had been a member at a very large church and had close friends. But then her husband had an affair and divorced her. As a result, her children were deeply damaged and rebelled against her and got into some trouble with the law. All this was clearly overwhelming and took away from her job performance, so she also lost her job. During that time, she noticed that her friends at church started being more distant, they stopped inviting her to coffee, avoided her at church, didn’t answer her calls, and eventually she confronted them and asked, “what’s going on? Why are you avoiding me?” And they said, “with all the stuff that’s been happening to you, we figured that you just weren’t walking with the Lord anymore.”

What does Jesus say? How should we respond to the tragedies and disasters in our lives and of those around us? This is exactly what Jesus addresses today in Luke 13, and he tells us exactly what our reaction should be: *Repentance*. Really? Yes. Repentance. And he tells a parable that gives us an insight into God’s heart, the theme for today: **It’s All About Repentance. 1.**

Repentance as The Goal. 2. Repentance as The Lens.

1. Repentance As The Goal. Luke tells us that a group of people approached Jesus, and they ask Jesus to comment on something that Pontius Pilate had done. Pilate, as you may know, was the Roman governor of Judea, and apart from being the governor that gave into Jewish pressure and let Jesus be crucified, he was also known for being prone to violence. We have a historical record of Pilate wanting to use temple funds to build water pipes into the city, and the Jewish leaders opposed him, so while a group of Jewish leaders were challenging him, Pilate sent soldiers into the crowd disguised as civilians and they killed many of the leaders. What these people are describing seems to be consistent with Pilate’s character- it seems that there were a group of

Galilean men bringing in sacrifices into the temple in Jerusalem, and for whatever reason, Pilate sent soldiers to strike them down on the Temple grounds while they were doing this, thus mixing their blood with their sacrifices. Right away, Jesus addresses what they are all likely thinking and says, “That’s not it.” They weren’t worse sinners or especially bad. That’s not why God allowed that. And according to Jesus, that’s not even the right question. The question shouldn’t be, “why them,” but, “why not me? Why wasn’t I the one victimized by Pilate’s ruthlessness? Why wasn’t I the one crushed by the tower of Siloam? Why didn’t I get cancer? Why haven’t I died yet? Why not me?” Jesus’ answer- because God wants you to repent.

What do we mean by that? Repentance is very clearly important to Jesus. He talks about it all the time. Repentance is a huge, huge, deal. Any church or group of people that calls themselves Christians is going to prioritize repentance. Repentance is everything- it is the goal of Jesus, it’s the goal of preaching, it’s the whole reason why the Church exists- so that people repent. But, what is that? In the Old Testament, the word *shuv* is the word that gets translated as “repent,” but really it just means, “turn,” or “turn to the Lord.” The idea is that I’m walking the wrong way, and I need to turn back to God. In the New Testament, the word used is “metanoia,” which means “a change of mind,” the idea that I’m thinking, living, acting, speaking a certain way, and I realize that I’m wrong and I turn to God. Today, When most of us hear the word “repent,” we hear, “feel bad about yourself!” To most people, repentance is just this vague feeling of self loathing or guilt and when we repent, we get a slap on the wrist from Jesus and then go on our way. That’s really not it. From what we see in the Scriptures, repentance has two parts- the first is that we feel genuine sorrow over our selfishness, our lies, all the ways we’ve hurt people and disobeyed God, and second and equally important part is that we look to the cross, see what Jesus has done, know that it was for us, and know that we are forgiven and set free. That’s what God wants. God wants you to be humbled when you realize how sinful and wretched you are, but also filled with joy at how loved, how forgiven, how accepted you are because of what Jesus has done. God wants you to feel the weight of your sin, but he also wants you to know that Jesus has taken burden instead of you and it’s completely gone. Repentance should remind you that you deserve nothing, but also remind you that God has given you everything beyond what you could dream of. This is what makes the task of preaching so complicated. Repentance has two parts, sorrow over sin, and joy in Jesus. Typically, people are inclined to one of those. Some of you here may be inclined to think your sins aren’t that bad, there’s a lot worse people than you, and when towers fall on others and good things happen to you, you think, “well, I must be doing something right! God must be really happy with me.” You’re wrong. Your sin is a big deal, and it has the power to destroy you forever, and you need to repent. Some of you, however, walk away from church thinking, “I’m worthless. I’m terrible! God could never love me!” You’re wrong. The Son of God thought you were so valuable, so worthy, so important that he gladly suffered hell itself because he wanted you. You are God’s child! You are perfect in his eyes- no sin, no stain, nothing. Therefore, repent- yes, feel sorrow over your sin, but then turn your eyes off of your sin and turn to the cross and see what Jesus has done for you and who he has declared you

to be. Repentance humbles us, but it also fills us with a different kind of confidence. With joy. That's what God wants. And as we see in Jesus' parable, repentance is not only God's entire goal, but also the lens through which we look at everything in life.

2. Repentance as a Lens. Jesus then tells a parable that gives an insight into the heart of God. There's a man who owns a grove of fig trees, and a certain fig tree hasn't produced fruit in 3 years, which actually, when you look at the Old Testament, one of the laws God gave them was when you plant a tree, you don't collect any fruit for three years, then on the fourth year you give the fruit as a sacrifice to God, and then you can take the fruit. So in reality, it's been seven years! No fruit! So he's going to cut it down, until his assistant says, "give it another year, let me lay some fertilizer by the roots, and let's see if it produces any figs." What's the point? Everything that happens in this world to you, your friends, your enemies, is fertilizer meant to produce the fruit of repentance. Everything that happens, painful or pleasurable, success or failure, life or death, happiness or sadness, is sent by God out of his mercy in order for you and everyone to come to repentance- not just bad things, good things too. Every second that we have here on Earth is God's gracious gift to us, because it is our opportunity to know him, trust him, love him, and be saved. That is the lens through which we see everything. You see, there are two ways to look at life, the first is religion, the second is repentance. Let me show you what I mean.

If you look at your life through the lens of religion, like most people, even non-religious people, then when good things happen to you, you will say, "well about time, God. Clearly I deserved this. I must be doing something right, unlike all those people!" And when bad things happen to you, you'll despair or grow bitter because you either think you did something to deserve this, or that God is being unfair with you! And then when good things happen to other people, you'll get envious and say, "why do they get that and not me?" And when bad things happen to others, you'll say, "wow- they must have done something awful." And when you look at life through the lens of religion- the good things will make you shallow, arrogant, and vain. The bad things will make you bitter and angry. When good things happen to others, you'll be envious and unable to be happy for anyone, and when bad things happen to others, you'll be unable to be any comfort to them because clearly they did something wrong- as we see in so many other religions, and even Christian churches! But if you view life through the lens of repentance, you'll constantly repent and be more humble and more joyful. When good things happen to you, you'll repent and say, "I deserve nothing, and yet God has given me everything in his Son and eternal life itself is mine, what more could I want? This is icing on the cake, an undeserved gift of God, thank you!" And when God takes those good things, or people away, you'll repent and say, "Yes, this hurts, and I don't know why God would do this to me, but he isn't punishing me, he gave what I deserve to Jesus, and therefore I know he isn't angry with me. This hurts, this is awful, but God is my father." And when good things happen to others, you'll repent and say, "Lord, I am nothing and deserve nothing, and yet you've given me everything, good for them that they've gotten icing on their cake. They can have it, I have enough." And when bad things happen to others, you repent and say, "That tower could have easily fallen on me, Pilate could have easily killed

me. That could have been me on the death bed. And God has given me mercy upon mercy.” And that enables you to comfort and share in the sorrow of the people who undergo disaster. When you view life through the lens of repentance, good things will make you more humble, bad things will make you softer and more tender, and that will enable you to rejoice with those who rejoice, and mourn with those who mourn.

A final word. Johann Gerhard was a Lutheran theologian, and he says this: “*God has promised grace to the repentant soul, but he has not promised tomorrow.*” Jesus is very clearly sending a message: The time to repent is now. The time to take God’s Word seriously isn’t tomorrow, isn’t when you have kids, isn’t when you get sick and know you’ll have to see God soon. That might be in five minutes. The time to repent is now. In repentance, God offers you the highest of joys, the deepest desires of your heart, salvation and life forever. Why wait? Amen.