

REPENT OR DIE

Luke 13:1-9

Third Sunday in Lent (Series C)

March 24, 2019

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Third Sunday in Lent comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 13, verses 1 through 9. It is on page 738 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus lays out the need for repentance in the most necessary terms possible. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 13, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he answered them, “**Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?** ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

⁶ And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ ⁸ And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ ”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

I had a moment this week where I had to work up a little bit of courage. When I tell you about it, you might understand, or you might think I'm kind of a wimp. It was on Thursday when it was time to submit the information for the bulletin. That's when I need to have the hymns, announcements, and sermon title all finalized. Usually I try to make the sermon title summarize the main point of the text. But I kept coming up with this: “Repent or Die.” Now that sounds a bit harsh, doesn't it? It's not exactly what you would call “seeker friendly.”

But it is the point of the text. I kept rereading the text to make sure I was getting it right, and it very clearly is the point of the text. Twice Jesus says, “**Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish**” (13:3, 5). And I remembered the words the LORD spoke to Ezekiel in the Old Testament lesson: “If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand” (Ezek. 33:8). Now, there isn't a one-to-one correspondence between the prophet Ezekiel and preachers today, but on the Last Day, I don't think it will go well for preachers who neglect the preaching of repentance. God wills that all people should repent (Luke 24:47; Acts 17:30; 1 Peter 3:9). To ignore repentance is to ignore the will of God. The point of the text is very clearly, “Repent or die.”

Now the tone of this statement is extremely important. Tone can have a dramatic impact on the meaning of words. Many innocent text messages have backfired when the recipient misinterpreted the tone.

So what is Jesus' tone when he says, “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish”? Is it a threat or a warning? Is he holding a gun to your head, or is he throwing you a lifeline? Because there is a big difference.

Remember how God spoke to Israel through Ezekiel: “I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (33:11). God is not threatening Israel. He is pleading with them—even begging them—to turn back and live.

And in the gospel lesson, Jesus is not threatening these people, but warning them.

They come to Jesus with the report of a tragedy. Apparently there were some Galileans—those would be Jews from the region in northern Israel where Jesus lived. And Pilate—we don't know why he did it—but apparently he killed them while they were offering sacrifices to God, and he mixed their blood in with the blood of the sacrifices. This is the same Pilate who oversaw Jesus' trial and execution. He was the Roman governor who was sent to keep the peace in Israel. Most likely, he wanted to make an example of these Galilean Jews, though we don't know why. We don't know what—if anything—they had done.

Jesus asks a rhetorical question: “Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered this way?” (13:2). And he answers his own question: “No” (13:2).

There is an ancient false doctrine that says God punishes you in this life for your sins and rewards you for your good deeds. So if something awful happens to you, you must have done something wicked to deserve it, and if something wonderful happens, you must have done something good to deserve it. This false doctrine is revealed in the book of Job, which is probably the oldest book in the Bible. Job's so-called friends try to convince him that he must have committed some horrible sin that led to his children dying and all his property being destroyed. These were some really bad friends. And this false teaching was still very common among the Jews at the time of Jesus. The clearest manifestation of it today is the doctrine of karma. It even shows up in *The Sound of Music*, where a couple silly lovebirds—who are really bad at theology—sing, “Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good.” It's the most natural doctrinal system: *If I do right, good things will happen to me; if I do evil, bad things will happen to me.* Our minds very easily work this way, but it's wrong.

In order to make this point, Jesus brings up a second example. There was a tower in Jerusalem that fell and killed eighteen people. Were they worse sinners than everyone else? No. Sometimes horrible things happen, and we don't know why. Sometimes wonderful things happen, and we still don't know why. Or, at least, we don't know the specific reason. In general, we know enough to attribute every good thing to the grace of God and every evil thing to the fall into sin. But as for why some evil thing happens to one person and not to another, we simply do not know. The person who suffers something evil is not a worse sinner than the person who lives a long and prosperous life. So Jesus asserts that these people who suffered tragedy were not worse sinners.

But Jesus doesn't say they didn't deserve it. In fact, the implication, at least, is that they did deserve it. And this might be the most shocking part. “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” They actually deserved what they got and much worse, and so do we.

One of the most foundational truths of Scripture that we must understand is the doctrine of man. “None is righteous, no, not one. … No one does good, not even one” (Rom. 3:10; Ps. 14:1; 53:1). We “were by nature children of wrath” (Eph. 2:3). We were enemies of God (Rom. 5:10). “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:11). These are just a few of the basic statements of Scripture on the nature of man.

The popular belief is that mankind is morally good; we just make some mistakes. I think we would all like to believe this, but that verse just isn’t in the Bible. What we do have, however, are all kinds of statements about how corrupt mankind is. And this is foundational to Christian doctrine, because if we don’t understand our own nature, we won’t recognize our need for a Savior.

This also seems to be the place where the majority of false teachings go wrong. We mentioned karma already. Karma rightly understands that God is just. Though the definition of God is very vague, it understands that God—whoever or whatever that means—it understands that God is just. But karma makes a mistake by assuming that man is more or less neutral, a blank slate where good deeds push us up and bad deeds pull us down.

And most Christian heresies—as well as other false teachings that don’t quite rise to the level of heresy—most of them come from an overly optimistic view of human nature. The end result is that all these false teachings place us in control of our own destiny. If we do what is right, or if we exercise the goodness within us, then God will be bound to reward us.

But God is never bound to reward us. Whatever good God does for us is purely out of his grace. If we actually received what we deserve, we would all receive far worse than the tragedies that make us question God. When God allows a tragedy to happen, or when God outright punishes the wicked, he is not being unjust. God is just. We are the ones who are not.

Now we do want to be a little bit careful about how we apply this, because there is a right way and a wrong way to do it. When someone asks you why something evil happened to them, do not say, “Well, you know, you really deserved it.” That is inappropriate, and it’s not really the way Jesus applies this doctrine. The correct thing to say is, “I don’t know,” because we really don’t know why something tragic happens to one person and not another. We do, however, know that God is gracious to us in Christ Jesus and will right every wrong on the Last Day. And we can certainly say that.

But as we reflect in our own hearts on these tragedies, we are reminded of the corruption of this world and the depravity of our own hearts. So we are reminded to repent. This is the right way to apply what we have learned. And this is how Jesus applies it to us: **“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”**

Now you might ask, well what do I have to repent of? If you don’t already know, there is a problem. But let’s try to fix that problem. I’ve told you this before, and if you give me enough time I’ll say it again: Consider yourself in light of the Ten Commandments. And when you do this, think of the Ten Commandments broadly, because that is how they are meant to be understood. They are a summary of all the moral commandments in Scripture. So “Honor your father and your mother” applies also to other authorities. “You shall not murder” applies to every kind of malicious bodily harm and even to our thoughts and words. “You shall not commit adultery” applies to every kind of sexual immorality, whether it occurs in thought, word, or deed. It’s tax season, so we should also apply, “You shall not steal,” to lying on our tax returns. This is

also a violation of the commandment, “You shall not bear false witness.” Consider yourself in light of the Ten Commandments, and consider the Ten Commandments broadly. We might be tempted to consider them very narrowly, because then we might be able to get ourselves off the hook, but that is not the right way to read them. They serve as a summary of all the commandments in the Bible. So find whatever sin—or sins—the Holy Spirit is convicting you of, and repent.

Now how do I do that? What does it mean to repent? What is repentance? Apparently it is necessary. Repent or die. That's about as necessary as a thing gets. So we had better understand what repentance is. In short, it means a change of mind or a change of direction. It means to turn from one thing to another. So, to repent of our sins certainly means to turn away from them, but there is much more that needs to be said concerning repentance. Ultimately, it means turning in faith toward Christ.

There's a popular notion of repentance where it means you quit sinning. If your sin is dishonoring your parents, you repent by cleaning your room and doing whatever your parents tell you to do. Or if your sin is shoplifting candy bars, you repent by not doing it anymore. That's the popular definition of repentance, but it's not the Christian definition. The problem is this: before God, you're already guilty of the sins you've committed. Quitting doesn't change that. It's like a court of law. You can't say, “Well, judge, I don't murder people anymore. It's been at least three days, and I promise I'll try my best to not do it again.” That won't fly in an earthly court, and it won't fly in the heavenly court. We are already guilty of the sins we have committed. And besides that, as soon as we put one sin away, we'll notice a dozen more that are worse than the first. And while we're working on those sins, the first one will probably come back. So we'll come back, again and again, asking God for a second chance, a third chance, a fourth chance, and so on, until we just start saying, “One more chance, because I can't remember how many it's been now.”

Christian repentance doesn't mean that we stop sinning. It doesn't even mean that we try to do better. And it certainly doesn't mean that we find a way to make up for our sins. That's not the kind of God we have. In the end, Christian repentance does lead us to try to do better, and, by the grace of God, we do gradually do better. But it's better to think of our good works as the fruit of repentance, instead of repentance itself, because there's an order to things, and the order actually matters.

If repentance means doing better, or, at least, trying to do better, than all we're doing is turning from sin to our own efforts to be better. These efforts will inevitably fail. And, when you think about it, this isn't really faith in Christ but faith in ourselves. If we think we can make ourselves right with God by not sinning anymore, we're not trusting in Christ; we're trusting in ourselves.

So Christian repentance consists of these two parts: contrition over our sins and faith in Jesus Christ. Do not trust in your own works, for you will perish by them. But trust in Christ. His works actually hold up before the Father as righteous. And, yet, he died anyway, not on account of his sins, for he had none, but on account of ours, so that he might remove our sins from us and give us his perfect righteousness to fill the dark hole left by them.

This is repentance: not that we turn ourselves from sin to righteousness, but that God turns us, for we find righteousness not in our own works, but only in Christ. Once God has turned us in faith to Christ, then good works will follow as a fruit of repentance. But if we confuse the order,

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if we imagine that our works can make us righteous before God, then we are not trusting in Christ, but in ourselves. This is not repentance, and we will certainly perish.

Consider the parable of the barren fig tree. We see the justice and patience of God. The owner of the vineyard certainly has the right to chop down this tree. It's wasting space in his vineyard, and it's sucking up rain water and pulling nutrients out of the soil that could be feeding fruitful trees. It's his tree; he can do with it as he pleases. But he is patient. His desire is not destruction. His desire is for this tree to be changed. He is just. If this tree does not change and bear fruit, he will cut it down. But he is also patient. So we see both the justice and the patience of God.

We also see the nature of repentance, for it is not the tree that changes itself, but the vinedresser who works on it. This is the work of the Holy Spirit, who convicts us of sin and calls faith to life through his Word. If the tree bears fruit, it is not because the tree fixed itself. It is because the vinedresser is really good at what he does. He takes barren, fruitless trees that are bad—they're just wasting space and resources—and he changes them, so that they bring forth fruit.

And so the Holy Spirit is really the one who works repentance in our hearts. He takes sinful, deceitful hearts that conceive only evil instead of good. He convicts them of sin, he turns them toward Christ, where they find pure and infinite righteousness, and he brings forth fruit.

Repent or die. God is just. If you refuse his call, you will perish. But God is also patient, and he does not desire for you to perish. Confess your sins. Look to Christ, who was crucified for you—more than that, who was raised and lives forever. Glory in his righteousness, for it is yours. “Live ... and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness; even as He is risen from the dead and lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true.” (*Small Catechism*, “The Second Article”). Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.