

TO ALL: REPENT

Luke 13:1-9

Third Sunday in Lent (Series C)

March 23, 2025

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 13, verses 1 through 9. 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.’ ”

Blessed Lord, You have caused all Holy Scriptures to be written for our learning. Grant that we may so hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them that, by patience and comfort of Your holy Word, we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

You may be seated.

Jesus makes his point very clear. There is no ambiguity. There is no wiggle room. We should all listen to it and accept it, because it is a matter of life and death. He makes this one point very clear: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (13:3, 5). Amen.

We could end the sermon there, and that might be the sermon we need. It would emphasize Jesus' point, so perhaps we would remember it and be repent. Or someone might resist that point and just call me lazy. Or someone might not understand what repentance really is, and despair of their inability to change their hearts, and leave with no hope. That's the danger of ending there.

The danger of going on to explain more is that someone might think that, by saying more, we can explain away Jesus' command to repent. And you may go your way thinking that you are okay just the way you are. Jesus' point remains true: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” If you want me to say more in order to dull the sharpness of Jesus' point, I cannot. “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

It starts with some people telling Jesus about some Galileans whom Pilate had mingled their blood with their sacrifices. We talked a little bit about Pilate last week. Pilate was not a Jew. He

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was the Roman governor appointed over the land of Judea, which was the southern region of Israel. The capital of this region was Jerusalem, which was also the holy city for the Jews. So Jews from Galilee, which was the northern region of Israel, would travel to Jerusalem to make sacrifice. There were sacrifices at the temple for special feast days, as well as for various life events. So there were sacrifices every day. And, apparently, there were some Galileans who had traveled to Jerusalem to make sacrifices. And Pilate had them killed, mingling their blood with the sacrifices they brought.

This might actually have some impact on Pilate's reluctant decision to crucify Jesus soon after. Being a ruler of a foreign land is a delicate business. You have to instill enough fear in the people so they don't think you are weak. But you can't be so harsh that you incite them to rebellion. Pilate had to maintain this balance of fear and peace. And so, having killed these Galilean worshippers, he maybe couldn't afford to anger the people any further. So he didn't want to anger the people by killing an innocent Galilean. And he could see that Jesus was innocent. But when he saw that the Pharisees had stirred up a crowd against Jesus, he saw that the way to keep peace was to give in to their demands. So he neglected justice in favor of peace and ordered the crucifixion of an innocent man. But, what he reluctantly intended for evil, God intended for good and brought about the forgiveness of sins for the entire world.

So some people report to Jesus what Pilate had done to these Galilean worshippers. Jesus' says, **"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?"** (13:2). This response might seem a little strange to us, though it would have made more sense to a Jew. We don't know the rest of the story. Perhaps they had committed some crime while there, which Pilate punished them for, but we don't know that. The Jews also believed, as many religions do, that if something bad happens to you, you must have done something bad to deserve it. That makes a little more sense of Jesus' response.

These Jews that Jesus was speaking with may have assumed that those Galileans were worse sinners than them. And we can derive some false hope from this way of thinking. We might look at people who commit crimes and get sent to prison. Or we might look at people who get addicted to drugs or alcohol, or make other poor life decisions and suffer the consequences. We might look at them and think, *I'm not as bad as those people, so I'll be okay. They made poor decisions, and they're getting what they deserve. So, since I'm not suffering those things, I must be okay. And God must be okay with me too.* But Jesus says, **"No ... unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."**

And in order to make his point even clearer, Jesus gives another example. There was a tower in Siloam that fell and killed eighteen people. That wasn't a civil punishment for anything. It was just a random accident. And Jesus says concerning them, **"Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."**

So we might also wonder sometimes, when we hear of disasters, if God is punishing a city for something. Jesus certainly does not say yes, that God works that way. But he also doesn't necessarily say no. It's more like, *you're asking the wrong question.* Instead of speculating about their unrighteousness, we should consider our own. We should think, *I deserve that same fate.* We should ask, *If that happened to me, what would become of me? Would I be allowed to stand beside Christ in the Judgment?* Instead of examining someone else, we should examine ourselves.

And when we read about people in the news who have been accused or convicted of some crime, we should not think, *They're getting what they deserve.* We can be thankful when justice is done. But above all, we should think, *Unless I repent, I will also perish.*

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We can become complacent, when nothing terrible happens to us, to think we are okay. That lack of disaster is simply God's patience. So Jesus tells a parable about a fig tree. For three years it bore no fruit. So the man was ready to be done with it. He ordered the vinedresser to cut it down. The vinedresser urged patience. He said, **"Let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure"** (13:8). This is a picture of God's patience and kindness. Instead of cutting down the tree, the vinedresser resolves to be kind and generous to the tree. And so is God with us, with the intention that the kindness of God would lead us to repentance (Rom. 2:4). It's reasonable for the vinedresser to think that if he gives the tree what it needs, it will bear fruit.

Now think about this from the perspective of the fig tree. Imagine you are the tree. You bear no fruit, so the vinedresser gives you some nice manure. Trees like that sort of thing. Do you think, *alright, this is just what I need to bear fruit?* Or do you think, *he just rewarded me with manure; I must be just fine the way I am?* In the second case, the tree confuses the vinedresser's patience and kindness for approval. But the vinedresser is not patient forever, and he will not throw good manure after a tree that bears no fruit. The next year, he will cut it down.

Do you see what this means? The patience and kindness of God is meant to lead you to repentance. If your life is comfortable, do not confuse that comfort for God's approval. **"Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."** It would be unnatural for a tree to be fertilized but still bear no fruit. It is equally unnatural for a person to receive good things from the Lord's hand but not repent. Do not confuse his patience for approval.

So what is repentance? This is critical to understand, and our hearts are tempted to get it wrong.

First, let's understand what it is not. Repentance is not turning your life around so God will accept you. It is not you fixing yourself in order to earn a reward from God. That is something that we cannot do, like we talked about on Wednesday night at the midweek service. We cannot turn our hearts to God. We cannot change our natures. Repentance is really God's work, where he turns our hearts to trust in him. And our good works, the fruit that we bear for God, is not really repentance either. That fruit follows repentance as the natural result.

Here's the best way to define repentance. It consists of two parts: contrition and faith. Through the Law, the Holy Spirit works contrition in our hearts. He humbles us to see and confess our sins. Then he works faith through the Gospel. We learn that Jesus has redeemed us from these sins by his holy and precious blood. So the Holy Spirit turns our hearts to trust in the righteousness of Jesus instead of our own. So repentance is not us turning away from sin in order to do good works. That would still be to trust in ourselves. But it's turning away from sin or turning away from trusting ourselves to trusting in Christ. It's not the tree changing itself. It's the tree being changed by the vinedresser. Consider the fig tree. The vinedresser doesn't just tell it to change itself and bear fruit. But he gives the tree what it needs. If the tree is going to change and bear fruit, it will be because of what the vinedresser does for it.

Repentance isn't really about what you do. It's about what Jesus has done for you. So do not trust in your own righteousness. Trust in the perfect and complete righteousness of Jesus Christ. He took your sins in his body when he died on the tree, as Peter says in his first letter, "that we might die to sin and live to righteousness" (1 Peter 2:24). The purpose of his death on the cross was to take away your sin, and not only that, but also to give his righteousness to you in place of your sin. So when God the Father looks at you, he does not see your sin, because it is removed. But he sees the perfect righteousness of his Son, Jesus.

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This is repentance: contrition and faith. So confess your sins, and trust that your gracious heavenly Father forgives you on account of Jesus' blood. You should trust this, because it's true.

And what sins should we confess? We should consider ourselves in light of the Ten Commandments.

Have I worshipped a different God? Perhaps not one that claims to be a deity, like Baal in the Old Testament. *But has my fear, love, and trust been captured by some other idol, like money, power, comfort, health, fame, or honor?*

Have I misused the Name of God, either by cursing, speaking carelessly about God, or by neglecting to call upon him, which is the proper use of his Name?

Have I neglected to worship him? Have I not made use of his Word in my personal or family devotions at home?

Have I dishonored my parents in some way?

Have I caused my neighbor bodily harm? Or have I harbored hate in my heart toward them? Or have I simply neglected to help and befriend my neighbor?

Have I been unfaithful to my husband or wife, if not in act, perhaps by what I have seen or thought? Or have I simply neglected to serve and cherish my spouse as I should?

Have I stolen anything or been deceptive in some transaction?

Have I lied? Have I gossiped? Have I spoken something intended to harm another person's reputation?

Have I coveted some person or thing? Has my heart been drawn away by something to think that, if I can obtain it, then I will be satisfied?

God has given the Ten Commandments for our good. They help to ensure a peaceful and quiet life in this world. But when we violate them, we not only harm ourselves and our neighbors, but we also come to deserve God's wrath, because it is rebellion against him and his will for his creation. But death and destruction are not his good and gracious will for us. So he calls us to repent. He calls us to confess these sins with full assurance that he will hear our confession and forgive us for Jesus' sake.

Remember what the LORD said to Israel through the prophet Ezekiel. "As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ezek. 33:11). That's from the Old Testament reading.

Consider the work of Ezekiel. The LORD appointed Ezekiel as "a watchman for the house of Israel" (33:7). This was a grave responsibility. If the LORD gave Ezekiel a message to warn the wicked, and if Ezekiel neglected to warn them, the wicked would die in his sin, but the LORD would hold Ezekiel guilty. But if Ezekiel did pass along the warning, the LORD would not hold Ezekiel guilty, even if the person refused to repent. So this was a grave office.

We might kind of covet the office of watchman, because it's the office of telling other people what to do. And, not only that, but it has the weight of the LORD behind it. So we might ask, "Who gets to be a watchman today?" We might think, *Maybe God has given me the gift of discernment to tell other people what to do?* No one should aspire to this, because it is a dangerous calling. And we should not equate ourselves with Ezekiel's office as a watchman. But the principle might apply, in some sense, to your station in life. For example, if you are a parent, or perhaps a grandparent, and you see your children or grandchildren living in unbelief or sin, who will warn them if not you? Consider your station in life, and whether you might, by the

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kindness of God, call them to repentance. Other than your station in life, we should not presume that God has made us a watchman, nor should we desire it.

Rather, we should especially think about it from the other: *who has God sent as a watchman for me?* The answer is, *it could be anyone*. The people of Israel could have said to Ezekiel, like they said to all the prophets, “Who are you to tell us what to do?” It could be a friend who becomes aware of some sin or error in your life. It may be your husband or wife. It could be a random stranger. It may be a preacher on the radio or YouTube. Not that every voice that tries to tell us what to do is correct, but if they speak the truth, we must listen. *Do they correct me according to the Ten Commandments? Are they instructing me to trust in Jesus?* If so, I should repent. Even if someone angrily tells me to honor my parents, or with pride or hate they tell me not to commit adultery, if the word is true, I should repent. Another person’s bad attitude, or our feelings against them, do not give us an excuse to dismiss the Word of God. In humility, we should turn and confess our sins.

When Jesus says, **“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish,”** he also implies the promise that if you repent you will live. This is his good and gracious will. God has no desire for you to perish. If he did, he would have left his Son in heaven, instead of giving him to die for your sins. But, in fact, your gracious heavenly Father has given his Son for you, **“that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life”** (John 3:16). And Jesus willingly, even joyfully, accepted the painful curse of death for your sake. And for the sake of Jesus’ blood, God declares you righteous. Your sin is forgiven. And by the power of Jesus’ resurrection from the dead, he guarantees you eternal life in the new creation. So repent. Confess your sins, trust in Jesus’ sacrifice for you, and live. Amen.

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