

Unless You Repent

Luke 13:1-9 | Feb. 2, 2020 | Bryce Beale

Right now is the time for you to get right with God. There is not one good reason for you to delay longer; there are a million good reasons to settle your accounts with your accuser this moment.

“Behold,” the Scriptures say to you, “now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.”¹

What are you waiting for?

If you have never known Christ, or if you this morning are his disciple but you have wandered from the paths of life, then there is no reason to wait before you return. The prodigal son came to his senses in the pig sty, and rose and went home. You too—it is time to come to your senses and go home.

The Father waits at his window, squinting his eyes against the horizon, waiting for the shape of his long-lost son. You cannot say, “I can’t come to God now; I’ve sinned too much, he would never receive me.” The Bible has a different opinion—it asserts that God would come running to you and take you in his arms. There would be rejoicing in heaven of no small a scale.

What prevents you from acknowledging your sin and, by the power of God, casting it away right now? If you are in sin, and you are not immediately confessing it to God and renouncing it, then you are actively choosing to keep that sin over God. There is no passive ground.

If you say to yourself that you will wait until tomorrow, then the Scriptures answer, “You fool! [What if] this very night your soul is required of you?”² There is nothing for it friends—now is the very hour, the very moment for reform. Now you must repent; now you must appeal to God for grace and aid.

I cannot make you, and some of you hearing this will leave here with your sins all intact, not softened with oil, not ready for removal. Others may begin to feel a sorrow, until the devil distracts the mind.

¹ 2 Cor. 6:2 (ESV).

² Luke 12:20.

But know that if you persist in your way of wickedness, you forfeit usefulness for God, you surrender the deepest, most satisfying meaning of your life, you dishonor the peerless name of the Almighty, you discourage angels, and you place yourself under the fearful and everlasting wrath of Jehovah.

Unless you repent. That is all God requires, all he asks of you—repentance, turning from sin to him, humbling of the heart. But from love he demands it be done *now*, before it is too late.

If I have not succeeded in convincing you, that is ok. For this morning we will do no other than observe the words of Jesus on this subject of repentance, and repentance *now*. His words cut like the sword, beyond the reach of anything I could ever say. So to him I commit my cause, and to his words we turn our attention. Everything is on the line. Let us receive his word with joy and trembling.

LUKE 13:1-9

We have before us this morning two passages which form one message. First Jesus, in verses 1-5, responds to something said to him. And then in verses 6-9 he offers a parable to reinforce what he said in his response.

But the two parts form a single, piercing cry: “Repent!” they say. Do not get distracted, says the first section; and do not delay, says the second. So we will consider these two in turn, and plead that God might pour upon this place grace sufficient to melt every heart that still resists him.

Don't get distracted

First then, Jesus responds to something said to him, and in his response he conveys this message: do not let anything distract you from your need to repent.

Jesus has just, at the end of chapter 12, urged us to know the signs of the present time—by which he means we need to realize that the judgment of God is just at the door. He ended that chapter by urging us to get right with our accuser—God!—before it is too late.

Now our text today begins, “There were some present [or who came] *at that very time...*”³ At the very time that Jesus was urging

³ ESV.

his listeners to get right with God, to repent, some unnamed persons appear and, in one sense, change the subject. They are still speaking about judgment, I suppose, but they've moved the spotlight away from their own sin and judgment, onto others whom they must have considered worse sinners than themselves.

This is, after all, how we often try to cope with our own offenses against God. We could own them, repent of them, be done with them—but a less painful way to excuse them is to turn our attention to worse sinners and say, “Well, my sin is not as bad as theirs. I'm not Hitler.”

See how they seem to do this, for after coming to Jesus they “told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” We know nothing more of this event than what is said here. It seems that some Galileans, perhaps rebelling against Pilate and their Roman overlords, were slain by the governor's soldiers while they were in the temple itself, sacrificing to God. And so their blood was spilt at the very place that the blood of their sacrifices was spilt.

To the Jewish people, this would be like dying by falling into sewage. It was a terrible, taboo sort of death. And thus the people must have imagined that these Galileans were wicked beyond average wickedness, and God granted that their sin found them out.

Jesus actually offers another event similar, but not involving Galileans like himself, in verse 4: “Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them.” In this case, some natives of Jerusalem—eighteen of them—were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Siloam was the area at the southeast corner of Jerusalem. Once, when Jerusalem was about to come under siege, King Hezekiah had dug a tunnel under the city to bring water in from a spring outside. The water came to Siloam. Much later the Romans built one of their mighty aqueducts to bring water in to that area. The pool of Siloam, you may recall, is where Jesus told a blind man in John 9 to go wash off his eyes, which healed him.

Apparently a tower, maybe one related to the building of the Roman aqueduct of Jesus' day, fell on top of eighteen Jerusalem Jews, killing them.

Here then we have two tragedies—the first at the hands of men, with Pilate's soldiers slaying some Galileans, and the second at

the hands of “chance,” with an accident snuffing out the lives of eighteen people.

I’ve offered both incidents at once because Jesus’ reply to both tragedies is identical. He has only one thing to say concerning them both. And in essence it is this: don’t let these tragedies distract you from the tragedy that will befall you if you do not repent. Do not spend so long looking at these, and pondering these, that you never act, that you never repent and escape the far greater disaster to come.

See it in Jesus’ own words, in verses 2 and 3: “And he answered them, ‘Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.’”

And again in verses 4 and 5: “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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

We can infer from Jesus’ words that he has a great concern. And if you are here present and are in sin, then this concern he has for you.

He is concerned that you might be distracted from repenting by your own sense of self-righteousness. Why else would the Savior say, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?” Or, “do you think that they [on whom the tower fell] were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?” Jesus himself knew what was in men and women. If he asks their thoughts here, it is because he knows their thoughts.

“Speaking of judgment,” they seemed to say, “how about those Galileans, huh? Or those eighteen on whom the tower fell? They must have been worse than all the other Galileans and Judeans—myself included.”

The problem with this line of thought is that it does not remove sin, it only tries to minimize it. It would be like getting a large cut that gets infected, turns to gangrene, and begins to spread so that your life is at risk; and then, instead of going to the hospital to deal with the infection, you say, “Well, this is bad, but it’s not cancer.”

It's not cancer—but it can kill you just as well as cancer can, and it will if you do not deal with it. You may not have to deal with cancer, but you have to deal with gangrene. Both are fatal. Don't be distracted by the cancer you don't have, so that the gangrene you do have kills you.

This is precisely Jesus' point. The Pharisee could stand and pray in the temple, "God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector."⁴ But the problem was that the Pharisee was like a Pharisee. His eyes were so fixed on the sins of the tax collector, the baser and more obvious sins, that he ignored his own lack of love and justice, and his own self-trusting pride. His sins may have looked different from the sins of the tax collector, but they were just as lethal. Jesus words to him are, "If you do not repent, you will *likewise* perish"—that is, just as certainly.

Those are his words also to you. You may be aware, even very aware, of the wrongs and injustices of others, especially when committed against you. You may have been burned by church people. And you comfort yourself with the thought, "At least I'm not a hypocrite like those people." But Jesus is now taking your head and forcing it away from those people. "What about you?" he says.

You will never know God's forgiveness unless you repent, and you will never repent unless you face up to *your* sins. They are the only sins you are responsible for, and you are responsible for them. When Jesus says in verse 4, "do you think that they were worse *offenders*," the word he uses for offenders is "debtor." You are indebted to God—he made you, and you violated his commands. There is a price on your head. There is a real judgment to come, and God's justice will be exercised perfectly. No sin of any sort can enter his heaven, or dwell on his new earth.

"It is," say the Scriptures, "appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment."⁵ And again, "The soul who sins shall die."⁶ And again, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

But give attention again to those few words, do not let them escape you—they are everything, our only hope and our only salvation: "unless you repent." There is a blessed "unless"! If

⁴ Luke 18:11.

⁵ Heb. 9:27.

⁶ Ezek. 18:4, 20.

there were no “unless,” God would be just and we would be doomed. But there is an “unless.” You will perish forever in the lake of fire, enduring the right wrath of God for your sin, “unless.” Unless what? Unless what? This is it, this is the only hope we have of eternal happiness, of escape from wrath.

“Unless you repent.” Repentance is a turning. It occurs when you accept God’s evaluation of your sin, and you accept his right judgment against you. You agree with God that he is just, and you are not. And you turn from the sin you loved, to God. Those are the two things that happen at once—you turn your heart and intention away from sin, for you see it now as poison and death, and in turning from you sin you have turned to God instead, for you see him by faith as your hope and life and salvation and joy.

Repentance requires no great labors on your end. It is not in itself a work of the law. It is the equivalent of “looking” to Christ. He has done the work, he has suffered the wrath of God upon the cross, has died and then resurrected defeating death and hell. He worked. We look. We ride into heaven upon the coattails of his work.

As the hymn puts it, “All the fitness he requires is to know your need of him.”⁷ That is repentance. And if you know your need of him now, no matter how base and horrid your sins have been, no matter how powerful the temptations that hold you now, no matter how high your hand has been in rebellion against God, he will accept you. “Unless you repent” means that, if you repent, you will not perish, but have everlasting life.

Repent. Put your fingers in your ears to every distraction, and run to Christ.

Don’t delay

This leads us to our second major point, which is Jesus’ second major point. He has urged you not to be distracted from repenting. But now he presses home his point by urging you not to be delayed. Don’t wait. Repentance needs to happen right now.

See him make the point with the parable he offers, beginning in verse 6:

⁷ Joseph Hart, “Come, Ye Sinners, Poor and Needy.”

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. 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?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The nation of Israel, in the famous song of Isaiah chapter 5, was compared to a vineyard that God planted, but which bore no fruit. Therefore God tore it down.

In the gospel accounts of Matthew and of Mark, we are told that when Jesus was near Jerusalem, Israel's very heart, he encountered a fig tree that had leaves, but no figs. He cursed it, and it died. It was a picture of Israel, centered there in Jerusalem, and it said the same thing as Isaiah's song: God's people were not bearing fruit, so judgment was coming. There is no reason to keep a tree or a vine if it does not do what you planted it to do.

That is the same point Jesus is making in his parable here. A man plants a fig tree in his vineyard, and for three years he comes expecting figs, but finds none. He has already been quite patient. The problem is, if this tree is not going to produce any figs, it needs to be removed because, figs or no figs, it is sucking nutrients out of the soil.

But just when the owner of the tree plans to cut it down, his vinedresser intervenes: "Sir, let it alone this year also." The vinedresser thinks the problem may be in the soil, who knows? So he will dig around it, in case the soil is not letting moisture through to the roots, and he will put manure around the tree to fertilize it, in case there are not enough nutrients in the ground.

And so we come to the point of the whole parable: the vinedresser says, "Sir, let it alone *this year* also..."

Three years there has been no fruit, but God's patience carries one more year. Yet it is *only* one more year. If in that span of time no fruit appears, then as John the Baptist had already preached in chapter 3, "Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

You may wonder now about repentance. We said it was no more than a turning from sin to God, yet here Jesus seems to say good fruits are required if we are to be saved from the wrath to come.

Of course they are—only because if you do turn from sin to God, then what could the consequence be except less of sin and more of God? Otherwise, how is there any turning? Do not misunderstand, we are not saved by our works. We are not trying to win our way into heaven, or buy our way there by our deeds, as if God could be bribed. The payment for our sins has already been made by Christ upon the cross, and nothing can be added to that full atonement, which saves to the uttermost all who come to him.

But good fruit is the evidence that you have repented, just like good fruit is the evidence that a tree is good. This is exactly what Jesus himself says in Matthew 12:33: “Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit.”

Repentance is all God requires of you, because if you repent, you will be immediately reborn. And if you are reborn, then you will be a good tree bearing good fruit. It is only our stubbornness that keeps us bad trees. The second we surrender, we are good trees and good fruit will follow without fail. “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ [that is, turn to him] and you will be saved.”

Paul says this as clearly as it can be said in Ephesians 2:

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. [But he adds,] For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.⁸

We are in other words, at the time we turn to God, made into good trees, his workmanship. And so we bear good fruit, or we do good works that are now natural to our new nature.

If we have this clearly in our minds, we can understand the main point of Jesus’ parable. He is still playing on that theme, “Unless

⁸ Vv. 8-10.

you repent,” and now he reminds you that your repenting must not only happen, but it must happen right now.

The tree in the parable has already wasted the ground three years, but only one year is left to it. The sands of time are sinking. The tree is not in the first of its four years, when it may feel free to dally and linger. It is not in the second, when it may say, “Well, I still have at least half my life to live out.” It is now in the third of four. The time is short. The axe is already at the root of this tree.

That is the one point Jesus wishes the parable to get across to you. You who are in sin, you must repent *right now*. God has waited long for you to repent; he has held his peace, has even broken up the ground and spread fertilizer, has put you in a church under the word of God, has perhaps surrounded you with believers, and immersed you in a country with Christian roots. What more could he do for his beloved than what he has already done?

Friend, God is banging upon your door. In his patience he is pleading—marvel that your Creator would plead with you! More, that he would die while you were yet a sinner, so that you might be saved. God’s justice speaks, “Cut down the tree, why should it waste the soil?” And God’s mercy speaks too, “Let it alone one year.”

God has your number—he has brought you here today and driven you into a corner. The prophet’s finger is in your chest, saying, “You are the man” or “You are the woman.” Harden your heart if you will, but I know God’s patience enough to believe that his goodness and his mercy, those two hounds of heaven, will chase you out those doors when this service ends. You are a wanted man or woman, and may your conscience feel it without rest. Those hounds will, if God be merciful, nip at your heels all this week, all this month, all this year.

But when one of God’s years has passed, they will stop nipping. That is Jesus’ warning to you. The axe is ready to fall, and it will fall—unless you repent.