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Repent or Perish!
Luke 13:1-5
Series: Key Texts for Difficult Times

Introduction: Take your Bible and join me in Luke 13, Luke chapter 13. We live in a world that is filled with constant news of calamity and tragedy. This has always been true in this sin-cursed world – that people die unexpectedly and tragically from horrible events. But we are more aware of these tragedies in our day and age than has ever before been available. Your news feed on social media is inundated with stories of difficulty and tragedy. The constant drone of the 24-hour news cycle seems to move from one catastrophe to another. We hear of a shooting which involved drug activity and several lives lost. We hear of a terrorist attack and dozens killed. We hear of an earthquake or a tsunami or a tornado or a hurricane – and billions of dollars in losses, thousands of lives affected, and most tragically many people killed. We hear of traffic accidents where whole families are killed, or we hear of a house fire or a building collapse or a boat sinking – and it all amounts to making us numb over the whole thing. It is impossible for us to fully deal with every tragedy that we hear about, so we grow distant and desensitized to it all. But then something comes along that we can no longer avoid. Some striking tragedy that is either so very tragic, or so very uncontrollable and threatening – that we can't help but think about it and respond to it. Like the terrorist attack of 9/11 or the spread of a worldwide pandemic, like the Coronavirus. What are we to make of it all? How are we to think about God and about what He is doing in the world when we see tragedy strike and lives lost and humanity thrown into turmoil?

Well, there are lots of voices out there telling you all kinds of different things aren't there? Most of those responses to the spread of the Coronavirus are words of glib hope. For instance, some are telling us to stay home, stay safe, stay away from others, and we will all get through this. But what if we don't all get through this? Others are saying that we will all be okay at the end of this, and if we are not yet all okay, then we are not yet at the end of this – I'm not even sure what that means, but it's a quote from a famous celebrity! Others are telling us that this pandemic will cause more harm to lives and economies and countries than any other

hardship we have faced. Some are telling us that this is really no big deal, the threat is pretty minimal, and we should all just get back to life as normal. If you're at all like me, you don't know who to believe anymore. The reality is, no one person or government entity has all the facts or can make all the proper predictions of how this is all going to pan out. And yet we find ourselves pining for more information and more press conferences with our President and more direction for the future from those in charge. But what we must be pining after – longing for – is the clear, right, and always relevant word of the Lord. If Jesus were to appear and preach to us this morning, what would he say in light of the worldwide tragedy of our current pandemic?

Well, in Luke 13 we have his words for times like these. In our text we find Jesus confronted with the headline news of great tragedy and loss, and we hear his response. Luke 13:1-5 says this . . .

I have said to you often that in times like these we need to hear from the Lord. And we need to hear particularly powerful truths presented in well-loved texts. So, we have looked at Jesus' words in Matthew 6 in which he calls us to not be anxious but to seek first the Kingdom of God. And then we looked at the great promises of Psalm 23 which presented the Lord as our trustworthy Shepherd. And, in coming weeks we will look at other texts which will be filled with words of comfort and hope and promise. But we don't just need good and encouraging and faith strengthening words in times of tragedy and difficulty. We also need true and hard words of cutting conviction. That is what Jesus provides for us in this text. These are not words we think we need to hear at a time like this, but Jesus thinks otherwise. These are the words he chose to speak in the wake of great tragedy. Therefore, we must need to hear them. Beloved, I must tell you that if ever there was a time in the midst of this pandemic where I wish we could be together in the same room, it is right now. This is a hard message and it needs to be communicated with compassionate zeal, which I am convinced will not come through so well on a video screen. But may we all trust that the thrust of the sword of the Word is being wielded by the loving hand of our gracious Lord.

In Luke 13, we find Jesus in the middle of his ministry. He is most likely in or around Jerusalem at the time of the Passover when he utters these words to the great crowd. Luke has given us an extended account of his teaching in chapter 12, and that teaching ended with Jesus calling for readiness and repentance. He tells

them that they will not know the day or the hour of the Master's return. He tells them that if they follow him, they can expect opposition from even their own family. And he tells them, right at the end of chapter 12, that if they can interpret the seasons, they should also be interpreting the signs of the times. They know it is springtime by the budding trees, therefore they should know that the time for judgment is near by looking at the things happening in their world. Therefore, he tells them in 12:58 that they should settle with their accuser before they get before the judge. In other words, before the Judge of both the living and the dead arrives, they should seek peace with Him.

It is in the context of that promised judgment that we find this interaction between some in the crowd and Jesus. In verse 1 we are not told who they are or even what they specifically asked, but we do know the gist of their concern. In light of the context of coming judgment they brought up the Galileans who were slain by Pilate and their blood was mixed with their sacrifice. They were essentially reading the headline news about the most recent tragedy and they were asking Jesus what he thought. And more than that they were asking him – is this an evidence of judgment upon those who died?

This event is not listed in any of the other gospels, nor in any historical record, so we don't know anything for sure about it other than what is included here. Pilate was a notoriously violent Roman ruler over Judea. Some scholars have tried to link this killing of the Galileans with 5 other possible events of violence orchestrated by Pilate against the Jews. None of them are the same, but together they show the nature of Pilate's rule. He was suspicious of any treason against Rome and he was determined to keep the peace by sniffing out any hint of rebellion. So, what probably happened is that there were some Jews from Galilee that were suspected of some form of dissension or riot against Rome. When they were in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration, they were sacrificing their lambs to observe the Passover feast, and Pilate ordered their execution in the Temple where their blood was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices. It was a horrific and tragic event caused by a nervous dictator and a rebellious people. It was a violent and gross offense to the Jews' most holy place. So, the question proposed to Jesus is – what about them – were they being judged by God?

In verse 4 Jesus brings up another headline event of their day. He poses to them the tragedy of the tower of Siloam falling and killing 18 people. Again, we don't

know a lot else about this incident. The tower of Siloam was in the SE corner of Jerusalem and we do know that Pilate built an aqueduct down there – as the Romans were so prone to do – and it is possible that something happened during construction that a tower fell and killed 18 people. So, the one tragedy is an act of human violence and the other tragedy is an unforeseen and unstoppable accident. And in both of them, lives were tragically taken suddenly and without time to prepare. So, the question being asked of Jesus is essentially – Is this evidence of God’s judgment upon them?

So, what is Jesus’ response? Well, in the face of tragedy, Jesus presents them and us with a convicting question and a clear command.

I. A Convicting Question – vs. 1-2, 4

- a. In answer to their question Jesus puts before them his own convicting question. He knows their hearts and he knows why they are asking about those who were tragically killed. He knows that they think God’s judgment was obviously upon those who perished, and their sudden death is proof that they were in need of great judgment. There is something commendable about that view by the way. They understood the seriousness of sin against a thrice holy God and they realized that God was well within his Divine right to bring swift judgment upon the human race. By the way – did you notice that neither Jesus nor the crowd say anything about Pilate or about the builders of the tower and how they are responsible for these great tragedies. They just assume that the fully sovereign Lord over all is in control of such things. And that assumption is correct. God is indeed Sovereignly controlling every event, every disease, every natural disaster, every pandemic, every car accident, every cancer diagnosis – it is all according to his plan, directed by His hand for the accomplishing of His purpose. This virus is God’s virus and through it He is accomplishing a million things that all fit perfectly into His overarching sovereign will. So, the crowd is right in that assumption, and they are right in their view of the seriousness of sin. But they are wrong in their assumption about the lesson of the tragedy.
- b. They assume that those who died were more guilty of sin than they are. That’s why they died – because they were worse sinners than the others who were around them. The calamity fell upon them because

in some way they deserved it because they were especially wicked. We see this same attitude in other places in the Scriptures too. Think of John 9 and Jesus' own disciples seeing a man who was blind from birth. They ask him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Their theological framework determined that if someone was born with a bodily defect this must be the judgment of God upon them for their sin. Or think of the viper that strikes Paul on the island of Malta in Acts 28. When the native people of the island saw the viper hanging onto Paul's hand, they said to one another – "No doubt this man is a murderer. Though he has escaped from the sea, Justice has not allowed him to live." Even they, pagan people who had no framework of truth or of the God of the Bible, even they assumed that calamity upon someone was evidence of their great sinfulness. So, it doesn't matter if you are religious or pagan, Jew or Gentile, refined or island native – when you see calamity fall upon someone else it is apparently built into our sinful nature to assume that this is because of that person's sin.

- c. But what does Jesus say? Well, by the cutting question he is making clear to them that there is no truth to their view. He is turning their eyes off of the one who has perished in the calamity and turning their eyes toward themselves, as we will see in verses 3 and 5. By his convicting question he exposes their smug self-righteousness and their presumption of their own righteousness and the sinfulness of others. This is the natural posture of our sinful hearts. We are hard on others and easy on ourselves. We judge others to the Nth degree while giving ourselves a gracious pass. So, it is with this crowd in Luke 13. They were quick to assign guilt based upon a series of assumptions about those who perished. But they don't even know the true state of their own heart. They presume to know the mind and plans and ways of God in tragedy, but they can't even see the vile wretchedness of their own life. They are so familiar with themselves and yet they do not truly know who they are before the God of Heaven. And the truth is, we will never see rightly until we have been shown by Christ the black spectacles of sin which distort our view.

II. A Clear Command – vs. 3, 5

- a. This convicting question which shows them their wrong understanding of the situation is followed up by the clear command

of verses 3 and 5. This is the right response to the tragedies they are talking about. Instead of seeing in those tragedies as specific judgment for sinners greater than themselves, the people were to see in those events a call for them to repent. In other words, these disasters were to be stop signs along their journey causing them to stop and evaluate life. They were to see in the tragic death of others a warning to themselves. They were not to think first of the greater sin of the ones who died, but of the great sin they harbored in themselves. And they were to see in the tragedy a shot across the bow of the ship of their life that they too will one day die, and after this moment of death they will stand before the Judge of all. So, they must repent, or they will likewise perish, Jesus says. This is his clear command – repent!

b. *Repent or Perish*

- i. What does it mean to repent? What is Jesus calling the crowd to here? And that is a very important question to answer well, because the consequence of not repenting is to perish – which means to be eternally lost. It does not simply mean to die a physical death because everyone will do that. It rather means to die physically before you have repented and therefore to die in your sins and not be at peace with God. So, we need to get this right.
- ii. Let's start with an example from normal life. Think of how you have considered the Coronavirus pandemic. Maybe early on it was a distant problem and you didn't think much about it. As the frenzy and fear picked up in our own country you gave it a bit more attention and you started doing some research of your own to try to figure this thing out. And through your research, let's say, you became very convinced that this virus was a very serious threat to your health and could potentially bring your own demise. Before that point you were out in public often and thought little of how close you were to people or of what you touched. But now that you have done this research and become convinced that this is a real threat, now you are mentally convinced it is a danger. And this knowledge compels your will to make decisions which are now completely different than they were before. You no longer go to the grocery store or out

in crowds. You no longer shake anyone's hand and you now are extremely conscious of what you touch. Your emotions are also greatly connected as you feel fear and frustration and anxiety and deep desire for this to all end. In essence then, you have repented when it comes to Coronavirus.

- iii. That is similar to what Jesus is saying here to the crowd. They must have a change of mind and a change of will and a change of emotions. This is a whole inner man change. This is the real you making a real decision about a real problem and its real solution. Well, what is the problem? The problem is our sin. And what is the solution? The solution is Christ Jesus, the second member of the Trinity who came to take our sins upon himself so that we do not perish.
- iv. This crowd that Jesus is talking to thought of themselves as not too sinful – at least not sinful enough to deserve God's judgment. The Galileans who were killed by Pilate – now they were sinful. The people who died in Jerusalem, crushed by the collapsing tower – now they were really sinful and deserving of God's judgment. But us? No, we are doing just fine. Jesus is confronting their smug self-righteousness and calls them to change their mind about that – to see the truth about that. They presumed themselves to be like judges over those who died in the tragedy, but Jesus is confronting them with the truth here that God alone judges all, so they must be ready to be judged by him. As James will later say in James 4:12 – There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, who is able to save and to destroy.
- v. This crowd didn't think they needed rescued – and that is the natural human condition. We don't think we need rescued. But then we see tragedy strike someone else this should cause us to ask – am I ready to meet God? And the way to be ready to meet God is to repent and to believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to save you. This is why Jesus came to earth – to purchase eternal life for His people. In John 3, Jesus is talking to a religious leader by the name of Nicodemus and he explains to Nicodemus that he must be born again if he is to have eternal life. His good works and his religious accomplishments and his family identity will

not make him right with God. He must be born again. He must be given a new nature. He must be given the wonderful gift of repentance and faith from the Spirit of God who moves wherever He wills. And in the middle of that interchange Jesus explains to Nicodemus why he himself came to Earth – “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” (Jn. 3:16-18).

- vi. Jesus came as the preeminent expression of God’s great love for the world to make peace with us through his righteous life and his substitutionary death. If you are born again you will repent and believe in Christ. The Commander of the Lord’s Army has himself come behind enemy lines. He left the glories of Command Central – Heaven itself – and he donned the battle fatigues of human flesh and he came to those who were at war with Him. And he came bringing with him a peace agreement to end the war. And this peace agreement was not a mere cease fire, but it was an offer to no longer be an enemy of the Creator God, the Sovereign One over all, the King of kings and Lord of lords. It was an offer that we should not be able to refuse. Paul describes the agreement in 2 Corinthians 5:21 as God making Christ to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God. In Colossians 1:20 he is described as reconciling all things to himself by making peace through the blood of His cross. In other words, the peace agreement is that the second person of the Trinity will enter into humanity and live in perfect righteousness. As the sinless Son of God then he will proclaim to the world that there is peace available with the God they are all fighting against, but this peace is only found in Him. He will then give that sinless life as a sacrifice on the Cross of Calvary so that He can purchase the forgiveness and redemption from sin for all who will believe. He will then, having truly and fully died under the righteous wrath of God to

take away sin and its punishment – he will rise from the grave and ascend into heaven where he patiently waits for and pleads for sinners to repent while there is still time. Because he is about to return to the Earth and lead the procession of those who have accepted the terms of this peace agreement. He will take them from this Earth and remove them from the outpouring of his wrath upon mankind that will come in the Great Tribulation. This is the peace agreement offered to you today! To look to Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. To see in His righteous life, his substitutionary death, his victorious resurrection, and his soon return your only hope for rescue from God's wrath against your sin.

- vii. This is what it means to repent. It means to see the truth about the whole matter and to admit it is true and to cling to Christ Jesus as your only hope for salvation. In 2 Thessalonians 2:10 it says that the wicked will perish because they have refused to love the truth and so be saved. In other words, they refuse to admit the truth about themselves being at war with God in their sin. They refuse to admit that they will have to give an account one day to the great Judge of all. They simply will not believe that God has provided a way for them to be reconciled to himself through His Son. They refuse the gracious gift, not just of a cease fire, but of a full and free acceptance into His eternal Kingdom and an adoption into His family. They would rather rely upon themselves. They would rather relish their sin and enjoy its pleasures in this life with no thought of the terrors of Hell which await them in the next. But it is far better to go to heaven weeping over sin than it is to go to Hell comfortable with sin.
- viii. In 1 Corinthians 1:18 we are told that the word of the cross – the word of this peace agreement that God is offering – is folly to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved it is the power of God. Those are the two categories of humans alive today – those who are perishing and those who are being saved. Those who are outside of Christ in sinful unbelief and those who are in Christ by grace through faith. Which are you?

- ix. God has sent me here today with a message from Heaven. He has not spoken to me in some vision or some new revelation. Rather, he has called me to be his ambassador through his clear Word. He has told me to be a minister of reconciliation – to go into the world and to plead with them to be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ. So Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5:20 – “Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” I am Christ’s ambassador. I have delivered to you this morning the message of Christ. As the coronavirus invades our world and kills more and more people, the message you need most to hear is – repent or you too will likewise perish! The threat of the virus has caused you to change your lifestyle and adjust your schedule. If you got the virus you would do everything you could access to conquer the virus in your body and stay alive. Well, friend, there is a more deadly virus already at work to destroy you, and it is sin. Nobody will escape its effect. We are dead men walking. We have a spiritual disease we cannot cure. Sin is the disease, and Christ is the cure! God is making his appeal to you through me this morning. And so, like Paul, I implore you – be reconciled to God. Do not delay. You do not know how much longer you have. You do not know whether you will make it through this week. By next Sunday we may be mourning your death and planning your funeral. What then friend? What will matter most? What will matter most is if you are right with God through the peace agreement he has offered you through His Son – the Lord Jesus Christ.
- x. I wonder – what should I go back and report to my King about you? What should I tell him was your reply? Will I have to say – I went to my own, but my own did not receive me? Will I have to say – I proclaimed the message of the cross, but they thought it was foolish and ridiculous? Will I have to tell the High King of Heaven that you did not see the need for peace? That you were happy with the war and thought that it was going quite well for you? Will I have to tell him that you were distracted with the things of this world and promised to give

attention to the state of your soul at a later time? What will I have to tell my Lord and Savior about you? Friend – how I long to tell him that another sinner has repented and believed and is accepting the peace agreement! May today be the day of salvation for you!

- c. But what about you Christian? If you have been born again and have repented of your sins and have been given peace with God through Christ – then is there anything here for you? I'm so glad you asked! The verb “repent” in verses 3 and 5 is in the present tense and the active voice. This means that this is not a one-time deal where you decide you will accept the terms of peace offered by God and then continue on in your sinful rebellion as if nothing has changed. Rather, this is an every day, every moment posture of the heart. You will not be free of your sin nature until heaven and it is constantly calling you to return to your former hostilities with the God of Heaven. But the ongoing posture of the Christian's heart – of one who has truly been born again – is one of ongoing repentance. He is not free from sin, and so therefore he does not make peace with it. One 19th Century writer stated the case perfectly when he said, “The difference between an unconverted and a converted man is not that the one has sins and the other has none; but that the one takes part with his cherished sins against a dreaded God, and the other takes part with a reconciled God against his hated sins.”¹
- d. So, beloved, this time in our world in which we are confronted with an unstoppable pestilence is a stop sign in your life to evaluate the state of your soul. Where are you harboring sin? Where are you hiding the goods of Jericho in your tent? Where are you failing to be at battle like David and are therefore putting yourself in temptation's path? Where are you self-sufficient like the church in Laodicea? Where has false teaching crept in like the church in Pergamum? Where have you tolerated the deceit and immorality of Jezebel like the church in Thyatira? Where have you left your first love like the Church in Ephesus? Where do you look like you are spiritually alive, but in reality you are dead, like the church in Sardis? Like Jesus says to those seven churches in Revelation 2-3, so I say to you – repent before he comes and removes your lampstand! If you return to the

¹ As quoted in Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?*, pg. 81-82.

enemy, you will prove that you were never truly at peace with God through Christ. Don't return but rather continue in ongoing repentance and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ!

Conclusion: In 1680 a Puritan preacher by the name of Philip Henry preached on the doctrine of repentance and faith, much like I have this morning. And he said, "Some people do not like to hear much of repentance. But I think it so necessary, that if I should die in the pulpit, I should desire to die preaching repentance, and if I should die out of the pulpit, I should desire to die practicing it."² Amen and Amen. Let's pray.

² Ron Prorise, *Preaching Illustrations from Church History*, pg. 173