

Luke 13:1-9 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.’”

Christ Does Everything Possible to Bring Us to Repentance

Part of the money that we send to Nigeria is supposed to go to purchasing bibles, hymnals, catechisms and other such Christian material for the members. Early on in my ministry in Nigeria I found out that although they were using the money to buy bibles etc and handing them out to the people they were then charging the members for those books. When I questioned them about this the answer I received was that if they gave them away for nothing the people would not treasure or take care of them. But if they had to buy them then they would care much more for those books. Also, they were putting the money back into the book fund and buying more books with it.

How true this is. How much more precious is a car to the teenager who worked hard for years saving every penny then to one who was simply given a car by his parents. The teenager who paid for his/her own car is generally going to take much better care of it than the one who didn't. Knowing this to be so, we can be confident that we are indeed very precious to the Lord. For he indeed paid the greatest price to buy us back from sin, his own death.

This is indeed borne out by our text. For we find here two things. First that repentance is absolutely necessary for without it we will surely perish. And second a gardener, and that gardener is Christ, who will go to any lengths to make sure that we produce fruits of repentance. He does this because we are so precious to Him and He is not willing that any should perish.

When we see others suffer we ought not to judge them but ourselves

The first thing we find in our text is these men who come to Jesus with this story about the Galileans. Apparently, there was a group of Galileans who were in the middle of offering sacrifices when Pilate's soldiers slaughtered them in the temple. Their blood ran down and was mixed with the blood of the beasts they had just killed. Why Pilate killed them we don't know and it doesn't matter.

What we do know from Jesus' response is that they brought this news to him to some degree in order to justify themselves. In their hearts they were saying, "Look at what a terrible thing happened to those men. Surely God is judging them for their actions. Surely they are worse sinners. Surely they brought it on themselves."

This is a common reaction when we see suffering and terrible things happen to others. Our sinful flesh wants to believe that they did something to deserve it. We want to think that way because it helps us make sense of the world and because it protects me. I don't have to worry about that because I'm not a sinner like them.

We see this same attitude all the time today. Immediately after Hurricane Katrina people started saying that was God's judgment on the sinful people of New Orleans. Or how quick we are to assume that the homeless guy we see on the corner begging must have messed up. It must be his own fault that he is in this predicament.

Jesus shows us that the correct attitude is not to pass judgment on them. But to pass judgment on myself. In the face of all such evil deeds and suffering we should remember that I am a sinner who deserves God's wrath and judgment and repent of my sins.

This is what is meant by the common expression "there but for the grace of God go I." That expression could be misunderstood as a judgment on them. They are without the grace of God therefore they fell. But it is not meant that way. The expression is meant to remind me that I am no better and the only reason I am not suffering with them is God's grace and mercy.

The apostle Paul and Isaiah whom he is quoting say the same in Romans 9:29

Romans 9:29 And as Isaiah said before: "Unless the LORD of Sabaoth had left us a seed, We would have become like Sodom, And we would have been made like Gomorrah."

The only thing that kept Israel from becoming like Sodom is of the grace of the Lord.

Here our sinful flesh wishes very much to take one more step. If I say that God's grace is what keeps me from being like them then I am saying that I have God's grace and they do not. This is the logic of sinners. It is not the logic of scripture. Scripture makes it clear that God's grace is universal. And that I am no better than them.

The correct attitude then when we see any terrible thing in the world is two fold. One, to look at my heart and repent of my sins because all suffering is a reminder of God's coming judgment on my sin. Two, to do whatever we can to help those who suffer.

Therefore we see that repentance is necessary

Three times our text stresses the necessity of repentance. In connection with the Galileans who were killed by Pilate, Jesus says you likewise will perish unless you repent. In connection with those who died when the tower of Siloam fell, Jesus says you likewise will perish. And then again in the parable Jesus comes looking for fruits of repentance on the fig tree and when he finds none pronounces judgment.

Now in this section Jesus probably has in mind the nation of Israel. The "you"s are all plural, and also the idea of a tree and a vineyard are commonly used in parable for the nation of Israel. So that what Jesus is saying here is that unless you the nation of Israel repents, all of you, the whole nation, will likewise perish. Nevertheless, the warning is to me individually either way.

I need to repent and bear fruits worthy of repentance.

What are these fruits which Jesus expects to find on the tree, that is in our life?

The first fruit of repentance is always confession.

When John the Baptist was calling for men to repent, the first thing they did was to be baptized. This baptism was a public confession of sin and guilt. It is true that Baptism is more than that, it is a Holy Sacrament by which we receive the grace of God. But it is also a confession that I am a sinner.

Psalm 32:5 I acknowledged my sin to You, And my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, "I will confess my transgressions to the LORD," And You forgave the iniquity of my sin.

However since the power is not in us to produce this repentance, it is Christ who must come and water and fertilize us with the Word so as to produce within us both the repentance and the fruits that naturally flow from this repentance.

Notice that Jesus is both the landowner and the gardener in this parable. He comes looking for fruit and when it is not found, He does everything he can to produce those fruits within us.

And so He did for the nation of Israel. For three years He traveled in Judea and Galilee preaching and looking for fruits of repentance. After that three years He died for their, and our, sins. He rose again and sent out his apostles to preach the Word. For the nation of Israel this was the fourth year of the parable.

For us this fourth year is right now. Jesus does not desire the death of any but that all should come to repentance. For this reason Jesus goes to great lengths to cause us to produce fruits of repentance.

We find this truth in many of the parables. He is the good shepherd who goes out searching for the one lost sheep. He is the farmer who works hard to sow the seed and till the land. He is the vineyard owner who gives to his vineyard everything that is necessary for it to thrive.

Above everything else He reaches us to us in love, forgiving our sins through His death on the cross.

Then after this our hearts filled with joy, we seek ways to make amends to any we have wronged. As did Zacchaeus who promised to give back four-fold to any he had stolen from. And beyond that we seek ways to serve one another in love.

These fruits of faith do not earn us salvation, instead they are merely the outward expression of what Christ has done for us. The natural reaction of the sinner to God's grace.

Psalm 51:11-13 ¹¹ Do not cast me away from Your presence, And do not take Your Holy Spirit from me. ¹² Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, And uphold me *by Your* generous Spirit. ¹³ *Then* I will teach transgressors Your ways, And sinners shall be converted to You.

Notice that mission work evangelism here is the natural result of God's grace in the heart of David.

Titus 2:14 ¹⁴ who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself *His* own special people, zealous for good works.

Because Jesus has filled us with His grace, watered us with His word and made us His own special people we respond with joyful hearts in repentance and fruits that flow from that repentance. This is what Christ our gardener does for us.

Amen