

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ² Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

⁸ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’” (Luke 13:1-9)

Unless You Repent

How do you respond to threats? We hear them all the time. “Unless congress passes the health care bill, we won’t be able to afford health insurance.” “Unless congress defeats the health care bill, our government will go broke.” That kind of rhetoric is a threat. And in the political world, it gets people riled up. But I’m more concerned this morning with threats that touch us personally. “Unless you clean your room, there will be no TV for a week.” “Unless you start getting to work on time, you won’t have a job anymore.” “Unless you start paying more attention to me, I’m going to get a divorce.” Those statements are also threats. And again, they can have tremendous impact on us.

This morning Jesus speaks a threat. Does that surprise you? We have a deeply imbedded image of Jesus as someone who would never say a harsh word to anyone. But that picture has nothing to do with the picture of Jesus that the Bible actually gives us. Many times, Jesus spoke what we would consider to be harsh words. Many times, Jesus said things that made people angry and even hurt their feelings. But those things needed to be said. Now we might be more comfortable calling it a warning, but in the end, it’s the same thing. What response was Jesus looking for? Repentance. Now, he makes no mention of any specific sin. He doesn’t talk about adultery or murder or even ingratitude. The sin he has in mind is refusing to repent. Jesus speaks this threat to us: **unless you repent ...**

I.

Jesus was in Galilee, slowly making his way to Jerusalem to die. Some people told him about “**the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.**” Apparently, some people from Galilee were making sacrifices at the temple in Jerusalem, where Pilate ruled, and for some reason he killed them. We don’t know how many. We don’t know why. But the people back home were talking about it. Jesus himself mentioned another piece of bad news that was making the rounds: a tower in Jerusalem at a popular pool called Siloam had collapsed and killed 18 people.

Now, the one event was an act of police brutality, if you will. It was an act of tyranny. The other event was a disaster. But the interesting thing is the conclusion that people drew from these events. Jesus asked twice if his hearers thought that the people who suffered these things were bigger sinners than everybody else. He asked that because of the way the Jewish mind worked at this time. The people figured that they were the descendants of Abraham so everything was supposed to go well for them. If it didn’t, that must mean that the person who was suffering was guilty of some secret sin. Recently, we saw a modern example of this kind of thinking in a now famous pronouncement by a televangelist to the effect that the earthquake in Haiti was God’s punishment for making a pact with the devil.

That kind of thinking was not limited to first century Jews. It’s a temptation that people of every age fall into. Do you know what kind of people are most susceptible to it? Religious people. Church going people. People like us. We come to church every week and we start to think that we’re entitled to a certain level of consideration from God. Especially when things are going well, we look at other people’s disasters and think, “Well, they should’ve known better.” Or we just shake our heads and assume that if they took care of business like we do, they wouldn’t have problems like that.

Jesus says, **“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”** And he says it twice! Now, he was speaking to the Jewish attitude that did not believe that they could be sinners. But my friends, that attitude is alive and well today. I cannot count the number of times that I’ve heard Christians say, “I would never do that.” Rather than stopping and examining their lives and their attitudes and asking if maybe there is some truth to what someone is saying, they go on the offensive and deny any possibility that they could be guilty. That’s what the problem was when Jesus spoke these words. Synagogue going people thought that they were less sinful than everybody else. That pride threatens to turn faith in God into faith in ourselves – faith in our niceness, faith in our commitment, faith in our church attendance and our work for the Lord. None of those things is the same as faith in Christ. None of those things can save us.

We are all sinners. There is no sin that we would never commit. But if we won’t listen when someone points our sins out to us, if we won’t even consider the possibility that we’re guilty of that sin, we can’t repent. We can’t confess our sin to our Savior. We can’t trust in him to take it away. We all need to remember how hard it is for us to see ourselves. That’s why God made the law into a mirror. It shows us things we can’t see and we don’t want to see. That’s why the Scriptures teach us to pray, **“Forgive my hidden faults.”** We sinners just don’t want to believe how bad our sin is. The more we hide from the things that we are guilty of, the more sin festers in our hearts and grows into pride in ourselves, a pride that is the opposite of faith in Christ.

Jesus says, **“Unless you repent” – unless you admit your sin ...** If we won’t listen, if we won’t repent, what will happen to us? Will a tower fall on us? Will we be victims of police brutality? Maybe, but that’s not the point. Jesus says that we will perish. Certainly, we will die physically. But that’s not the worst of it, because the truth is, even if we do repent, we’ll probably die one day. But if we die trusting in how good we’ve been, if we die denying our sin, we die without faith in Jesus. That means that we will spend eternity in hell. And there is no greater tragedy than that.

How does the fact that I dare to suggest that that could happen to you make you feel? Angry? Offended? If so, then you’re still missing the point. We’re all sinners and we need to hear these things. We – and I include myself in this – we need to hear what we’re guilty of, no matter how hard it is for us to hear. Anger at those words is sinful pride.

But maybe this suggestion makes you feel something different, something truly better: sadness. Even fear. Those feelings are better because they are beginning part of repentance. I know that I’m a sinner and I know that I deserve to go to hell, and that is scary and sad. But those feelings mean that you’re taking Jesus’ words to heart and examining your life and seeing the sin that is there. But those feelings are not the end of repentance and if you go no further than that, you haven’t really accomplished anything. After those feelings needs to come the gospel. To the person who feels guilty, who knows their sin, Jesus says, “I forgive you.” Jesus died and he paid for every sin that we will ever be guilty of. He died and paid even for our refusal to hear his law. He died and he paid for the pride that doesn’t want to admit how sinful we really are. He died and paid for every one of those hidden faults that we can’t see in ourselves. He died and he paid for it all. Then he rose and he swept all that guilt away. Day after day, he announces to us that we are forgiven. That we are loved. That we are his.

II.

But what makes it hard to examine ourselves? What makes it hard to hear about our own faults and sins? I don’t like to be told that I’m a sinner. I don’t like to have my sins spelled out for me. I get defensive, just like everybody else does. Why? Part of the answer is sinful pride. But part of the answer is also fear. If I’m really that bad, what does that say about me? What does that mean for me? In my experience, people who won’t even listen, people who won’t let you tell them what they need to hear are engaging in a defense mechanism because it’s too unpleasant to consider the truth about themselves.

But repentance is supposed to be a blessing. To help us see that, Jesus told a parable. In the story, a man planted a fig tree in a vineyard. But for the three years, it produced nothing. So he told the man who worked in the vineyard to cut it down. It was wasting the nutrients in the soil. But the worker pleaded for one more year. He promised to give special attention to this unfruitful tree, to dig around its roots and to apply fertilizer, all in hopes of seeing fruit. But, if nothing came, then he agreed it must come down.

Now, what does this parable mean? It’s about repentance. Real repentance brings forth fruits. You and I are the tree in the vineyard, which is the Church. God has rained down on us spiritual and physical care. But he is looking for fruits from us. He is looking for us to change our lives and to fight against the sin that rises up

inside us, day after day. When we refuse to hear his call, when we refuse to change our lives – either because we refuse to see our sin or because we don't want to change – then our repentance is not real.

That is the key issue. Real repentance begins with admitting our sin. Real repentance reaches its fulfillment when we trust that Jesus died for those sins that we hate about ourselves and that God has forgiven those sins we don't really like to see in ourselves. But real repentance doesn't figure that's the end. Real repentance always creates a desire to change our lives. Now, that does not mean that change is easy. It does not mean that we won't fall into the same sin again tomorrow. And it would be wrong to say to a person who's trying to change, but who fails today, that they have no fruits of repentance. But a person who doesn't care, a person who goes through the motions of saying they're sorry to make everybody happy but has no intention whatsoever of changing anything, a person who really doesn't think they have anything to change – that person really is not repentant.

To that person, Jesus speaks his threat, **“Unless you repent,” unless you produce fruits of repentance ...** What will happen? In the story, the fig tree would be cut down. In real life, the unfruitful person who claims to be a Christian will spend eternity in hell. God's justice demands payment for our sins. If we continue in those sins, if, in spite of all that God has done for us, we don't care enough to change our lives and our attitudes, we will spend eternity in agony, cut off from God, unable to feel any love or see any light ever again.

But notice the love in this parable. God's justice demands payment for the hypocrisy of the Christian who makes no changes. But God's love prolongs his patience. Jesus loves us. He died for us. He makes every effort to reclaim us, especially when we haven't been fruitful. God gives us more time and he pays special attention to us. In the parable he dug around the roots and added fertilizer. What does he do in our lives? He arranges things so that we have to see the hard things we don't want to see. He may force us to face difficult situations so that we examine our relationship with him and with our fellow Christians. And he sends the word to us. He sends people who have the courage to tell us that we are sinning, and that we need to repent. We don't like to hear that, but we need to hear it. Because God loves us, he sends that message to us.

If we still won't hear it, the day will come when we will face his justice. But God does not want that to happen. Jesus died because we are sinners. He keeps coming to us, day after day and year after year, to call us to repent, to admit our sin and trust in him for forgiveness and then to change. And he keeps working through the gospel to make that change happen. He is just waiting to forgive us. He longs to forgive us. He loves us that much.

So don't be afraid! It's hard to hear things that we don't want to hear. But God will be with us when we have to hear those things. God's forgiveness is there for us – that's what he wants to share with us. That forgiveness is what gives us the power to change. Do you want to live a new and holy life? Then you need to let people tell you about your sin and you need to let them tell you about Jesus' forgiveness. In that gospel, God will heal your heart. In that gospel, God will give you a new desire to live for him and the strength to change. Trust in his love and live a life of true repentance. Amen.