

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?’” (Luke 13:1-9)

What Does God Want?

Do you think God is demanding? Is he like that math teacher in high school that no one wants to get because A students struggle to get B’s and C’s in his class? Or is he like that supervisor who always finds something to criticize about your work? It probably feels that way to us sometimes. I think that’s actually the biggest reason why so many people don’t want to hear what the Bible says – way down deep they know that they can’t please God no matter how hard they try. It’s easier to just dismiss him. But is God really like that? It is true that God sets standards for our lives and those standards are not open to debate. God isn’t interested in us “doing our best.” He demands perfection. While that seems unrealistic, even in this life, there are situations in which we look for perfection. My dad used to run factories. In his world, people would ask: how many newborn babies should a nurse be allowed to drop? 1% of the babies she picks up? Half a percent? The obvious answer is zero percent. They should never drop any baby. In my dad’s world, some people would say we should have the same standard for manufacturing: a 0% error rate. Whether that really works for factories or even for hospitals, that is God’s standard for our lives: a 0% sin rate. But he’s dealing with people who can’t be perfect and he knows that. So while his standard doesn’t change, how he deals with us does. As we stumble through life, trying to live our faith while our sinful nature clawing away at us, **what does God want?**

I.

Our gospel lesson for today tells us. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, surrounded by crowds of people who were also on their way to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. Luke tells us that some people **“told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.”** Now, history doesn’t tell us anything about this incident. But apparently, some Galilean Jews were at the temple in Jerusalem offering sacrifices and Pilate sent soldiers into the temple to kill them. We aren’t told why. But the idea that this Roman governor would desecrate their sacred space was horrifying to religious Jews. It naturally raised some questions in their minds: why did God let this happen? And why to these particular people? Were they guilty of some secret sin and God was punishing them?

Do those questions seem natural to you? Maybe not, but take out the tyranny aspect, and put in some other terrible thing – like Jesus did. Jesus pointed to a tower that had collapsed and killed 18 people. Why did those people die? Was God punishing them for something? Do we ever think that way? When someone we know gets cancer or has a terrible car accident, when they lose their job or their house burns down, so we wonder *why them?* Do we assume there must be some sin that we don’t know about that God is punishing? Do we ask ourselves that question when something bad happens to us?

Jesus said, **“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”** He says the same thing about those people who died when the tower fell. Those tragedies did not mean that those people were bigger sinners than anybody else. And that’s still true today – when bad things happen to us or to someone else. Now, sometimes our sins do have natural consequences. If I rob a bank and I go to jail, there’s a clear cause and effect. You can absolutely connect the dots and say that my sin caused my suffering and God is using that to call me to repent. But if I get cancer or my car gets T-boned in an intersection, God is not punishing me for some secret sin.

So what is he doing? He's working in my life to draw me closer to him through suffering. He's calling me to trust him because he alone has the power to rescue me when those things happen. And Jesus points to one more thing that God is doing. Twice he says, "**But unless you repent, you too will all perish.**" Every hurt and sorrow of this life reminds us of our need to repent. How so? All the pain and sorrow of this world finally comes from sin. When God made the world, it was perfect. But Adam and Eve sinned and plunged this world into death and sorrow and hurt. Every consequence of their sin is a reminder that we're all sinners who deserve to die and spend eternity in hell. But God doesn't remind us of that because he wants us to live. He reminds of that because he wants us to live. He wants us to make it to the one place where nothing bad will ever happen to us again and we will forget what pain felt like. The only way for us to make it there to heaven is to repent.

What does that mean? It means two things: first it means that we recognize our sin. That's hard for us to do. Think how many times you've tried to shift the blame onto somebody else. "It's not *my* fault!" Think how quick you are in your own mind to make excuses for your sins or rewrite the script of what was done and said so that you look better. We sinners hate admitting we're guilty. But repentance begins with honesty. I am a sinner. My heart is full of sin and that sin comes out, again and again, in my words and actions.

But that's only the beginning. The second and far greater part of repentance is trusting in Jesus. He died and he paid for all your sins. He has taken all your guilt away. You will not be punished. You are still loved by your Father in heaven and he wants to give your heart peace. In its own way, accepting that is just as hard as admitting our sin. Sometimes, we can't stop beating ourselves up. We can't stop replaying in our minds the stupid words we've said and the hurtful things we've done. We can't let go of our sin and guilt. Why not? It's often a sinful pride issue. I should do better. I should know better. But I can't solve this problem. Only Jesus can. He forgives us. He gives us communion and baptism and sermons and confession and our pastors and fellow believers to tell us over and over again that we are forgiven. But it's not an argument that he's trying to win. It's not therapy, as important as that is. God built his power into the gospel. He comes to us in that gospel message and he conquers our guilt and our ego and our fear and he gives us peace. You are forgiven, my friends. **What does God want? He wants true repentance.** True recognition that we are sinners. And true and real trust that Jesus has taken all that sin away.

II.

Jesus left heaven and endured a life of poverty and opposition and then the most horrible death in human history so that he could give us eternal life. He doesn't want us to throw it all away. How could we ever do that? One way is to think that repentance means feeling bad, instead understanding that we're repentant when we go to Jesus for peace and forgiveness. So to be repentant when we need to beat ourselves up. But some people have another problem: they think repentance is just a hoop I jump through and then I'm good. They ignore the fruits of repentance. That's what Jesus addressed in the second half of our reading.

Jesus told a parable: a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. Israel is a very rocky, hilly country. Good farmland is at a premium. This tree wasn't producing. For three years, the man had found no fruit on it, so he told the man who took care of the vineyard to cut that tree down. Do you see the point Jesus is making? When God gave us faith, he planted us in his church, in his vineyard. God puts us among his people so that we can nourish each other's faith. And God is looking for fruits from us. What are the fruits? A new and holy life. God is looking for us to turn from sin. God is looking for us to make a commitment to living for him. That starts with hearing his word and bringing our families to hear it. But it also means being a part of our fellowship and joining in on the work. It means teaching our children to know their Savoir and taking care of and honoring our elderly parents and members. It means showing love, day in and day out, to the people we meet in here and out there. It means living as Jesus lived.

Those fruits are a natural product of a real and living faith. So when God doesn't see those fruits – especially after patiently waiting and letting us grow – he condemns us because faith without fruits is dead. So when people claim to be Christians, when they go through the motions of joining the church and being confirmed, and then they slip away and live without any evidence of their faith, that faith is dead or dying. God wants to see fruits of repentance just like a doctor wants to see a patient breathe or he wants to hear a patient's heartbeat. If there is no breath and no heartbeat, that patient is dead! If there are no fruits of faith and repentance, we are simply not believers.

But just like a doctor can do CPR and occasionally save a patient whose heart stops or who stops breathing, our faith doesn't die instantly. God can and does do spiritual CPR. In the parable, the man who ran

the vineyard asks the owner to give that tree one more year. He promises to dig around the roots and apply fertilizer to it in hopes of making that tree fruitful. The vinedresser is Jesus. When we have no fruits in our lives, he doesn't just shrug his shoulders and move on. He tries to reach us. He digs around our roots and applies fertilizer. What does that mean? He reaches out to us with the law and the gospel. Now, he may also do things in our lives to get our attention. He may send a crisis to make us sit up and examine our lives. He may allow the consequences of our sins to overtake us or he may shake up the things we care about most to get us to stop and ask ourselves how we got to this point— in hopes that we will see our sin and turn to him for forgiveness, in hopes that we will hear his message and repent. That's not pleasant for us to go through. But Jesus does it because he loves us.

Jesus does it because he wants us to have a true and living faith. Jesus wants us to be truly repentant. The first fruit of repentance is turning away from the sin that I felt guilty about and needed forgiven. I cannot say that I repent if I have no intention of turning. Now, it might be hard to turn. It might be the kind of sin that I have done over and over again and changing that way of thinking and acting might take a lot of effort. I might commit that sin again and need to repent of it again. But true repentance always strives turn from that sin. If I have no intention of turning, I am not repentant.

There are other fruits of repentance, too: restoring what I have stolen or broken, going to the person I have hurt and asking for forgiveness and doing what I can to bring about healing, avoiding situations that lead me into sin. If you gave me enough time, I could probably list more. But what all those fruits have in common is that they come from the forgiveness that Jesus has pronounced on us. They are not attempts to earn that forgiveness. They are ways of saying thank you to the Lord who laid down his life to take our sins away and then sent the gospel to us to comfort us and give us peace as we wrestle with our sin. But they do show that our faith is alive and our repentance is real. Without them, even Jesus says, "Cut that tree down!" Send them to hell! That's why those fruits are so important to him. They mean that we are spiritually alive. My friends, **what does Jesus want? He wants fruits of repentance.** He wants the natural proof that our repentance is real.

All this matters because God is not some arbitrary taskmaster who sits up in heaven looking for ways to slap us down. But God is a judge who must send sinners to hell. When it comes to standing before God, that nurse and baby standard applies. Dropping even one baby would get a nurse fired. Committing even one sin condemns us to hell. But Jesus has taken all our sin away. God now sees us as perfect because Jesus was. God wants us to repent – to trust that our sins are gone and to show that with a new and holy life – because God wants us to live forever with him. God wants you to have peace, today and forever. Amen.