

Jesus had been instructing his disciples in the need to be ready for the coming judgment: 12:35: “Stay dressed for action and keep your lamps burning.” vs. 40: “You must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect.” Peter asked Him, “Is this warning for us, or for everyone?” Jesus answered, “Especially for you.” Then, some of His hearers tell Him about some Galileans who had been slaughtered by Pilate while they were sacrificing. It's as if they are saying, “Oh, we get it. Those Galileans must have been pretty wicked for God to let a pagan Roman kill them while they were worshiping God!” If there is any time and any place that God's people should be safe, it would be at church. So how wicked those people must have been! They sure should have listened to you, Jesus! If I were that wicked, I would definitely repent, just like you're saying, Jesus.

They've missed it entirely. Peter asked, is this for us, or for everybody? And Jesus said, especially for *you*. And this group steps forward and says, “What you mean, Jesus, is that other people should repent.” Big judgment falls on big sinners, and so big sinners should repent.

And we are quick to repeat this same mistake. When judgment falls, or when people suffer, it is easy for us to say with our lips or even just to think in our hearts that they have gotten what they deserve. Instead of having compassion on those who suffer, we judge them. This attitude is evil in the sight of God, and when it springs up in our hearts, we need to put it to death!

Because Jesus says, “No, that is absolutely the wrong lesson to take from what I'm saying. You cannot judge the sinfulness of someone's life by the circumstances of their death. And you cannot conclude that just because they died horribly and you are still alive that God hated them and is pleased with you!”

And it seems as if there was even an ethnic component to what they were saying. “You know how Galileans are. I see your point, Jesus: Galileans really need to repent!” It would be like if we heard about a tragedy happening in a Baptist church, and concluded that Baptists ought to repent.

And so Jesus brings up another story of a terrible thing that happened right in Jerusalem – the tower in Siloam, probably part of the original city wall of David, fell on 18 citizens of Jerusalem. Even Jerusalem Jews die. And so Jesus asks, “Are you going to conclude from that event that people who live near towers should repent?” Is God singling *them* out for destruction because of their super-sinfulness, and sparing you because you aren't that bad? No!”

“Here's the point: The reality of death, no matter what the circumstances, calls us all to repentance!” When you hear about some death or tragedy that strikes, you should not try to connect the dots between specific sins and specific judgments. (Not because it can't be done, but

because *you* can't do it. God can do it, but remember, His ways and thoughts are higher than yours.) What you need to think, whenever you hear about tragedy and death, is this: "That person died because of sin. I'm a sinner. The same judgment is coming for me, unless I repent!"

Remember this universal truth: ***death happens because of sin.*** From that universal truth, learn this universal lesson: ***Repent, or perish!***

When you try to understand the specifics, you reach beyond your competency. You don't know enough to understand the ways of God. But even worse, when you think you do, you come up with the incorrect, self-justifying conclusion that you are not that bad, which leads you to conclude that you don't need to repent!

Remember, knowing good from evil is the forbidden fruit. The day you eat of it, you die. That's not just a Bible story. It's a daily reality. When you set yourself up to know good and evil, you insulate yourself from the need to repent, and if you do not repent, you will perish!

So, very plainly: how much sin? *Not the point.* How gruesome the death? *Not the point.* Christian or pagan? *Not the point.* Who did the killing? *Not the point.* Was it an accident? *Not the point.* No, the point is that every single one of you needs to repent!

Paul makes this same point in the lesson we read from 1 Corinthians: "I want you to know," he says, "That God doesn't just judge outsiders, but He judges you. The saints in the Old Testament were baptized and shared in the Lord's Supper too, in a manner of speaking. Nevertheless, God was not pleased with them because they fell into sin." The lesson is not "*unbaptized people* need to repent." or "*people who don't take the Lord's Supper* need to repent". It is not that *unbelievers* need to repent. It is that ***everyone needs to repent!*** And as Jesus' answer to Peter makes clear, especially you, you have heard the word of God clearly, you have have been baptized and fed from Christ's table. You understand so much more about your need to repent, and so your guilt will be so much greater if you fail to repent!

And you might be saying, "But I repent every week here at church." No. What happens here is that we confess our sins and promise to forsake them, which is the beginning of repentance, but repentance involves our whole life. Your repentance begins here, but how you live the rest of the week is where your repentance is shown. Remember, John the Baptist rebuked the Pharisees who showed up to make a baptismal confession but didn't really intend to repent. "Go bear fruit in keeping with repentance." John said.

And this is where Jesus goes next, as well. You must repent, and repentance means not just saying that you are sorry for your sins; it means that you stop sinning! It means bearing fruit, the fruit of a changed life. You have not repented until you are living differently.

So Jesus' parable comes as a warning: if you confess your sin all the time, and think that you are fine just because you are planted in God's vineyard, think again. It is absolutely necessary that you bear fruit. If you are sitting here today, all that proves is that you are a fig tree in God's vineyard. It does not mean that you are a *fruitful* tree, the kind that will still be in God's vineyard on the last day.

Jesus is telling this parable first and foremost about Israel. Israel is the fig tree, and by this point in her history, she should be bearing fruit for God. Some people think that the three years refers to the three years of Jesus' ministry, others think it refers to the law, the prophets, and Christ, but I don't think either of those suggestions is quite right. Jesus is referencing a specific passage in Leviticus 19, and applying it metaphorically to Israel. Listen to [Leviticus 19:23-25].

Jesus is saying that God has not brought Israel to judgment too early, by demanding the fruit in the first three years. He comes now, after three years (metaphorical years, meaning “at the proper time”), to claim His rightful fourth year fruits, but He hasn't found any. I understand Jesus to be the vinedresser in this parable, who asks God to wait until His work is done before judging Israel. Jesus will spend His ministry pouring out all the blessings of healing and casting out demons and teaching and calling on Israel to repent, and if Israel does not repent and bear fruit in response to Jesus' work, then it truly is time for them to be destroyed.

God is extremely patient with Israel. She should have born fruit without needing the special efforts of Jesus. She doesn't deserve this season of grace and special care, but God sends Jesus anyway. But now, by refusing to repent even in light of Jesus' work, Israel makes it abundantly clear that she is never going to bear fruit.

And not only is Israel a fruitless tree, but she is actively “using up the ground.” God's vineyard has no room for fruitless trees to just stand around forever, absorbing valuable resources. All the blessings that God has spent on Israel could have been directed to the Gentiles, and they would have born fruit! This is exactly what Jesus says, and exactly what His ministry proves time and time again – the Gentiles are determined to seek Jesus out and be blessed, while the Jews just can't be bothered. And so the tree will be cut down, so that the vineyard's resources can be given to those who will bear fruit. The parable establishes Israel's guilt, so that they will feel the weight of Jesus' warning: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish, even though you consider yourself to be God's special people.”

And this is exactly what happens. A few Israelites repent individually, and are saved, but Israel as a nation does not repent. They see judgment falling all around them, and they say: “I thank you God, that I'm not like those Galileans, or those who got crushed by the tower!”

And so in Luke 21, Jesus warns that the temple will be thrown down, and that Jerusalem will be destroyed. He tells His disciples, those who have repented, to flee from Jerusalem. If they believe Him and bear fruit by obeying Him, they will be saved. If not, they will perish. And in verse 29, Jesus calls them back to the fig tree: when the leaves start to appear, since the fourth year didn't produce any fruit, then the fifth year will be the end of the fig tree, and the beginning of the kingdom of God, when the Church will be planted to bear fruit for God.

Jesus' parable was metaphorical; the judgment that He warned about was very real. In AD70, Jerusalem was surrounded by armies, and all who did not flee according to Jesus' words perished. They were killed by Romans, who mingled their blood with the sacrifices, and many were literally crushed by the walls of Jerusalem, which the Romans hurled down upon them. All of this is recording by the Jewish historian Josephus.

But remember again the words of Paul: all these things were written for us as examples, so that we would not desire evil and given in to idolatry like they did. If any of you thinks that this warning was just for the Jews, take heed, lest you fall! Because the same temptations still face you. Death and tragedy still warn *you* to repent, and God still calls on *you* to bear fruit.

The fact that Jesus' words against Israel were already fulfilled does not mean that you don't need to repent and bear fruit; it means exactly the opposite! Since God has invested so much more in your lives, by revealing this to you, by making you aware of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and His coming in judgment against Jerusalem just as He promised, the stakes are not *lower*; they are even *higher*.

If you think that the Jews who ignored Jesus and died in the calamity of AD70 were worse sinners than you, and that you don't need to repent, because you are already planted in God's vineyard – “Good thing I'm a baptized Christian sitting in a Christian church.” - then you have missed the whole point!

Brothers and sisters, if you go away from this place and think that *other people* should repent, then I don't know what more I can do for you. You need to repent. Or if you go away from this place knowing that you need to repent, and *yet you do not repent*, I do not know what else I can do for you. Take time today to search your heart, and ask God to search your heart. Or if you go away from here thinking that just because you are planted in God's vineyard, but without committing in your heart to bear fruit for God by the power of the Holy Spirit, then I do not know what more I can do for you. Even if you show up to worship and say all the right words, even if you have been baptized, even if you eat the Lord's Supper, if you do not bear fruit, then you will be cut down and burned in the fire. God is patient with you, but He will not ignore your fruitlessness forever. **You need to repent, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance!**

If you are afraid of death and judgment and honestly convinced that you need to repent, (which is why Jesus spoke these words – He *wants* you to feel that way), then hear the good news: Christ Jesus was crucified for your sins, and raised to life so that if you repent and call on His name, your sins *will be forgiven*, and you *will not perish*, but have everlasting life. Jesus died so that your repentance will be accepted and your sins forgiven. So when you are confronted with death and you realize that you deserve death too, remember this: ***Jesus died for you.***

And if you have already trusted in Jesus and been planted in God's vineyard, then ***hear this warning: you must bear fruit, or you will be cut down.*** But if you are eager to *show* your repentance by bearing fruit, then ***be encouraged:*** You must bear fruit, but don't think that Jesus is just standing by waiting for you to bear fruit by yourself. Jesus Christ is at work within you, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to nourish you and strengthen you, to give you life and health and everything you need to bear fruit. Jesus doesn't bear fruit for you; but He does give you His very life so that in Him, you can bear fruit for God. The Apostle Paul puts it this way, in Philippians 2: “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” So when you are confronted with the possibility of fruitlessness and the danger of being cut down, remember this: ***Jesus lives for you.***

Jesus died for you, Jesus lives for you, and this is the Word that He speaks to you today: “Repent, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance.” And what He commands you to do, He enables you to do, by the power of His death and resurrection, through the work of His Holy Spirit. So repent, and believe the good news,

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.*