Repent or Perish

Luke13:1-9

Key Verse 13: 9: “If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.”

People like to hear about good things such as blessing and prosperity, but today I’m going to speak about words people don’t like to hear. They are the words “repentance” and “judgment.” These words are not very popular in our present day and age, especially in the U.S. Many churches avoid the message of repentance because people hate it. They are turned off by the message of repentance. They are turned on by the message of blessing and prosperity. But repentance is the subject of today’s passage. May God help us to pay attention to the word of truth!

1. **Unless you repent…**

In this morning’s passage, Jesus seems to clip two tragic stories from the local Jerusalem newspaper. Let’s begin with the first disaster. Look at verse 1. “Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.“

This would have been headlines in the Jerusalem Dispatch. It is likely that this event took place during the Passover, and some Galileans were offering sacrifices at the temple. Galileans were known for their hotheaded resistance to Roman rule. Apparently Pilate sent his soldiers to find some Galileans and slaughtered them while they were offering sacrifices. We don’t know any of the details. But there they were, offering their sacrifices. Pilate’s soldiers found them there and sliced them up in a very gruesome and gory way, so that their blood was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices. Perhaps the men who told Jesus about this were shaking their heads as they spoke. They might have expected Jesus to explain why this happened to those Galileans or why God punished them.

What was Jesus’ answer? Look at verse 2. “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?”

We first need to understand there was a belief in Jesus’ day that good things happened to good or righteous people, while bad things always happened to bad people. It was like a punishment from God. Therefore, if Pilate murdered some Galileans while they were sacrificing in the Temple, guess what the popular opinion was? They must have deserved it for some sinful rebellious act.

But Jesus calls their conventional theology into question. Now do you think that the reason this happened to them was because they were the greatest sinners in Galilee? Is that what you think? Do you suppose that?  
Jesus said in response, “No.” The Galileans who were slaughtered by Pilate were not greater sinners than others.

Let’s go to the second calamity. Jesus brings up another issue from the front page. Look at verse 4. “Or those who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them – do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?”

If a tower fell on eighteen people and killed them, guess what? It must have been some form of punishment from God because of the sin in their lives. Did God judge them for their excessive sin? Were they worse sinners than the others living in Jerusalem? Jesus said in response, “No.”

Then, what is Jesus’ point? Look at verses 3 and 5. “**But unless you repent, you too will all perish.**” Here Jesus does not give a roundabout answer to their question about these tragedies. Jesus rejects the question about the degree of sin because it distracts from the real question. He challenges us to think about deeper issues.

The real calamity is not that you were killed in the temple or that the tower fell on you or that you died by any other means. The true calamity is that you die and experience the judgment of God. The issue is not how people die or when they die or by what cause they die. The issue is that they die without repenting of their sin.

How easy it is to be self-righteous and point the finger at other people for “deserving” the punishment. “They deserved it, those sinners.” But Jesus is pointing the finger back at his followers; Jesus is trying to get them to see their own sin. For example, this year when the earthquake and tsunami hit Japan, it was so easy to point out and say, “This must be a punishment from God.”

But Jesus wants us not to judge others, but to point the finger back at ourselves and realize our own guilt, our own sin, and that God judges us all equally. Don’t make the mistake of believing that bad things always happen to bad people, and good things only happen to good people. People who had tragic endings were not necessarily greater sinners than anyone else.

In truth, it’s an equal playing field before a perfect and holy God; sin is sin, and we all need to repent. There are no innocent human beings. "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). "There is no one righteous, not even one" (Romans 3:10). We are all on equal ground before God because all of us have sinned. In God’s eyes, even one sin, whether in thought, word, or deed separates us from Him apart from Jesus Christ. God does not have a measuring stick to compare those who are worse sinners than others. God is not going to compare us to each other on judgment day; God is going to compare us to his perfect sinless Son Jesus Christ. And quite honestly all of us will fall short of that mark.

Jesus reminds us, “**Unless you repent of your sin, you too will perish**.” Jesus is saying, “If you want to believe bad things happen to sinful people, you better look out because you might be next.” Jesus is saying, “Look, don’t assume anything. You’re going to likewise perish except you repent.” Just because Pilate’s soldiers ran by you to get to those Galileans, say nothing about your righteousness. Just because the tower fell and you had just left a few minutes before, don’t presume that you are more righteous than those killed.

What it does mean is that God is showing you more mercy, more patience, giving you more opportunity to repent. The word “repentance” means, first of all, to change one’s mind or heart. Everything begins in your mind and thinking. You must change your thinking about yourself, sin, and God. You must turn from sin and turn toward God. Either you repent or perish. It is that simple.

1. **If it bears fruit next year…**

After hearing Jesus’ message, “Repent or perish,” people might have been frightened. But Jesus had something more to say, that is, that repentance must bear fruit. In other words, talk is cheap; there must be evidence of our commitment to turning from sin. Jesus pointed this out with an illustration about a fig tree.

A man went to look at the fig tree in his garden again and again, but there was no fruit on it. Three years went by, but still nothing. He ordered his gardener to cut it down because it was just taking up good space. But the gardener asked to give it one more chance by fertilizing it and waiting another year.  
Jesus says, there must be fruit of repentance, evidence that God can see that we have turned from sinful life. Anyone can say the words, but we should mean it by trying to turn from our sin. Repentance involves changing one’s mind in a way that affects change in the person. Repentance alters your life.

With repentance, you can’t stay the way you are. With repentance, you can’t keep going where you were going. With repentance, you can’t keep talking the way you were talking. With repentance, you can’t keep thinking the way you’ve been thinking. With repentance, you can’t keep doing the things you’ve been doing. With repentance, you can’t keep acting the way you’ve been acting.

Repentance is a change of mind about self, sin and the Savior. It is a change that results in change of life. It is a turning from sin and a turning to the Savior. It is a change in direction.

The words “Cut it down!” refer to God’s impending judgment. They echo the message of John the Baptist, who said, “The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire” (Lk 3:9).

However, in the parable, there is a caretaker who intercedes on behalf of the fig tree. Look at verses 8-9. “**‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’**”

Fortunately, we are reminded of God’s mercy. God entrusts the farmer to put more fertilizer around the tree, and give the tree another chance. God is merciful and gives us many opportunities to repent and turn to him, but the parable makes clear that the mercy of God does not last forever. Some day death will take us, or Christ will return and we will be out of time. His mercy must lead us to repentance. Romans 2:4 says, “Or do you show contempt for the riches of His kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you to repentance.”   
So we have to ask ourselves, are we pointing our fingers at others’ sin rather than pointing the finger back at ourselves? What sin in our own lives do we need to repent of? An attitude, thoughts, a behavior, or action? We must ask ourselves, “What is the fruit of my repentance?” 

What should amaze us is not that some are taken in calamity, but that we are spared and given another day to repent. The really amazing thing is not that sinners perish, but that God is so slow to anger that you and I can sit here this morning and have another chance to repent. I pray we might realize repentance is really a good thing. It's good for us because it saves us and makes us right with God. May God help us to respond to Jesus’ love and hope for each of us with all our hearts and lives!