

**Luke 13:1-9** *Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup>Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? <sup>3</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. <sup>4</sup>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? <sup>5</sup>I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” <sup>6</sup>Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. <sup>7</sup>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?’ <sup>8</sup> “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. <sup>9</sup>If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Agree or disagree: If nothing really bad ever happens to you, this is a sign that you are living a godly life or that God is pleased with you. Or how about this: Agree or disagree: Calamities only come to those who are extremely sinful. Our mind knows that we should disagree with both of those statements, but our hearts want to agree. Certainly there are many people around us, people that we know well and love, who would wholeheartedly agree with them. We live in a reward/punishment society. If you do good things and live right you should be rewarded with good things. If you don't live right, you will be punished with bad things. This is the normal thought that seems right to us. Of course the flaw in this thinking is: what if you live right but bad things still happen or what if someone lives badly and does many bad and wicked things but still has good things come to them? How do we reconcile these thoughts which would go directly against this line of thinking?

The reality is that we like to live in degrees. We measure people and deeds as better than some or not as good as others. We like to measure how we are doing against how others are doing. We reason that we might not be perfect, but we're doing much better than others. We like to say that some things are worse and more wicked than others as a way to soothe our consciences that at least we aren't as bad as other people. Today, Jesus levels the playing field. He takes us out of the realm of degrees and punishment/reward and helps us to see the reality of the situation. The truth is, we are all sinners in need of repentance. Our life as God's people is not about comparing ourselves to others around us, it's about repenting. It's not about looking at what everyone else is doing. It's about looking at your own heart and putting it up against what God says in his Word. It's about looking individually at our own hearts against the law of God and repenting of the sin that is there.

This is what Lent is all about. Lent is about taking a realistic look at the real problem in our lives—the problem of sin. It is a season of preparation which helps us to marvel at the solution our Savior provides for this problem of sin. This is the time when we as part of God's church step back to assess where we are at spiritually, to study the solution of our spiritual problem of sin and to celebrate the wonderful answer to our sin our Savior provides. The text before us today deals directly with the problem of sin. It not only pinpoints the problem and consequences of sin, but it reminds us of the solution and deliverance offered by our God. It helps us prepare for our Easter Sunday victory celebration by reminding us that **Lent is a Season of Repentance.**

We don't know the exact situation that the people in our text were referring to when they came to Jesus, but we can speculate a little. It seems that some soldiers of Pontius Pilate murdered some God-fearing Galileans when they were making sacrifices at the Temple. We don't know what prompted this attack nor even exactly when this attack happened. Whatever the situation, these people who came to Jesus were using this as an attempt to criticize Him. They were essentially accusing Jesus: “What bad thing did these people do to deserve such horrible treatment?” Jesus read their minds and asked them a question we are often tempted to ask when something like this happens, “*Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?*” Many are tempted to think that when a tragedy strikes a person, it is because that person has done something very bad for which he or she needed to be punished. It would be like saying, “The people in the panhandle of Florida must be worse sinners than us because of how hard the hurricane hit them last fall and the amount of damage it did.” Or “The people in Christchurch, New Zealand who were gunned down last week must have been really bad to have such a massacre happen to them.” This thought stems from the thinking that some sins are little and not that big of a deal, at least not as bad as others which are more deserving of punishment.

But Jesus makes an interesting observation about sin. Yes, sometimes tragedy comes as a direct result of a poor or sinful choice that we make. But tragedy comes as a consequence of sin. None of us are exempt from this. God doesn't operate in degrees or levels of sin. For him, it's very black and white. There is a solid line drawn in the sand. Either you are perfect or you are a sinner. Even one sin makes you a sinner and deserving of the consequences which come from sin. Since we have all sinned against God, none of us are exempt from troubles and challenges and even severe tragedies and calamities. Two different times in our text, Jesus emphasized, “*But unless you repent, you too will all perish.*” Before we stand too tall in our pride and say that since everything is going pretty well for us we must not be that bad of people, we do well to listen and take to heart what Jesus says. Before God, all people are sinful and in need of repentance. While these people referenced in our text suffered a terrible fate with a terrible death, without repentance they would have suffered an even more terrible fate—that of hell. This is the real punishment for sin. Lest we think that we are better than others because we haven't faced this sort of tragedy, Jesus urges us to think again. He urges us to take a deep look into our hearts to recognize that before God, we aren't in any better of a position than these people. There isn't anyone exempt from these types of things because all are sinful. We live in such a competitive society in which we like to think that as long as I'm doing fine and better than you that

I'm ok. But Jesus reiterates for us here that unless we are 100% perfect, you are not ok. God doesn't judge on a curve. He judges by a strict percentage. You are either 100% perfect or you deserve eternal death. Because you sin, you too will die.

There is only one escape from this terrible fate: repentance. Repentance in the Bible is described as a three-step process. The first is recognizing our sin and placing that sin humbly before our God to ask for his mercy and deliverance. The second step is receiving the forgiveness God offers through Jesus our Savior. The third is then turning from that sin, with God's help and motivated by thanksgiving and our love for him, to stop from committing that sin again. Because Lent is a Season of Repentance, let's take some time to examine ourselves in light of God's Word.

In the parable Jesus tells in our text, he talks of a man who owned a fig tree that didn't bear any fruit. While sin is certainly those evil wicked things that we do wrong, we are reminded of another aspect of it here. Not bearing good fruit is just as bad as bearing bad fruit. With the example Jesus uses here, he wasn't just pointing at the evil things the people of Israel were doing, he was pointing to the good things they weren't doing in their faith. Throughout the Gospels, Jesus states time after time that the branch that is connected to the vine will bear fruit. Those who are God's people will give testimony to their faith by the things that they will do. They are committed to spiritual growth—intentional, determined and planned spiritual growth. They will be regular in worship at God's house. They will be regular in their study of God's word when Bible Study is offered at church and in their homes. They will be active in using their talents and time to serve others with God's Word. They will witness for their Savior with their friends and family. They will be generous and sacrificial in their offerings to God trusting he will provide. They will be kind to their neighbors, loving to their family, ready to serve others in whatever ways will benefit them. As you ponder the fruit which you bear because of your faith, how are you doing?

The truth is, many times we're rather lazy spiritually and lukewarm in our Christianity. What do I mean by that? Let's look at some figures. On any given Sunday less than half of us gather together to worship our Savior. When you look in the worship folder you see that we're averaging only 45% in worship on a Sunday. It would be even worse if I published the number who participate in our Bible Study in a given week. That's only about 10% on average. While we may confess the need to study God's word, only 1 out of 10 are actually doing it. The average giving in our church body is about 2.5% of our income. The Bible gives us 10% as a guideline. You can do the math with your own giving but I would imagine for most of us it falls far short of 10% and more around the synod average. We know that we are to be witnessing for Christ to our community and doing what we can to reach out with Christ's love, yet the majority of time it's only our called workers who are working to staff the booths at our outreach events. We get some more for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July parade. But we don't have many people clamoring for more opportunities to get out and share God's word as a congregation. As I looked at past call presentations that I've given, I see the same thing has come up every single time—the need to get more members involved in ministry. At times I feel like a broken record. Yet stepping forward to give of time and talents to help serve others is not always the priority in our lives. As hard as it is to hear this, this suggest spiritual laziness and lukewarm Christianity.

The first step of repentance is to fall our knees in recognition of this sin. O Lord, please open our eyes to recognize before you our spiritual laziness and lukewarm Christianity. O Lord, help us to see that this is sinful and for this and all of our sin we deserve to die. We dare not look at others and think they are worse than us. We dare not hide from reality. We have sinned and deserve God's punishment. Like a tree that does not bear fruit, we deserve to be cut down and thrown into the fire.

The wonderful news is that repentance does not stop here. God has given us a time of grace on this earth. We hear of this patience in our text by allowing another year for the tree to bear fruit. God does not instantly destroy us in our sin. He has given us the time and opportunity to bring our sin before him and be assured of the forgiveness he offers through Jesus our Savior. We are not doomed in our sin. We will not die eternally because of our sin. God promises that though our sins were as scarlet, we shall be as white as snow. This is the joy of the Lent message. It brings to us the solution to our problem of sin—Jesus Christ, who lived and died and rose from the grave to pay the debt of our sin before God. We need not fear destruction because Jesus was destroyed in our place. We need not live in terror of God's judgment because he already punished Jesus for our sins. We follow Jesus through his sufferings to see him on the cross and there see God's gracious and loving answer to our sin. Jesus was the sacrificial lamb who paid for our sin and freely gives us his perfection through faith. We are forgiven and restored to live as his people. We are assured that our sin has been wiped from us and when we stand before God with faith in Jesus we do so as the perfect people he demands that we be.

It is this refreshing news of forgiveness in Jesus that lead us to the third step of repentance: to rise from our knees and go and sin no more. Forgiven in Jesus, we are refreshed to go out and bear the fruit of being his disciples. We leave God's house to be the people he made us to be: committed to spiritual growth, active in our Bible Study and worship, generous with our offerings, prioritizing our time so we can use our talents to serve others with God's word, pooling our resources and working together to reach out into our community and share with more the love God has for them.

How thankful we are for this season of Lent! What a gracious God that he loves us enough to call us to repentance so we can go and serve him. Let's not spend our time comparing ourselves to others and puffing up our selfish pride that thinks more highly of ourselves than we ought to. Let's use this time before us during Lent to reflect upon God's word, inspect our hearts in light of God's Word, and bring our sin before our gracious God who forgives us in Jesus and gives us the wonderful privilege of serving him as his children. May God bless your spiritual journey during Lent—**A Season of Repentance**. Amen.