

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

⁶He told them this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came looking for fruit on it, but he did not find any. ⁷So he said to the gardener, ‘Look, for three years now I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and I have found none. Cut it down. Why even let it use up the soil?’ ⁸But the gardener replied to him, ‘Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. ⁹If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down.’ ”

Many people think of God as a vengeful God. They see his might and deem that he is acting in selfishness and pride. They see all the tragedies of society and come to the conclusion that he is frustrated, angry, and full of hate. But as he shows again and again in his word and throughout history, his desire is not to destroy and kill, but to bring life. We see that today in Jesus’ own words.

The group around Jesus starts discussing current events. Jesus has just criticized them for not being able to interpret the present time. Now he’s going to give them a concrete example of how off they are, even about the happenings in their own generation.

It seems a few Jews from Galilee had come to Jerusalem to worship. But while they were there, Pilate’s soldiers struck, leaving the blood of some of these Jews pouring out alongside the sacrifices they had brought. I can only imagine how Hollywood would depict the carnage at the temple. Now Jesus asks, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered these things?” What had these dead Galileans done that those still alive had not done? Were they liars? Were they cheaters? Was their faith in God lacking? I would suspect the crowd might say yes. There must have been something those who perished did to separate them from those spared. And if it was all up to chance, wouldn’t that mean God was not in control? No, the good survived and the bad died, just as life goes. But Jesus says, “I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too.”

Before there’s time for discussion, Jesus himself brings up another example. There was a tower collapse in Siloam. Eighteen dead. What did those people do wrong? Were they bad friends? Bad neighbors? Bad spouses or parents? Bad children of God? Again, I imagine the crowd nodding along, “yes they must have been bad children of God.” But again, listen to Jesus: “I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too.”

This brings us to the always asked question after tragedy: Why? Why would God allow thousands of people to die as planes were flown into buildings a quarter of a century ago? Why would God allow sons and brothers and fathers to be mown down on the battlefield? Why would God allow a worldwide pandemic to leave so many dying in the hospital, often without any loved ones by their side? What did all these people do to deserve it?

When we think in this karmic way, that good things happen to good people and bad things happen to bad people, we can make two grave errors. The first is that God does not care or has no control over the situation. The second error we make is that humans don’t deserve the suffering they face. Neither of these things is true,

but what if the point of suffering is to show the opposite of these things? God allows bad things to happen to show he is in control. And God also allows hardship to show that human suffering is the result of sin.

But Jesus' point is not about other people. It's not about teaching the lessons we just talked about in an academic way. When Jesus says, "I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you will all perish too," he's turning the focus away from those who have perished to those who are perishing. You see, Jesus is not focused on those who were killed because their time of grace had come to an end. Likewise, those who died in the Twin Towers or on the beaches of Normandy should not be our focus because they have either been wrapped in the arms of their Savior by faith or faced eternal punishment by unbelief. Their time is up. But Jesus knows that those who hear these words still have time. And they should not keep asking, "What did the dead do wrong that they ended up in the coffin?" Instead, they should ask, "What have I done wrong that would lead me to end up some place even worse?"

Repent. That's the instruction Jesus gives. It is that Spirit-driven act of feeling sorrow over sin and trusting that Jesus has taken it away. It's that change from depending on yourself to make things right and depending on Jesus, who has already made things right.

While the devil wants to distract you with the problems of everyone else's life, Jesus cares enough about you to come and confront you with sin. And he does that to show you himself. He wants you to be aware of the poison you're drinking so that he can give you the cure, himself.

Jesus calls sinners to repentance. But unfortunately, many do not heed his words, at least not right away. Because of the devil's lies, even those who know Jesus and what he offers to sinners do often respond to other people's calls to repentance with deflection and anger. We do not like being called out. And if believers struggle with the law being preached to them, how could you expect those who do not know Christ to receive these words without bitterness?

Jesus understands this better than we ever could, so he tells a parable. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. This fig tree wasn't anything exotic in Israel. It was the kind of tree you passed every time you walked down the road. But the man didn't find any fruit on it. And as he talks to his gardener, we find out the tree had been fruitless for three years. That's too long. This tree was certainly not healthy, and it was probably dying. So, what did the owner do? He ordered the tree to be cut down. It was taking up space and wasn't producing. It was time to cut it down and plant something else.

But the gardener thought differently: "Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down." This gardener did not own the vineyard. This was not his tree. But what was he advocating for? More work for himself. It would have been so much easier to say, "cut it down and we'll plant something new." But he was willing to do the tough work of taking this tree under his wing and nursing it back to strength.

Now, Jesus is not telling this story to extol the virtues of horticulture. He's speaking about his kingdom, and he's showing something important about himself. We were and sometimes still are the trees that do not produce the fruits of repentance. If we hate sin, we should work to escape it down every path possible. But we don't always do that, do we? Instead of keeping our distance from that person, place, or thing which tempts us to fall back into our sin, we engage it. We say, "Sure, I have impure thoughts when I see tasteless scenes in movies, but am I really supposed to give up rater R movies for that?" "Sure, I'm dating a person who pushes the pace of physical intimacy faster than I know is right, but what am I supposed to do? Dump them?" "Sure, I know that my lips get loose and meanspirited when I've had a couple too many drinks at the bar, but am I really supposed

to cut back?” If we hate sin, we should work to escape it down every path possible. But that would involve giving something up. It would involve surrendering to the world and relying on Christ.

But the Gardener waits. He waits for that repentance which produces fruit. And thank God he does. He advocates for us, “Do not destroy them now. Give them time. Just a little longer.” We call this our time of grace. It is the time God has given people to repent. You see, just as Peter writes in his second letter, “The Lord is not slow to do what he promised, as some consider slowness. Instead, he is patient for your sakes, not wanting anyone to perish, but all to come to repentance.” God is not slow because he’s unable. He’s slow because we’re hard-headed. He’s patient because we’re stubborn.

You think about all those times when someone, in love, called you out for your sin, and your blood pressure shot through the roof: “How dare they! How dare they tell me that what I’m doing is wrong! It’s my life, not theirs!” But over time, maybe that defensiveness settled. Maybe the law of God started to take effect on your heart as your conscience spoke up again and again. You screwed up. You sinned. You broke. “Sir, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put fertilizer on it. If it produces fruit next year, fine. But if not, then cut it down.” Your Lord’s patience with you is longstanding, because God does not want you to perish.

But I’ll warn you not to take God’s patience for granted. Notice how Jesus’ parable ends. There’s something missing, right? The end. Why is it that Jesus ends with the gardener’s plea? Why do we not find out about the fate of the tree? Because for you and for me, the year has not passed yet. Judgement has not come. Our time of grace is not yet over. Will we be found in Christ, pumping out those fruits that come from a life of repentance, or will we be found dead, focusing on everything else but our need for a Savior and the Savior who filled that need?

When our trees grow dead with arrogance over sin and we become blind to the danger of our transgressions, may Jesus come to us dead trees and say, “unless you repent, you will all perish too.” And then let him show us the wounds he bore for us. Let him show us the agony and the pain of the punishment of sin crushing down on him completely. Confess your sins to him. Trust his mercy. Repent, because God does not want you to perish. Amen.