

A Sermon  
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Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Changed Mind, Changed Life**

Luke 13:1-9

Many Christians are now two and a half weeks into the season of Lent. It all began with the familiar refrain of Genesis 3:19: "You are dust, and to dust you shall return." Those are the words the minister repeats to each person who comes forward to have ashes applied, in the shape of a cross, to their forehead. It's a visible reminder that we're fragile, fallible, fallen human beings. None of us is exempt from the reality of death.

Not even the folks who engage Jesus in conversation at the beginning of today's text from Luke, though they seem to have lost sight of the fact that they're mortal too. At present, they have the luxury of being able to sit back and speculate about the reasons behind two fairly recent tragedies. One was an episode of state violence in which imperial troops, taking their orders from the Roman governor Pilate, had slaughtered a group of helpless peasants. The second was a construction accident in which a tower in Jerusalem's city wall had collapsed, killing eighteen people, most of them innocent bystanders.

Based on Jesus' response, it sounds like some in the crowd were using a theology of retribution to interpret these events. In other words, those who died were apparently being punished by God for their sins. But notice that Jesus will have none of it. He quickly dismisses that theory. "If these people died because of their sinfulness," says Jesus, "then does that mean that they were worse sinners than all the people who weren't killed? Is the fact that you're sitting here, alive and well, having this conversation with me, a sign that your own transgressions, though bad, aren't as bad as the kinds of things the deceased had done during their lives?"

It was one of those "let him who is without sin cast the first stone" moments. For those who thought the world is basically divided into good people and bad people, and that God shows special favor to those who behave themselves, while wiping out those who don't, Jesus has a strong rebuke. It's similar to a scene in the Clint Eastwood film, *Unforgiven*. A young gunslinger is trying to deal with how shook up he feels after having just killed another human being. "Well, I suppose he had it coming," he concludes. To this the grizzled old gunslinger played by Eastwood replies, "We all got it coming, kid."

Judgment is coming, says Jesus. We're all accountable to God for our lives. And compared to God's righteousness, we all come off looking incredibly unholy. So there's no need hoping that God grades on a curve, or that we can elevate ourselves spiritually by paying more attention to the sins of others than we do to our own. According to Jesus, our perception of ourselves and of others is deeply flawed and distorted. Our thinking is all screwed up.

That's why Jesus warns us that we need to repent. In many parts of the Christian faith, the word "repent" comes up a lot this time of the year in conjunction with the observance of Lent. It's certainly something that we acknowledge as an essential element in being a disciple of Jesus. We usually associate "repent" with feelings of remorse, a sense of guilt, and expressions of regret. When we think of repentance, we think of turning around and going in a different direction with your life. It's true that all these things have links to repentance. But they don't really get to the deepest heart of the matter. In many places in

the Bible, including today's text, "repent" is primarily about having a changed mind, a new perception, a different way of seeing things.

As author Dallas Willard puts it, when Jesus calls for us to repent, he's basically saying, "rethink your thinking."<sup>1</sup> According to Willard, "*Repent* just means to turn back on how you are thinking about things and to reconsider."<sup>2</sup> Not just because it's a good idea, or because Jesus sounds like a really wise person, but because the kingdom of God is real, and has arrived through him, and is available to you. But if you're going to come into it, and live out its reality in the here and now, you've got to overhaul the way you see things. And in today's text, that means getting a whole new awareness, a reawakened perception, of your own mortality.

"Unless you repent," says Jesus, "you too will all perish" (vv. 3, 5). He's not just talking about physical death, as if to say, "If you don't rethink your thinking, a construction crane might collapse and fall on you, or a flash flood might sweep you away, or cancer might take over your body." No, Jesus doesn't make quick, one-to-one correspondences between what a person does and what God then does to that person. Now this doesn't mean that there aren't often direct connections between our behavior and the consequences of that behavior. But it does mean that tragedies and suffering often go way beyond our ability to understand and explain, especially when we're inclined to give some kind of prepackaged, overly simple theological answer.

Granted, there's a time and place for deep, heartfelt wrestling and intense theological reflection on the sorrows and sufferings of life, especially when they happen on a large scale. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do good things happen to bad people? Why did such a tragedy happen to this particular group of people? Were these just random occurrences, or did they happen according to some divine purpose? Trying to relate the presence and activity of God to events in our lives, and the life of the world, is just part of what we do as people of faith. And it's important that we do that.

But when it comes to life's deepest and most difficult questions, we should never let our own uncertainty keep us from hearing the one message that is certain, namely, Jesus saying, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." Jesus is warning us about that end-time destruction of the soul that awaits those who reject the reign of God. And one of the sure signs of a perishing soul is a misplaced, judgmental focus on the sins of others, rather than paying attention to one's own mortality and need for divine forgiveness. Remember that no one gets into the kingdom because they have perfect knowledge of God's ways or a foolproof explanation for the reality of human suffering. No, entry into God's reign comes via humility and reliance on the merciful, life-giving power of God in Christ.

In his book, *Tuesdays with Morrie*, Mitch Albom captures some of the insight and wisdom he gathered from a former college professor who was dying of ALS, sometimes called Lou Gehrig's disease. During one of their meetings, Morrie said, "Everybody knows they're going to die, but nobody believes it." "Believe it," is Jesus' essential message in today's Scripture passage. He isn't trying to be morbid. Jesus is simply warning us about the dangers of false self-assurance. He knows how our perception of life gets corrupted and distorted, and we lose sight of just how vulnerable, fragile, and at risk we really are.

I was recently on my way to the church one morning, traveling down Livingston Road in front of Maryland Airport, when I noticed that the car coming from the opposite direction was beginning to cross the yellow line onto my side of the road. I had to blow my horn and make a quick shift even further to the right to avoid an accident. As the other driver passed by, I could tell that he was distracted by his attempt to light a cigarette. I'm grateful that both he and I were okay. But it was one of those wakeup moments when you realize just how thin that daily line is between life and death. A few more feet and we could have

collided head on. Both of us could have been injured. Both of us could have died. I might not be standing here in front of you this morning.

Jesus knew better than anyone how to interpret the events of the day. A political ruler decides to crack down and ends up murdering those who can't defend themselves. A tower collapses. A biopsy comes back malignant. A shooter walks into the workplace. A tornado drops out of the sky. A heart attack strikes while shoveling snow. A car crosses the center line. If you're wondering what these things mean in terms of relationship with God, Jesus gets right to the point. Life is fragile, and death is certain. And life's fragility demands urgency. Not the urgency of figuring out the whys and wherefores of other people's deaths, but the urgency of changing your own thinking and your own living. In other words, repentance. Repentance that leads to life. A life that bears the fruit of repentance.

About two years ago, a new product named Tikker became available. Tikker is a wristwatch that counts down your life so you can make the most of every second. Basically, you look at a dot-matrix screen that displays the seconds you have left on earth as they disappear down a black hole. Of course your estimated time of death is just that—an estimate—based on an algorithm similar to the one used by the federal government to figure a person's life expectancy. Tikker then converts that into a countdown of years, months, days, minutes, and seconds, so you can see how your time is running out.

Tikker's inventor is a 37-year-old Swede named Fredrik Colting. He said that he invented the gadget not as a morbid novelty item, but as an earnest attempt to change his own thinking about life. Colting, a former gravedigger, said, "the occurrence of death is no surprise to anyone, but in our modern society we rarely talk about it. I think if we were more aware of our own expiration we'd make better choices while we are alive." That's why Colting calls Tikker "the happiness watch." He believes watching your life slip away will remind you to savor life while you have it.<sup>3</sup>

Instead of handing out Tikker watches, whose calculations could be wrong, Jesus tells a story. It's a parable about a barren fig tree. The tree isn't just fruitless now. Apparently it has been fruitless for at least three years. The owner of the vineyard is ready to cut it down. All it's doing is taking up space. But thanks to the intercession of the gardener, the tree gets another chance, another year, to produce some fruit. Interestingly, when the gardener tells the owner to "leave it alone," the Greek term is the same root from which we get the word "forgiveness." It's identical to the phrase Luke uses in his presentation of the Lord's Prayer: "forgive our sins" (11:4). So maybe we should not only hear the gardener saying of the tree, "leave it alone," but also "forgive it" for its fruitlessness. "Have mercy, be patient," says the gardener. "I'll give it all the help I can, and let's see if it can start bearing some fruit."

The tree is given some more time. So it is with you and me. How much time? Only God knows. After all, our days are in his hands. And not just our days, but our minutes and seconds as well. As they tick away, what will you do with them? Jesus' call is clear. Now is the time for repentance. The way into the kingdom is open. But to enter it, you'll have to rethink your thinking. You'll need to turn back and reconsider your perception of things. And your change of thinking will need to generate a change of living, namely, a life that bears the fruit of mercy and righteousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Dallas Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence: Final Words on Heaven and the Kingdom of God* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2014) 15.

<sup>2</sup> Willard, *Living in Christ's Presence*, 15.

<sup>3</sup> "Watch Counts Down Time Left Before Death." PreachingToday website. Accessed February 25, 2016 <<http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2014/may/5052614.html>>.