

UNLESS YOU REPENT

Luke 12:54-13:9

Key Verse 13:5

“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

In this passage, Jesus told his listeners to have a proper interpretation of their present time. A proper interpretation leads to proper actions which can lead to life-changing results. A few years before the 2007-2008 financial crisis, a handful of people foresaw that the housing market would collapse catastrophically. In response, they made big investments against the housing market. In other words, they would make money if the housing market went bad. It didn't make sense at the time. Housing prices were rising rapidly. Related industries were booming. People lived like these markets would grow forever. Meanwhile, the naysayers initially lost money. But then in 2007-2008, the housing market blew up. The financial crisis hit worldwide. People lost their jobs and their homes. Today, eight years later, many have still not recovered. But this small minority, who invested against the housing market, profited hundreds of millions of dollars. This was the subject of a book written a few years ago and a recent movie. No need to read the book or watch the movie. But these people properly interpreted the times in which they lived. They saw certain calamity, took drastic action and in the end, came out ahead.

We, too, need to think about our present time but from God's perspective. He wants to give us something infinitely more important than investment strategy and money. He wants to give us eternal life. May the Holy Spirit open our hearts to carefully listen and respond to Jesus' words.

First, interpret this present time (54-56)

Most of us get our weather from the news or our favorite mobile device. But in Jesus' day, people looked into the sky or felt where the wind was blowing. Jesus said to the crowd, **“When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘It's going to rain,’ and it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, ‘It's going to be hot,’ and it is.”** Clouds from the Mediterranean brought rain. Winds from the south brought strong desert heat. They could predict rain or a hot day and adjust their daily routine accordingly.

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Their weather forecasting skills were quite good. But their spiritual forecasting skills were quite poor. Look at verse 56. **“Hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky. How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?”** The key phrase here is **“interpret this present time.”** Mark 1:15 says, **“‘The time has come,’ he said. ‘The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!’”** During that time, Jesus healed the sick, raised the dead, fed the hungry, and proclaimed good news. Jesus demonstrated his love, grace, power, authority and truth. Jesus hoped people would put it all together and understand that the present time was the time to believe in him as the Messiah. But after three years, many in the crowd still did not accept Jesus. So Jesus challenged them, **“How is it that you don’t know how to interpret this present time?”**

Life today is fast-paced, busy, stressful and full of distractions. Science, technology, medicine, social progress, and industrialization have created a world that Jesus’ immediate audience would not recognize. Furthermore, Jesus is no longer physically here, teaching, healing, and performing miracles. Instead the headlines are dominated by violence, social unrest, political upheaval and economic uncertainty. People tend to think that the present time has nothing to do with Jesus who lived so long ago. But that would be a gross misinterpretation of the present time. We are in the time between Jesus’ ascension and his second coming. Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead. The present time will not last forever. Many scoff at such a thought. Even Christians can become dull to the reality of Jesus’ return. But Jesus will surely come, like a thief in the night. Therefore, the present time, despite all that is happening, is the best time to seek Jesus with all our heart.

Second, be reconciled before it is too late (57-59)

With a God-centered interpretation of the present time, the next steps become clear. Jesus used an example of appearing before a judge. Let’s read verses 58-59. **“As you are going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled on the way, or your adversary may drag you off to the judge, and the judge turn you over to the officer, and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny.”**

Implied in Jesus’ very direct example is that you are in debt to your adversary. You owe him a lot. In this situation, there are basically two ways to respond. You could fight your adversary, and insist on your rights. You could hold on to your pride and money. You could stand on your limited smarts and attempt to

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defend and justify yourself in court. The difficulty here is that the judge already knows you are guilty. If this goes before that judge, you will certainly be thrown into prison with no hope of getting out.

The other way to respond to your adversary is to do everything you possibly can to reconcile with him. You do not insist your own way. You do not become defensive or justify yourself. You accept that fact that you are in great debt. You humble yourself and accept the terms of making the debt right. You reconcile with your adversary and avoid standing guilty before the judge. You avoid prison time and having an unpayable debt hanging over your head.

To reconcile is much better and is Jesus' point in his story. The massive debt is our sin. The judge is God who has authority to throw us into the eternal prison of hell. His judgment of our guilt is just and correct. The adversary or opponent is Jesus. As long as we oppose Jesus or do not commit ourselves to him, he is our adversary. But when we are reconciled to Jesus, he is no longer our adversary. He becomes our Savior, Friend and Shepherd. Rather than dragging us to the heavenly court for judgment, he is our Advocate.

Reconciliation with Jesus Christ is the most urgent life matter in this present time. Life in the present is no doubt often very hard. We have enough things occupying our mental and emotional space. Reconciliation and judgment seem irrelevant. But that is a lie. Romans 13:11 summarizes this. **“And do this, understanding the present time: The hour has already come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”** For those who have never reconciled with Jesus, the hour to do so is now. Do not delay. For those of us who have reconciled with Jesus, let us thank him for being our Savior, not our adversary. At the same time let's not fall into spiritual slumber, dragged away by the concerns and pleasures of the world. Our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.

Third, repent or perish (13:1-5)

As Jesus taught about the present time and reconciliation, he was interrupted with some tragic news. Some Galileans were at the temple. While they were offering their sacrifices, the Roman governor Pilate sent soldiers and slaughtered the Galileans in the temple. The massacre was so bad that the blood of some of the victims mixed with the blood of the sacrifices. The scene was gruesome. The event was tragic and incendiary.

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Jesus knew what was in the minds of the bearers of bad news. Jesus pointed it out in verse 2. **“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?”** Then Jesus brought up another event. Look at verse 4. **“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?”** Underlying the retelling of the event were faulty theological assumptions. People assumed that the Galileans had died this way because God was punishing them for their sin. The whole book of Job is about this theme. In John 9, the disciples encountered a man born blind and asked Jesus whose sin had caused the man’s blindness.

Mass media and the Internet have made manmade and natural calamities commonplace. But the questions remain the same. On June 26, 2016, the Istanbul airport was attacked. 45 people died and 230 were injured. Why did they die like this? Were they worse sinners than all other people at the airport that day? On June 12, 2016, 49 people were killed at an Orlando nightclub. Why did they die like this? Were they somehow more guilty than all the other people in Orlando? On Friday, March 11, 2011, almost 16,000 people were killed when a tsunami slammed into northern Japan. Why did they die like this? Were they greater sinners than others in Japan? Many of us shuddered when I even phrased the questions in that way. But that’s how the people in Jesus’ time thought.

In response to the tragedy of the Galileans, Jesus answered in verse 3, **“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”** In response to the accident that killed eighteen people in Jerusalem, Jesus gave the same answer. Let’s read verse 5. **“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”** Jesus did not say that these people were not sinners. Nor did he say they were guiltless. The Galileans were sinners. The people in Jerusalem were guilty. But they were not worse sinners or more guilty.

Yet Jesus did not continue down this line of speculation. To Jesus, the important question was not, “Why did those people die?” but rather, “Why are you still alive?” Look at verse 5 again. **“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”** Jesus taught that tragedies in the world are warnings signs to the living. Physical death can come unexpectedly and by any means. We do not know when. We do not know the method. Tragic events remind us that life is fragile and short. Therefore, we must turn our hearts to God in repentance. Jesus said, **“But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”**

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Jesus strong words here are a warning but they are also good news. Jesus is not intimidating us with a threat. Actually, Jesus does not want anyone to perish. In this context, perish does not mean physical death but eternal death in hell. Repentance will not necessarily spare us from physical death nor even a sudden, tragic death. Almost 3,000 people died in the 9/11 attacks and there were certainly Christians among them. But when we repent and put our faith in Jesus, he does promise that we will not eternally perish. John 3:16 says, **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”** Repentance is turning away from sin and unbelief and turning to Jesus.

There are many ways to respond to the tragedies of the world. We can become angry and think, “I hope those evil people get theirs in the end.” We can think selfishly, “I’m glad it wasn’t me.” We could even think, “Those people got what they deserved.” Those are all wrong responses to tragic events. The only right response is to repent before Jesus. We repent for ourselves and we repent on behalf of a people or nation. None of us were directly responsible for the heartbreaking events in New Orleans or Dallas or France or Germany. But we can repent our negligence or other sinful attitudes and actions. Moreover, we can take the sin of our people as our own sin and bring it to God in repentance. In the Bible, this is what Moses and Daniel did. 2 Chronicles 7:14 says, **“... if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and I will forgive their sin and heal their land.”**

Repentance is the most urgent matter for all peoples. Let’s read verse 5 one more time. **“I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”**

Fourth, the result of genuine repentance (6-9)

Jesus used a parable to explain that repentance has very clear results. There was a man who owned a vineyard. The vineyard owner had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. The man went to look for fruit on the tree, expecting to see big, juicy, sweet figs. There is a small apple tree growing in my backyard. For the first few years, there was no fruit. But I liked that tree because of the potential for apples. In fact, when we put in a garage, we positioned the garage in a way that I could keep that tree. That’s how much I liked the potential of that tree. In due time, it produced one very small apple that my son John ate. And this year, if I go to that tree, there are bunches of growing apples.

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Likewise, the man in Jesus' parable expected to see figs on his fig tree. But to his dismay, he did not find any. He was so disgusted with this tree that he was ready to take drastic action. Let's read verse 7 together. **"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?'"** The owner was expecting to see fruit each of the past three years but saw nothing. He was ready to cut it down.

Of course we know Jesus was not really talking about gardening strategies or soil conservation. He was making a point about repentance. In the parable, the vineyard owner is God. The man taking care of the vineyard is Jesus. The fig tree represents the people. Jesus had already been ministering about three years, the same length of time the owner had been looking for fruit in the parable. For three years so many people had heard Jesus' teaching, witnessed his miracles, experienced his healing, and even ate his bread. God expected to see repentance and fruit. Genuine repentance would have resulted in love, compassion and peace. Instead God saw suffering and neglected people, civil unrest and political turmoil. Repentance would have resulted in a people bursting to share God's great love and hope. Instead God saw self-absorbed people struggling with their identity. Even before Jesus began his ministry, John the Baptist proclaimed, **"Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 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 3:8a,9)

Jesus' parable does not end there. The man who took care of the vineyard intervened on behalf of the fruitless 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.'"** The man did not give up. The fig tree still had potential to bear fruit. He was willing to dig around it to get more nutrients and water to the roots. He was willing to fertilize it. The man really wanted to do everything possible for this fig tree so that it could become fruitful.

This is what Jesus has done for us. We deserve to be chopped down like the tree. We are sinners and the wages of sin is death. But Jesus has graciously given us more time to repent and bear fruit. Jesus did this through his death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead. His death paid the debt of our sin. 2 Peter 3:9b says, **"... he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."** And Jesus has not only given us more time but he works directly with us. He comes to where we are. Jesus works hard to dig around and

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fertilize in order to make us fruitful. This digging and fertilizing is sometimes unpleasant. But Jesus does this with hope, seeing our fruit-bearing potential. Praise God who gives us more time and another chance. Praise Jesus who works in us to repent and bear fruit like love, joy, peace, patience and kindness.

We also see in this parable that the extra time we've been given is finite. We ought not to squander the time and chance we've been graciously given. Let's repent and with the remaining time, allow Jesus to work and produce fruit in us.

I have a small story about repentance and fruit. In my workplace, I am a manager. The week before last, my boss gave me specific instructions to resolve a serious problem affecting other workers. What he told me to do sent my stress levels through the roof. I was very afraid of what would happen if I did what he told me. I asked my boss for help but he said, "You must take responsibility for this Tony," because I am the manager. It made me very upset and rebellious, on top of my fear and stress. Why should I take responsibility for what he told me to do? I dreaded going back to work on Monday.

Yet God's timing is impeccable. Do you remember the passage from last Sunday? It was about being a faithful and wise manager. God hammered into me two simple truths: 1) a faithful and wise manager knows and does what his master wants, even when it is hard and 2) God gives us wisdom. Repentance meant doing what my boss wanted without a rebellious mind but simply as a faithful manager. So I repented and I also repented my fear and stress. Repentance freed me to pray for wisdom which God later gave through my wife. I did what my boss told me to do and God worked out the situation very pleasantly. This earthly experience also taught me a spiritual lesson. I can be a faithful and wise manager when I know and do what my Heavenly Master wants, even if it is hard. The same repentance allowed me to prepare this message. Message writing usually shortens my fuse and again sends my stress through the roof. Yelling at my children and being unkind to my wife while I am preparing a message on loving your neighbor as yourself makes no sense. However, for the first time, I've had zero stress preparing this message. I am only being a manager, doing my Heavenly Father wants me to do. This is a small fruit of repentance. Pray for much more fruit through repentance.

In summary, we learned to have a spiritual interpretation of the present time. Jesus is coming soon and therefore, being reconciled to him is the most urgent matter. We can be reconciled to Jesus through repentance and repentance results in fruit that God desires to see in us. Let's have a right, spiritual interpretation of our present time based on the signs God has given to us. May the Lord Jesus work in

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each of us to embrace repentance, to be reconciled to God and to bear wonderful fruit.