

When the Kingdom Comes Close

Week 1 — “Unless You Repent”

Luke 13:1–9

Series Big Idea

When the Kingdom of God comes close, people cannot remain neutral. Jesus confronts our assumptions, exposes our hearts, extends mercy, and calls for decisive response.

Sermon Main Idea:

Jesus uses tragedy, warning, and a parable of patience to call every person to urgent repentance before it is too late.

Anchor Truth:

God’s patience is real, but it is not permission to delay repentance.

Introduction

Most people ask the wrong question when tragedy strikes.

When disaster happens, we instinctively ask:

- “Why them?”
- “What did they do wrong?”
- “Did they deserve it?”

That’s exactly what happens in Luke 13.

Some people bring Jesus a disturbing news report: Pilate has massacred Galileans during worship, mingling their blood with the sacrifices in the Temple. It was political violence, religious desecration, horrifying evil.

Then Jesus references another tragedy: the Tower of Siloam collapsed and killed eighteen people. A random catastrophe. No warning. No apparent reason.

The crowd wants Jesus to explain the victims. Jesus instead confronts the listeners.

Not: “Why did they die?”

But: “Life happens unexpectedly. Are you ready to die?”

That shift changes everything.

I. Tragedy Reveals Our Mortality (Luke 13:1–5)

The Wrong Question: “Were They Worse Sinners?”

The people assume suffering must directly correspond to sinfulness.

- The Galileans must have deserved judgment.
- The eighteen crushed by the tower must have been exceptionally guilty.

This is an old human instinct:

“If something terrible happened to them, they must have done something terrible.”

Jesus completely dismantles that assumption. “No, I tell you...” (Luke 13:3, 5) Jesus refuses simplistic explanations for suffering. Not every tragedy is direct punishment for specific sins.

That matters pastorally. Some people carry enormous guilt because tragedy entered their lives: sickness, loss, accidents, abuse, and death. Jesus refuses to let suffering always be interpreted as personal divine retaliation.

Jesus Redirects the Conversation

Jesus changes the focus from: “Why did they die?” to: “Why do you think you won’t?” The shocking reality exposed by tragedy is mortality. Death exists in this fallen world. And tragedy reminds us how fragile life really is.

A tragedy occurs during a distorted religious ceremony in Jerusalem. A tower falls near the southern wall in Jerusalem. What about today? A diagnosis comes. A phone call arrives at 2 AM. A normal day becomes irreversible. Tragedy tears away the illusion of control.

Tragedy reveals our mortality. Jesus redirects our thinking from our own perceived immortality to actual reality. **“Unless You Repent...”**

Jesus repeats it twice because urgency matters. The word “perish” here points beyond physical death toward eternal judgment. Jesus is saying that the greatest danger is not dying suddenly. The greatest danger is dying unchanged. He is using tragedy as warning. Are you ready? Are you prepared to swing out into eternity?

The forever Kingdom has come close in Jesus. And closeness demands response. Are you ready? Have you repented? That’s certainly a code word. Repentance. We use these words and never really define them clearly. We just all think we have agreed upon some definition. Except, I bet if I asked all of you to write down what repentance means, I would not get any two identical answers, unless you’re copying off of your wives, fellas.

II. Repentance Is More Than Feeling Sorry

Many people reduce repentance to a cycle of guilt, shame, apology, and then temporary behavior modification. But biblical repentance goes deeper.

Repentance Is a Change of Perception

The Greek idea behind repentance means a transformed mind, heart, and direction. Not merely, “I regret what I did.” Rather, “I now see things differently.” And what do you see differently?

You begin to see God as glorious, sin as destructive, Christ as worthy, and your life as belonging to Him. John Piper once described repentance as “A change of the mind’s perceptions and dispositions and purposes.”

Repentance happens when God becomes beautiful to you again. Sin loses its charm because God gains your affection.

Repentance Is a Change of Direction

Repentance is not perfection. But it is reorientation. It is an about-face. Acts of obedience are not repentance themselves, they are the fruit of repentance. I don’t repent because I changed my actions. I change my actions BECAUSE I repent. I think differently, I perceive things differently.

I understand that my life has a very different purpose now that I am a part of God's family. This is why John the Baptist said: "Bear fruits in keeping with repentance." (Luke 3:8)

Fruit does not create life. Fruit reveals life.

A car traveling the wrong direction on the interstate is not fixed by slowing down, apologizing, rolling the windows down, or admiring the scenery.

It must turn around. Repentance is spiritual turning.

III. God's Mercy Gives Us Time (Luke 13:6–9)

Jesus now tells a parable about a barren fig tree. For three years the owner has sought fruit and found none. The verdict seems obvious: Cut the stupid thing down. Chop it up for firewood.

But then comes one of the most beautiful pictures of mercy in the Gospel. "Let it alone this year also..." The gardener pleads for more time. This is the patience of God. This is a picture of the mercy of God.

IV. "Dig It and Dung It"

The gardener says: "I will dig around it and put on manure." Growing up, I always heard from my KJV toting grandfather concerning things we planted that we needed to "dig it and dung it." That gardener is going to prepare for the process of growth: "I will dig around it" "and put on manure." The process of growth is disruptive and messy.

"Dig It"

The soil around the roots has hardened. So, the gardener breaks it up. He aerates it. Loosens it. Removes obstacles. Spiritually, repentance often begins when God starts disturbing hardened ground. Sometimes God digs through conviction, disappointment, suffering, confrontation, exposure, and brokenness.

God loves us too much to leave the soil untouched. Hard hearts cannot sustain healthy fruit.

"Dung It"

Then comes the manure. Nourishment. Fertilizer. Necessary nutrients for life. But manure is messy. Sometimes its stinky. I walk outside some days in the ‘Ville and I smell the herds east or southwest of our neighborhood. Grandpa used to say that manure smelled like money.

Real spiritual growth is not neat and polished. Faith requires work. And the work faith requires can get dirty. Repentance means wading honestly into your pride, lust, bitterness, greed, hypocrisy, addiction, selfishness, hidden wounds, and false loves. That is unpleasant stuff to process. I mean, nobody likes the smell of manure. But manure makes gardens grow.

Sometimes the very thing we want God to remove immediately is the thing He is using to produce growth.

The miracle of the Gospel is that Jesus does not merely demand fruit from barren trees. He tends them. He intercedes for them. He works the soil. He bears with us patiently.

And ultimately, Jesus Himself would be “cut down” so barren sinners could live. At the cross judgment fell, mercy flowed and patience was purchased.

The cross proves that repentance is not earning God’s love. It is responding to the love God has already shown in Christ.

V. The Danger of Delayed Repentance

The parable ends unresolved. Will the tree bear fruit? Or will it finally be cut down? Jesus leaves the ending open because the listener is the ending.

Every hearer must answer: What will I do with the mercy of God?

God’s patience is astonishing. But it is not endless postponement. The same sun that melts wax hardens clay. The same Gospel that softens some hearts hardens others when repeatedly ignored.

For Unbelievers

You cannot save yourself through morality, comparison, or religious performance. The issue is not whether you are worse than someone else. The issue is whether you have turned to Christ.

Repent and believe the Gospel.

For Believers

Repentance is not merely the doorway into Christianity. It is the ongoing posture of Christian life. Ask yourself, “Where has my heart hardened? What soil is God digging up? What uncomfortable work is God doing in me? Where am I resisting change?”

For the Church

We must stop treating repentance as embarrassment. Repentance is grace. Repentance is how dead places come alive again. Healthy churches are not churches without sinners. They are churches where sinners keep turning toward Jesus.

The tragedies in Luke 13 remind us that life is fragile.

The fig tree reminds us that mercy is still available.

The gardener reminds us that Jesus is patient.

But the command still stands: “Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” The Kingdom has come close. So do not waste the mercy of God. Do not mistake His patience for indifference. Do not delay what Jesus says must happen now.

The Gardener is still digging.

The Gardener is still calling.

The Gardener is still extending mercy.

But the call is urgent:

Turn around.

Turn toward Christ.

And bear the fruit of a changed life.