

*“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”* Twice Jesus says this. And you know that is not the response from Him the people are looking for. Pilate had killed some Galileans, in the temple at Jerusalem of all places. Either condemn Pilate for this barbaric act, or blame the Galileans. Maybe they had it coming for something they had done. But no. *“Unless you repent,”* He says, *“you also will perish.”*

A tower fell in Jerusalem. It killed eighteen people. Were these eighteen people unlucky? Maybe they deserved it. Don't even go there, says Jesus. *“Unless you repent, you will likewise perish.”*

Bad things happen today just like in Jesus' day. A devastating tornado. A fatal car wreck. A plane crash. When bad things happen, all of a sudden, we become judges. We determine that either the victims got what they did not deserve, or they got what they did deserve. But there is only one response that Jesus wants from us. Not to judge, but to repent.

Accidents, diseases, suffering, calamities, death. All this is in our world because of sin. Not just because of his sin, and her sin, and their sin. Because of sin. When anything truly tragic happens, it should be seen as a sign. A sign of God's judgment. Yet not on the sinner who suffered the tragedy, but on all sinners, on all people.

What this means is that every time we hear of a tragic occurrence somewhere, God through that tragedy, is calling upon you and me to repent. And isn't it interesting that with the internet, and instant world-wide communication, we hear about murders, and towers falling, and everything else that is sad and tragic on a daily basis. This affords us the opportunity to repent not just when we think we should, but daily.

The people in our text tell Jesus of the tragedy that happened in Jerusalem, not because they feel the need to repent, but because they have the opposite attitude actually. They are judging, not repenting. *“Someone was bad. Either Pilate or those Galileans who were killed, but it wasn't me. Obviously, they are the ones who should have repented.”* This led Jesus to say, *“Do you think they were worse sinners? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will likewise perish.”*

God's justice is hidden from our eyes. We are not to think, as the Jews did, that bad things are punishments upon bad people, and that the absence of troubles are evidence that a person is righteous before God. No, my friends. Troubles, suffering, deadly accidents can strike anyone at any time. And when they strike that person out there, and not me, I am not to judge that one, but acknowledge that I, too, am a sinner living in a sinful world, knowing that the only reason I was spared is because of God's mercy.

You and I are not the judges of others. But we are journeying through this life on our way to meet the Judge. By God's grace, He places Jesus' cross before us again and again as we journey. And the message of His cross is that He perished there for us, and for all sinners, in our place.

You see, Jesus wants no one to perish eternally. He wants all to reach repentance. That's why, in His parable of the fig tree, He is the vinedresser who pleads for the barren fig tree. "Don't cut it down yet," he says, "Let me dig around it and put on manure. It may, then, produce fruit next year."

I've seen that happen, and I'm sure that you have too. People, maybe ones we love, who failed to show fruits of repentance in their lives year after year. But then something happened; something wonderful. The fruits came. They responded to the love of God for them. They opened up their dusty Bible. They got down on their knees in prayer. They came back to church. They truly wanted to change their life for the better.

And friends, even if this has not yet happened for some of your loved ones, keep praying for them that God will make it happen. How does it happen? How did it happen for some? It happened because God was patient with them. It happened because God showed mercy to them. And because Jesus did what it took, as a competent vinedresser, to bring them back, to produce fruits of faith in their lives. And He used you, and me, and other Christians to do this wonderful work. And you know, He even did that wonderful work for me, and for you, when we, at one time, were barren fig trees.

Now notice that the vinedresser in the parable does two things. He digs around the fig tree first, and then puts on manure. The Law and the Gospel. The digging is necessary. The cutting of the Law must be applied or no one will repent. And then comes the Gospel, the manure. Did I just call the Good News of Jesus manure? I sure did. Manure is despised. It's gotten rid of. Just as Jesus was despised and nailed to a cross. The only one who appreciates manure is the fig tree who needs it to produce fruits. The sinful world has no use for the Gospel of Jesus Christ. But His Christians love it. You were baptized in it, in the manure of the Gospel. You live your life in it. That's why you are a stench to the sinful world. And that's why you grow healthy as Christians and produce figs.

And I'm here called by God to fling this precious manure to you. And so, let me do some flinging right now. Friend, you are God's fig tree, and there is no one here who produces perfect fruits as we should. That's why we need Jesus to dig around us with the Law, and put on the manure of His cleansing blood.

He is patient with all of you. He wants none to perish eternally. And friend, He forgives you. However lacking you have been in producing fruits, He says to you: "You are forgiven." And that forgiveness is the fertilizer you need to bear beautiful figs.

That's how it works. No one has to yank you here by the collar. You come because you love Jesus; because He is patient with you and does forgive all of your sins. You come faithfully because you are not the world which has no use for His precious manure. You are His fig tree rooted and growing in Jesus. Amen.