

Unless You Repent...

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[0 : 00] The early 20th century British economist John Maynard Keynes lived through difficult and changeable days.

He was a top member of Britain's economic think tank, dealing with Britain's money during the two world wars and the Great Depression. Keynes most famous quote made memorable and altogether more powerful by the notorious days in which he lived is this, when the facts change, I change my mind.

What do you do sir? When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do sir? Britain went to war in 1914, in the late 1920s experienced the ravages of the Great Depression and then went back to war in 1939.

On each occasion as the facts changed, economists needed to change their minds on economic policies. To have done anything other would have been disastrous for our nation.

When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do sir? It's very easy to admire people who never change their minds, who even when the facts change, stick to their guns and fight their corners.

[1 : 27] But the path of reason and wisdom is, when the facts change, to change one mind. Let's put economics to the side.

Let's consider something of even more fundamental importance. When the facts about Jesus Christ change, when we discover for ourselves who he really is, and what he came to do 2000 years ago, it is even more important that we change our minds.

Perhaps until now we've been able to keep him in the background of our lives. We like to hear about Jesus, but who he is and what he's done has been rather foggy for us, and therefore doesn't really change our daily lives.

But recently, for some inexplicable reason, we've been thinking more about Jesus. And the truth is that we're now struggling to dismiss the facts about him.

Because with us once we thought about him merely as a good man, now we realize he's far more. And with us once we thought of the cross as a tragedy, we're now beginning to see it as it really is.

[2 : 39] Jesus loves me and died to take all my sins away. The facts have changed. What is to be our response?

Surely, to use Kean's word, our response is to change my mind. Surely the wise response to the greatness of Jesus' love and the saving impact of the cross is to change my mind.

At its most basic level, the word repent means to change one's mind. Now it means far more than that, given that in the original language, the mind is not what it is for us today.

Repentance for those who were living in Jesus' day was a whole life change. It was a change of mind, a change of heart, and a change of will.

North became south, and east became west. The entire compass of life was turned upside down. In the Christian context, whereas once a person lived for himself, now as the facts about Jesus became real for him, he began to live for God.

[3 : 51] And how he could serve God with his life. Where are you today on the spectrum of repentance? Is Jesus still in the background of your life?

Or you like to hear about him. But who he is and what he's done is rather foggy in your mind. Or is Jesus in the center such that your whole life revolves around him?

Our passage today is all about repentance. About Jesus' call to us today to change our minds, our hearts, and our will toward him.

So we're going to read in Luke chapter 13 from verse 1 to verse 9. Luke chapter 13 verses 1 to 9, page 872.

Luke 13 from verse 1 to verse 9. There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

[5 : 05] And he answered them, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

or those 18 on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them? Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. And he told this parable, a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came seeking fruit in it and found none. And he said to the vine dresser, look, for three years now I've come seeking fruit on this fig tree and I find none.

Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? And he answered him, sir, let it alone this year also until I dig round it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good.

But if not, you can cut it down. Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Today is an opportunity, and who knows it may be our last, to respond to Jesus' call of repentance in this passage. To use his words, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. This passage, as you can see from the Bible you've got, is split into two sections. First of all, from verse 1 to 5, a sign to repent, a sign to repent.

[6 : 53] And second, from verse 6 to 9, a time to repent, a sign to repent. First of all, verses 1 through 5, sign to repent. One of the things which makes the Bible so real is that it's true to life.

It doesn't hide the distressing realities of life in this broken world. Jesus talks of two singularly nasty disasters in Israel. The first concerns Pilate, the Roman proconsul of Judea. Now, Pilate was a psychopath whose rule was marked by terror. On this occasion, some pilgrims from Galilee had come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the temple. At a whim, Pilate had their throats cut and mixed their blood with the blood of sacrifices.

Now, those who told Jesus about this were probably also Galileans because the majority of Jesus' disciples were Galileans. And even though Jesus was born in Bethlehem, He was raised in Galilee. That those who told Jesus about this massacre do so in order to provoke Jesus to anger and to condemn Pilate to begin a Jewish uprising against the Romans. Perhaps political revolution was uppermost in their minds when they said this. The second disaster concerns a tower in the city of Jerusalem which collapsed and killed 18 people. It's something we see happening all the time. Buildings collapse, are set on fire, are set on fire, and people tragically die. Now, we can put it down to the negligence of the builders or to being in the wrong place at the wrong time, but whatever, 18 people died, every one of them precious in the sight of God. In the Israel of Jesus' day, it was commonly thought that disaster was a punishment for sin. These Galileans must have sinned terribly against God for them to have suffered so much at the hands of Pilate. These people upon whom the tower fell must have offended God terribly to have fallen victim to such a disaster. It's like karma. It's such a cold, merciless, and sick way of thinking. And it's also very self-justifying. After all, those who told

Jesus about these disasters weren't massacred by Pilate or weren't crushed by the falling tower. Therefore, in their own minds, they hadn't offended God and sinned against Him to have deserved such punishment. In our own day, many people use disasters as a weapon against God. If God is good, why did He allow such an evil thing to happen as that of the psychopath Pilate killing the Galileans?

[9 : 48] Or if God is powerful, why did He let the tower of Siloam fall on these people? Many people today, use the question of evil against God use the question of evil against God. The reason that if God is all powerful and God is all good, He would not allow disasters. The fact that these things happen every single day proves to these people that there is no God. How does Jesus respond when challenged by the crowds?

Does He deal with it politically, turning His anger toward the Roman occupiers and provoking rebellion, as the Galileans perhaps wished He would? Does He deal with them theologically, condemning those who died in these disasters as sinners and deserving the judgment they received, as perhaps the Pharisees wished He would? Does He deal with them morally, answering the question of evil once and for all, as perhaps some in our society today would like Him to? The answer is no, no, and no. Jesus is not interested in being used as a political, theological, and moral

pawn in a game of human chess. He is focused on our good and God's glory. Of the victims of both disasters, Jesus asks the question, do you think they were worse offenders? Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans because they suffered in this way? Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? Jesus unequivocally answers no in verse 3 and no in verse 5.

The Galileans who died and those who died when the tower fell on them were no better and no worse than anyone else in society. What happened to them had nothing to do with their own sinfulness.

By saying this, Jesus is flying in the face of so many in His own society who thought that disasters were punishments for sins. Jesus categorically denies this. No, He says. It's as if He says, stop using these tragic disasters for your own heartless purposes. When those terrorists killed all those people in the Manchester Arena bombing, wasn't it heartless to hear some Christians saying, well, it was sinful in the first place to go? Rather, Jesus says, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. By using the word likewise, Jesus isn't suggesting that we too will die in natural disasters, simply that one day we too will die. He's telling us, look at these disasters from a personal perspective. What are they saying to me? Not what are they saying about me or about God or about the political regime, about the question of evil? What are they saying to me? They're telling me that my life is short, unpredictable, and I must be ready for the day of my death. Human life is unpredictable, and we must be ready for the day of death.

In the previous passage in chapter 12, verse 40, we saw this last week, Jesus warned His disciples to be ready for His unexpected return. You must also be ready, for you do not know, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect. And this passage is telling us that we do not know what to expect of life, so we must be ready for the day of death. Now, chances are, none of us will die in the kind of disasters referred to in this passage, but we will all die. And the question is, are we ready?

[13:51] Now, this sounds like a very gloomy perspective, doesn't it? It's not why you came to church this morning, I'm sure. But you know, it is only when we're ready for the day of our deaths that we can truly live our lives to the full without worrying about unexpected things happening to us. It's only when we're prepared to meet with God when we die that we can get on with living life without fear.

We may be foggy-minded about many things in life, and it doesn't really matter, but this must not be one of them. But then you ask, okay, I must be ready. How can I be ready? To which Jesus answers, both in verse 3 and verse 5, repent. Repent. To repent, to repeat what I said earlier, to repent is to change one's mind, one's heart, one's will. It is to turn the entire compass of one's life around. My life was once pointed toward myself and what I could get out of my life. Now it's pointed to God and how I can serve Him with my life. To repent is to change direction, to stop going our way and to start going God's way instead. To repent is to move self from the throne of one's heart and to crown Jesus in its place.

Until the revolutionary work of Nicholas Copernicus, it was thought that the sun revolved around the earth. Before we came to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, before we repented, we thought that everything in life, including God, revolved around us. But now we know the truth. God is at the center of everything, and we exist to know, love, and glorify Him. That's what it means to repent. It means basically to put God at the center of our lives. Jesus is telling us, this is the way to be ready for the day of your death. If by faith Jesus comes first in your life, you can now get on with living without being afraid of dying. But if you're still living for yourself, you're not ready to die.

You're simply not ready. It's as simple and direct as that. One can almost imagine the compassionate and urgent emotion in the eyes of Jesus as He's urging His listeners to be ready for that day.

But rather than use the tragedies of this life as weapons of politics, theology, and morality, they view them as opportunities for personal repentance, to get ready for the day when our time on this earth is up by repenting and putting God first. Some years ago, a young lad in my wife's home village got very drunk one night, and he wandered or hobbled along the jetty, fell into the sea, and tragically drowned. It was the biggest funeral the village had seen in years.

[17:08] But what did all this young man's pals do after the funeral? We all know, don't we? Having heard from the minister of their urgent need to believe in Jesus before it's too late, all of them went to the local hotel and got blind drunk.

They learned nothing from their friend's death. Nothing. How foolish. When we experience a tragedy or we hear of a disaster, what is to be our immediate response? Jesus says, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. View them as God-given opportunities to turn away from self and to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ. When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir? The fact of our mortality changes everything, not the least of this, not the least of which is this.

Given the unpredictability of human life, it is never too early to repent and believe. Never too early. A sign to repent. Well, then secondly, verse 6 through 9, a time to repent. A time to repent. In this short parable, Jesus is continuing the theme of repentance. But whereas before, Jesus was viewing it from the perspective of human death, he's now viewing it from the perspective of divine justice.

[18 : 39] One day we will all die, yes, and on that day we will face the judgment of God. Therefore, we are all accountable for the way in which we have lived our lives and our present attitude to God. That's the point of this parable.

So a man plants a fig tree in his vineyard. The vineyard soil is rich and fertile, so the man should expect to see fruit within at least three years. Every year he comes and he finds no figs on his fig tree.

Finally, he calls in his garden and says, You cut that tree down. It's just taking up space. I could plant something else there instead. The vinedresser persuades the man to let it, let it, just let it, leave it for one more year.

And if there's no fruit after that one more year, then you can cut it down. Now let's think of the imagery behind this parable. The image of vineyards and fig trees is deeply embedded in the Old Testament.

They're pictures of the people of Israel, a people God rescued from slavery in Egypt and planted in the fertile land of Canaan. So in the context of this parable, the fruit Jesus is speaking of is repentance, of turning away from self and turning to God, of putting God first in our lives, of trust in God and faithfulness to Him.

[20 : 01] From a whole Bible point of view, Jesus is speaking on a national scale of the people of Israel and of how they have not repented and they have not put God at the center of their lives.

Add to that the timescales involved in this parable. This man should have expected to see fruit from his fig tree within the three years. By this stage in the ministry of Jesus, he has been active for three years.

He's been preaching the message of the kingdom of God for three years and performing the works of the kingdom of God for three years. And yet the people of Israel, especially the leaders of the nation, have still not repented and still not believed in Jesus.

They're still stubbornly sticking to the legalistic, hypocritical religion of the rabbis and Pharisees. Now, parable's beginning to make sense, right? After three years of Jesus' public ministry, is it not time for God to judge the peoples of Israel?

Is it not time for God to cut them down? Even as a gardener cuts down a fig tree that doesn't bear fruit, they've had their opportunities to respond to the message of Jesus and they have refused.

[21 : 17] However, more time is granted. Another year. One last historical fact. In AD 67, the Roman army besieged Jerusalem and in AD 70 raised it to the ground, destroying it, destroying its temple and killing its population.

The destruction was apocalyptic. And from then on, Jews were banned on pain of death from living in or even visiting Jerusalem. These three years of Jesus' ministry were more than enough time for the Jewish ruling authorities and people to repent, but they didn't.

They were given more time, but eventually God's judgment came and Jerusalem was destroyed. With the hindsight of history, we can see how this parable was fulfilled.

But here, it's not so much human death which should prompt us to repent now. It is the prospect of divine judgment. And to back up Jesus' argument here, as if it wasn't enough in and of itself, we have the historical fact of Jerusalem's destruction in AD 70, because it was a terrifying event without parallel.

The Jewish historian Josephus describes it as the worst and bloodiest tragedy in human history. It is estimated that over a million Jews were killed by the Romans.

[22 : 45] Earlier, Jesus said, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Now, here in verse 7, he describes the consequences of not repenting as being cut down.

Cut down. It's a terrifying prospect, not just that we shall all die, but that we shall face the judgment of God. And it's a judgment more severe than anything we can imagine in our worst nightmares. In verse 28, a passage we'll look at in a couple of weeks, Jesus describes it as being cast into a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. It is not something we speak of often, because it's too painful to contemplate.

But this is the eternal judgment of all those who have lived purely for themselves and have failed to heed Jesus' warning that unless you too repent, you will all likewise perish.

It's going to be an awful day. Pictured in terrifying form by the AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem, but far worse. You cannot preach it without a bleeding heart.

[23 : 58] Repentance is at base purely this, that if we shall trust in the Jesus who died for us and live no longer for ourselves, we shall be saved.

And if we should not take what I've said today seriously, consider the fact of history and the AD destruction, AD 70 destruction of Jerusalem.

One last perspective and a time to repent. Many older people have said to me over the years, I'm too old to change. I've been this way my whole life.

I'm too old to change now. As we get older, we do tend to get a bit more stuck in our ways, do we not? I used to think this was a fair argument.

But something changed my perspective and made me realize that the I'm too old to change argument is ludicrously false. A lot of rubbish.

[25 : 31] The 19th of October, 1994, was the first national lottery draw in the United Kingdom where a lucky ticket holder could become a millionaire overnight.

I was a student in Aberdeen at the time. A national lottery ticket, sold as they were in local news agents, were gobbled up by the masses.

I stood and watched the long lines waiting to buy their tickets. And I noticed among these long lines of people waiting to buy the national lottery tickets, a disproportionate number of grey-haired, white-haired, and blue-rinzed-haired pensioners in those lines.

And I thought to myself, but I thought all these older people used to say to me, I'm too old to change. You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

And all that. And the realist within me understood something important. We're only too old to change if there's nothing in it for us. We're only too old to change if there's nothing in it for us.

[26 : 35] If we stand the chance of becoming a millionaire overnight, we'll change. You bet we will. Now today, our eternal destiny hangs in a balance.

Something far more important than a few numbers on a ticket or a suddenly huge bank balance.

The only people who having heard Jesus' message in this passage and then say, I'm too old to change, obviously haven't appreciated what's at stake here.

Now we could take many other passages from the Bible to provide a carrot to repent and believe in Jesus, but let's stay with the stick Jesus provides us with here.

Do we really want to perish? Do we really want to be cut down? Do we really want to go to that place of weeping and gnashing of teeth?

I have a haunting series of photographs and with this I close in my archives. These photographs were taken on a South Asian beach in December 2003. The first photograph is of a tourist on the beach.

[27 : 55] Idyllic Thai beach. And he's looking inland. The next is of a massive tidal wave approaching. The tourist still unaware and looking inland.

He's unaware because the wave is behind him. The last in the three photographs is of the beach being completely covered by a seething tidal flood and no tourist to be seen anywhere.

That unfortunate tourist, precious to God, was one of a quarter of a million people who lost their lives in the tragic Indian Ocean tsunami. That tourist didn't know what was about to hit him.

All he was doing was enjoying himself on a lovely South East Asian day. And the next moment he was gone.

What next for us? Do any of us know the future? Surely with tears in our eyes as I'm sure they were in the eyes of the Lord that day, the message of this series of photographs is exactly that of Jesus.

[29 : 10] Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?

Are you ready to repent? Now is the day to believe in Jesus and put him first. Amen.