

Luke 13:1-9

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Preacher: Canon Dr. J.I. Packer

[0 : 0 0] Please have your Bibles opened at page 72 in the New Testament section, where the passage read to us earlier in the service is found in the left-hand column, Luke 13, verses 1 through 9.

Bad news travels fast, doesn't it? People who wouldn't ordinarily be talking to you stop you and say, have you heard?

And then they tell you the bad news, and then they say, isn't it awful? And they expect you to agree with them. And so there's been communication where there wasn't communication before.

We love, don't we, to gossip to each other about bad news. That's how it was, if you recall, on 9-11, when commercial aircraft were hijacked and turned into bombs, and thousands of people died as a result in New York and Washington.

I remember that day. I had just arrived at Regent College fairly early in the morning for a day's work there.

[1 : 3 3] Someone stopped me. Have you heard? A plane has crashed into one of the World Trade Towers. A little later, somebody stopped me.

Have you heard? There's a second plane hit the second of the World Trade Towers. And then a bit later on, it was, have you heard?

Both towers are down. I expect you had a similar experience. We love, as I said, to gossip about bad news.

And that's what's happening at the beginning of this passage. You look at verse 1 of chapter 13, and we read, there were some present at that very time who told him, the Greek means made a point of telling him, it's an emphatic word, who made a point of telling him of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

This was some kind of atrocity, whereby the Roman governor had had Galileans killed as they were engaged in the worship of God.

[2 : 5 1] And as an atrocity, it's reported to Jesus. And clearly, the people reporting it want him to react, want him to comment.

They think of him as at least a wise rabbi. I wonder what he will say about this. And that's something we understand very well, isn't it?

For we, on 9-11, if I may go back to that, were constantly saying to each other, what's happening to us? What does it mean? Well, Jesus responds.

He responds by commenting on the atrocity. And then he goes on to speak of an accident, not an atrocity, but a sad event, such as we often hear of on the news today, whereby a natural accident that couldn't have been foreseen killed people, floods, storms, and here it was the unexpected fall of a tower.

And so he says, verse 4, those 18 on whom the tower of Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?

[4 : 14] That's a repeat of the question he'd asked apropos of the atrocity. Do you think they were worse offenders than anybody else?

And then he says, I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. I think Jesus was straight away giving them an answer which they would have preferred not to hear.

It is the way of human nature, and I invite you to verify this, thinking of yourself and your own nearest and dearest, to talk, even gossip, certainly talk gravely concerning other people's deaths and never a word or never a thought about our own.

We talk about them, and Jesus had been asked to comment on them, and instead he comments on you, you who are asking the question, you who are listening to me just now, and by parity of reasoning, he, from his word, this very morning, talks to you and me here in St. John's.

And he says, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Well, we are among those who ask the question on 9-11, as one does, what does all this mean?

[6 : 05] What are we to make of it? And I'm taking that question as my probe now, and I'm using it to probe three questions with which this passage confirms us.

Let's take them in order. Question one. What meaning did Jesus see in the atrocity and the accident and by parity of reasoning in other similar atrocities and other comparable accidents that had taken place?

You see, from his words, that he doesn't interpret these events the way that some perhaps are still inclined to, and evidently people in his day were inclined to, interpreting them, that is, in terms of the theology of Job's comforters and arguing, well, because this has happened, the people to whom it's happened must have been specially terrible sinners and this is a special judgment of God on them.

That, remember, is what they said to Job. Here you are, Job, suffering pain and grief, that must mean that God sees you as an outstanding sinner and is dealing with you as you deserve.

There's nothing of that in Jesus' words. Let's clear that idea out of our minds as we think of atrocities and accidents. Whatever else they mean, it's not that.

[7 : 55] And then again, Jesus' words show that it isn't part of his thinking that these events reveal that God, after all, is not in control of what takes place.

You often hear that idea nowadays. People will tell you, well, my idea of God makes it inconceivable that he is in control when these things happen.

All right, that's their idea of God, but it wasn't Jesus' idea of God. The God whom Jesus acknowledged as his father is the God of whom he says, not a sparrow falls to the ground without him.

And in his mind, the very hairs of our head are all numbered. He knows everything. He controls everything. That's who he is.

and nothing happens in his world outside his control. So, what does Jesus say is the meaning of atrocities and accidents?

[9 : 11] He interprets them, as these words show, as a reminder, a reminder of the universal human condition, your condition, my condition, everyone's condition.

It's a reminder of certain things about our condition that we would like to forget and often do forget. That's why we need the reminder. And God confronts us with the knowledge that these things have happened in order to bring to us that reminder.

Reminder of what? Well, in the first place, that everyone's death is a certainty. Death is the one certain fact of life.

Ben Franklin said there are two certain facts of life, death and taxes. But there are places in the world where you can live without taxes. There's no place, however, where you can live and not be subject to death.

Death is certain, and life is uncertain. none of us knows how long we have to live. None of us knows how much more time God will give us.

[10 : 32] In a sense, all our time, the time of our lives, I mean, is borrowed time, and God is a generous lender. there. But there will come a closure eventually, and it may be sooner than we think, maybe sudden.

Life is uncertain, and we need to live with that fact clear before our minds. And furthermore, we all of us are guilty sinners.

sinner. People who suffer in atrocities and accidents are not, says Jesus, worse sinners than other people.

For we all of us are guilty sinners. I hope you don't mind my using that word. It's Jesus' own word to describe what we are. Sinners, people who have not lived for God the way we should.

People who have done all kinds of things that we shouldn't. People in whom there is no health in the sense in which our general confession declared, and we all of us joined in, didn't we, and said of ourselves, there is no health in us.

[11 : 55] We've left undone things that we ought to have done, and we've done things that we ought not to have done. We are sinners, guilty sinners, everyone. And we live under God's judgment, and we shall all of us, now this is the part that is really grim, but I must say it because the Lord says it, we shall all of us come to grief in the way that we think of these folk in the atrocities and accidents as having come to grief.

We shall all of us come to grief unless we repent. That's the meaning that Jesus finds in atrocities and accidents.

We would be wise, brothers and sisters, if every time we hear of atrocities and accidents in our modern world, and God knows we do hear of them constantly, we reminded ourselves of these things of which God wishes to remind us.

every time they cross our mind. Our second probe. What did Jesus mean when he used the word repent?

This, says Jesus, is the alternative to coming to grief. Unless you repent, what does it mean to repent?

[13 : 31] repent. You will agree with me that repentance was a key word in Jesus' ministry. This isn't the only place he uses it.

Matthew and Mark tell us that repentance was the burden of his message when he began to preach. When John was cast into prison, we read, Jesus began to preach and say, repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.

Repent. And in this gospel of Luke, chapter 5 and verse 32, tells us of Jesus telling the Pharisees, those who are well, healthy, don't need a doctor, only those who are sick.

I came not to call righteous people, but to call sinners to repentance. repentance. And the Pharisees, of course, didn't understand that when he says that, that includes everybody.

But this is what I came to do, says the Lord, to call sinners to repentance, because that's the gate of life. Woe to you, Chorazin, woe to you, Bethsaida, two villages in Galilee, if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented sackcloth and ashes.

[15 : 02] They would have got down before God in humility and acknowledged that these were signs, signs of God's reality, calling them to repentance.

They didn't do it. And so Tyre and Sidon, like Sodom and Gomorrah before them, they perished. But repentance is the gate of life.

The only gate there is, but it is the gate of life. So it's very important to us to understand what Jesus meant when he talked about repentance.

Doubly important, in fact, because we, when we hear the word, regularly misunderstand it. Did you realize that?

Oh, yes, we do. We hear the word repent, and we think that what's being spoken of is simply regret. I wish it hadn't happened.

[16 : 07] As in the cynical proverb, you know it, marry in haste, repent at leisure. don't tell me that you've never heard that one before.

But there's more to repentance than regret. Just as there's more to repentance than remorse. The if only line of thought, if only I hadn't done that, if only I hadn't said that, if only I'd done something else, that what I did was the wrong thing to do, what I said was the wrong thing to say, I wish I hadn't.

Well, regret and remorse, you can see, they're cousins. And remorse also, like regret, is part of the repentance story, but it's not the whole of it. And when we've got that far in our understanding, we tend to stop short.

So that we don't actually understand repenting the way Jesus did at all. What did he mean when he said repent?

Something more than regret, something more than remorse. He meant return. Return to God. Return to God, yes, in regret and in remorse because of your sin, but return to God because that's the way to pass from under condemnation, find forgiveness and so establish yourself on the path of life.

[17 : 50] Repentance, you see, means change. It means rethinking the way you're going to live. It means reprogramming yourself.

it means that you face your sin and admit it to be a fact which most of us don't like to do, be it said, but we must.

And confessing that sin, being quite specific about what's been wrong with our life, and asking God's forgiveness for Jesus' sake, forgiveness made possible for us through the cross.

Humbly, we ask for that. And to ask for that, I may say, and to look to Jesus for it, that's faith. Repentance, real repentance, is a blood brother to faith, and you don't get the one without the other.

And when you've confessed your sin and asked forgiveness for it, then you set yourself to abandon it, change your ways to whatever degree is necessary to program yourself not to do it again, and to accept Christ's lordship and follow him in the life which he leads us into, and from then on to fight whatever seductions come to lead you back into the sin, the way of sin on which you turned your back.

[19 : 30] That's repentance. All of that is repentance. Nothing less than that is repentance. You can put it in military terms, right about turn, quick march. March back in the opposite direction from which you were marching before.

Return to God. Forrow in penitence, as we say, yes, that word does take us to the heart of what repentance is, and in resolve to live a new life according to God's commandments.

And let's be clear, friends, for all Christians, repentance is not just something that you do at the time of personal conversion, although to be sure, personal conversion isn't real unless there is an across-the-board repentance, going with your turning to Jesus and acknowledging and adoring him as your Savior and your Lord.

But repentance has to be a regular business, a daily business, for you and me. I said a life's work. I meant it.

Because day by day we slip, and day by day we are called to confess our slippage and ask for forgiveness and ask the Lord to help us not to do it again.

[21 : 08] I've been teaching the Puritans at Regent College for these last two weeks, and one of the Puritans, a man named Philip Henry, said something about repentance that's been running through my mind.

He said, if I should die in the pulpit, I would wish to die preaching about repentance.

And if I should die out of the pulpit, I would wish to die practicing repentance. He said, I hope to carry my repentance up to the very gates of heaven, which was a way of saying, I hope to make it a lifelong business.

Having said that, he commented rather wryly, there are some people who do not like to hear much about repentance. But Philip Henry's view was that we do ourselves great harm, spiritually now, if we don't face up to the realities of repentance in the way that he was doing.

I was told that one of my students once said to another, wouldn't it be wonderful if Dr. Packer died preaching? And while I think I see what he meant, I have found my heart going with Philip Henry.

[22 : 59] And I really can't think of a better way to go than preaching repentance, the word that we don't want to hear and yet which we so badly need to hear.

But that's what Jesus meant by repentance anyway, that was the point here. And may I say this to you? One day we shall all of us appear before Jesus, speaker here, and he will be our judge.

Here, as I said, he's speaking in love. Then, I would suppose that one of the things he will say to us is, did you take my words about repentance to heart?

did you take them to heart as you heard the preacher talking about them on July 18th, 2002?

We're going to be searched, brothers and sisters, at the day of judgment. Let's be sure that we understand what repentance means, and that we understand why our Savior is calling us to it as the basis of our Christian way of life.

[24 : 28] And that leads on to the last probe. What's the meaning of Jesus' story about the fruitless fig tree?

I don't think it's difficult to interpret the parable. What Jesus is doing is applying what he's just said to the Jewish people in general, and particularly to those hundreds, perhaps thousands of them, that were gathered around him as he gave this teaching, for this was a time of his greatest popularity.

They were listening to him, they were interested, they were fascinated by what he said, but he knew that not many of them had been changed by what he said.

And then this story, there was a fig tree in a vineyard that bore no fruit. What would the fruit stand for if we caught the imagery of the story?

It would stand for changed lives and their influence. The owner of the vineyard said to his gardener, cut that tree down.

[26 : 00] The gardener said, no, let's give it one last chance. I will manure it, I will dig around it, I will fertilize it, I'll take special care with it, and we'll see if it fruits next year.

And the owner of the vineyard says, all right, but if it doesn't fruit next year, we're going to cut it down. What Jesus is talking about is the need to understand to understand some situations as the last chance given to impenitent people to take his word about repentance into their hearts and act on it.

The day of grace doesn't go on forever. As I said earlier, we've got to face the fact, the fact that Jesus is telling us that life is uncertain.

We don't know how long we have. And postponing the issues of repentance and faith and conversion is the most stupid and disastrous thing that any of us can do.

Please hear me when I say that, and don't imagine that this is Packer throwing his weight about because he doesn't preach very often and he wants to shock people when he does.

[27 : 42] No, friends, it's not that. It's that I am seeking faithfully to echo and reproduce what Jesus said. It is Jesus that we're hearing in this.

It's Jesus who told this story. And it's Jesus who told the story in order to make us realize that is the day of salvation.

Now is the day to begin that life of repenting which is at the heart of conversion. And that's the word that I want to leave with you, brothers and sisters.

There's a further application we could make of it. we could think of the church in general. We could think of particular congregations in the church.

We could think of the sadness it is when a congregation as such loses the focus on repentance.

[28 : 53] We can remember how in one of the letters to the seven churches, in Revelation chapter 2, Jesus from his throne through John tells the church that if they don't repent and come back to him in love and honest, heartfelt adoration and service, if they continue as those who've left their first love and are simply going through the motions and no more, well, he says, he'll take their candlestick, that is, their lamp stand, out of its place.

In other words, the life of the church will come to an end. St. John's have a special call just at this moment to be faithful to the word of God in a diocesan matter where, as you know, we have problems.

don't let us suppose that mere fidelity to a biblical standard and a matter of that kind is going to guarantee special blessing to us if we leave our first love and our concern that our lives personally should be penitent and holy lives.

you can take the thought further. I don't need, I think, to take it any further. It's part of the solemn truth that our Lord is teaching us here and which I beg that we take to heart.

What does it add up to? It adds up to this. Every day of our lives, you and I, friends, need to remember, we are in God's hands.

[30 : 38] we don't know how long we've got. We are facing God's claim and we dare not ignore it.

God calls us to conversion, faith in Christ and repentance from sin. And every day our repentance needs to be renewed as we look back over yesterday and acknowledge, yes, I slipped there and I slipped there.

I shouldn't have said that. I shouldn't have done that. I should have said and done things I didn't do. Father, forgive me and enable me to do better today.

Repentance is of the essence. Every day, let's remember that. And every day, let's remember that our Lord expects fruit in our lives, the fruit of transformation by his power, the fruit of influence by being different, radiantly different for him in the circles where we move.

life. And every day, friends, let's make it our business to be real about these issues, to face the facts and not to evade the issue.

[32 : 12] So listen to our Lord and take it to heart. Remember, he is the lover of our souls. He says these stern things to us, as he said them to the Jews of his day, out of love.

We are used to the situation in our own families, aren't we, where one person says to another, if you really loved me, you wouldn't say that.

And the response is, it's just because I do love you that I say it. You need to hear it. And, friends, this very morning, it's like that with our Lord Jesus addressing us through these scriptures.

Face him. Deal with him and let him deal with you. And so, may we be found on the right side of the gate of life, the gate that leads into life.

and so, may God bless us all. Amen. Josephine king, there, there, there está in line with it.

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