

## REPENT, OR PERISH!

Luke 12:49–13:9

Key Verse: 13:5

“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Did you ever hear a warning but do nothing about it? The engine light may appear on our dashboard. To us, it may seem like no big deal. We may be able to get away with ignoring it for a while. But eventually, our ignorance can produce a disaster. We human beings seem like rational creatures. But we often ignore warnings and persist in negligent behavior. We get warning signs all the time: about our health, our finances, our relationships. Some warnings we can take or leave, while others are serious. The Bible gives us spiritual warnings, which are always most serious. In today’s passage Jesus warns us to repent. And he’s very serious. He says, “Unless you repent, you will perish.” What does he mean? Why is repentance so necessary? What, specifically, do we need to do? May God open our hearts to really listen to him, and may he speak to us through his word.

In Luke’s Gospel, repentance is a major theme. Luke’s Gospel repeats the word “repent” 14 times.<sup>1</sup> In Acts, Luke repeats it another ten times.<sup>2</sup> Only Luke describes John the Baptist helping people to repent practically (3:10–14). When Jesus says, “I have not come to call the righteous but sinners,” only Luke adds “to repentance” (5:32). Only Luke says the Pharisees and lawyers rejected God’s purpose because they had not accepted John’s baptism of repentance (7:29–30). Only Luke records “The Parable of the Prodigal Son,” showing what repentance looks like (15:18–20a). Only Luke records Jesus telling us “...repentance for the forgiveness of sins” should be proclaimed in his name to all nations (24:47). Today’s passage, stressing repentance (13:1–9), is also found only in Luke.

Why does Luke emphasize repentance? He was writing to Gentiles. Through Paul, many Gentiles had heard the good news of God’s grace in Jesus (Ac20:24). They heard we are not under law but under grace (Ro6:14). But some misunderstood that, in the name of grace, they could keep on sinning (Ro6:1,15). Many people today still have this wrong view of grace. We all need to learn from our Lord Jesus the importance of repentance, and how to actually do it.

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<sup>1</sup> (3:3,8; 5:32; 10:13; 11:32; 13:3,5; 15:7 [2X],10; 16:30; 17:3–4; 24:47)

<sup>2</sup> (2:38; 3:19; 5:31; 8:22; 11:18; 13:24; 17:30; 20:21; 26:20)

And he has been training his disciples on this subject. In chapter 10, when he sent out the 72, he told them to warn people that if they didn't receive him, they would suffer even more than Sodom (10:10–12). Then he rebuked the towns where he had already done mighty works, because they were so slow to repent (10:13–15). In chapter 11, when crowds were increasing, he said, "This generation is an evil generation" (11:29). Then he reminded them through the Ninevites' example that they needed to repent (11:32). He pronounced six woes on the religious leaders for their hypocrisy and unrepentant hearts (11:37–52). Then he warned his disciples to avoid their bad influence (12:1–3). Now, in today's passage, Jesus is still training his disciples, through his own example, to help people repent. Disciples of Jesus repent, and help others repent. But why do we have to? And how can we?

#### I. His baptism (12:49–50)

Jesus first turns to what he must do. Read verses 49–50. "I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished!" It's a rare moment when Jesus gets this personal, sharing what's in his own mind and heart. Notice how both his statements end with an exclamation point. He's longing to get the fire started. And he's longing for his own baptism to happen. Until it does, he says his personal distress is great.

What does he mean? First, let's think about his baptism. Jesus was already baptized by John the Baptist (3:21,22). But here he says he's got another baptism. What is it? It's his upcoming death on a cross. Obviously, it would be hard for anyone to go through with getting crucified. Being fully human, Jesus didn't want to end his young life like that. But his "great distress" points to something more. Being God the Son, Jesus loved his Father God. He was eager to do his Father's will. Yet he knew the devil was trying to distract and hinder him from carrying it out. Jesus knew that God's salvation plan was resting on his shoulders alone. Everything written in the Bible was pointing to his death on a cross in Jerusalem (9:30–31; 22:37; 24:44). No wonder he says, "...how great is my distress!" It's why, as he began this journey, he "set his face" to go to Jerusalem (9:51). His soul could not rest until his task was accomplished.

It's his baptism, his death on the cross, that's the real reason we all have to repent. Why is that? On his cross, God showed all the world how serious sin is to him. Human sinfulness is so serious that Jesus had to suffer and die like that, so that God could forgive us. On the cross Jesus had to turn God's wrath away from us (Ro3:25a; 5:9; Heb2:17; 1Jn 2:2; 4:10). On the cross Jesus had to bear all the punishment our sin deserves (Isa53:5). On the cross Jesus had to pour out all his blood to forgive our sin (Mt26:28;

Heb9:22). On the cross Jesus had to actually die, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness (1Pe2:24; 2Co5:21). The baptism of his death on the cross proclaims to the whole world: “Time’s up!” We’ve all spent enough time “living in sensuality, passions, drunkenness, orgies, drinking parties, and lawless idolatry” (1Pe4:3). The gospel of Jesus is the good news that anybody can repent and receive forgiveness of sins in his name (Lk24:47; Ac2:38). But if we’re taking sin lightly, if we’re coddling sin, or even defending sin, we need to take a closer look at Jesus on the cross.

## II. His fire (49–53)

Look at verse 49 again. “I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled!” This could happen only after the baptism of his death on the cross. What is the “fire” Jesus came to cast? Read verse 51. “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” This is the first of three times in today’s passage that Jesus says, “No, I tell you” (12:51; 13:3,5). Jesus did come to bring us peace.<sup>3</sup> But, as the angels said at his birth, it’s a peace “among those with whom [God] is pleased” (2:14b). It’s a peace God gives to those who repent and believe in Jesus. And every time the gospel is preached, some people repent and accept it; others refuse and oppose it (Ac4:2; 14:4; 23:7; 28:24). God shows no partiality to people in every nation; his message is the same for all, it’s the good news of peace through Jesus Christ (Ac10:34–36). But when it’s preached, there’s always this same division. Jesus says here this division happens even within our immediate families (12:52–53). Why does he say this much about it? He’s warning all disciples that when we tell people to repent, we should expect rejection and opposition. It’s so painful, like getting burned with fire. This division is especially severe for those coming from different religions or atheistic families. Jesus predicts it, to help those who suffer to stand firm in faith.

## III. Interpret the present time (54–56)

Jesus goes on to rebuke the crowds (54–56). What’s his point? People are always diligent to get the weather forecast, to protect themselves or their gardens and farms. But we tend to ignore what God is doing through Jesus. God is bringing his kingdom near through Jesus (10:9,11; 17:21). In his time, people could see God’s kingdom clearly in all the gracious works of healing Jesus was doing (7:21–22). Many ordinary people were rejoicing at all the glorious things done by him (13:17; 19:37). But many were persistently blind and didn’t take action. The same is true today. We tend to see the world around us in a negative way. We highlight all the dark things happening, the bad trends. We become like the cartoon character Glum in the old TV show “The Adventures of Gulliver.” Glum would always say, “It will never work!” or “We’re never gonna make it!” or “You will never

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<sup>3</sup> (1:79; 2:14; 7:50; 8:48; 10:5–6)

do it!” And most famously, “We’re doomed!” Jesus is not telling us to look at the present time like that. He’s telling us to open our spiritual eyes to see the work of God’s kingdom through the preaching of the gospel. God is still reigning, even over this extremely wicked world. God is still bringing the lost into his kingdom. God is still inviting all people to repent. Repentance is still possible. And repentance is kind of like adjusting ourselves to the weather forecast. God wants us to wake up, see what he’s doing through Jesus, and repent before it’s too late.

#### IV. Settle (57–59)

Jesus tells another parable to show us what repentance looks like (57–59). We may be like the self-righteous person Jesus describes, going to a magistrate against someone else over some conflict. We’re so blind, so sure we’ll be vindicated. But on the way, as we think about it, we might start realizing that it’s us who’s really in the wrong. In fact, we may realize we’re the ones in danger of getting arrested and thrown into prison. Jesus even says we may never be able to get out. What’s his point? He’s saying that to truly repent, we need to realize our own sinfulness, then take action—again, while we’ve got the chance. The key word is “settle.” In this context, it means to stop the hostility, drop the lawsuit, cancel the debt, let the person go. We all have various kinds of conflicts with people. To really repent, we’ve got to get right with God, then forgive while there’s still time to do so.

#### V. Stop judging, start repenting (13:1–5)

Look at 13:1. “There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” What a horrible story! Galilean people had come to Jerusalem and were trying to make offerings at the temple. But Pilate somehow interpreted this as rebellion against Rome. So he had them killed, and mingled their own blood with their sacrifices. News of this must have enraged many people. But why tell Jesus about it? Maybe they’re upset. Maybe they want him to start preaching revolution against Rome. But probably they’re thinking these murdered Galileans had committed some sin—in fact, this is what Jesus actually says in verse 2. Whenever people suffer, we too can get judgmental, thinking it’s because they’ve sinned.

How does Jesus respond to such thinking? Read verse 3. “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” He immediately tells his own “current events” story. Look at verse 4. “Or those eighteen 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?” These victims may have been building an aqueduct there under orders from Rome. So, after the accident, they could have been viewed as compromisers who

deserved their death. How does Jesus interpret the tragedy? Read verse 5. “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” He repeats his warning exactly, because he’s so serious. Jesus doesn’t agree that any of these people died due to their sin. He’s just warning that this is what’s going to happen to all those who refuse to repent—maybe not right away, or even ever in this life, but definitely when he comes again. Hearing about God’s judgment isn’t enough to get people to repent. But it does get things started.

We may not be thinking like the Jews of Jesus’ time did and be so quick to pass judgment on others’ sufferings. But we *can* think God is not going to do anything about human sin. Many people today seem to enjoy life to the fullest. Such people always seem so prosperous. They never seem to be in trouble as others are. They even boldly defy God and his ways (Ps73:1–12). But just like these two tragic incidents, God’s judgment through the Second Coming of Jesus is going to come like a thief (12:39,46), suddenly and swiftly.<sup>4</sup> We shouldn’t think, “Well, I’ve gotten away with my sin thus far.” Jesus is urging us to repent, or one day we may find out we waited until it’s too late.

#### VI. Start digging (13:6–9)

In this last part Jesus tells one more parable to help us repent practically. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. He came seeking fruit on it and found none. He said to the guy in charge, “Look, for three years now I’ve been looking for fruit on this tree and find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?” It tells us God is always looking for fruit in our lives. Not talk, but fruit. As John the Baptist said, we all need to “produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (3:8–9; cf. Ac26:20). What kind of fruit? God wants us to change, to actually do the opposite of our old sinful ways. If we used to be lazy, God wants us to start working hard. If we used to be takers, God wants us to start giving. If we used to hurt others, God wants us to start healing. Faith in Jesus is this practical.

And the man in charge of the vineyard shows us how to repent. He took his boss’ words seriously. He started diligently digging and fertilizing. Like him, we need to accept Jesus’ warning to repent. We need to start wanting the fruit in our lives that God wants. And we need to take practical steps and actually start doing our job. We need to start caring about our own spiritual condition, find out what’s causing problems, and do our part to improve it. We need to stop ignoring our fruitlessness, stop abusing our privileges, stop taking up valuable space and time. Let’s all ask God’s mercy to help us.

Read 13:5 again. May God help us look at our Lord Jesus on the cross, who suffered so much to save us from our sin. May God help us take his warning to repent

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<sup>4</sup> (Dt32:35; Ps64:7; 73:18–19; Pr6:15; 28:18; 29:1; Isa47:11)

seriously. May he help us stop judging others, and show us what we need to do, how we can get right with God, how we can dig deeper, so our lives can produce the fruit God wants.