

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

It was a legitimate question. Jesus had just finished telling his disciples all about making heavenly gains for God's family, winning back brothers and sisters who were straying in sin, first with a parable about a shepherd who went after 1 of 100 sheep who had wandered away, and then how he rejoiced in locating and saving that lost sheep. Jesus is the same. And then, we walked them through the process of continually approaching an erring brother or sister in Christ, doing that with a loving goal, to lead them back to God's forgiveness.

And then Peter asked, "How many times should I forgive?" How often should I come back to a person who has sinned against me and say, "I forgive you and Jesus does, too"? And the answer? As many times as you need to.

Well, this morning, we approach that question from the other side of the issue. Instead of how many times ought I to forgive, it's how many times should we say I'm sorry? How important is our repentance? Well, in walking the road to the cross, it's so important because that walk involves repentance, true repentance.

In our verses this morning, if there's one point Jesus wants so desperately to drive home, this is it. He wants true repentance. That's what he was looking for from the crowd he was speaking to because it seemed like he really wasn't getting it.

He was in the midst of talking about the end times, what to be expecting and keeping watch for because every passing minute is one step closer to Judgment Day. And yet, many of those people there, same as with many today, weren't overly concerned about the end of the world coming. They were content with where they were, what they were doing (even if it was sinful), and just weren't ready to face the fact of impending judgment, which should have meant changing their lives around.

Jesus reserved some harsh words for his audience, and well, I bet you can guess how they reacted. Not surprisingly, they tried to shift the blame. There had to be this kind of mindset going around, "Well, if Jesus thinks we're pretty bad, then wait until he hears about this..."

"Jesus, don't know if you've caught the news recently, but it was just a couple of days ago when there were people from Galilee who were at the temple, offering sacrifices, and well, Pilate had his soldiers come in and, for whatever reason, they slaughtered a bunch of those Galileans...now those must have been some pretty sinful people, to face such a gruesome end..."

Jesus saw what they were doing. "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?" Or, in other words, were they worse sinners because they were so terribly murdered? That just was not true.

It would be the same as if on the way to church today, your car had skidded off the highway and you slammed into the median and you shattered your pelvis and we sat here and mused about how terrible of a sinner you must be, what horrible sin did you commit to deserve such a punishment.

Or, another example...Jesus brings up another familiar incident, at least familiar to the Jews. The tower of Siloam, on the southeast section of Jerusalem, a freak accident, just collapsed and killed 18 people. "Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?" Jesus asked. That they were somehow more deserving of God's wrath than anyone else.

Kind of the same argument Job's friend Eliphaz (and I use that term friend rather loosely) accused him of when he said, "Is not your wickedness great? Are not your sins endless?" Trying to accuse Job of such grave sins he must have committed to make God punish him severely as Job suffered.

And it would be like us saying that what happened to the people in the Twin Towers on 9/11 was God's way of punishing the worst sinners, those who were guiltiest? Again, just not true.

Can you see Jesus' point? Yes, every negative thing that happens in this life is a consequence of sin. But is it always that the punishment fits the crime? That the horrible sin results in the horrible punishment and the lesser sins results in the lesser punishment? No. Because then, what about those to whom nothing really bad happens in life? Is that a sign they have been living good lives and haven't been sinning? We know that's just not true, either. It's not possible.

That's why Jesus said, and repeated, this truth, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." Repentance is the emphasis here. Jesus is teaching that not only certain people, who we would consider to be very wicked people, that they need to repent, but that repentance is necessary for everyone.

You know how important repentance is to Jesus? Look what's on the other side of the coin, what he presents as the other option, if there is no repentance. "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Right there, Jesus puts an end to any thoughts that might run through our minds, somehow tempting us to become self-reliant or self-righteous. What I mean is this...haven't you ever thought the same way as some of these Jews were thinking here in our verses, making some comparisons?

Like, I have this friend, she doesn't go to church, and her life is just falling apart. Her boyfriend left her, she's lost her job, she's starting to get caught up with the wrong crowd, doing some questionable things. God must be punishing her for not being true to him. But on the other hand, I'm going to church fairly regularly, I'm doing the best I can to be a good person, still screw up every once in a while, but life is going pretty well, at least better than it's going for my friend. God must be happy with me!" "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Or..."I didn't realize this, but I've started picking up some not-so-godly language in my everyday speech, no one's really said anything about it, it doesn't seem as though God's really minding, since I haven't seen any negative consequences, it's not really that big of a deal, so there's no need to go back or to say I'm sorry." "Unless you repent, you too will all perish."

That kind of thinking is a very dangerous game to be playing. If we're going to try to compare our sins with someone else, to make ourselves feel better that we aren't the worst sinners and AS guilty of God's punishment of others, Jesus wants us to check those attitudes because the real comparison isn't between me and this other person...it's between me and the almighty, holy, perfect God. And I fail.

If we think we can live our lives in a such a manner that we don't need to confess and repent of our sins, whether we get caught or not, whether it's a "big" sin or not, Jesus warns us, "Unless you repent, you too will perish."

That's fair. After all, Jesus is the owner of the vineyard. He's the one who's planted the fig trees, us. And he wants to see fruits in us, holy living, repentance when we sin.

So how are your fruits? Well, let's put it this way. Jesus says repent or perish. He says he wants to see fruits. And on our own, there are no fruits. By ourselves, there would only be one real, fair option...perish. Our tree, us, cut down and burned up in the fire.

But that same parable Jesus tells, the one about the fig tree, Jesus didn't tell it for our condemnation. Jesus told that parable to show his incredible grace. Can you see it?

Here's God, putting all this work into nourishing us, lavishing us with his love. The love he showed by creating us. The love he showed through Jesus, his Son, whom he sent to live, die, and rise to save us, forgiving all of our sins. The love he's showed by making us his very own by working through the Holy Spirit to create saving faith in our hearts. The love he's showed by giving us the time to show love back to him by the way we live each moment of our lives.

But if there's no fruit on our part, then what should he do with us. I mean, put yourself in the owner's shoes. Wouldn't you get frustrated if something you spent so much time cultivating, fertilizing, watering, nourishing, and you had nothing to show for it? Should he not cut us down and feed us to the flames...and be right, be perfectly justified in doing so???

But then, here comes the gardener to our defense. You know who he is. Jesus. The Bible talks about him being in this mediating capacity. It says, "But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." It says, "Christ Jesus, who died – more than that, who was raised to life – is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." It says, "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."

That's exactly what the gardener does in this parable. That's exactly what Jesus has done for us. He tells us in his Word, "I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live." Jesus has not given up on us. He doesn't want to. After all, it was his perfect body, his precious blood he gave up on the cross so we could be forgiven and so we could be saved.

And now, when we fall, he's still right there, forgiving us and giving us another chance, even though we don't deserve it, but another chance to produce fruits, to repent.

That's what God wants to see, and that's what Jesus works in us to produce...fruits of repentance. And he gives us time to do that. That's gospel. God, in his love, allows us a time of grace, a long time for us to show our repentance.

You know what true repentance is? The word repent literally means to turn about, to do a complete 180. We turn from sin to righteousness. This means that we understand from God's law the meaning of sin together with God's just punishment which every sinner deserves.

To repent also includes faith. We turn to the help which a gracious God offers in the gospel. We receive with the hand of faith—even though it is an empty hand—the righteousness which alone can stand before God, and that is the righteousness of Christ.

And then out of thankfulness to God for his free gift of forgiveness, life, and salvation we bring forth the fruits of faith in a life which is pleasing to God. Meaning, in everything we do, we show our thankfulness for a love from God that is beyond compare, a love because of which we will not perish. Now, that's the tree worth keeping.

On our walk to the cross, no, throughout our entire life's walk with Jesus, it has to be one of repentance. There are many times we'll have to say I'm sorry because our walk is still filled with sin. But it's even fuller of Christ's forgiveness, a forgiveness which never ends. And there's only one way we can respond to that...with fruits. With fruits of repentance. And with Jesus, our Gardener, cultivating us and our faith in him, we will produce them. Amen.