

Sermon File # 1096

Scripture Text: Luke 13:1-9

Sermon Title: *Jesus' Call to Repentance*

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Jesus' Call to Repentance

Introduction:

Open your Bible with me to Luke 13:1-9, as we continue our journey through the Third Gospel. Last Sunday we looked at Jesus' words about watchfulness and our need to live in preparation for and expectation of his coming, either in glory or in our going to meet him in death. The way to prepare for his final coming is for us to seek him now, realizing that he comes to us daily through the Holy Spirit. In the closing verses of Luke 12, Jesus warns about the unavoidable division that the Gospel brings between those who follow him and those who are opposed to him (verses 49-53) and the need to live with discernment and prudence in these "last days" (verse 54-59).

In our text for today, Jesus is approached by some unidentified interlocutors who inform Jesus about an atrocity committed by the cruel Roman governor, Pontius Pilate (AD 26-36/37). Although Pilate's murder of Galilean worshipers was "a little-known incident" this cruel slaughter "fits the assessment of (ancient historians) Josephus and Philo regarding Pilate's brutal character" (page 616, HW Hoehner, "Pontius Pilate" in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, Green, et. al., editors). The way Jesus is approached publicly with this question reminds me of typical news journalists who are anxious to interview a well-known public figure, hopeful that he will say something controversially newsworthy.

In his reply Jesus issues a call to them and to us today about repentance. Follow as I read **Luke 13:1-9**.

This attack by Pilate on the Galilean Jews offering sacrifices in the temple was an atrocity but was not widely reported because the Jews were becoming accustomed to Pilate's acts of cruelty toward their Roman occupied nation. Such an atrocity would have been as newsworthy as perhaps another suicide bomb attack in Iraq, for example. Like these attacks that result in numerous deaths and injuries, it was horrible but not unthinkable or even unusual.

This "current event" reported to Jesus would have been similar to the atrocity in Turkey a few months ago, when three Christian workers in a publishing house were brutally murdered while meeting for Bible study. This event in Turkey shook the Christian community but was not particularly newsworthy in the broader secular media. So too, this atrocity was chilling news to the Jewish community; and these reporters asked Jesus what he thought about it.

In essence, Jesus replied that this event was to be viewed as a "wake-up call" to the nation. And then, to accentuate his point, Jesus added another "current event"—the collapse of a tower in the Siloam section of Jerusalem, which resulted in 18 deaths.

The last time I preached this text was on Sunday morning, September 16th 2001. You can deduce what was on everyone's mind that Sunday morning, since the previous Tuesday was September 11th, what will always be known in my home country as "9-11," the Attack on America by al Qaeda. During that dreadful week, I heard numerous preachers in rallies across the nation and even in our own city refer to this event as "God's Wake-up Call to the Nation."

In the providence of God our church, the very weekend before, was privileged to host Henry Blackaby, well-known author and Bible teacher, who has been on the forefront of calling our nation (USA) to revival. When Henry taught about revival in our land, he noted that when God is pleased to bring an awakening to a nation, it is usually during a time of national crisis. Two days later our nation was deeply shaken and thrown headlong into grief over the attack on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington DC, which resulted in an astounding loss of life. Since "9-11" America, in some ways, has never been the same.

On the Sundays following "9-11," churches in the US experienced an upsurge in attendance, not only on Sundays, but in special services for prayer, calling on God for healing for the nation. Of course, there were instances of true and lasting repentance, but overall, in a matter of weeks things were back to business as usual, at least as far as church life and attendance were concerned. As Blackaby had taught us the Saturday and Sunday before the attack, a

national crisis does not guarantee revival. If God's people respond to crisis as God told Solomon in 2 Chronicles 7:14 we must, then a crisis like "9-11" can become a wake-up call to the nation. I remember that during in the wake of "9-11" many of us were encouraged by the great resurgence of patriotism for our nation and determination to recover what had not been irretrievably lost. But I also recall how that, just weeks following "9-11," Henry Blackaby was lamenting that the nation had failed to experience the most valuable lesson from the Attack on America—God's wake-up call.

Jesus was saying to the people around him that through the tragic events of life, the most important thing is for us to awaken to his call for repentance. Jesus' call to repentance is, first of all...

➤ **A Universal Call (verses 1-5)**

The text does not tell us who these people were who announced this atrocious current event to Jesus, whether they were fellow Galileans who truly grieved over the worshipers whom Pilate slaughtered or if they were rival Judeans. In any case, Jesus avoided commenting on the specificity of the victims and instead issued a call for everyone to repent.

His call to repentance is one...

- *From a holy God in a fallen world*

These interlocutors were perhaps engaging Jesus in the age-old debate surrounding the question, "Why does a good and all-powerful God allow suffering?" That question arises in minds that fail to apprehend the nature of God, his purposes and his provision of free will. Of course, had not God created man and woman with the freedom to choose good or evil, right or wrong, obedience or disobedience, then the world would never have gone "off course" but would have remained mechanically and dutifully under his control. Yet part of the image of God in mankind is the ability to choose. And God wants the crown of his creation, man and woman, to choose to love, obey and honor him.

When we look daily at all the images and reminders of horrific suffering in the world, we need to look again in the first chapters of the Bible to remember that suffering was not in God's original plan for creation. God created a paradise for Adam and Eve. It was their sin that drove them from the garden and that introduced separation from God, alienation from one another, hostility and conflict, and the struggles and sorrows in the entire creation, which continues to "groan" as Paul wrote so graphically (Romans 8:22).

Thus, the news about the slaughter of the worshipers in the temple, down to the killing of people in British subways and Pakistani markets is nothing new. Such

atrocities have been occurring in this fallen world since the day that Cain slew his brother Abel (Genesis 4:1-16).

And so, Jesus' call is...

- *To self-righteous sinners, asking the wrong questions*

Although we don't know the identity of these bearers of bad news to Jesus, we can surmise something, based on Jesus' reply. Jesus knew that these reporters were thinking secretly that these murdered Galileans must have been worse sinners than they were, since these "sinners" were slaughtered and they were spared a similar fate.

Their thinking was typical among the religious people of that day. We see this mindset all the way back to what well may be the oldest book in the Bible, the Book of Job. Job's friends, who proved to be "miserable comforters," tried to convince poor Job that the reason he had suffered so terribly was because God was punishing him for his sin. This mindset continued to prevail in Judaism all the way to Jesus' time, as we see, for example, in John's Gospel. When Jesus and his disciples came upon a man who had been blind from birth, his disciples asked, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" This was a typical way to interpret suffering, as a direct result of sin. Jesus answered that the man's blindness was not a direct result of sin, but that God had a purpose that encompassed the man's blindness—"that the work of God might be displayed in his life" (John 9:3).

Since the fall and the entrance of indiscriminate suffering in the world, God is able to redeem human suffering, using it for his purposes. In this fallen world, suffering and tragedy are not confined to the wicked nor are temporal and general blessings reserved only for the righteous. As Jesus said, the heavenly Father "causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). We must not therefore be simplistic and judgmental toward those who suffer tragedy and misfortune, which is a form of cruelty and emotional abuse. (I'm reminded of the implications of this truth in the minds and hearts of those who are victims of the false teaching of "health and success/name-it-and-claim-it" preachers. What about those whose bodies are not healed and who continue to be mired in poverty or who may be the victims of overt persecution in countries hostile to the Christian faith? The false teaching of these "evangelists" implies that sufferers simply don't have enough faith)

Kenneth Bailey, who served for decades as a Presbyterian missionary in the Middle East and was a New Testament seminary professor in Beirut, Lebanon, gives unique and penetrating insight into the Gospels and particularly the parables of Jesus. He remarked that whenever he taught our text for today, the students in Beirut marveled that Jesus was not lynched on the spot for his reply

to this news of Pilate's slaughter of the Galilean worshipers. During this time of Bailey's teaching, Lebanon was in the midst of the 75-76 civil war. He noted that in a land of constant war and strife, the repressed people develop a self-righteous mindset of always being the victims at the hands of always-wicked repressors. In Jesus' day, Pilate was the epitome of all that the Jews hated—a cruel tyrant who worked for the Roman occupying forces. So when Jesus was told about the latest atrocity committed by the hated Pilate against their fellow repressed Galileans, everyone would have expected Jesus to express sympathy. Of course, had Jesus done so, his enemies would have immediately accused him to the authorities of fomenting rebellion against Roman authority (See Kenneth E Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* and *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*, pages 75-79).

Jesus' courageous reply implied that these, who had become self-righteous victims of oppressors, were also raising the wrong questions. Whether the reporters were implying that they were spared the tragedy because they were righteous or whether the implication was that their people were suffering unjustly at the hands of a hated enemy, they were missing the point.

So, Jesus made his confrontational message clear...

- *To perishing sinners, ignoring the real problem*

And the point is, Jesus says, all of them, the self-righteous fortunate or the suffering unfortunate, must hear the call to repent. The real question is not the "Why?" of suffering, but rather, in the face of life's tragedies, atrocities and uncertainties, "*What must I do?*" (The question asked by a Philippian jailer, who himself was "awakened" by a severe crisis, was, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Acts 16:30). Jesus dared to tell the reporters and all who were standing around him that they had been ignoring the real problem, which was their urgent need to repent.

Of course we need to join in the causes for humanitarian relief of widespread suffering and pandemics, such as the HIV/AIDS crisis. We should pray and work for peace and justice as God's representatives of his kingdom of perfect peace and justice. We must give the Gospel credibility in the eyes of a hurting world that wonders if we really care. We must do what we can to help the needy and intervene in behalf of victims of injustice and oppression. Yet we must bear in mind that the most urgent need remains—the need to repent and receive God's forgiveness and free gift of eternal life. How tragic, if in our zeal for change and relief from human misery we forget the call of Jesus, a universal call, for repentance.

Jesus issued the call to those who were blinded to the reality of sin or who were questioning the justice of God. They thought they deserved God's grace and were offended to think they might be under God's justice. To accentuate the truth

that we are all sinners in need of repentance, Jesus added another current event, the collapse of a tower in Jerusalem that killed 18 people (verse 4). And he repeated his message: “Unless you repent, you will all perish” (verse 5).

During that dark week of “9-11” 2001 in America, Friday the 14th was designated a National Day of Prayer. In many services of worship, including the one in the city where we lived, the popular hymn, *Amazing Grace* was sung. In fact, that great hymn by John Newton, at least unofficially, seems to have become the new national hymn. Yet, as it is sung, I cannot help but wonder how many who sing it miss the point. Grace brings true repentance and not just relief from suffering.

RC Sproul says we have begun to take God’s grace for granted, and no longer are amazed by it. In fact, we think God owes us perpetual mercy. Sproul says we sing the song, “*Amazing Justice*,” and our lyrics tend to go like this:

*Amazing Justice, cruel and sharp
That wounds a saint like me:
I’m so darn good it makes no sense—
The tower fell on me!*

(Page 167, *The Holiness of God*)

Jesus calls everyone to repentance and he issues...

➤ **An Urgent Call (verses 6-9)**

When Jesus issued this call to repentance, he understood that looming on the horizon was the impending Roman-Jewish War of AD 66-70, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem. But even before that time, most of his hearers would face death and be unprepared to meet God in judgment. His message was that the atrocity of the murders in the temple and the collapse of the tower were God’s call to all to repent.

CS Lewis wrote that we cannot ignore suffering. Pain “insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains. It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world” (page 93, *The Problem of Pain*, Macmillan, 1962). In our electronic culture and time, we might say that pain and suffering are God’s amplifier.

We all know share the experience of having our silence or attention interrupted with more urgent messages. When the airplane is preparing to land, you may be watching the news on the television monitor, but suddenly the sound and picture are shut off. Then the voice of the flight attendant on her microphone tells you to shut the drop-down table in front of you, return your seat to its upright position, make certain your seatbelt is tightly secured. It’s time to prepare for landing.

Especially in verses 6-9 we read that Jesus says that it's time to prepare to meet...

- *God's expectations*

Jesus told this parable about a man who owned a vineyard that also had a fig tree growing in the midst of it. Jesus' audience and Jewish readers perhaps would have recalled the Prophet Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard," which laments that the nation of Israel had failed to meet God's expectations and to bear the fruit of justice and righteousness (Isaiah 5:1-7). In the final week of his earthly ministry, as he entered the city of Jerusalem the week of his passion and death on the cross, Jesus enacted the "live" parable of cursing the fig tree. He thereby showed his demand that his people bear fruit or suffer his judgment (Mark 11:12-14, 20-24; Matthew 21:18-22).

God expects his people to produce the fruit of righteousness. He demands that we have a righteousness that surpasses the piety of the religious leaders and punctilious, legalistic law-keepers (Matthew 5:20). The only way any one of us can get into heaven is through the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

A friend of mine, influenced by New Age philosophies, believes in re-incarnation. She cannot accept the fact that someone, namely the Son of God, should have to die for her. Her path to "nirvana" is through a succession of reincarnations that will lead her to a higher life, each incarnation being closer to the ideal moral life. My reply to her is that in a million lifetimes we could never attain to the righteousness that would allow us into heaven. God expects the fruit of complete godliness which we can never achieve by our efforts alone.

And Jesus looks for not just the initial act of repentance but an entire lifetime of repentance toward God and faith in Christ Jesus (Acts 20:21). Every day we express repentance when we confess, agree with God about, our sins. Then we forsake them, assured of his forgiveness but also determined to grow in holiness and victory over besetting, habitual sin, which robs us of joy, peace, assurance and joy—in other words, of the fruit Jesus expects.

And so, when our lives give no evidence of the fruit of godliness we face...

- *God's judgment*

God, the Creator and heavenly Father, the Owner of his vineyard, looks at us in our sinfulness and unfruitfulness and he says to his gardener, "Cut it down!" (verse 7). Without the fruit of godliness our lives are not only "taking up space," but also become a detriment to those around us.

The fig tree had ample time to bear fruit. Some suggest, when the years are all added together, including the years when the fruit was forbidden until the fruit was considered holy, the fig tree could well have been as old as nine years (See Kenneth Bailey, page 82-83, above citation). In any case, the tree had ample time to become fruitful. And God will judge every life, as we noted last Sunday, based on his perfect justice and the opportunities we have received to know and to follow him (Luke 12:47-48).

If our lives are not bearing fruit for God they are not merely neutral, but are at cross purposes with him. As Jesus says, "He who is not with me is against me, and he who does not gather with me scatters" (Matthew 12:30). As George Buttrick points out, the fig tree, allowed to stand in the middle of the vineyard, would rob fruitful grape vines of needed nutrients from the soil and light from the sun (Page 105ff, *The Parables of Jesus*).

Unless our lives are in step with God we will inevitably cause damage in the lives of others and will face judgement, not only for the harm we have brought to our own lives and lost opportunities, but we will stand accused of the negative impact our lives had had upon others.

Paul addresses those members of the church who are "saved as those escaping the flames" of the fires of hell (1 Corinthians 3:15). Their works will be destroyed. Such unfruitful believers also, it seems to me, forfeit the assurance of their salvation, since fruit is the evidence of genuine, life-changing, saving grace. Such backslidden "believers" are like the unfruitful tree, just using up the soil, and a stumbling block in the way of Christians whose lives would otherwise be fruitful.

I contend that the most dangerous life, mortally speaking, is the life of the believer who has become spiritually unfruitful. He himself may be saved, yet by the inconsistency of his life, and his rebellious and unfruitful life, is leading his own children and unbelieving friends into eternal darkness.

Before holy God we would all stand under judgment as the Owner says, "Cut it down!" As a pastor, one who is called to be fruitful by life and service, I must dare to look at my life and ask, am I like that barren fig tree, just using up the soil? (verse 7). If my life heart becomes unresponsive to God's word of warning and I refuse to repent of a life that rejects God's fruit, I am in danger of his judgment that simply will not allow me to simply "use up the soil."

I recall a comment by my father, who was a fervent church planter and director of a state conference of Baptist churches in the Midwest of the USA, when asked if a certain man were pastor of a particularly mentioned church. Sardonicly my dad, who was never reluctant to express his displeasure with difficult or lazy ministers, gave this reply: "No, he's not their *pastor*; he's just keeping the church from having one." My prayer is that I will not keep this church from having the pastor God wants for you, that I will not just "use up the soil."

But there is another there, the Caretaker, who says, "Leave it alone" (verse 8). And he offers to dig around it to loosen the hardened soil and "manure" it, giving it another opportunity to bear fruit. And so we hear...

- *The Savior's intercession*

Perhaps Jesus is referring in this parable to his role as the Mediator between holy God and sinful humankind (1 Timothy 2:5; 1 John 2:1-2). Yet, we should not divide the Triune God, separating an angry Father from an importuning Son. God in his totality was involved in our redemption (2 Corinthians 5:19), and we are saved by the love of God as well as the grace of our Lord Jesus (2 Corinthians 13:14). I like the way Augustine worded this picture of the caretaker imploring the owner: "The merciful One intercedes with the merciful One" (page 223, NT volume III, Luke: *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*). From before the creation of the world God designed our rescue from judgment that we might once again become fruitful as he intended. Because God is perfectly holy and just he could not simply overlook our sin. But because he is perfect holiness and love, he provided for justice to be done, while also proffering his mercy and grace. That was done through the substitutionary suffering and death of Jesus, the eternal Son, for our sins. So, in this parable Jesus perhaps "hints" at the way the Father, the Owner of the vineyard, would provide, through the interceding Caretaker, for our being spared his just judgment.

Paul writes about this provision of a just God for us sinners being made right with him: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice....he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus" (Romans 3:22-26).

What is the way to receive the mercy and grace of God that suspends his judgment? We go back to Jesus' words in reply to the atrocity and disasters that were reported: "Unless you repent, you will all perish" (verses 3 & 5).

In other words, he expects us to admit that we can never by our efforts live up to his standard of perfect righteousness. We must admit we are sinners who will always come up short of being like Jesus, just as Israel always failed to produce the fruit God demanded. But Jesus was to show that through faith in him alone the standard of God's expectations could be met. His death on the cross would pay our sin debt owed to holy God and Jesus would suffer the penalty we all deserve to suffer for our sins. He the righteous one would suffer for the unrighteous (1 Peter 3:18). And by faith in Jesus and by true repentance our

sins would be forgiven and our sinful hearts be transformed into hearts that seek after God and that seek to please him (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Only by the grace, the free giving of God, can we experience faith and repentance, which is a radical change of mind and disposition toward God. John the Baptist came preaching repentance and demanded that repenting sinners “Produce fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:7). When we turn from our life of living for self and our perpetual rebellion against God, he gives us his gift of faith to trust him and the will and power to live a new life, a life of pleasing God. Paul reminds us that our new life/the gift of eternal life is nothing we can achieve by our own goodness. But once we turn from sin and turn to God in a life of trust and obedience, then we are enabled to do the good works he has prepared for us (Ephesians 2:8-10). The cross of Christ pays our sin debt, but we must continue living in the way of the cross.

Repentance is not a one-time experience, but becomes a way of life. Our lives must continue to be an expression of repentance. By grace through faith we have a change of mind and heart. We have sorrow for our sin that caused the Savior’s suffering, and we turn from self and sin and come to Jesus for his merciful forgiveness. We then are re-made and given a heart to love and obey God. And that re-made heart and restored relationship keeps us turning to Christ for his continual forgiveness of our sin and re-making of our minds and hearts. Thus, repentance, which at first opened the door to our conversion to Christ, becomes the daily discipline that continues to make us more like Christ (See “repentance” in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, IVP, article by R Kearsley, pages 580-581). For me, I must often and regularly repent of my spiritual barrenness that simply causes me to “use up the soil (verse 7) and ask God to mercifully make my life and ministry fruitful, for his glory.

This true and lasting attitude of repentance is the key to fruitful living. And, as Jesus shows in this parable and elsewhere, although we are saved by grace, we will be judged by our fruitfulness. God’s purpose for us, as it was for ancient Israel, is to bear fruit for God, to glorify him by fulfilling his purpose for us. The grace that saves is totally free. There is nothing we can in ourselves do to deserve or to earn our being made right with God. But that free grace is not cheap. It demands that we give our lives in continual repentance of sin and growing in Christ-likeness and taking the cross way of self-denial (Romans 12:2; Galatians 2:20). Although we are saved by grace, we will be judged by the fruit that true saving grace unfailingly produces. That is why in Scripture the judgment passages, whether in the Old Testament or New, picture God the Judge as the “Fruit Inspector,” the Judge who has the right to expect results in his people (Isaiah 5:1-7; Matthew 7:19-20; 25:31-46). Thus, the key to gaining assurance of our salvation is not our memory of a past conversion experience or rite of baptism. Rather, the way to make our calling and election sure, says Peter, is to add Christ-like virtues to our lives (2 Peter 1:5-10).

Thus, the Savior, the Caretaker of the vineyard, continues to intercede for us, that we might bear fruit that passes inspection (Hebrews 7:25). And, in answer to his prayer, we realize the urgency of bearing the fruit of the Spirit, as we live in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25). We are called to produce the fruit of godly character, faithful witness, praise and good works that bear witness to our glorious God (John 15:5,8,16; Hebrews 13:15; Colossians 1:10).

Although grace is full and free and available to all who call upon the Lord in true repentance, Jesus' parable teaches the somber truth of...

- *Grace's limitation*

RC Sproul, while a seminary student, delivered a sermon in his preaching class/lab. The title of his message was "*God's Infinite Grace*." He was sure it was an impeccable sermonic/homiletic masterpiece. But after delivering this sermon the professor of preaching asked, "Mr. Sproul, where did you ever get the idea God's grace is infinite?" Young RC had to admit the idea came from a gospel song he had sung often in church, about God's marvelous, infinite grace. (Actually, the lyrics of the hymn, *Grace Greater than Our Sin*, by Julia H Johnston, do not have the words "infinite grace." These words can be apparently attributed to tune writer Daniel Towner, who has the altos and basses singing in antiphony, "Marvelous grace, infinite grace" during the refrain which he added to the hymn)

God's mercy and grace indeed are marvelous and he is always able and willing to forgive and change any repentant sinner. But his grace is not infinite in time and opportunity. One can sin away and many have sinned away the opportunity to receive God's marvelous *but not infinite* grace.

Years later, when RC Sproul became Professor Sproul, he gave his seminary class an assignment of a research paper, due in the middle of the term, and worth 50% of the final grade. Emphatically he stated that no late papers would be accepted. On the day the papers were due, eight students came up to him after class and good-naturedly explained the various dilemmas that resulted in their having no research paper to hand Professor Sproul. Graciously, the godly professor gave them pardon, and than a new due date. But he also gravely warned them of the consequences if they did not have their papers in his hand on this new due date.

Amazingly, these same students reported on this new due date that other problems prevented them from meeting this new deadline. Just as amazing was the grace of the good professor, who extended them yet a second new deadline. But this one, he emphasized, was a "drop-deadline," and there would be no more grace, but only the judgment of a failing grade after that. Yet more amazingly, a few of these dilatory students had the temerity to approach Professor Sproul on the date of this third and final deadline with their excuses. But Dr. Sproul said

this time the ax had to fall. Grace was not infinite. Grace was over. Judgment fell. These students failed the course (See RC Sproul, pages 158ff, *The Holiness of God*).

God will say of the unfruitful life, "Cut it down!" God will say some day of every life that has rejected his grace, "Cut it down!" Peter explains the delay in the Lord's coming in judgment as the exercise of his patience, but that even the patience of God will some day run out. "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief,*" he quickly and emphatically adds (2 Peter 3:9-10).

The unbeliever must not presume upon the patience of God, nor must the believer, who remains outside of God's will and who, apart from repentance and restoration, would be ashamed to face the judgment seat of Christ (1 John 2:28; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

Conclusion:

Hopefully for some in America, "9-11" in 2001 was indeed God's wake-up call. We can at least hope that some heeded the wake-up call and came to repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:21). But for those who did, it was not out of fear alone that they came to genuine repentance and faith. Obviously, the thousands that flocked to church and national prayer day assemblies did not all experience genuine, life-changing repentance, since they showed no lasting fruit. The repentance that Jesus calls us to is by his amazing and undeserved grace.

The Holy Spirit must work in our hearts a true and clear awareness of our sinfulness and our moral unworthiness before holy God. God alone can create in our otherwise self-centered, self-righteous and spiritually insensitive and darkened hearts a sense of regret for our waywardness and self-centeredness and an urgent desire to be made right with God. The Holy Spirit is the great revealer, who uncovers all the ugly parts of our lives that God alone can cleanse, erase and transform. Grace alone enables us to change our minds and then to change the direction of our hearts/wills and lives from self toward God.

For me, repentance must be a daily movement, more from my sinfully selfish will to the heart of God. Only as I repent and turn from my old, sinful nature am I remade into the likeness of Christ and begin once again to bear the fruit that honors him, that he seeks from me and by which he will judge me.

Grace can lead us to repentance even before a traumatic wake-up call. It wasn't the tragic current events of the slaughter by Pilate and the collapse of the tower that brought repentance. It was the word of the Lord Jesus that called his

listeners to repentance. We have had a sufficient number of tragic events to awaken our minds and hearts to our need for God's amazing grace. There will always be political, social and personal tragedies, Jesus says, and even an increasing number of natural disasters before the final day of the Lord. We all know that we live in an ever-increasingly dangerous world. We awaken almost daily to read or hear about another terrorist strike or attempt, even much worse than Pilate's atrocity or the tower's collapse. But the wake-up call to repentance that we need is simply the gentle whisper of his word, reminding us that, although his grace to forgive and restore is amazing, it is not infinite.

Today we must repent of our fruitlessness or we too will all perish.

Questions and thoughts for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. What are some typical responses to atrocities, such as the murder by Pilate of the worshipers in the temple? What do many people say about God in light of those atrocities and disasters?
2. In what ways can and should these atrocities and disasters (such as terrorist attacks and devastating floods) become God's "wake-up calls"?
3. Why do these disasters often bring a temporary spirit of reflection to a nation but not one of lasting and true repentance?
4. How do you define repentance?
5. In light of our text, what are God's expectations of every life? On what basis will he judge the unconverted? On what basis will he judge his redeemed people?
6. Describe what you believe is the fruit that Jesus expects from everyone.
7. If our lives are not bearing the fruit God expects, in what way(s) can they "use up the soil" (verse 7), i.e., be detrimental to the cause of Christ?

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