

“When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ‘Repent’ (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.” Anyone know where that’s from? Martin Luther wrote that in his *95 Theses*, 95 propositions intended to spark debate about some of the Catholic church’s teachings and practice. In fact, that’s thesis #1 of 95!

That priority placement leads to the next important question. What does a life of repentance look like? Daily trips to the confessional booth to pour forth your sins? Constant weeping over how terrible you and your sins are? Perpetual apologizing? Or does it look like something else entirely?

Today, as we continue our Lenten quest, Jesus teaches us what it means to live a LIFE of repentance. Since Jesus references a parable about a fig tree, we’ll call it ***A Life of Fruitful Repentance***. In order to live that life, we need to understand two things: First, ***Understand the Times***. Second, ***Understand God’s Time***.

As Jesus was teaching a large crowd of Jews, including his disciples, some people in the crowd wanted his opinion about a recent news headline. ***“Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.”***

History doesn’t record this story for us. But most likely, some Galilean Jews were offering Passover sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. For some reason, these Galileans had angered the volatile, violent Roman Prefect, Pontius Pilate, who sent soldiers into the Temple to slaughter them—spilling their blood along with the blood of the sacrifices the Galileans had slaughtered.

These people probably hoped Jesus would condemn the Romans’ actions. But instead, Jesus responds, ***“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”***

Then, Jesus references another news story—how the Tower of Siloam, part of Jerusalem’s walls, had collapsed and killed 18 people. ***“Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”***

Most Jews believed the false notion that every disaster comes as the result of personal sin. They thought the Galileans were slaughtered, and the 18 were crushed because they must have done something really bad. But Jesus flips it around. Whether an atrocity carried out by human hands, or a freak accident, Jesus warns the people to understand the times—to not see these tragedies as evidence that others needed to repent, but to understand them as reminders of our own need for repentance.

We experience similar tragedies in our times too. Last week, 50 Muslims were killed in terrorist attacks in New Zealand. An atrocity carried out by human hands. The week before, 157 people were killed in an Ethiopian airlines crash, a freak accident. “Understanding the times” help us live a life of repentance in two ways.

First, such tragedies remind us of our own need for repentance! Why are there such atrocities in the world? Because of sin—sin that we too are guilty of! Brutal murders, shocking accidents—death in general—are sermons that remind us, ***“The soul who sins is the one who will die.”*** Second, such unexpected deaths remind us that our time on this earth is limited and uncertain. Don’t put off repentance! Because the greatest tragedy is not death by murder or accident, but the eternal death of those whose lives end in unrepentant sin.

Living a life of fruitful repentance requires us to understand the times we live in. Every tragedy and atrocity reminds us that we too are sinners, who need to daily repent of the sins that make us deserving of death and destruction. May every breaking news report of tragedy or terror bring to your lips the prayer, “Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Maybe it's important to take a minute to review what repentance is. By definition, repentance means to turn or to change. So to repent means to turn away from sin; to have your heart and your mind changed about sin. Certainly, if our hearts and minds have been changed about sin, then our actions in regards to sin will also be changed.

That's why Jesus continues by telling his disciples a parable about living a fruitful life of repentance. To do so, we need to understand the times we live in. But most importantly, we need to understand God's time.

Jesus paints the scene. ***"A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any."*** There are a couple things here that help us understand Jesus' point. First, fig trees are some of the most fruitful trees of all. Fig trees bear fruit 10 out of the 12 month, and are harvested three different times each year. Beyond that, this fig tree was in a choice location. Planted in a vineyard, this fig tree would be tended to and cared for to make it as fruitful as possible. The owner had been extremely patient as well. He'd been looking for fruit on the tree for three years. Since fig trees generally weren't harvested for the first three years, this man had patiently waited 6 years for fruit, but had nothing.

This tree's only purpose was to produce fruit. By nature and nurture, it should have been extremely fruitful! And yet, it was fruitless. It's no surprise then that the owner tells his worker, ***"Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?"*** The tree wasn't just worthless, it was negatively impacting the trees around it, uselessly sapping nutrients from the soil, and occupying a place where a fruitful tree could be planted. No one would blame this owner for cutting that tree down and using it for firewood. That tree wasn't doing what it was supposed to.

So why do we naturally bristle at the thought of God cutting down people who don't produce fruits of repentance? Human nature doesn't like being told what to do, and especially dislikes being told that we're wrong. So when Jesus tells us we need to repent or perish, to produce fruit or be cut down, our sinful nature rebels.

This week, our family spent time with my sister's family in Minnesota. After church on Wednesday, my 3-year old niece started running to catch up to her brother as he crossed the street, not realizing there was a car coming. My wife screamed her name, and thankfully, she stopped running before crossing the road. But she then proceeded to scream-cry for about a half-hour. She didn't like being called out. But what would the alternative have been?

In the same way, as much as our sinful nature might recoil at Jesus calling us and others to repent, we need to understand why God calls us to repent. He does it out of love! He wants us to turn away from our sin, because he knows unrepentant sin will kill us eternally.

Jesus' parable is about repentance. But running through it is also a beautiful element of mercy. Because as the owner rightfully calls for the fruitless tree to get the axe, the gardener requests grace for the tree. ***"Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, cut it down."***

The gardener asks the owner to give the tree more time. And not just more time to sit back and wait. He asks for more time so he can dig around the tree to allow better sunlight and rain, and fertilize the soil to help it produce fruit.

In his mercy, that's what God has given to every person. We call it the "time of grace." The length of life God gives every person so he can do his work of digging, fertilizing, and watering with the Word and sacraments to bring people to faith and help them produce fruits of repentance. God's desire isn't to cut down the trees. As Peter writes, ***[God] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.***

You see, repentance isn't something we do for ourselves. Repentance only happens when God changes our hearts as the Spirit works through the Word. Through the law, producing sincere sorrow over sin so we see our need for forgiveness; changing our minds about sin, so we see it as despicable, not desirable.

Repentance is turning away from sin. But it's also turning to Christ! Through the gospel, faith is produced which trusts that Christ has forgiven all of our sins. Repentance means turning to the gardener who has come into the garden to save

us, not just by working on the tree, but by going to a tree—the tree of the cross, so that every single one of the sins we repent of have been forgiven.

But what do fruits of repentance look like? They don't look like perfection. If God was only looking for perfection as the fruits of repentance, he'd be searching for a lot more than three years! Our sinful nature makes it impossible for us to be perfect. Rather, fruits of repentance are actions that show our hearts and minds have been changed about sin. The alcoholic stops going to the bar. The porn addict installs filtering software on his computer. The teen girl breaks up with the boyfriend who pressures her to go too far. Fruits of repentance are steps taken to struggle against sin; actions that show our hearts have been changed from desiring sin, to desiring Jesus.

When we understand God's time—his time of grace and mercy, we can live a life of joyful repentance, trusting in Christ for forgiveness. But we also understand that God's time also has an end time. If the fig tree still doesn't produce fruit after being fertilized and receiving special care, eventually the time of grace comes to its end and the tree is still chopped down.

Note that Jesus' parable doesn't conclude by telling us whether the tree produced fruit or not. It simply tells us what the gardener did, and reminds us that the time of grace still comes to an end for unfruitful trees. Jesus leaves the rest up to his listeners to complete. A life of repentance? Or a life of fruitlessness?

Dear brothers and sisters, understand the times. As sinners, we too need to repent and produce fruit, not apathy. But also understand God's time. In your life of repentance, look to God's grace, and turn confidently to Jesus—our gardener, who went to the tree to save fruitless trees like us, so we might produce fruit.