

**“Unless You Repent, You Will All Likewise Perish” (Luke 13:1–9)**

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We live in the age of the “hot take.” A hot take is an instant reaction to some event, usually a significant, news-worthy event. Something big happens, and everyone has an opinion about it, even if, or especially if, they don’t know what they’re talking about. This happens frequently on radio and television, particularly since the advent of 24-hour cable news. But it’s heightened in the age of the internet. Everyone has an opinion.

This is particularly true when there’s a tragedy of some kind. When there’s a natural disaster or a shooting or bombing, instead of grieving at the loss of life, people offer their hot take. Instead of mourning, they instantly start fitting that event into their agenda. They politicize it, using it as a way to criticize their political enemies or to advance their political program. Sometimes, they speculate as to why something happened. Or, they look for someone to blame.

We see this with recent shootings. Just last weekend, a young man shot some people at a synagogue in California, killing one. And, perhaps not surprisingly, Joy Behar of “The View” said that Donald Trump was the culprit. That’s politicizing an event. Often when there’s a shooting, people use that event as a way to advance their favorite gun legislation, whether it’s for gun control or against gun-free zones. When there’s a natural disaster, like Hurricane Katrina, which decimated New Orleans and the Gulf Coast in 2005, people speculate as to why it happened. Those commentators sometimes offer up religious interpretations of the event, suggesting that the victims of the disaster were incurring the wrath of God because they were particularly sinful. Or, in the wake of the same event, people will look to issue blame. They say things like, “Why do so many people live in city that’s below sea level? They’re asking for trouble.”

Perhaps the worst hot-take reaction to tragedies is what Germans call *Schadenfreude*. Germans like to smash two nouns together to make a new word, and that’s what they’ve done here. *Freude* means “joy” and *Schaden* means “damage” or “injury” or “loss.” So, *Schadenfreude* refers to that perverse human emotion of feeling joy at another person’s loss. When someone we don’t like is hurt, we take joy in it. When someone we don’t like loses health, wealth, or something precious, we may be happy. It’s a terrible emotional reaction, which comes to us without bidding because we are fallen, corrupted creatures.

We see these kinds of hot takes in the world because of the internet and television and radio, and it's probably the case that these media stir up within us the worst sides of human nature. But hot takes are nothing new. As long as people have had opinions, and as long as bad things have happened, there have been hot takes, even if they weren't broadcast far and wide.

Today, we're going to see people ask Jesus for his hot take on a tragedy. But we're going to see that Jesus doesn't play along with this game. Instead of falling into the trap of politicizing an event, speculating on why it happened, issuing blame, or experiencing *Schadenfreude*, he uses the opportunity to give us a warning.

We're looking at the beginning of Luke 13 today. If you haven't been with us recently, we've been studying the Gospel of Luke for over a year now, because we want to consider carefully who Jesus is and what he has done. The Gospel of Luke is one of four biographies of Jesus that we find in the Bible. The Gospels are theological biographies, focusing on the most significant events of Jesus' life, including his miraculous conception, his teachings, his miracles, his death on the cross, and his resurrection from the grave. They're called Gospels because the word gospel means "good news." Jesus is indeed good news, the best news in a world filled with bad news—and the foolish and unhelpful hot takes that follow bad news.

We'll begin today by reading the first five verses of Luke 13.

<sup>1</sup> There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? <sup>3</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. <sup>4</sup> 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? <sup>5</sup> No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."<sup>1</sup>

Throughout Luke 12, Jesus was warning people of coming judgment. Jesus warned people not to fear those who are only able to kill the body, but to fear God, who is able to cast the soul into hell (Luke 12:4–5). He warned against greed because our treasures on earth won't last and we will stand before God in judgment (Luke 12:13–21). He said we must be ready because when he comes to earth a second time, it will be at an unexpected time (Luke 12:35–48).

While he's teaching these things, some people tell Jesus about a recent event. Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor of Judea, had "mingled" the blood of some Jews from Galilee with

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<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

the blood of their sacrifices. This must mean that these Galileans had come to Jerusalem to offer animal sacrifices at the temple, and that, for whatever reason, Pilate had them killed. We don't know what happened, because this is the only historical record of this event. It's not mentioned in the other Gospels, and it wasn't recorded by the Jewish historian, Josephus. But it's the kind of thing that happened in the first century. Tensions between Jews and the Roman Empire ran high, because Jewish people thought God had given them this land and because it was occupied by Roman forces. Jewish people resented the Romans, and the Romans had a way of showing their power through force. So, perhaps some Galileans had challenged or insulted Roman rule in some way and Pilate had these people killed. We don't know the details.

In bringing this news to Jesus, these people are probably trying to trap him. In Luke 11:53–54, we're told that the scribes and Pharisees, some of the Jewish religious leaders, were looking to catch Jesus in something he said. They wanted to get Jesus in trouble, to entice him to say something that might lead to his death. Perhaps they were expecting that Jesus would side with people from his own region of Galilee. Perhaps they were hoping that Jesus would respond to this news about Pilate by saying, "God is going to strike Pilate down." That would be enough to get Jesus killed. But Jesus doesn't play along. He doesn't say the Galileans deserved death. He doesn't say that Pilate deserves death. What does he say? "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

It was common for people to assume that if a tragedy befalls a person, it's because they deserved it. God was punishing that person for their sin. In the book of Job, found in the Old Testament, tragedies come upon Job. He loses his wealth, his children, and his health. His friends assume that he has done something wrong, and now God is punishing him. They were wrong, however. This reaction is still common today. Whether it's 9/11 or Hurricane Katrina or some other event, people often assume that God was punishing people.

What's interesting is that Jesus doesn't say that God wasn't punishing these people. He doesn't say these people who died were not sinners; they were. Everyone except Jesus is a sinner. We have failed to live life according to God's terms. God made us to live a certain way, to relate to him in a certain way. He made us to know him, love him, obey him, and worship him. That is a good thing, because God is a good King who blesses his people. But we assume that we know better than God. We ignore him, we make our own rules, and we live life in ways that can

be quite destructive. We fail to love God and we fail to love other people. All of that is sin. The people who died at the hands of Pontius Pilate were no more or less sinful than you and me.

At the same time, Jesus doesn't say that God was punishing this people. He doesn't say that Pilate was right or wrong. All he says is, "unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." What happened to those Galileans is a picture of judgment. God will strike down sinners who have not repented. Jesus is saying, "If you don't want to experience something like that from God, then turn away from your sin and turn back to God."

In a similar way, Jesus brings up another recent event. At the pool of Siloam, a reservoir in Jerusalem, a tower fell and killed eighteen people. We don't know any other details than this. It seems that it was a construction project of some kind, and someone probably didn't design or build this tower well, so eighteen people were killed. These might have been construction workers or just people passing by. We don't know. But Jesus tells the crowd not to assume that these people deserved this kind of death any more than anyone else. He says, "do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Again, Jesus doesn't say that these people weren't sinners, that they didn't deserved death. He doesn't say these were particularly bad sinners, and God used this event to punish them. He simply reminds the crowd that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory, and that the wages of sin is death (Rom. 3:23; 6:23).

What Jesus is doing is reminding us that life is fragile. Whether we die in a tragedy or quietly of natural causes, we all will die. "All go to one place. All are from the dust, and to dust all return" (Eccl. 3:20). We don't know when our time may come. It could be very soon. Before it's too late, Jesus urges us to repent. The Bible says that our lives are like grass, which grows for a season and then dies (Isa. 4:6). Psalm 102:11 says,

My days are like an evening shadow;  
I wither away like grass.

James says, "What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes" (James 4:14). Death comes for us. It is a partial punishment for our sin. But a final, decisive punishment is judgment. It isn't just physical death; it's final, ultimate spiritual death, being cut off from God and everything good. God is the source of truth, beauty, goodness, and

life. Being condemned is failing to experience any of those things. Jesus is warning us who are still alive to turn back to God while we still have time.

That's what repentance is. It's turning back to God. It's turning away from worship some god-substitute, an idol. It's turning away from sin. It's coming to our senses, learning what life is really about. As one of our deacons likes to say, it's coming to the end of yourself, or, as the Bible often says, it's putting the old you to death so that God can create a new you. As our other deacon said just yesterday, it means to come back to God.

The Bible often pairs repentance with faith (Luke 24:47; Acts 2:38; 3:19; 20:21; 26:18, 20). They are two sides of the same coin. When we trust Jesus, believing that he is who the Bible says he is and that he has done what the Bible says he has done, we put our faith in him. Faith is more than knowing those facts to be true, it's a personal trust that Jesus is Savior and King, that he is the only one who can take care of our sin problem and bring us back to God, and that his rule is the best thing for our lives. When we have realized all this, our lives will change. We'll stop doing all the things that we used to do. That doesn't mean we stop all sinning completely. That would be nice. But we are in a process of becoming more like Jesus. We still struggle and wrestle with sin. That wrestling match begins with faith, but the act of repenting and trusting in Jesus continues through all of life. Turning away from sin and fighting against sin is a necessary part of the Christian life. We don't earn a right standing with God by doing that. If that were the case, we could never make ourselves perfect enough to be right with God. No, salvation is a gift. But if you've received that gift, it changes your life. You will start to bear good fruit.

And that leads us to what Jesus teaches next in Luke. He tells his audience a short story, a parable, to talk about the necessity of repentance and also God's patience. Let's read verses 6–9:

<sup>6</sup> And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. <sup>7</sup> And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' <sup>8</sup> And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. <sup>9</sup> Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The story is quite simple. A man planted a fig tree and has waited three years (perhaps three years after it should have started to produce fruit), and he doesn't find fruit. He tells his gardener to cut it down. This tree is wasting the nutrients of the soil and it isn't producing

anything good. Why should the man continue to let this fruitless tree take up precious resources when it isn't productive?

Surprisingly, the gardener steps in to plead for the tree. He asks the owner to give the tree another year. The gardener will dig around the tree so he can put some manure in the soil. Perhaps the tree needs a little more fertilizer. And, if after a year the tree doesn't bear any fruit, well, then the owner can cut it down.

The fig tree has a lot of meaning in the Bible. The fig tree was in the garden of Eden; Adam and Eve used its leaves to cover themselves up after they sinned. When the people of Israel were on their way to Canaan, the Promised Land, they were told it was a place of "wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, a land of olive trees and honey" (Deut. 8:8). Prosperity for Israel was described in terms of each person sitting under a fig tree (1 Kgs. 4:25; Mic. 4:4). But fig trees were supposed to bear fruit. Similarly, Israel was supposed to bear good fruit. They were supposed to live for God, coming under his rule in order to receive his blessing. But they lacked good fruit. The prophet Micah likens godlessness to a lack of figs (Mic. 7:1–2). In the Gospels, Jesus curses a fig tree that doesn't produce fruit, a symbolic action lamenting the lack of good fruit that Israel produced (Mark 11:12–21).

The point of the story is that God expect good fruit to be produced by his people. And God is patient. The reason why we all haven't been judged yet is because God is giving people more time to turn to Jesus (2 Pet. 3:9). But that time will not last forever. God will only be patient for so long. There will come a point, whether we die or whether Jesus returns to earth during our lifetime, when it will be too late to turn back to God in faith and repentance. If we haven't turned back when it's too late, we will be cut off from God, cut down as fruitless trees. This is the message of John the Baptist, who said earlier in Luke's Gospel, "Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:9). Jesus says pretty much the exact same thing in Matthew 7:19 and here. In John 15, Jesus says that he is the vine, and that his disciples are branches connected to him. Those branches are meant to bear good fruit. Jesus says, "Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit" (John 15:2). He says, "If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned" (John 15:6).

The apostle Paul uses a similar image in his letter to the church in Rome. In the middle of the letter, Paul talks about the people of Israel. We might call this Old Testament Israel or biological Israel. He says that many of his fellow Israelites do not believe in Jesus, and therefore they stand condemned. (This is presupposed by Rom. 9:1–3 and 10:1.) He says that they were like branches of a tree that were broken off because of their unbelief (Rom. 11:17–20). But he warns anyone who comes to Jesus that if they do not continue in faith, they will be broken off, too. Paul says that if people come to faith in Jesus, they can be grafted back into that tree. He notes the kindness of God. But he also talks about the severity of God as well (Rom. 11:21–24). God is kind to give us an opportunity to repent. He is kind because salvation is his gift to those who would receive it. But his judgment, when it comes, will be final and severe. Do not take his kindness for granted. Produce good fruit in keeping with faith and repentance. Jesus is telling us to bear good fruit or perish.

This message is for everyone, for all human beings. Earlier in Romans, Paul makes it clear that both Gentiles and Jews were in danger of condemnation. Though Gentiles weren't familiar with Scripture, they have no excuse. Everyone who lives knows, simply from living in God's creation, that God exists, that he is eternal and powerful (Rom. 1:20). Everyone has a conscience, no matter how damaged by sin, that tells us there are rights and wrongs. All of life testifies to God's existence. But Jewish people who had access to God's written word were even worse. They certainly had no excuse (Rom. 2:1–3, 17–24). Paul says that "all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin" (Rom. 3:9).

But God has delayed judgment to give people time to turn to Jesus. That is why Jesus hasn't returned yet. And it's why there's still sin in the world. When Jesus returns, there will be no more killing, not more natural disasters. There will be no more shootings in synagogues and churches. There will be no more towers falling, or hurricanes and earthquakes. But there will also be no more sinners. Those who have turned to Jesus in faith and repentance will be transformed, able to sin no more. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1). But those who do not turn to Jesus will be cut off, cut down, cast out.

This is not the kind of feel-good message that some people want to hear. Some people want a Jesus who never condemns, who always includes everyone all the time. But the real Jesus often spoke of judgment and condemnation. Some people want a Jesus who always takes their side, who agrees with their hot takes: "Those people died? Well, they deserved it! Serves 'em

right!” Jesus doesn’t play along with that commentary. He says, “You see that that person died? Don’t gloat. Don’t assume you’re right. Don’t rush to judgment. No, let their death be a reminder that you will face judgment if you don’t repent, turn to Jesus, and start to produce good fruit.”

I think it’s clear what we should learn in all of this. First of all, don’t rush to judgment. Don’t be like everyone else with their ignorant hot takes. If you’re a Christian, do better. If people die, take time to mourn their loss. Grieve for those lost. Weep with those who are weeping. Pray for those who are hurting, whether you agree with them or not. That doesn’t mean there’s never a time to wonder how a tragedy could have been avoided or to figure out if someone does share some measure of blame. But that shouldn’t be our first response. Christians should be known for being slow to speak, quick to listen, quick to mourn, quick to offer compassion, and quick to think deeply before offering up their opinions. We should respond soberly. Every death is a reminder of the price of sin, the consequences of turning away from God. Every day we have an opportunity to be reminded of the need to turn to Jesus in faith. Every day, there is a reminder to repent.

If you’re not a Christian, this message is certainly for you, too. Turn to Jesus while you still have time. You will stand before him. You will do that with the confidence that he died for you, or in terror, knowing that you rejected the only offer of help that God had given you.

People may be turned off by Jesus’ warnings of judgment, but they shouldn’t be. He was telling the truth. And Jesus isn’t just a fire-and-brimstone preacher. Of course, he’s the Son of God, the Christ, too. But he’s also a compassionate Savior who would die for the sins of his people. He is the only one who doesn’t deserve judgment, and yet he willingly was betrayed, arrested, abandoned, mocked, tortured, and killed. He did this so that God’s justice could be satisfied. When Jesus was crucified, he paid the penalty that sin deserves. He did this for anyone who would turn back to God. Those who put their trust in Jesus have their sins punished already. They are free from guilt and condemnation. They are put back into a right relationship with God. Jesus endured hell on earth when he was on the cross, taking the wrath of God against sin. And he beckons sinners to turn to him so that they don’t have to experience hell forever.

Jesus’ words are sobering, and they may strike some as uncaring. But these words come from a man who cares so much he would die for you. They come from a man who is also God, a man who knows exactly what he is talking about. He beckons us to turn back, to come to our senses, to come home. Turn to Jesus. Keep turning to Jesus. Tell others this message. In a fragile



world, where we are not promised another breath or another heartbeat, our only hope is Jesus.  
Come to him.