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Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
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Dr. Mark E. Gaskins
Senior Pastor

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Only Two Options
Luke 13:1-9

We like options, don't we?

You know what I mean. We're not satisfied with just chocolate and vanilla ice cream, are we? Have you ordered a milkshake at Cookout lately? Heaven forbid that you don't already know what flavor you want when you get to the microphone at the drive-thru, because if you have to sort out all the flavors on the sign, you'll be there awhile!

And what about coffee in a coffee shop? Used to, you just ordered a cup of coffee. There might be a choice of regular or decaf. But have you been in a coffee shop lately? Mocha, latté, frappe, cappuccino, espresso, and the list goes on. I usually say, "I just want a regular coffee."

We like our options. Personalizing things is the name of the game in marketing. We all want to have it our way, put our personal stamp on it, so to speak.

But sometimes our options are limited, aren't they?

You pay your light bill, or the electricity is turned off. You pay your phone bill, or your service is disconnected. If your car isn't paid for, you pay the payments, or it's repossessed. If your house isn't paid for, you pay the mortgage, or the mortgage company eventually forecloses.

People like to think that we have a lot of options when we're dealing with God. We like to think that we're in control, that we can do things our way and everything will be alright in the end. We like to think that there are many different roads that lead to God, that what really counts is if somebody is sincere, and that the commitment Christ calls for isn't nearly so serious and exclusive as what it sounds like in the Bible.

And then we read a text like this one.

Words of Warning

One day while Jesus was teaching,¹ there were some people in the crowd who told Him about a terrible thing that Pilate the Roman governor had recently done. It had apparently taken place at Passover. Pilate had ordered the death of some Galileans who were at the temple to offer their sacrifices. From the little bit that Luke tells us they told Jesus, it appears that as a warning to others, Pilate had mingled the Galileans' blood with their sacrifices. We're not told the reason behind this act, but Galilee was something of a hotbed of rebels against Rome. So Pilate probably perceived these people as rebels, and was out to eliminate them and to strike fear in the

¹ These commentaries were helpful in my interpretation of this text: Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002) and Malcolm O. Tolbert, "Luke" in *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970).

hearts of others who might think about rebellion against the empire. And while this specific incident isn't reported by other sources, similar incidents are. This kind of act was certainly consistent with Pilate's character and mode of operation.

How did Jesus reply to their report? He seized the opportunity to warn them all to repent! He asked them:

"Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish" (13:2-3).²

Apparently the popular view of that day assumed that this awful tragedy at Pilate's hand was a direct result of some awful sin in these people's lives, over and above the sins of others. Jesus said that wasn't necessarily the case, and warned them all that they needed to repent.

He expanded His warning by asking them:

"Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them— 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" (13:4-5).

For some reason, some people assumed that these men were committing some great sin by working on this tower. Maybe it was a Roman building project, and they viewed it as a sellout to Rome. Whatever the case, they thought it was some kind of divine punishment on them when they were killed.

We have people who react the same way today when there's a tragedy. After the terrorist attacks on 9/11, there were some prominent television preachers who said the attacks were God's judgment on America because of certain things that were being allowed that we used not to allow in our nation. More recently, another prominent television preacher pronounced that the recent earthquake in Haiti was a result of a supposed pact with the devil that Haitian slaves made during the slave rebellion in 1791. I haven't heard any comments from him about last weekend's earthquake and tsunami in Chile or this past week's earthquake in Taiwan.

Now to be sure, Scripture does speak about certain tragedies (some caused by humans, some by nature) being the visitation of God's judgment on people or nations. But it's difficult for us as humans to sort out what is and what isn't. Still, that often doesn't stop us from trying!

But here Jesus confronted the notion that this tragedy at Pilate's hand (a human cause) and the tragedy of the tower of Siloam (a natural cause) were direct punishment of these people by God, and that they were therefore greater sinners than others. He very distinctly refuted that notion and called everyone to *individual* repentance!

Then He went on to tell them the parable of the barren fig tree. Now it wasn't unusual for farmers to plant fruit trees in their vineyards in ancient Palestine. It usually took three years for fruit trees to reach maturity and begin bearing fruit.

In the parable, the owner had apparently been coming to this fig tree expecting fruit for three years. He wouldn't have started looking for fruit until the third year, so that means he had waited six years total, and it still wasn't producing any fruit. So he tells the vineyard keeper to cut the tree down. But the vineyard keeper asks the owner to leave it alone for one more year.

² Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

He would dig around it to loosen the soil and remove the weeds, then fertilize it. If it bore fruit the next year, great! And if not, then he would cut it down.

Jesus doesn't say whether the owner agreed or not. And He doesn't say whether the tree bore fruit or had to be cut down. But the point is clear. The delay of judgment and the attempt to turn people to repentance is *mercy* on God's part. If there is no repentance, then the only option is judgment. The fig tree probably refers to Israel; so this is a warning and a call to *national* repentance!

Jesus warned His hearers that they were all in danger of perishing, unless they repented. In other words, there are *only two options*. There is no alternative, no neutral position, no third way. *It's the same with everyone: we are all in danger of perishing, unless we repent!*

The necessity of repentance

Repent or perish! That's pretty dire, isn't it?

Maybe so. But it's the truth. Think of it this way. If you're traveling on a road that has a bridge over a deep river, and the bridge is out, what's going to happen if you keep heading in that direction? You'll drive right off into the river and drown, right?

But if you see a sign that says "Danger! Bridge Out," or somebody flags you down and warns you, and you turn around, you'll be saved from perishing, right?

That's what repentance is—*turning around*. Without Christ, we're headed the wrong way. So we have to turn in the right direction. It's more than just being sorry. It's a genuine change of mind and heart, where we turn from our own way to God's way. We repent of specific sins, yes, but even more than that, we repent of the root of *sin*, our own self-will, our own self-worship, putting ourselves in God's place.

Repent or perish! Only two options!

Now we need to understand that this message is not just for some people who somehow are worse than others. Jesus tells us that *we're all on equal footing*, and it's a precarious perch! As Paul put it in Romans 3:23, "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." Though some commit more sins than others, we're *all* sinners, and we *all* face the same danger and consequence.

But Scripture teaches us in 2 Peter 3:9 that *God doesn't want anyone to perish, but wants everyone to come to repentance*. Most of us memorized it as children (John 3:16, KJV):

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son,
that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have
everlasting life.

In Jesus Christ, God has made a way for us not to perish. And that way is to repent, to turn to Him.

Jesus made it clear: *We are all in danger of perishing, unless we repent!* Sin brings death and destruction — perishing. Unless we repent, we will all alike experience the ultimate consequence of sin: eternal separation from God. The only remedy is genuine repentance.

Frederica Mathewes-Green says about repentance:

The first time Jesus appears, in the first Gospel, the first instruction
he gives is "Repent."

From then on, it's his most consistent message. In all times and every

situation, his advice is to repent. Not just the scribes and Pharisees, not just the powerful—he tells even the poor and oppressed that repentance is the key to eternal life.³

Now all this is true for us as individuals. But church, understand that there's a warning for us here as well! This same principle applies to churches when we ignore the need to repent.

Do you remember the risen Lord's letter to the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:1-7? We looked at those letters in detail some months back. To the church at Ephesus, which had lost its first love, Christ said, "I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, *unless you repent*" (RSV).

And so . . .

And so what about you this morning?

Have you repented of your sin and put your faith in Christ? If you haven't, will you do it today? Trust Him now and find eternal life. You see, real repentance is the flipside of the coin of saving faith.

Maybe you've repented before, and you're a Christian, a follower of Jesus, but there are things in your life that you need to deal with. Will you do that this morning?

Are there things we need to deal with as a church, some direction we've been going in that we need to turn from toward God? Will we join together in prayer and repentance about it?

Chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, blueberry, cherry, even peach cobbler and banana pudding ice cream and milkshakes. Plenty of options.

Mocha, latté, frappe, cappuccino, espresso, and more kinds of coffee. Plenty of options.

Repent or perish! *Only two options*. Really and truly, *only two options*. Which have you chosen this morning?

†MEG

³ Frederica Mathewes-Green, *The Illumined Heart: The Ancient Christian Path of Transformation* (Orleans, MA: Paraclete Press, 2001); cited on <http://preachingtoday.com>.