

RUF Large Group Bible Study
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Parable of Repentance (Luke 13:1-9)²

Luke 13:1 There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2 And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? 3 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4 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? 5 No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

6 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. 7 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?' 8 And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. 9 Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

About thirty of us have just returned from the RUF Winter Conference. Dr. John Hannah, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary (DTS) spoke to us about the Puritans' view of sanctification. You're going to be hearing some of that sprinkled through our lesson tonight. It was superb. I pray that I can do him justice.

Our problem is this: If you say you are a Christian, if you say that you are a new creation, if you have been bought with a price, if you have been justified, ransomed, released – why is it that we still sin? Why is it that I cannot stop my evil thoughts from entering my mind? Why is it, if you truly could look at my thoughts and my heart, that most of you would be aghast at the vileness of them? What am I supposed to do about this apparent contradiction? Am I supposed to ignore it, which is my usual approach? Am I supposed to doubt my salvation? Am I to worry and wonder?

The Bible says we are to repent. That's what our passage is about tonight. Repentance. The Christian life is one of struggle against sin, but we are assured that we will win the battle – when we die. Until then, we wage war against our enemy, never stopping. Jonathan Edwards wrote this resolution at the age of twenty: "Resolved, never to give over, nor in the least to slacken my fight with my corruptions, however unsuccessful I will be." That should be our approach to sin. Let's talk about when, how and why to do this.

The Context of Repentance

Or: *Because we are sinners, we must repent, AND because we are wonderfully blessed, we must repent*

Our text opens with a pericope that isn't a parable. Jesus is discussing some of the current events of the day. In one situation, Pilate had killed some Galileans for extremely light reasons, and then mixed their blood in with the sacrificial blood. Terrible. In the other, a tower had fallen on eighteen people, killing them. We don't read about these events anywhere else, but it's not hard to imagine that things like this happen every day. And they do in our day too, of course. Obviously, the twin towers come to mind.

Here is the question in the minds of the listeners: Did that happen to those people because they were bad? Was that God's judgment on them? It was commonly held that disaster was punishment for sins.³

Now you subliminally think this way too. But you usually think of it in the converse way. Why did you get the promotion, get the house you wanted, get on the team, get the position, get the girl, get the job, get the great deal? You naturally drift toward thinking that you got it because of your worth, because you deserved it. Thus, the person you beat out for whatever it was *didn't* deserve it. You have the scale in your head in which you're always judging and weighing people, meting out punishments and blessings according to character and actions.

Admit it.

But Jesus says that this comparison and judging of others ought not to be done. Why did the tower fall on *those* people? Because God ordained it. Not because they were any worse than you. You should take notice that the time ran out on their lives. Completely unexpectedly. That's a little scary, especially on this side of Sept. 11, 2001.

But Jesus isn't talking to the people the tower fell on. He's talking to people who are safe, happy, healthy. They are standing right there in front of him. There aren't any towers around. Yet he tells them to repent. That's his message. Repent.

When should you repent? Always. In the bad times, and in the good times.⁴ The message for the bad times is that you should cry out to God to save you. We all deserve towers to fall on us. Actual towers or metaphorical towers. You are a sinner. You have

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² My sources are: *Harmony of the Gospels*, J. Calvin; Tim Keller sermons found at redeemer.com and preached to Redeemer Presbyterian Church; John Piper sermon manuscripts found at desiringgod.org; *The Gospel According to John*, DA Carson; *The Gospel According to John*, L Morris; *Exposition of The Gospel According to John*; A. Pink; *John*, Hughes; *Getting to Know John's Gospel*; R Peterson;

³ Leon Morris, *Luke*, p. 242

⁴ "For as often as God chastises anyone under our eyes He is warning us of His judgments, so that each one of us may learn to examine himself and to consider what he also has deserved. And when He spares us for the time, He is inviting us by this kindness and mercy to repentance.... Hence Christ corrects the wicked judgment that makes us enemies to the wretched and afflicted. And at the same time, to drive out the universal self-satisfaction. He teaches first that those who are treated more harshly than the rest are not the worst; for God executes His judgments in the order and manner He thinks best; some are immediately snatched away to punishment,

provoked God's wrath. The fact that towers don't fall on us is absolutely amazing, for we deserve death and destruction. If you are dealing with a falling tower, turn to God now and repent.

Likewise, as per his instruction to these safe and happy people, if things are going well for you the message is the same. Repent. You don't deserve goodness in your life. Romans 2:4 says, "*Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?*" God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance! That you have God's kindness is a testimony to God's graciousness to you. Don't think that you are doing well because of YOU, but realize it is because of HIM that he stays the tower in its place. Jesus' fundamental presupposition is that you don't deserve all the goodness you get. The fact that you get kindness, goodness and preservation should cause you to fall on your knees in thankfulness.

Thus, everything is an opportunity for repentance. When you get fired or get the promotion, repent. When you get engaged or get dumped, repent. When you get a perfect paper or an F, you should repent. When you find a dollar on the street or when you lose your wallet, repent. It's all about repentance all the time. God is sovereignly in control and you are a sinner who needs his mercy.

Let's put it another way. Imagine you were talking with Jesus. "Jesus, did you hear about the World Trade Center and all the people who died?" you ask. "Why did that happen?" Jesus looks at you, he looks into you and says, "Do you think that happened because those people were worse sinners than you? Do you think that couldn't happen to you tomorrow? I tell you that the most important issue is your own soul. If you aren't right with God, you will perish."

God is giving you another chance to repent. Tonight. Here it is. Will you?

Jesus says in verses 3 and 5: "*unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*" He doesn't mean that unless you repent that a Siloam tower will fall on you. Or unless you repent Pilate will get you. And he also doesn't mean that if you do repent, you won't die at all. He is saying that you will face ultimate judgment at some time, and it will come suddenly for you – unless you repent. If you do, you will experience true freedom and joy, life with God. You'll still die, but that won't be the end for you in the least.

Jesus' unrepentant sinners were setting themselves on a course which meant unrepentant death in due course.⁵

The Definition of Repentance

Okay, so if we're supposed to repent in the good and the bad times, what is it that repentance is exactly?

Let me delay that question for just a minute more. Let's see the connection between the first paragraph and the second one in our text today. Jesus has just said, "*unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.*" He now tells a parable of a fig tree, the owner of the field and the worker of the field.

Fig trees took about three years to get established. After that time, the tree was supposed to bear fruit, in fact, in that climate a fig tree would produce fruit for ten months of the year.⁶ The regular function of a fig tree is to bear fruit.

Jesus is making the connection (for there isn't any other one) between repentance and the fig tree. If the figs symbolizes repentance in this story, what is the tree itself? Israel as a nation was often symbolized as a faith tree. This is a picture of people in the covenant community! In other words, this tree was planted in a good location, it had all the advantages the other trees had. It was in a community that was well cared for. Yet still no fruit. Now it was just taking up space that could be used for another tree. The patience of the fruit farmer was coming to an end. He wanted to cut his losses. It was time for judgment.

This isn't really a parable for "outsiders." Of course it is in some ways, because we all need to repent. Everyone. But Jesus is making the point that those who have all the advantages of the covenantal community must display the fruit of a real live tree. This is the proof of life, the fruit that shows the tree is growing and living.

But this tree isn't producing fruit. The worker asks the owner to give him another year. He wants to fertilize the tree and give it more time and more love. But eventually even the worker knows that that time must come to an end. Patience is delimited by time. God's mercy is great, but in the end the day of judgment comes.⁷

God's patience eventuates in judgment if the sinner does not repent. "When the allotted time for one's repentance has expired, God's judgment is finalized. The time God allots is a period of grace, reflecting his mercy toward human beings. God does not merely go the second mile. He will go a third mile and, if need be, a fourth in order to save a sinner. But when his patience is exhausted and God's call for one's repentance has gone unheeded, then judgment is unavoidable."⁸

Okay, so that is the parable.

How do we know if we are a tree that is alive or dead? If we aren't producing figs all the time, how do we know if we are truly unregenerate or if we are just in a funk and need to get out of it? Great question.

Dr. Hannah says that you need to go to the Puritans for the best answers. John Owen really helps. Hannah says here are the: *Characteristics of the Universality of the Dominion of Sin (the unregenerate person):*

1. Perpetual rebellion – continuance of practice
2. A despising of warnings and convictions
3. A contempt for the ways of God
4. A voluntary relinquishing of the means of grace
5. A resolute choice to resist correction

while others rest a long time quietly in idleness and pleasures. He then declares that all the calamities that happen in the world are testimonies to the wrath of God. Whence we gather how great is the destruction that remains for us unless we forstall it." Calvin, Harmony volume 2, p. 96-97

⁵ Morris, p. 242

⁶ Wenham, p. 198

⁷ Kistemeyer, p. 156

⁸ Kistemeyer, p. 156-157

So if you are regenerate, if you are a Christian, you can take these qualities and reverse them. You see, sin doesn't have *universal dominion* over you any longer. Sin is still present, of course, but it is weakened, it is counteracted by Christ, by grace, by repentance. Thus you cannot continually rebel against God. You do not despise warnings and convictions. You do not have a contempt for the ways of God, but you love God and want to please Him. You cannot stand to stay away for very long from prayer, reading the Bible, hearing the Bible preached and taught, from taking the Lord's Supper, from living in community. You long for godly correction for you know that you cannot do it alone and you seek wisdom from others.

Look at these areas. Mull them over. Repent.

Now, if sin doesn't have universal reign in your life, how does it get in there at all? If we don't *have to* sin, why do we so much?

Again here are Hannah's thoughts:

The Method of Falling Into Sin:

1. Sloth and neglect of sin
2. Loss of fear of God
3. A complicated view of the gospel
4. Lack of serious watchfulness of Satan
5. Imitation of bad examples
6. Enjoyment of secret lusts of the heart
7. Lack of private times with God
8. An increase of knowledge without obedience
9. An increase in worldly wisdom
10. A failure to repent

We become lax in our war against sin. We like to go back to our old masters and let them have their time in our hearts and lives. We don't trust that God really is good and has our best in mind. We don't consider how each and every action may or may not glorify Him throughout our days. We have left areas in our lives unexamined, giving ourselves peace where there shouldn't be peace.

Okay, so how can we combat this?

"Sanctification has a double aspect. Its positive side is vivification, the growing and maturing of a new man; its negative side is mortification, the weakening and killing of the old man."⁹

That means that there are things you have to do to kill the sin and to replace it with goodness. You always run away *from* something *to* something else. There are godly things we must do in order to gain victory over sin.

The Characteristics of Positive Acts of Vivification:

1. Constancy of mental reflection on Christ and Calvary
2. Emotional and intellectual striving in the scriptures; or the forgotten art of meditation, memorization and delight
3. Frequent times of intense private seasons of prayer
4. Never neglecting the corporate nature of spirituality
 - a. submission to divinely stated spheres of authority – church leadership and correction, marriage and family, the Lord's Supper and church attendance
 - b. small group interaction and dependence
 - c. reading excellent books from the past

How are these operating in your life? Are you "vivifying" the Spirit? Do you take your reflection of the cross seriously? Some would say that the cross is for "beginning" Christians and that once you mature you have to move on to greater things like discipleship and evangelism. That is absolute foolishness. The cross is what makes us who we are. It redefines everything about us. It is our center point. We never grow out of it.

And we must be a people of the Book. Not necessarily having "a quiet time" every day, or reading the Bible for so long every day, but yes, reading it and thinking about it. Reading the Bible should become a habit in your life, one that you develop so that you miss it if you don't have it. You should strive to read the Bible through over and over again so that you can get the Word into your life. You should desire to talk about it with others, to make time for it in your day, to orient your life around its authority.

But how do we kill the flesh?

Specific Principles for the Mortification of Sin:

1. Consider the dangerous consequences of sin (guilt of sin, loss of peace and strength, grieving the spirit, wounding of Christ)
2. Load the conscious with the guilt of sin (consider God's infinite patience and forbearance)
3. Consider the state of one's self at all times, sin's total depravity and thoughts of one's vileness
4. Trace the particular manifestation of sin to its root
5. Don't hurry to gain relief from you sin
6. Act quickly against the first temptations toward a sin
7. Allow God to speak peace rather than assuming you have it

⁹ JI Packer, *A Quest for Godliness: The Puritan Vision of the Christian Life*, 1990

The Right Weapons in the Mental Struggle with Sin

1. Wholehearted trust
2. Faith
3. Obedience
4. The presence of right thoughts
 - a. God's sovereignty
 - b. The effects of sin
 - c. The love and kindness of God
 - d. The wonder of Calvary
 - e. The reality of indwelling sin

All I'm trying to say is that it seems to me that the two big things in the battle against sin are thoughts/beliefs and habits. You have to spend some serious and good time lining up your thoughts correctly. Sorting them out. Figuring yourself out. Seeing why you do the things you do. Why certain things set you off or cause you to worry or make you depressed or send to you pornography or make you cling to someone or create a desire for positions. That is hard work. Then you have to untangle those messes and get them aligned with God's truth about those issues. Our beliefs lead to our affections which lead to our actions.

And we need to think about our habits. Our habits can shape us. Sometimes we don't have to understand why we're doing something before we do it. Ruthie is learning long division. She tried the "This doesn't make a difference in my life so therefore I shouldn't have to do it" line the other day. That won't fly. She needs to learn it. It will become valuable in the future. We can learn to love our habits. Our affections can be instructed by our bodies, if we chose to do something our minds think is valuable.

That's a huge lead in to actual repentance.

Here are Louis Berkhof's thoughts from his *Systematic Theology*:

The elements of repentance

An intellectual element – There is a change of view, a recognition of sin as involving personal guilt, defilement and helplessness. It is designated in Scripture as *epignosis hamartias* (knowledge of sin), Romans 3:20, 1:32. If this is not accompanied by the following elements, it may manifest itself as fear of punishment, while there is as yet no hatred of sin.

An emotional element – There is a change of feeling, manifesting itself in sorrow for sin committed against a holy and just God, Ps 51:2,10,14. This element of repentance is indicated by the word *metamelomai*. If it is accompanied by the following element, it is a *lupe kata theou* (godly sorrow), but if it is not so accompanied, it is a *lupe tou kosmou* (sorrow of the world), manifesting itself in remorse and despair, 2 Cor 7:9-10; Matt 27:3; Luke 18:23.

A volitional element – There is also a volitional element, consisting in a change of purpose, an inward turning away from sin, and a disposition to seek pardon and cleansing, Ps 51:5,7,10; Jer 25:5. This includes the two other elements, and is therefore the most important aspect of repentance. It is indicated in the Scripture by the word *metanoia*, Acts 2:38, Rom 2:4.¹⁰

I think that Berkhof is trying to also say that, "Confession of sin and reparation of wrongs are *fruits* of repentance."¹¹ Don't think that because you are just sorry for what happened as a result of you sin is the same as repentance. That is worldly sorrow. Non-Christians can be and are sorry for wrong things. Repentance is deeper than that, more cosmic and profound.

J.I. Packer puts it this way: "The New Testament word for repentance means changing one's mind so that one's views, values, goals and ways are changed and one's whole life is lived differently. The change is radical, both inwardly and outwardly; mind and judgment, will and affections, behavior and lifestyle, motives and purposes are all involved. Repenting means starting to live a new life."¹²

The Westminster Confession of Faith says in Chapter XV:

Of Repentance unto Life

I. Repentance unto life is an evangelical grace, the doctrine whereof is to be preached by every minister of the Gospel, as well as that of faith in Christ.

II. By it, a sinner, out of the sight and sense not only of the danger, but also of the filthiness and odiousness of his sins, as contrary to the holy nature, and righteous law of God; and upon the apprehension of His mercy in Christ to such as are penitent, so grieves for, and hates his sins, as to turn from them all unto God, purposing and endeavouring to walk with Him in all the ways of His commandments.

III. Although repentance is not to be rested in, as any satisfaction for sin, or any cause of the pardon thereof, which is the act of God's free grace in Christ, yet it is of such necessity to all sinners, that none may expect pardon without it.

IV. As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.

V. Men ought not to content themselves with a general repentance, but it is every man's duty to endeavor to repent of his particular sins, particularly.

VI. As every man is bound to make private confession of his sins to God, praying for the pardon thereof; upon which, and the forsaking of them, he shall find mercy; so he that scandalizeth his brother, or the Church of Christ, ought to be willing, by a private or public confession and sorrow for his sin, to declare his repentance to those that are offended; who are thereupon to be reconciled to him, and in love to receive him.

And the Shorter Catechism says:

¹⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 486

¹¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 487

¹² JI Packer, *Concise Theology*, p. 162

Q. 87. What is repentance unto life?

A. Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.

The Practice of Repentance

Or: Because we are not Christians, we must repent, AND because we are Christians, we must repent

We've had a little theology lesson today. You may be dazed and confused, but I wanted you to have this information so you can think about what you need to do.

We don't know the end of this parable; it is left hanging. Did the fig tree start to produce figs? Did it remain barren?

So we look at our lives. Do you bear the fruit of repentance or not? I'm not asking you if you are sorry for your sins. Look again at the list of the universality of the reign of sin. Would those describe you? Are you longing for the Word of God? Do you take correction seriously? Are you engaged in the positive acts to live in the Spirit? Are you waging war to kill the flesh? Not just in general but in specifics?

Let's finish with this illustration. Let's cross-reference another parable, that of the Lost Sons in Luke 15. There are the two real aspects of repentance in this story, and they show *the how* of repentance.

When the Prodigal son wakes us, when he comes to his senses (an epistemological act), he sees the true nature of things. He sees that he not only is screwing up his life, but has offended his father. He wants to return, but feels shamed by his sin and rebellion. Yet he returns. He has his speech prepared: "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants." He knows what he deserves. And yet, when he begins to near his home, his father rushes out to meet him, throwing his arms around him and kissing him for his return. The son begins his speech, "Father I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But he isn't allowed to finish. The father hears his repentance and doesn't want any more of it.

That is the first aspect. The son realized his need, his sin, his throwing away his father's goodness. He wasn't just sorry about it, but he got up out of the pigsty and returned home, humiliated. He gave words to his sorrow, and told his father that he had blown it in deep, deep regret.

But here is the other aspect. He had to claim his restoration as well. The father didn't say, "Yes, you're right. I am going to make you a servant here to punish you for forever. I will never forget what you have done." No, he restored him, and gave him back his place and position. Now, think for a moment. The younger son had squandered all that he had. So who now owned everything in the estate? It was all the older brother's. The ring, the robe, the fatted calf – they all belonged to the older brother. In the parable, the older brother gives them up reluctantly and shows himself to also be estranged from grace, from the father.

But in the story of redemption, Jesus is our older brother. All that we have when we are restored to the father is ours because he, though he has every right to keep it all for himself, gives us his ring, his robe, his food. When we come back to him, we are restored – because of Jesus.

What is repentance? It isn't a vague feeling of remorse. It isn't truly being sorry that you hurt someone. It isn't an every-*once-in-awhile* thing. It is seeing things from God's perspective, and changing your thoughts and ways to correspond to that.

All of us need to repent. We are all sinners. We all need grace. The characteristic of the Christian life should be repentance. All the time. We're not like a dogwood tree that flowers for a month of the year. We are described as fig trees, bearing fruit five out of every six months. Regularly we should be finding new areas to repent of. We should be re-repenting of old areas. We should be sad at our lack of progress. We should be amazed that that we are seeing some victories. We should stand in awe at the goodness of Christ.

After all, he is the one who delays our punishment. He wants us to come to repentance. He gives us more time, more food, more nourishment, more love than we deserve.

Looking at him, we bend the knee.

May we be this people.

On true and false peace, by George Whitefield:

"It is a great matter, therefore, to know whether we may speak peace to our heart... I shall endeavor to show you what you must undergo, and what must be wrought in you before you can speak peace to your hearts..."

First, before you can speak peace to your hearts, you must be made to see, made to feel your actual transgressions against the law of God... We are not only to do some things, but we are to do all things, and we are to continue so to do; so that the least deviation from the moral law, according the covenant of works, whether in thought, word or deed, deserves eternal death.... Give me leave to ask you, in the presence of God, was ever the remembrance of your sins grievous to you? Did you ever see that God's wrath might justly fall upon you, on account of your actual transgressions against God? If not, for Jesus Christ's sake, do not call yourselves Christians; you may speak peace to your hearts, but there is no peace.

But further, you may be convinced of your actual sins, but before you can speak peace to your hearts, conviction must go deeper; you must be convinced of the original corruption each of us brings into the world with us.... If we look inwardly, there is pride, malice and revenge. When the sinner is first awakened, the Spirit of God shows that he has no good thing by nature. Did you ever feel and experience this? The indwelling of sin in the heart is the greatest burden of a true Christian. If you have never felt this inward corruption, indeed my dear friends, you may speak peace to your hearts, but I fear, nay I know, there is no peace.

Further, before you can speak peace to your hearts, you must not only be troubled for the sins of your life, and sin of your nature, but likewise for the sins of your best duties and performances. When a poor soul is somewhat awakened by the terrors of the

Lord, then the poor creature, being born under the covenant of works, flies directly to the covenant of works again. And as Adam and Eve hid themselves among the trees of the garden, and sewed fig leaves together to cover their nakedness, so the poor sinner, when awakened, flies to his duties and to his performances, to hide himself from God, and goes to patch up a righteousness of his own. Says, he, 'I will be mighty good now – I will reform – I will do all I can; and then certainly Jesus Christ will have mercy on me.' But before you can speak peace to your heart, you must be brought to see that all your duties – all your righteousness – put all together are so far from recommending you to God, are so far from being any motive and inducement to God to have mercy on your poor soul, that he will see them to be filthy rags, that God hates them and cannot but do away with them, if you bring them to him in order to recommend you to his favor.

I do not know what you think, but I can say that I cannot pray but I sin – I cannot preach to you or any others but I sin – I can do nothing without sin... My repentance wants to be repented of, and my tears to be washed in the precious blood of my dear Savior. Our best duties are as so many splendid sins. Before you can speak peace in your hearts, you must not only repent of your sin, but also of your righteousness. There must be deep conviction before you can be brought out of your self-righteousness. It is the last idol taken out of the heart. Did you ever feel the need of the righteousness and not just the forgiveness of Jesus Christ? And can you say, 'Lord, thou mayst justly damn me for the best duties that I ever did perform'? If you are not thus brought out of self, you may speak peace to yourselves, but yet there is no peace. You must lay hold by faith of the all-sufficient righteousness of Jesus Christ, and then you shall have peace."¹³

¹³ George Whitefield sermon, paraphrased by Tim Keller, and then edited just a bit by me.