

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.<sup>2</sup> Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?<sup>3</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.<sup>4</sup> 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?<sup>5</sup> I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.”

<sup>6</sup> Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any.<sup>7</sup> So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’

<sup>8</sup> “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it.’<sup>9</sup> If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’ (NIV84)

Theme: The Lord is Gracious in his Patience

1. He urges us to repent
2. He gives us time to repent

“Patience is a virtue.” Growing up my Mom said that to me and my brothers again and again. Usually we were getting antsy waiting to go somewhere, or to leave some get-together. Maybe we were frustrated at some of our teammates who weren’t good enough or tried hard enough in our minds. Maybe we were becoming upset with our brothers who were bothering us. “Patience is a virtue” my mom would tell us. To be honest, I didn’t care much for that saying; I found it a bit annoying. Patience wasn’t exactly a quality that I really cared to have, I would have rather have what I wanted when I wanted it than the ability to wait patiently for it to come!

Really, I think its parents who often need patience—they are the ones who have to deal with whining and complaining, the constant fighting and arguing, the interrupting and the not paying attention—and the blatant disobedience. Perhaps my mom said “patience is a virtue” so

often because she was dealing with four boys—she might have been saying that more for herself than for us!

Today we see the patience of our Heavenly Father. And this patience is nothing but grace, for he urges us to repent and turn to him; and he gives us the time to do so.

In our text for today a group of people who were listening to Jesus told him about a horrible massacre. A group of Galilean Jews were offering sacrifices to the Lord, perhaps in the temple in Jerusalem, when Pilate slaughtered them—and so mixed their own blood with the of their sacrifices. Jesus also brought up another horrible event. A tower at Siloam, one of Jerusalem’s water supplies, fell on 18 men and killed them all. We don’t know anything else about either of these events; but these horrible tragedies must have been well-known at the time.

And what do we think when we see such tragedies occur? God has lost his patience. They must have committed some horrible sin, done something absolutely disgusting in order for God to punish them this way. The response of Jesus indicates that the people talking to him thought that those people got what they deserved.

**I tell you, no!** Jesus said. Those people didn’t die in such a horrible way as a direct result of their sin. Sure, tragedies happen in a general sense because of sin. But not every tragedy is a direct result of sin. So we don’t dare claim that this or that tragedy happened because those people committed this or that sin. Or claim that God lost his patience with them and put them to death. At times he may do so, like he did with Korah and his followers who rebelled against him and his servant Moses, which we read about in today’s first lesson. But because we don’t know for sure whether or not God is punishing someone directly for a sin, we don’t accuse those who suffer through tragedies of a horrible sin.

And neither does it mean that those who don’t die in such terrible ways are somehow better than those who did. It’s not as if those who offered sacrifices without being killed were somehow better than the ones Pilate slaughtered. Or that those who weren’t killed by the falling tower were somehow without sin. That would be saying that those whose house was not destroyed by a tornado must have been better than his neighbors whose house was destroyed. No, we’re all

sinners. None of us is better than anyone else. We are all deserving of death. Tragedy should strike us all.

And if tragedy does strike—especially when it happens to good, God-fearing people, we often wonder why. If these people weren't especially wicked, then why did God allow them to happen? Those Jews who were offering sacrifices to God were doing a good thing; and yet God allowed them to be killed. It would be as if a gunman opened fire on us tonight as we were worshiping.

How could God let this happen? How can God allow any tragedy to happen, especially to his own children? Why does God let bad things happen to good people? And so we complain about God—that he is either unjustly punishing us, like a father who has lost his patience, or he simply doesn't care for us and doesn't guard and protect us against the bad things in this life.

Here is a better way to look at tragedies when they strike: They remind us of our own mortality. We are reminded that our own death may be just around the corner. No one is going to escape death. God is going to take us whenever and wherever he chooses. And all of us are sinners who deserve death; and we'll all die in whatever way God chooses. And when we die there will be no second chances—we will face immediate judgment.

And we all know the judgment we deserve. So tragedies will also lead us to repentance. That This is the warning Jesus repeated to us twice today: **Repent or you too will perish.** If we don't repent of our sins, we will receive a worse fate than those who died by the tower or at the hands of Pilate—we won't just die a physical death, we will die forever in hell. The Lord doesn't need to give us any more warnings. But in gracious love, he does just that. Anytime a tragedy strikes—whether it's a personal tragedy or one that is more wide-spread, they can be used as personal reminders that we need to repent.

And so we are filled with remorse and deep-felt sorrow. Guilt over our sins weighs down heavy upon us. This leads us to turn away from our sins. What we used to do, is now detestable in our eyes. What we did before is no longer okay in our own minds, but a horrible, disgusting sin. So we don't defend our actions, or try to justify them before God. No, we confess our sins to our Lord, and know that he forgives us.

And this isn't a one-and-done type of a deal. God doesn't give you one time to repent and if you don't right away than he puts you to death and sends you to hell. Instead he gives you time—time to repent again and again. He gives you chance after chance to do what is right. How many times have you sinned, repented from that sin, and not long later fell into a similar sin, or the exact same one again. And yet the Lord doesn't strike you down, he keeps you alive and gives you another chance to repent.

That's just the thing—think of all the tragedies that have taken place throughout the world during your lifetime. Think of all the people around you who have died. You may be able to think of some instances—a medical condition you had, a car accident, or something of the like where you should have died and could have easily died, but you didn't. You are still here. God has kept you around for a reason. He is giving you another opportunity to repent, more opportunities to hear his Word and grow in your faith, and giving you more times to be able to share the gospel with others who desperately need to hear about their Savior.

To teach this to the people, Jesus used the parable of the fig tree. Man planted a fig tree in the middle of his vineyard. He had the caretaker of the vineyard look after it. After it grew and matured the owner of the vineyard went to the tree to get some figs—but it bore no fruit. For three years he kept coming to this tree for figs but for three straight years it bore no fruit.

So he told the caretaker to cut it down—why should it waste the soil. But the caretaker pleaded for the fig tree. He said, give me one more year—let me dig around it and fertilize it; and if it bears fruit—great, but if not, then you can cut it down.

The owner of the vineyard in this parable is the Lord. Jesus is the caretaker. The vineyard is the Church, his true believers who produce fruit through faith in him. The fig tree represents each and every one of us as individual Christians. The Lord comes to us looking for good fruit—he looks for us to do what pleases him, for obedience to his Word, for us to show love to him and to others. But he often does see too many good works; we often don't produce the fruit that he desires, and some of the fruit that we do produce looks good on the outside, but is rotten inside because it isn't done purely out of love and thanks to him. And so we ought to be cut down.

But Jesus pleads our case. He intercedes for us to the Father, and asks for more time. He wants to give us more time to repent, to turn from our sins and to produce fruit in keeping with that repentance. In this way, the Lord doesn't condemn us right away, but he gives us time to repent and be saved. As Paul wrote in Romans 8, **Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us.**

We may refer to our lives here on earth as “our Time of Grace.” Our lives are the opportunities we have to hear God's grace, to believe God's grace, to repent and receive forgiveness through God's grace, to share God's grace, and through God's grace produce good fruit. The Lord doesn't treat us as our sins deserve, but he extends our time of grace, our time here on earth so that we may believe in him and thus be saved and as a result produce good fruit.

The tragedies that we face cause us to pause and think about our own death. We are reminded of the wages of our sins and the damnation they deserve. When tragedies strike, then, it is good to get into the means of grace—his gospel in Word and Sacraments. Read the Word and be reminded of the love and mercy of God and the sacrifice of his Son. Recall your baptisms. That through it the Holy Spirit washed away your sins made you his own dear child. Through our baptisms we have been crucified with Christ and clothed in garment of his righteousness. Receive Christ's true body and blood in, with, and under, the bread and the wine in the Lord's Supper. Receive it on a regular basis—whenever you get the chance. For through it, you have the forgiveness of sins. You receive the very thing Christ gave up and poured out to pay for you sins.

“Patience is a virtue.” I may have not appreciated that saying growing up; but it is true—for all people. It is also a virtue of the Lord; a gracious virtue, through which he gives us time to repent and believe, and thus be saved. As Peter says in his first letter, **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.** Amen.