

# PARABLES | The Barren Tree

Rob Rogers      March 5, 2023

## Introduction

In 1875, William Ernest Henley, a staunch atheist, defiantly penned these words from his hospital bed...

*"In the fell clutch of circumstance,  
I have not winced nor cried aloud  
Under the bludgeonings of chance  
My head is bloody, but **unbowed**..."*

*...It matters not how strait the gate,  
How charged with punishments the scroll,  
I am the master of my fate,  
I am the captain of my soul."<sup>1</sup>  
~ William Ernest Henley "Invictus"*

Henley says, "I don't care about the narrow road... I don't care about God's laws and warnings... I don't care about heaven and hell. I don't care about the consequences I might face one day. No matter what, I will not submit. I'm in charge of my life and I will not bow. I will not repent.

To Henley, along with a host of modern secular people today, *the idea of repentance is utterly absurd*. One poet wrote that repentance is only for weak people.

But even within the church, when we talk about the idea of repentance there is often and limited understanding of what repentance entails.

In fact, the first of Luther's 95 Theses that he nailed to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral in 1517 says...

*"Our Lord and Master Jesus Christ willed the **entire life**  
of believers to be one of **repentance**."<sup>2</sup>  
~ Martin Luther*

## Understanding repentance

When you look into the words and teachings of Jesus... the idea that repentance is only the way into Christianity, or that it is only for the weak, or that repentance is ONLY to the broken All of a sudden you realize that the way we've understood repentance is either dead wrong or painfully incomplete.

### Luke 13:1-9

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

<sup>1</sup> William Ernest Henley. *In Hospital* (Read Books Ltd, Feb 13, 2015)

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Keller. *Prayer: Experiencing Awe and Intimacy with God* (Penguin, Nov 4, 2014) p. 208

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>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.”

I’m going to deal in depth with this first section that leads into the parable — we’ll get to the fig tree a bit later in the message.

### ***What in the world is happening here?***

A group of people come up to Jesus, and they start telling him about these awful tragedies that everyone in that region would have known about, *“There’re awful things happening to people, Pilate killed these Galileans while they were offering sacrifices... and this tower... a bunch of people were spared, but it killed 18 people.”*

**Then they ask the question we all ask when something like this happens... “Why? Why those people and not others? Surely, they offended God in some way... their sin must have been worse than everyone else’s. Is that why they died?”**

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## **Why is this happening to me?**

### **This is human nature to a degree...**

1. When **something bad** happens to us or when hardship breaks into our life, often times our first reaction is to ask, *“Why is this happening to me!? What did I do to deserve this? Other people aren’t having to go through this? Am I being punished?”*
2. Or on the other end of the pendulum, if **something good** happens, and our circumstances drastically improve all of a sudden, our instinct is to say, *“This is happening to me, and not to other people, because I’m a good person. I’ve paid my dues, and I’m just getting what I’ve earned. My good character is paying off.”*

***And either way, we infer from our circumstances good or bad, that we are either good or bad.***

And Jesus takes both of these ideas and says in verses 3 and 5, and says, “Wrong.”  
*Did these people die because they were worse sinners than other people?*

### **Luke 13:5**

**No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”**

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## **What is Jesus saying?**

What this sounds like is... *“if you don’t repent, a big tower is going to fall on you and your friends. So repent!”* But is that what Jesus saying? Yes... and no. ***So, what is He saying?***

First, Jesus tells us that *when you see tragedy, when horrible things happen in the world... don't assume "Those people deserved it and you don't." Don't justify tragedy with the motive of self-preservation.*

***Instead do what — Repent.***

**Objection:** *Rob, they didn't do anything wrong... why should they repent? They're just asking a question!*

- You're right. And this is where Jesus brings clarity to the concept of repentance for us.

***Because while repentance is "turning away from sin and turning back toward God," repentance is also coming into alignment with God, and agreeing with God about Himself, about you, about the world.***

**Repentance, according to Jesus,  
is not just turning away from the bad things we do,  
but also the wrong beliefs we hold.**

- It's not just doing away with sinful habits; it's bringing our beliefs under the Lordship of Christ.
- And often our habits won't change until we repent of our wrong beliefs!

**PERSONAL:** Being an addict for years of my life... that's what I believed about myself — I am an addict. And it wasn't until Christ got a hold of my life and I began to believe that *my actions don't dictate my identity. Christ alone determines who I am.*

He says, "You are a son of the Most High! A child of the Almighty! — I'm free from the schemes of the devil! I'm the very righteousness of Christ, Holy, blameless, chosen, and empowered for Kingdom purpose!"

You know what happened after that? I stopped doing drugs. Why? Because there was repentance in my beliefs! In my thinking! And the moment I began to agree with God about what He says about me, my actions began to change.

*Repentance is far more than just turning away from wrong behavior and moving toward God — is doing away with your wrong beliefs about yourself, and trusting in what He says, no matter how you feel.*

**Mark 1:15**

*"...the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."*

Jesus sends out the twelve two by two, with what message?

**Mark 6:12**

*"...that people should repent."*

Peter preaches the very first sermon after the ascension of Jesus and the baptism of the Holy Spirit. At the end of the message, it says that all those who were gathered...

**Acts 2:37**

*...they were cut to the heart, and said to Peter and the rest of the apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" <sup>38</sup> And Peter said to them, "Repent..."*

The apostle Paul says at the Areopagus...

### **Acts 17:30**

The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now He commands all people everywhere to repent...

- ***This is why Luther says, “All of life is repentance.”***
- *God will not do what He wants to do in you or through you unless you repent.*
- Repentance is central to life itself.

*What the Bible tells us is that **there is no action that requires more courage or produces more goodness in your life or in the world than repentance** – Nothing.*

**Jesus says in this passage, “Are you joyful? Repent. Are you angry? Repent. Are you confused? Repent. Are you grateful? Are you prideful? Repent! Are you worried? Repent!**

We have to expand our understanding of repentance... because most people think repentance is just a general feeling of shame, remorse, guilt or self-hatred, and that you're just supposed to wallow in it for a while and somehow that's pleasing to God.

- Just beat yourself up about things in every circumstance. That is not repentance. That's self-hatred. And that is NOT going to lead to anything good in the world and that definitely is NOT what Jesus means when He says “repent.”

***To repent, there must be a realigning, an agreeing with God about Two Realities.***

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## **Sin**

Some people think power is the biggest human problem. Others think greed is. Others believe oppression is the biggest human problem. Some people believe religion is the problem. Granted, while some are more problematic and destructive than others — **the common thread** in every single one of these examples is the existence of **sin!** The pervasiveness of sin in the human heart. Sin is an “out-for-number-one, radical self-centeredness that permeates your thoughts, actions, motives, relationships, desires, and appetites.

**Personal:** One of our girls when they were little, whenever we'd tell her to pick up her toys or clean her room... she'd look at us and with all the attitude and defiance she could muster say, *“I belong to my own self. I don't have to listen.”*

It's William Henley saying... *“I'm not bowing my head, I'm the master of my fate, the captain of my soul.”*

- I'm on the throne of my life, no one else. I call the shots. I'm in charge. I decide what's right and wrong, what is good and evil.
- Sin twists every single thing that God designed for good and leverages it for our self-exaltation, self-interest, self-preservation, and self-justification. As a result, every single one of us **is just like the fruitless fig tree that deserves to be cut down.**

### **Romans 3:23**

**For all have sinned** and fall short of the glory of God.

### **Romans 6:23**

For the wages of sin is **death...**

If you can grasp that and wrap your head around it... you're only a part of the way toward genuine repentance. It's not enough just to stop there... and it's actually dangerous to stop there.

*There is a second component that's needed for genuine repentance.*

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## Grace

You have to understand that *God is committed to rescuing you from what you actually deserve.*

**Look at the parable:** There is a man who owns a fig tree, and that fig tree isn't a very good one — it doesn't have any figs! It's been a figless fig tree for three years. So the owner is saying, *get rid of it.*

Here comes the vinedresser. The caretaker is committed to making this tree fruitful! The caretaker begs and says, "Oh, give me one more year! I will dig around it. I will fertilize it. I will irrigate it. I will create all the conditions necessary for this tree to bear fruit."

***In the parable, you and I are the tree. The tree represents all of us...***

- The fruit is what's born out of our lives as the result of repentance.
- And then there is one that's saying, *"I know they deserve to be cut down. I know they're empty and fruitless right now — but give me time, let me create the conditions through which they will bear fruit. I know they deserve to be cut down, but I don't want to give them what they deserve. I want to bring them to repentance and save them from what they deserve."*
  - ***Who is caretaker? It's Jesus.*** Jesus is tilling up the soil, adding in the fertilizer and doing all the work in order to create the conditions through which you would come to repentance. Your job as the tree is to simply to cooperate with what the caretaker is doing!

***If you only know the first part, "I deserve to be cut down..." without seeing the second part — you'll live in self-hatred and toxic-shame.***

***If you only know the second part without the first part, you'll think, "Of course God will help me out... I am pretty great after all..."***

- *If you just know the bad news without the good news, you're not agreeing with God... about your value.*
- *If you just know the good news without the bad news, you can't agree with God about your unworthiness — and you've cheapened God's grace because you think, "I deserve to be loved and adored like this — there's no need for repentance."*

***When you see both together...***

- You see your sin and recognize that you are entitled to nothing — that you and I, like barren trees, deserve to be cut down!
- AND YET... you have a caretaker that has laid down His very life for you because you are chosen, you are cherished, you are adored, and loved beyond anything you can fathom or comprehend. You are invaluable to Him.
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***It's those two realities together that bring genuine repentance to life in you.***

**That's repentance.  
It's the bad news of sin,  
covered with the good news of grace.**

- It's the prodigal son coming home to a Father that runs to meet him and says, "There's no way you're coming back as a servant... you're my son. Bring the Robe. Kill the fatted calf, put sandals on His feet and the ring on his finger. My son was dead and now He's alive!"
- ***Our sinfulness — colliding with God's extravagant grace — that's repentance.***

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## **Practically — how do we live a lifestyle of continual repentance?**

Whether conscious or subconscious level, **in all of us there is some expectation that good things should come our way**, "*I've paid my dues, I've made the sacrifices, I've invested the time. I cried the tears, I've toiled, I've labored... I deserve the good things in my life.*"

**PROBLEM:** If that's your reaction *and you don't process it through the lens of the gospel* — do you realize what you're doing?

- ***You're robbing God of His glory and killing the joy of receiving the good things God is giving you.***

***But if instead, if you'll agree with God*** and say, "*In reality, I'm entitled to nothing. I don't deserve the life that I've been given, no matter what hardships I face, there is so much good and all the good in my life is not because of me... it's because of HIM. It's His goodness, not mine. It's all by His sheer, miraculous, unfathomable, extravagant, beautiful grace...*" **That's repentance. You're reminding your heart of what's true.**

**On the other hand, when suffering or hardship comes into your life...** instead of saying "*I don't deserve this! Why is this happening to me! I'm a good person...*"

- ***Repentance enables you to say***, "*You know what, I deserve a whole lot worse than this... But God! Who is rich in mercy, even when I was dead in my trespasses, made me alive together with Him.*"

The Apostle Paul says:

### **1 Corinthians 15:9-10**

For I am the **least** of the apostles, **unworthy** to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by **the grace of God I am what I am**, and His grace toward me was not in vain.

***"I'm not wasting God's grace on me thinking more highly of myself than I should!  
I'm nothing — but God! And I will not waste what He's given me!"***

**PERSONAL:** A few months back in a Sunday service, the presence of God was so tangible, and I had a clear sense of God telling me, "Rob, scrap your plans. I want to do something different today." And church — I didn't listen. I was wrestling with the Lord, and in my mind I'm giving all the excuses — and in the end I did not loosen my grip.

A few days later, Logan and I were at lunch with some friends that were in from out of town. I confessed to them, "Guys, I didn't listen to the Lord. I was disobedient. I'm confessing, and I'm

repenting of my sin. And the next time the Lord says to ‘Let Go,’ I’m letting go.”  
And God did something so beautiful 3 weeks ago! I’m so grateful He’s a God of second chances.  
He is a God of extravagant grace.

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## Don’t wait

***There is one last very important point in this parable.***

The owner says, “*It’s been three years and it’s not fruitful. Cut it down. It’s not beneficial. It’s just taking up space. Cut it down.*” Jesus says, “give me another year. One more year.”

Here’s what this means — ***if you sense God working on your heart now, don’t wait. Repent now.*** And here’s why...

- If you say, “*I’ll repent later... I’ll repent next time...*” you know what this parable tells you? *There might not be a next time. If you resist what He’s doing now, there might not be a later.*

What Jesus tells us here is that God is under NO obligation to help you later. Jesus is under no obligation to keep tilling the soil of your heart. He’s under no obligation to continue creating the conditions that might bring you to repentance. ***If He’s working on you now, repent now!***

- No matter how many times you should have repented before, no matter how late in life it is, no matter how dark the sin — *the invitation from Jesus to you today is if you’ll repent now, you’ll come to life!* You’ll bear fruit! You’ll be cleansed, forgiven, set free! The burden you’ve been carrying will be lifted.

*Maybe for you, like me, you’ve heard God telling you to do something small or something big... and you haven’t listened. **The invitation of God to you today is Repent.***

*Maybe you’ve held onto beliefs about other people or yourself... you’ve believed you’re just an addict... you’ll always be dealing with these same problems and that’s just your lot in life — and you’ll never be able to change. **Repent. God has something very different to say about you.***

*Maybe you’ve believed that you’re unlovable. Undesirable. Unacceptable. Or that you’re defective in some way. God has very different things to say about you, and *today you need to bring those wrong beliefs into alignment with what God has to say about you.**

*Maybe you’ve been stuck in some pattern of sin that you know you need to turn away from —and turn back toward God — but you’re terrified that if you bring it to God, He’ll reject you. Jesus says,*

**John 6:37**

***...whoever comes to Me I will never cast out.***

*Maybe today you know you need to surrender your life to Jesus again or for the very first time. You’ve been at the center of your life, on the throne of your life, and it’s lead to so much pain, and disappointment. **Repent and invite Jesus to be the center of your life today.***

**The Lord wants to clean house today. Will you let Him?**

**Revival begins with repentance.**

300 years after the Invictus poem was penned by Henley... Dorothea Day responded with a poem:

*“I have no fear, though strait the gate,  
He cleared from punishment the scroll.  
Christ is the Master of my fate,  
Christ is the Captain of my soul.”<sup>3</sup>*  
~ Dorothea Day, “My Captain”

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## Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever told yourself that you were in charge of your own life? How did things turn out?
2. Discuss Martin Luther’s statement, “*Lord and Master Jesus Christ willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*”
3. When something bad has happened in your life, have you asked, “Why me?” What was the answer you received? What about if something good has happened in your life. Do you still ask, “Why me?” Why or why not?
4. What do these questions have to do with **repentance**?
5. Have you had wrong beliefs about yourself? What does that say about your relationship with God? How do you bring those wrong beliefs into alignment with what God says about you?
6. Do you have anything that you need to repent of *today*?

## NOTES

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<sup>3</sup> Hazel Fellerman. *The Best Loved Poems of the American People* (Doubleday, 1936) p.73