

Luke 12:54 - 13:9 // Four excuses that Jesus destroys

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[0 : 00] The reading is from Luke chapter 12, beginning at verse 54, which can be found on page 1046 of the church.

And it does. And when the south wind blows, you say, it's going to be hot. And it is. Hypocrites, you don't know how to interpret the appearance of the earth and the sky.

How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time? Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? As you're going with your adversary to the magistrate, try hard to be reconciled on the way.

Or your adversary may drag you off to the judge and the judge turn you over to the officer and the officer throw you into prison. I tell you, you will not get out until you have paid the last penny. Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

[1 : 23] Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way? I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Or those 18 who died when the tar and 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. Then he told this parable. A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard.

So when he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. 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? Sir, the man replied, Leave it alone for one more year, And I'll dig round it and fertilise it.

[2 : 26] If it bears fruit next year, fine. If not, then cut it down. This is the word of the Lord. Thanks for reading, Catherine.

And as Joanne reminded us, we need those big ears to listen as we come to hear what God has to say to us. We need our Bibles open. And we need to ask God for his help as we come to think about what he might be saying to us.

So let's pray. Those who have ears, let them hear. Lord God, we thank you for the kindness of your warnings in your word.

And as we listen now, would you open the eyes of our hearts, open the eyes of our minds. Please impress on our hearts the urgency of repentance.

At the same time, please remind us of the depth of your grace in Jesus. Give us ears to hear, soft hearts to respond, and a willingness to turn to you.

[3 : 49] For his name's sake. Amen. Well, Jesus doesn't beat around the bush, does he? Listen again to Luke chapter 13, verse 3.

And then he repeats it in verse 5. Unless you repent, you too will all perish.

There it is in black and white. Repent or perish. That's the ultimatum. No softening, no sugarcoating. He's speaking the truth.

He's shocking us away. He's scaring the living daylights out of us because he loves us too much not to. And notice, he's not just saying, believe in me.

He's saying, repent. You can't really believe without repenting. And you can't really repent without putting your trust in him.

[4 : 48] Imagine that you're on a plane and it's going down. And it's not enough to believe that the parachute works. You've got to put it on. You've got to make that leap of faith and put your trust in the parachute.

You've got to jump. You've got to act. That's a bit like repentance. It's a word that we don't hear today too much outside of church. Sounds old-fashioned. Embarrassing even.

Like a bit of a street preacher with a sandwich board and a megaphone. But we can't gloss over it. Because if you skip repentance, you miss the gospel.

John the Baptist preached it. Jesus proclaimed it at the outset of his ministry. After the resurrection, he reminded his disciples, Repentance for the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all those around us.

Early in Luke, Jesus said, I've not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

Repentance is simple to define, but profoundly life-changing.

[6 : 01] A 180-degree U-turn. So why don't we talk more about it? Why don't we point people to Jesus at work, at school, in the gym?

Why don't we more often steer ordinary conversations towards the gospel? Why don't we call people to repent and believe?

Fear. Fear. Fear. Fear of rejection. Fear of ridicule. Fear of awkwardness. Fear of being thought of as that person.

We imagine the worst. And of course, sometimes people do push back. Often they don't. Penn Jillette, the atheist magician from Penn and Teller, once said this.

If you believe that there's a heaven and a hell and people could be going to hell, how much do you have to hate that person not to tell them?

[7 : 05] I mean, if I believe beyond a shadow of a doubt that a truck was coming at you and you didn't see it, at some point I'd step in and tackle you. This is more important than that. That's an atheist speaking.

Sometimes our fear of what people think is bigger than the reality. But you know, whether people listen or not, the loving thing for us today is warn them.

Now Luke's writing this gospel so Theophilus and people like us can be certain. Jesus has risen. Forgiveness is real.

And there is resistance. Resistance. Resistance is real too. People back then, just like today, make excuses. They delay.

They rationalize. They compare themselves to others. They assume that they've got plenty of time. They bury their heads in the sand. And in this passage, Jesus exposes those excuses.

[8 : 10] He exposes those excuses. Four ways we avoid repentance. And his message is clear. These excuses won't stand.

No hiding. No delaying. No comparing to others. No pretending it won't happen. His warning is simple. Repent or perish. So let's take a look at these excuses.

And as we do so, let's think, how do they show up in our world around us? And perhaps more importantly, how do we recognize them in our own hearts?

So excuse number one. I didn't know. I didn't know I needed to change. Now Jesus isn't being polite here. Listen to verse 54. When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say, it's going to rain.

And it does. You know how to interpret the sky. Hypocrites. How is it that you don't know how to interpret this present time?

[9 : 15] In other words, this isn't an intelligence problem. You're not confused. You're avoiding. You know how to read the small things.

But you won't face the big thing, the most important thing of all. Because the truth is, we're actually very good at reading signs. We track financial forecasts.

We watch the property market. We analyze football stats for our fantasy teams. Some of us track our step count, our sleep score, and screen time like we're running a clinical trial on ourselves.

Others keep a close eye on what's trending. Who's up? Who's canceled? What's gone viral? When it comes to the weather in Glasgow, you don't even need an app. It's raining.

And if it is sunny and it hits the heights of 14 degrees, see, the whole city acts like we're on holiday. Costa del Clyde. We know how to read the signs.

[10 : 18] Just not the important ones. Not the ones that matter. So Jesus asks, if you can read the weather, if you can analyze the trivial, why can't you read the times you're living in?

Because Luke's gospel has been laying out the evidence. Who Jesus is, his authority, his power to forgive, his miracles, his call for us to turn back to God.

The evidence isn't missing. The question is whether we're willing to face what it means for us.

Rebecca Pippert tells a story from her student days in Barcelona.

One evening she was talking to an Irish girl called Mary. And Mary asked her quite bluntly, Rebecca, how can you be an intelligent person and still be a Christian? Isn't that intellectual suicide?

Believing without evidence. Rebecca replied, Mary, I actually agree with you. I don't understand either how somebody could believe blindly.

[11:23] But I'm also puzzled about something else. I don't understand how someone can reject Christianity without first looking at the investigating the evidence for themselves.

That's the issue here. Not a lack of evidence. A lack of looking. A lack of seriously considering the claims of Jesus for yourself. Because deep down, we already know that something's not right.

The world isn't the way it's supposed to be. Death isn't normal. Injustice isn't right. And you know, if we're honest, we know that something's wrong with us too.

Our selfishness. Our pride. The way we hurt people very often. The way we center life on ourselves.

You don't need a theology degree to see that. So when we say, I didn't know I needed to change. Jesus says, you did know.

[12:28] You just didn't want to act on it. Burying your head in the sand is an innocence. It's avoidance.

It's the ostrich strategy. If I don't look at it, if I don't think about it, if I just carry on, maybe it will go away. But living as if there is no God does not make God disappear.

And a good and loving God doesn't leave us without warning. The spiritual weather is clear. The signs are there.

The wind is picking up. Judgment is coming. So this excuse won't stand. I didn't know. Jesus says, yes, you did.

Excuse number two. I'll sort it later. It won't be that bad. So then Jesus goes further. Verse 57.

[13:27] Why don't you judge for yourselves what is right? In other words, don't drift. Think. Make a call. And then he gives a picture. You're on the way to court.

You know you're guilty. You know how this is going to end. So what do you do? You settle before you get there. Because once you're standing before the judge, it's too late.

It's too late to negotiate. Now, I'm not insinuating anything here, but maybe you've had something like that. Let's say you're caught speeding on the motorway.

The camera flashes. A few weeks later, the envelope drops through your letterbox. You don't say, I'll just ignore that. You take the speed awareness course.

Because delay only makes it worse. Points on the license. Insurance premium through the roof. Jesus' point is simple. Delay is not neutral.

[14:25] Delay risks disaster. Delay risks paying what you can't afford to pay. This is the ostrich again. Not saying the court isn't coming.

Not pretending you're innocent. Just head in the sand. Later. I'll think about it. I'll come back to Christ when life settles down.

When I'm done living life the way I want to live. But Jesus says, you're already on the way to court. And here's the extraordinary thing.

Jesus isn't just warning about judgment. He's offering you an out-of-court settlement. He's saying, I'll take your place. I'll pay what you cannot pay.

On the night before the cross he said, this is my blood poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. There is a way for this not to end with you paying the full price.

[15:31] But the way is not delay. The way is putting your trust in Jesus' sacrifice. Because if you keep saying later, later, there comes a point when later runs out, when later becomes too late.

And when God asks, what will you give for the life you've lived? The only life you'll have to offer is your own. That's the tragedy of spiritual procrastination.

Not that we don't know, but that we assume that we're in control of the timing. So let me ask you, if you're here and you're exploring the Christian faith, have you considered Jesus properly for yourself?

Have you given him a fair hearing? The comedian Lee Mack once said something very honest on BBC Radio 4's Desert Island Discs.

Guests get to choose what songs they take to the island. They also get given a Bible always. And Lee Mack said, I think it's quite strange that people like myself in their 40s are quite happy to dismiss the Bible.

[16:49] But I've never read it. If an alien came down and said, what's life all about? And you say, well there's a book that claims to tell you. And they say, wow, what does it say?

What's it like? And you say, I don't know, I've never read it. That would be quite odd, wouldn't it? He said, if I'm stuck on an island, I'd finally read it and make up my mind for myself.

And our passage in Luke says, why wait for the desert island? Why wait for the crisis? Why wait until it's too late? Jesus says, judge for yourself what is right.

Make the call while you're still on the way. Take the out-of-court settlement at the cross. Excuse number three. I'm not as bad as them.

Ah yes, the classic excuse. When we don't want to face God, we compare ourselves to other people. We shift the spotlight. We tell ourselves, at least I'm doing better than someone else over there.

[17:57] Remember the ostrich? The head in the sand? Avoiding the inevitable? Well this is a different kind of avoidance. Not ignoring the danger this time, but reassuring yourself that you are safe by pointing at someone else.

That's what's happening here. Some people come to Jesus with the latest news. Chapter 13, verse 1. Some Galileans have been slaughtered by Pilate.

Their blood mixed with their sacrifices. Massacre in the capital. Shocking scenes. Brutal. And the question behind it is, were they worse people?

Did they somehow deserve it? It's an instinct we all recognize. Call it karma. Call it moral relativism. This is the folk religion of the karma chameleon. There's a karma chameleon. Apologies to Culture Club for that. Blend in.

[19:01] Keep your head down. Don't stand out. And you'll be just fine. Bad things happen to bad people. Good things happen to better people. And if my life hasn't fallen apart, then I must be doing okay.

It's a deeply embedded assumption in our culture. Blend in. Not as bad as them. They got what they deserved. So I'm safe.

Right? Wrong. Wrong. Verse 2. Jesus says, Do you think they were worse sinners than all the others? I tell you no. But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

He brings up another headline. A tower in Siloam collapsed. 18 people killed. An accident. No villain. No obvious cause. Again, the question, were they more guilty than everyone else?

Jesus says, No, of course not. But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Do you see what he's doing?

[20:06] He refuses the comparison. They weren't worse. And you aren't any better. The lesson is not, why them?

The lesson is, why not me? Because if we compare ourselves to other people, we'll always find someone to feel better than.

But the comparison game won't save you. God's standard isn't other people. It's his own holiness. And by that standard, we've all fallen short.

So here's the real question. If they weren't worse than you, why are you still here? Why have you been spared?

And the answer here is time. Not proof that you're better. Grace. Another year. Another month.

[21:10] Another day. Not because you deserve it somehow, but because you might have the chance to repent. That's the warning. And that's the mercy.

Because the good news is, repentance isn't God saying, fix yourself. It's God saying, I will give you a new life.

I heard a story about a man dying of heart disease. A story I heard recently. A true story. Years of heavy drinking, chain smoking, his body failing.

Then he received a heart transplant, a second chance. I suppose he could have gone back to the same old life, but he didn't. Everything changed.

He got fit. He ran marathons, a completely different direction for his life. Ran marathons, raising money for the heart unit in gratitude for the motorcyclist who had died so that he could live.

[22 : 17] That's what repentance looks like. Not trying harder. Receiving a new heart. When someone knows they've been given life like that, how could they go back?

Someone died so you can live. Jesus died so you can live. So everything begins to change.

New desires, new priorities, a life shaped by gratitude. And when the heart changes like that, it shows it. It begins to bear fruit. And that's the question Jesus wants us to face next.

If you've been given time, if you've been spared, if God is giving you another opportunity, what is growing in your life? Because one of the easiest excuses we have is to think, I've got time.

I've got time. That's exactly the issue Jesus addresses in the story he tells next. Excuse number four. It will never really happen.

[23 : 30] This is the final excuse. You've been given time. You've been given opportunity. And so it's easy to tell yourself, it won't come to that, will it? Judgment. Really.

Life just carries on. The sun comes up. Work, study. School runs, holidays, Netflix. Nothing dramatic.

And so a thought begins to creep in. If judgment was real, surely something would have happened by now. But Jesus tells a story. A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard.

For three years, he came looking for fruit. Nothing. So he said, cut it down. Why should it use up the soil? But the gardener replied, leave it alone for one more year.

I'll dig around it. I'll fertilize it. If it bears fruit, fine. If not, then cut it down. Jesus is saying, we are living on borrowed time.

[24 : 37] God's patience is real, but it's not endless. God's patience isn't permission. It's a window. It's a window that could close at any moment.

Now, if you've been following Luke since the beginning, this might sound familiar. So flip back to chapter 3, page 1029. I think it was probably August that we were in chapter 3, so it might not be that familiar.

But chapter 3, page 1029, chapter 3, verse 8. John the Baptist warned, produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And then verse 9, the axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

The warning has always been there. The axe is ready, and now here is Jesus, the gardener, saying, give me one more year. Give me another year. Do you see the mercy?

[25 : 54] It's a stay of execution. There's a story that John Piper tells about the Niagara Falls, and in winter, chunks of ice float down the river towards the falls.

A vulture lands on the ice to feed on the scraps. It's not a stupid bird. It can fly. It can see the danger, but as the ice drifts closer, it assumes I can get away when I need to.

So it keeps feeding, drifting, getting closer. What it doesn't notice is the cold. Slowly, its talons freeze into the ice, still feeding, still drifting, still thinking, I've got time.

Until the roar gets deafeningly loud and it finally tries to fly, it can't. Not because it wouldn't leave, but because now it can't.

That's what Jesus is warning against. Not open rebellion, quiet delay, drifting through life, putting him off.

[27 : 03] You know, there comes a point when repentance isn't refused. It's simply too late. It's no longer possible. And none of us, none of us know when that day will come for us.

But don't miss the most astonishing part of the fig tree parable. The gardener, leave it one more year. God doesn't just wait.

He works. He gets his hands dirty. He digs around the roots. He fertilizes the soil. He gives the tree every chance to bear fruit. That's what Jesus is doing.

every time his words confront you, every time your conscience stirs, every time your life is shaken, that's the gardener digging, working the soil of your heart.

And so that raises a deeper question for us. Will you let him? Will you let Jesus get to the roots?

[28 : 08] Will you let him deal with the sin that you've been harboring? The habit that you wouldn't name? The resentment that you hold on to?

The unforgiveness that you refuse to release? The shame that you keep buried? Will you let Jesus loosen the grip of the things of the world that have entangled themselves around your heart?

