

Immediately following the terrible earthquake in Haiti a few weeks ago, the evangelist, Pat Robertson announced that the earthquake was caused by a pact the Haitians made with the devil two hundred years ago when they asked the Devil to help them get rid of the French colonialists.

After Katrina hit New Orleans and devastated that region of the Gulf coast, another evangelist called it God's judgment on the sins of New Orleans.

After the towers fell in New York, Pat Robertson said it was God's judgment on the homosexuals and liberals in our country. God killed three thousand people as a judgment on our nation.

I know that knowing the Bible as you do, and the God revealed in the Bible, all of you would say that the idea of God causing these disasters as punishment is ludicrous. Jesus says in today's passage after a tower had fallen in the middle of Jerusalem killing eighteen people, the idea that these 18 were worse than anyone else and that God chose to kill them—Jesus said such thinking is wrong.

Accidents happen in construction, natural events happen, crazy people harm innocent people. These are not God's judgment. The rain falls on the just and the unjust alike.

The true nature of God is revealed in the parable of the fig tree at the end of this passage. The owner of the vineyard decides to throw out an unproductive fig tree. A human being might decide that the tree needs to be thrown out for not producing fruit. Yet God the Gardener says no, give it another year and I will nurture it more. When we do not produce for God it is God's nature, over and over again, to try harder to nurture us to produce. God does not throw us out, God tries over and over again to nurture us.

That is the nature of God, not retribution, but nurturing.

Still, Jesus says something in this passage that seems to contradict this on-going nurture of God, this endless forgiveness. Jesus says, "The tower falling is not God's judgment on the workers, but unless you repent you too will perish."

American evangelical Christianity has confused us by misrepresenting the actual meaning of the word, "repent." We have been taught that the word "repent" means confessing and stopping our personal sins. Yet consistently when Jesus says the word "repent" he means something else. By repent means to change our way of thinking. Jesus calls us to repent, that is reform our thinking or we will perish. By perish Jesus is not speaking of physical death but the internal death of spirit. He is telling us to change our way of seeing God as retributive for this leads to spiritual death. He is telling us to change our way of seeing crises as judgments of God. Such thinking leads to spiritual death as we judge others and speculate how they must have been evil for bad things to happen to them.

Such thinking is spiritual death. And maybe most of all it is spiritual death when we judge ourselves and things that have happened in our lives as God's judgment upon us.

We perish inside when we think of God as a God of retribution rather than a loving gardener who each year decides to try harder to nurture us, never throw us out of the garden.

At the table spread before us there is no judgment. At the table God feeds us, nurtures us, so that we might get healthy and produce.

Brothers and sisters come to the nurturing table where you can repent of attributing to God your judgmental thoughts. Repent of the wrongful way of judgment that leads you to spiritual death.