

# Why Can't You Tell the Time?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, we are going to turn now to our only true place of hope and of refuge, and that is, of course, the Word of God. And we're going to read together this morning in the Gospel of Luke, Luke's Gospel at chapter 12, and some verses from verse 49 of chapter 12, reading into the beginning of Luke chapter 13.

Do follow with me at home if you have a Bible, or just listen in. These are the words of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus said, I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled. I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it's accomplished. Do you think that I've come to give peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. For from now on, in one house, there will be five divided, three against two, and two against three. They will be divided, father against son, and son against father, mother against daughter, and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against daughter-in-law, and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law.

He also said to the crowds, When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, a shower is coming, and so it happens. And when you see the south wind blowing, you say there'll be scorching heat, and it happens.

[ 1 : 26 ] You hypocrites. You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right?

As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison.

I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny. There was some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans, whose blood, Pilate, had mingled with their sacrifices.

And he answered them, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you.

But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those 18, whom the Tyre of Siloam fell and killed, do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

[ 2 : 32 ] No, I tell you. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 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.

And he said to the vineyard dresser, Look, for three years now I've come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig round it and put on manure.

Then, if it should bear fruit next year, well and good. But if not, you can cut it down. Amen.

And may God bless to us his word. Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

That's Jesus' question in Luke chapter 12, verse 56. And it's a question I want to think about together this morning. Perhaps you'd have that passage of Scripture open before you to help you.

[ 3 : 49 ] I find it very striking in recent days to read newspaper columnists who are self-confessed atheists, or at least entirely non-religious, asking questions of the church.

Simon Heffer wrote an article the other day, crying out for spiritual leadership in the nation. Philip Johnson suggested in his article, even I, he said, might find my way back to church.

And I'm sure that there have been others writing similarly. It's very striking because the general attitude in our society is that God has been dead and buried for a very long time.

The church is just a relic of the dark old days, long since dismissed as irrelevant, utterly on the back foot, cowering before the powerful questioning, the accusation of a secular consensus that thinks

that it has all the answers to life, to the universe, and to everything.

It's as if God has been firmly in the dock, being savaged by the merciless questions of a top barrister, left humiliated, totally undone.

[ 5 : 05 ] Some of you may remember George Carman QC. He died, I think, about 20 years ago, but he was infamous for his utter destruction of plaintiffs in the witness box.

It was he, of course, who did for Jonathan Aitken in his libel trial against the Guardian newspaper. It was he also, very famously, who did for the disgraced MP, Neil Hamilton, in that Cash for Questions episode that happened, I think it was 1999.

One person who was mauled by George Carman QC said this, whatever award is given for libel, being cross-examined by you would make it not nearly enough money.

And Martin Bell, remember the BBC journalist who stood against Neil Hamilton for his seat in Parliament, in his memoirs where he was writing about the Neil Hamilton affair and Neil Hamilton's situation, he said this, of all Neil Hamilton's ordeals, which ranged over the years of his self-destruction from being censured by a commons committee to being lampooned on have I got news for you.

Of all these, his cross-examination by George Carman was probably the hardest. It was merciless. And of course, he was left, wasn't he, spectacularly ruined and undone.

[ 6 : 27 ] And the thing is, that's how many people, I think, in our modern world have thought of the God of the Bible. Floored, undone, silenced, humiliated forever by the clear and the clever questioning, the merciless mockery of our sophisticated modern world.

But friends, modern man doesn't look quite so triumphant today, does he? Mightily serious questions are being asked about our supposed invincibility.

Half the population of this whole world is in lockdown. Economies are facing absolute ruin for who knows how long. A world helpless, fearing, cowering before an enemy that we can't even see, we can't touch, we can't smell.

Something so tiny and yet so absolutely terrible. Suddenly, the tables seem to be turned. It's not God in the dock, it's man in the dock.

And looking really very fragile indeed. And perhaps what these columnists and many others are sensing at the moment is a chink in their sense of security.

[ 7 : 51 ] And as they call for spiritual leadership, is it at least in part an admission that perhaps God is now asking questions of us? Certainly, in the face of a worldwide pandemic, a great plague, the Bible would have us ask ourselves those questions.

Because it's an inescapable fact that in every instance of plague or pestilence that the Bible references, we're told very clearly that it's sent by God himself in order to awaken people up who seem deaf to his warnings about coming judgment for their sins.

Now, you might find that very troubling. I do myself. But that is simply a fact. Why would God do that?

Well, the answer is because we as human beings don't really care about the things that offend God. So we ignore him. We don't listen to him.

Unless, that is, he shouts at us and forces us to pay attention like someone shouting through a megaphone to make us hear what they're saying. That, of course, is how the author C.S. Lewis once famously put it.

[ 9 : 13 ] We're so perverse, we're so deaf to God that he has to cause us pain to make us heed his dire warnings. Just like our government has to threaten fines and prison to force people to listen to the warnings about COVID.

As C.S. Lewis puts it, he says, pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pain.

It is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world. But the question, friends, is this, are we actually listening to him even now?

That's the question and it's a question that God has been putting to mankind all through history and sometimes having to shout through his megaphone of pain. Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

That's what Jesus says here in Luke 12, verse 56, in just such a circumstance, actually. In fact, when you start to read the Bible, what you find is that all the way through, God is constantly putting man on the spot, putting man in the dock in just that way.

[ 10 : 29 ] When you read the words of Jesus Christ, you'll find that he is always on the front foot. He is interrogating us with very pointed questions, ones that expose us, that exposes so much of our futile thinking in very, very devastating ways.

Look at verse 56 here. Jesus Christ leaves even an advocate like George Carman in the shade. You hypocrites, he says to his listeners, you know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

You think you're sophisticated? You think you're scientific? Think again. You can't even tell the time. It's like a dressing down of primary school children by their teacher.

What does Jesus mean when he's saying this? Well, let's look at these four short paragraphs and see what he's saying to the people then, which in fact is precisely what he is saying to people also today.

First of all, look at verses 54 to 56. Jesus says, you people are totally ignorant. You have no idea what's really going on in the world.

[ 11 : 45 ] You can't even tell the time. He said to the crowds, when you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, a shower is coming and it happens. When you see the south wind blow, you say, there'll be scorching heat and it happens.

You hypocrites, you know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time? What he's saying is you're great at all the trivial things in life, but totally ignorant when it comes to the really important things.

You're great at weather forecasts. You see a cloud in the west and you know that rain is coming.

Well, friends, let me tell you, you don't need to have a PhD in meteorology to predict that in the west of Scotland for sure, do you?

There only are two weather forecasts here. It's either raining or it's about to rain. And we certainly don't have any experience of the scorching heat that verse 59 speaks about here.

But of course, they knew in Israel, they knew that the clouds came from the sea in the west. That was what brought the rain. That the wind came from the scorching desert down in the Sinai. That's what brought the heat.

[ 12 : 50 ] Everyone knew how to interpret matters of earth and sky. But they're really vital matters of life and death and the meaning of life itself.

the ultimate issues, heaven and hell. You're ignorant about all of that, says Jesus. And you're not even interested in thinking about these things.

Well, it's not really any different today. Think of all the effort that goes into predicting all kinds of things to do with earth and sky, daily life and commerce and so on.

Will interest rates go up or down? When will they? Will the oil price begin to go up again or will it go down? And even further, what effect will all of these things have on the dollar, on the pound, on the footsie, on the housing market and so on?

And all the more, of course, at the moment. What effect will COVID and this dreadful virus have on everything? What will it do to the economy? Never mind people's health.

[ 13 : 49 ] Whole industries are built on these kind of predictions about the prices of everything, about the politics of everything. Speculation's endless.

Isn't it? Constantly talking heads on TV, the papers, nowadays on Facebook, on Twitter and all the rest. And with people stuck at home, all the more at the moment, it's only multiplied, hasn't it?

Exponentially. But in the midst of all of this intense examination of all these matters of life and business and commerce and politics and health and all the rest, does anyone have a clue about God's timing?

About what God might be doing in this world? Does anyone even care? Is anyone even asking that question? Well, apparently not in Jesus' day because he says, you don't even see it coming, do you?

You can't even tell the time. What is it that Jesus says his hearers are so blind to, so deaf to, so ignorant of?

[ 14 : 55 ] What is it that's creeping up on them? They just don't see coming. Well, it's there. Look, in verse 49. the fire of God.

The judgment of God let loose on the whole earth. That's what Jesus says his whole ministry is about. I came, he says, to cast fire on the earth. That's a shock, isn't it?

And verse 51. Do you think I've come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, rather division. Sorry to ruin millions of Christmas cards, but that's what Jesus says.

He says, he came with a message to divide the world now and ultimately to divide the world forever.

Yes, it was gentle Jesus, meek and mild, telling us himself that he came to divide the world.

It's wake up time, he's saying, but you're not listening. But look back to verse 40. Jesus says, you must be ready because the Son of Man is coming at an hour that you don't expect.

[16:08] That's what Jesus was saying to the Jews of his own day. He's saying, wake up, welcome me as your Messiah, welcome me as your promised King. That's the message of the whole of Luke's Gospel, the whole of his book.

It begins with the announcement. Remember that all the prophet's words have been fulfilled, that God's oath to Abraham at last is reaching its climax. The sunrise from on high has visited us to give light to those who are walking in darkness.

That's what old Zechariah sang. That's why old Simeon and Anna in the Christmas story were so overjoyed, wasn't it? Because all of their lives were told they'd been waiting for the consolation of Israel, longing for the redemption of Jerusalem, the great day of the Lord to come.

But of course there was another side to that day of the Lord. It was the day of joy, the day of salvation, long awaited, but also that day would be the day of God's final judgment.

When God himself stands upon this earth, he comes to right all wrongs. He comes to judge in righteousness and in truth.

[17:24] So what time is it when the Son of God himself appears on earth? Answer, it's the beginning of God's final judgment of this world.

I came, said Jesus, to cast fire on the earth. But you people, he says, you're ignorant. Why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

And not only ignorant, here's the second thing, he says, you people are indolent. Why won't you act in time? In time for the coming judgment which has begun now in my coming to earth, in my very own ministry.

What time is it? It's time, says Jesus, to repent. That was John the Baptist's message, wasn't it? Repent, accept your king, or perish.

That was Jesus Christ's own message from the very beginning to the end of his ministry. And that is precisely what he is saying here. The whole point of learning to tell the time is so that you can act in time.

[18:34] That's the reason for a weather forecast, isn't it? Especially when it's a warning of a storm to come, so you can act in time, avoid the disaster. Well, says Jesus, you need to listen to my forecast, and you need to act in time before you meet your judge.

Look at verses 57 to 59. Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way.

Lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer. The officer put you in prison. I tell you, you will never get out until you've paid the very last penny.

Life, says Jesus, is a journey to the bar of judgment. You're on the way to court with your accuser, and so now is the time to settle with him so as to avoid disaster.

Act now before it's too late. It could hardly be plainer, could it, Jesus' message. Judgment is coming. So how do I interpret the present time?

[19:44] It's time to repent, to sue for mercy, to seek forgiveness from the one that you've wronged before it's too late. And unless you do, says verse 59, the outlook is very, very bleak.

You will never get out of prison until the last penny is paid, which of course means never because once you're in prison, you're never going to earn another penny.

Now as soon as anyone mentions God's judgment today, of course, people react in horror. People are indignant at the very thought of a God who could judge.

We won't have a judge, a God, who will judge anything. That's what people say, especially not judging me. And yet, of course, we ourselves are very quick to make judgments, aren't we, all the time.

That's unfair. That's unjust. That's wrong. It's what we say when we see something that infringes our view of morality. That's so unfair. It must be one of the first things children learn to say.

[20:46] It must be one of the commonest expressions in the world, especially when we're the victim. That's so unfair. Why should that happen to me? Or, contrary-wise, we say, well, they

certainly deserve that, didn't they?

When we consider that somebody's misfortune is justified. They deserve everything they get. Isn't that right? I'm using common sense. You're being unwise.

He's a co-vidiot. You see, we won't allow God to judge, will we? But God must allow us to judge, to judge each other, and very often, of course, to judge him.

That's, I think, why Jesus says in verse 36 that we're all to be called hypocrites, because we are.

We all judge. Depending on our outlook, our politics, and so on, we judge one way or another.

You show me your daily paper, I can tell you who it is and how it is that you judge. Everyone rushes to judge. Just read the morally indignant letters in the Daily Mail, or read the even more morally indignant columnists in the Guardian.

[ 21 : 53 ] It's very striking, isn't it, that our world is full of morally indignant and self-righteous people judging all sorts of things all of the time, and yet the one thing that unites people in their indignance is a thought of a God who, by the way, made the entire universe, that God himself should ever be morally indignant or outraged about anything at all.

We can't accept a God who judges, although so often we're indignant judges ourselves. And of course the truth is, friends, that most of our judgments are utterly confused and wrong so very often in the world and, sadly, also even in the church.

I remember watching a TV preacher from the United States confidently proclaiming during that aftermath of that hurricane, Hurricane Katrina that hit New Orleans in 2005, that it was God's specific judgment on the gambling and the drinking and the sex in that particular city, even though, of course, it hit many other places than New Orleans.

And then at the exact same time, I listened to other people from other churches denying that God would ever judge a city or ever judge, in fact, anybody ever for anything. I remember reading Polly Toynbee writing in the Guardian after the Asian tsunami saying, I'm an atheist, but were there a God, he would be to blame.

She's the judge. What a lot of confusion there is in the world and even in the church about God's judgments. But, of course, that's actually nothing new at all.

[ 23 : 31 ] In fact, it's right here in the very next paragraph. Look at verses 1 to 5 of Luke chapter 13. See, again, Jesus is very, very plain. He's saying, you're not just ignorant. You're not just indolent.

He says here, you're arrogant. You don't even think that any of this is going to affect you. But you all need to repent. He says there were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

And he answered them, do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the others because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those 18 on whom the Tower of Siloam fell and killed them.

Do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you.

But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Some people had told Jesus about a massacre of these Galileans, probably with some self-righteous satisfaction because the Galileans were despised by the Judean Jews.

They were half-breeds. They were an immoral bunch. So they'd have been saying, well, they must have deserved that. See, Jesus, we can tell the truth about God's judgments.

[ 24 : 48 ] God does judge the wicked, just like some TV evangelist might say today. Well, well then, says Jesus there in verse 4, how about that Tower of Siloam disaster which happened in your own very capital city of Judean Jerusalem, no doubt, with very respectable people just like you dying in that.

How do you explain that? Were those people dreadful offenders in your eyes? No, says Jesus, in both these cases your judgments are completely wrong.

Notice Jesus doesn't say these people were not sinners, they weren't deserving of God's judgment, nor does he deny that God was ultimately responsible for all of these things.

He doesn't deny that God is utterly sovereign. But what he doesn't do is just, he doesn't enter into that discussion at all. What he does say is very clear, isn't it?

In fact, he says it twice there in verse 3 and verse 5. He says, all of these things are warnings for all of us. Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

[ 25 : 56 ] Again, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. See, that's God's message to all of us. in every such terrible happening in the world according to Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

In every earthquake, in every tsunami, in every terrible plane crash, in every pandemic. Not for us to say, oh, they must have deserved that.

Or for us to say, oh, how can there be a just God to allow these things to happen? No, but so that we will listen and understand and say to ourselves, there or worse, but for the grace and mercy of God go I.

Unless I repent, I also will perish ultimately. how are we to interpret the present time? Well, friends, the Son of God Himself is telling us that every judgment in the course of human history is but a pale shadow of the great judgment that is still to come, the judgment that will be eternal.

But each one is shouting to us a warning like a great megaphone, a gracious warning saying, look at the time.

[ 27 : 24 ] The time is racing on. Listen up. Unless you repent in time, you also will perish eternally. Jesus wants us to stop being ignorant and to know our own time as the psalmist puts it, to teach us, to number our days so that we will get a heart for wisdom.

And again and again and again He is saying, unless you repent, you also will all perish. Now, you might not like that message very much.

I confess, I find it a very unsettling message myself. But I don't think we can deny, can we, that these are Jesus' words. This is not the words of some renting preacher.

This is not the words of some so-called nasty apostle who's perverting the gospel. These are the words of gentle Jesus, meek and mild. So let's not say, oh, well, I'm all for Jesus.

It's just those apostles like Paul I can't stand. Or let's not say, oh, I'm all for Jesus. It's just those Christians who evangelize I can't stand. No, be honest.

[ 28 : 36 ] If you can't stand this message, it's Jesus Christ himself that you can't stand. Because the fact is, friends, that the gospel of Jesus Christ is a warning shout to this world.

None of us can afford to ignore it. It's a warning of a far, far greater judgment to come for all humanity. far greater than any calamity throughout history.

Jesus, the judge, shall come. That is the gospel of the New Testament. That is the word of Jesus Christ himself.

But don't miss this last paragraph here, verses 6 to 9. Very, very important. Because although Jesus is determined that we take him seriously as judge, he's the very antithesis of a vengeful and hateful and spiteful judge.

We may be ignorant and indolent and arrogant in the face of God's coming judgment, but these verses make so clear that he is patient. He's merciful.

[ 29 : 53 ] He's loving. He's wonderfully patient. Verse 6, he told this parable. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.

He said to the vine dresser, look, for three years now I've come seeking fruit on this fig tree. I could find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? He answered him, sir, let it alone this year also until I dig around it and put manure on it.

And then, if it should bear fruit next year, well and good. But if not, you can cut it down. Do you see how patient the master is with his fruitless fig tree?

Fig trees are an image that Jesus so often used to represent his people Israel. A constant, total disappointment they were.

Fit only for destruction. And that is the story of God's people as you read all through the Bible. But it's also the story of humanity. It's your story.

[ 31 : 01 ] It's my story. Recalcitrance. Rejection of God's way over and over and over again. Yet how patient God is with us.

He holds out his hand of grace again and again and again. Verse 8, another year. Let's give it another chance. Let's do all that we can to let it bear fruit.

God is merciful. He is slow to anger. He is abounding in love. He is not slow to fill his promise to come again, to put this world to the right as some people say.

That's what the apostle Peter tells us. But because when he does come again it will be to judge this whole world with utter finality. because of that Peter says he is patient towards you not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance.

The whole message of the Bible is absolutely plain. God says I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked. Turn back, turn back for why will you die?

[ 32 : 11 ] He is patient. He is merciful. And so today there is still time. But not forever.

You see, look at verse 9. It's very plain. At last there will be no more time. If not you can cut it down. Friends, Jesus was not joking when he spoke these words to Israel to that generation. They had not only Moses, not only all the prophets, they had the words of the Son of God himself in their midst. And even after their rejection, their crucifixion of him, they had the preaching of his apostles through his Holy Spirit to them. And still in the main they refused to repent.

And in AD 70 the history books tell us within a generation their time ran out. The nation was taken, people were scattered, said the temple was destroyed forever.

[ 33 : 14 ] Jesus was not joking then. Nor is he joking today. The message of the gospel that he has entrusted to the church is an urgent warning.

It says today is the day of salvation. It's time to act. It's time to repent. It's time to seek mercy from your accuser before it's too late. Jesus is urging all people today to learn how to interpret the present time, to know your own time, to learn to number your days, to get a heart for wisdom. The gospel proclaims today is the day of salvation. salvation. But it warns us tomorrow may be too late. No one knows, no man or woman, no nation either, how far along they are in that merciful extra year of God's favor.

None of us knows how much borrowed time we have left. When you're young, of course, you think you're invincible. Until an airliner crashes with hundreds of young people on board, or until a ghastly terror attack happens that murders people of all ages.

Even when you're older, you can still think that, can't you? Until that sudden heart attack, that sudden stroke, that sudden cancer diagnosis renders your fat pension worthless.

[ 34 : 45 ] Or a pandemic, which sweeps through your particular age group above all others. fear. And at a time like the one we're living in today, a time of great uncertainty, that fear abounds.

Here's the truth. This might be the last sermon I ever preached to anybody for all I know. It could also be the last word from God that you ever receive as part of his careful tending, his fertilizing of your life, the last effort to bring forth fruit for eternity.

I don't know. Neither do you. But I do know that if you're listening today, then God has granted you time still, that it's not yet too late to repent.

And I do know that Jesus Christ is abundantly merciful. were those people who have died already in China, in Italy, in Spain, here in our own country, were they worse sinners than you or me?

No is the answer Jesus gives. But he says also to every one of us, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish forever.

[ 36 : 14 ] So do you know how to interpret the present time? That's the vital question, friends, for every one of us listening, for everyone in this whole wide world today.

Do you know how to interpret the present time? I wonder if you know this poem. It's inscribed on a clock in Chester Cathedral in England.

It's called Time's Paces. When as a child I laughed and wept, time crept. When as a youth I waxed more bold, time strolled.

When I became a full-grown man, time ran. When older still I daily grew, time flew. Soon I shall find in passing on, time gone.

O Christ, wilt thou have saved me then? man. That's the real question that matters for every human being on this earth today, more than any other question there is.

[ 37 : 24 ] And friends, whatever your time is, it's not standing still. Not for you or me, not for anybody. And so for every Christian believer, every follower of Jesus Christ today and every day, our greatest task is to follow our Lord Jesus himself in seeking to dispel ignorance, propel the indolent, plead with the arrogant to listen to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, and to learn to interpret the present time, the time to repent now in time for eternity.

Amen. Let's pray together. Lord, open our ears and our hearts, we pray, to hear your voice, to respond this day, to bow to your gracious Lordship, so that when the last trumpet's voice shall sound, we may then in him be found, clothed in his righteousness alone, and faultless to stand before the throne through his merciful, forgiving gospel grace.

May it be so for every one of us listening today, we pray, for Jesus' sake. Amen.