

To Seek and To Save the Lost

Jesus Gives a Warning

Luke 13:1-9

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Scripture

This is the third Sunday of Advent. Advent is the season of the Christian year in which we remember the first coming of Jesus and also anticipate the second coming of Jesus.

In our study of *The Gospel of Luke*, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem from Galilee. He only had a few months left to live before his death. He knew that he was going there to pay the penalty for sin by his death. He would sacrifice his life in order to reconcile sinners with a holy God.

In Luke 12 Jesus gave his followers some very important teaching regarding discipleship. He also gave a series of warnings. Jesus concluded the dialogue with yet another warning.

Let's read about Jesus' warning in Luke 13:1-9:

13 There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. **2** And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? **3** No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. **4** 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? **5** No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

6 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. **7** 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?' **8** And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. **9** Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'" (Luke 13:1-9)

Introduction

John Mark wrote the book we call *The Gospel of Mark*. In all likelihood, it was written seven to ten years before Luke wrote *The Gospel of Luke*. Many scholars believe that *The Gospel of Mark* was the first Gospel written about the life and ministry of Jesus.

Mark writes the following about the start of Jesus' ministry, "Now after John [the Baptist] was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the gospel of God, and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel' " (Mark 1:14-15; cf. Matthew 4:17).

From then on, "repent and believe in the gospel" is Jesus' consistent message. In all times and in every situation, Jesus urges people to repent and believe. His message is not only for the religious leaders of his day, it is a message for everyone. Repentance and faith is the key to eternal life.

Lesson

The analysis of the topic of repentance as set forth in Luke 13:1-9 teaches that all people must repent if they are to avoid truly perishing.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Necessity of Repentances (13:1-5)
2. The Urgency of Repentance (13:6-9)

I. The Necessity of Repentance (13:1-5)

First, let's look at the necessity of repentance.

Luke seems to suggest that chapter 12 is a single discourse by Jesus. Jesus ended his message with a warning to find safety in Christ before it is too late (12:49-59).

At the beginning of chapter 13, Jesus is told about a particularly heinous incident. Jesus used the opportunity to talk about catastrophes, but redirects the focus to what the proper response should be to human atrocities and natural disasters.

A. *Human Atrocities Should Cause Us to Repent (13:1-3)*

First, human atrocities should cause us to repent.

Luke noted that **there were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices (13:1).**

Luke is the only Biblical author who mentions this atrocity. We know nothing else about this incident because it is not mentioned in any other historical record.

We do know, however, that **Pilate** was a ruthless ruler of Judea. One commentator says that “many massacres marked his administration.”¹

This atrocity presumably took place at the temple in Jerusalem during the Passover. Normally priests made the animal sacrifices, except during the Passover, when pilgrims made their own sacrifices. Apparently, some **Galileans** were making their sacrifices at the temple, and **Pilate** had them killed.

Why did **Pilate** kill these **Galileans**? We don’t know. The **Galileans** were there, along with thousands of other pilgrims, offering their sacrifices to God. While they were worshiping, they were killed. Their own blood mixed with the blood of their sacrifices, and this was deeply disturbing to the people of God. To help explain how upset people were when they heard about this, Art Lindsley makes the following comparison, “It would be as if terrorists came into a church and shot worshipers as they

¹ John Richardson Major, quoted in Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952), 371.

were partaking of Communion, then mingled their blood with the Communion wine.”²

And so Jesus answered them by asking, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?” (13:2).

Jesus’ question exposes a common view in his day. John MacArthur summarizes the view as follows, “To the Jewish people of Jesus’ day, the explanation of why bad things happened to people was singular and simple: calamities were always God’s judgment on sin.”² This view was found throughout Biblical history.

For example, Job’s so-called friends reflected that view when they said that Job must have been suffering because of some sin that he had not yet confessed. Eliphaz put it this way, “Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?” (Job 4:7).

Even Jesus’ own disciples reflected the view that suffering was the result of sin when they asked him about the man born blind in John 9:2, “Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?”

People today still think the same way. They think that whenever something bad happens, it must be because they have sinned or done something wrong.

How do we respond to such thinking? First, we need to affirm that sometimes people do suffer the consequences of their own actions. Speeding down a highway without a seatbelt fastened may result in greater injuries, and even death.

But, second, we also need to affirm that not all suffering is the direct result of our or someone else’s sin. Sometimes we get sick or hurt simply because we live in a fallen world.

² Art Lindsley, *True Truth: Defending Absolute Truth in a Relativistic World* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 37.

² John MacArthur, *Luke 11-17 MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (MacArthur New Testament Commentary Series) (Kindle Locations 3107-3108). Moody Publishers. Kindle Edition.

The point is this: human suffering is not necessarily the direct result of a person's sin. That is what Jesus was saying.

Jesus went on to say in verse 3, **"No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."** Commentator Philip Ryken summarizes Jesus' comment by saying:

This statement assumes that we are guilty sinners, and so we are. Our depravity is so self-evident, so noncontroversial, that Jesus does not even assert it; he just assumes it. Some sins are more obvious than others, and some are easier to hide. Some sins are worse than others in their destructive power. But all sin is sin, and even the smallest sin is a violation against the holiness of an infinitely perfect God. We are no different from anyone else. We all fall short of the glory of God.³

There are all kinds of suffering in this world. When we encounter human atrocities, Jesus wants us to think of our own upcoming deaths and our great need to repent of our sin. For, unless we repent, we will perish eternally in hell.

B. Natural Disasters Should Cause Us to Repent (13:4-5)

And second, natural disasters should cause us to repent.

Jesus gave a second illustration to his listeners. He went from *human* atrocities to *natural* disasters. He asked his listeners in verse 4, **"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?"**

Once again, this is the only place in the Bible where this incident is mentioned. Apparently Jesus' listeners were familiar with this disaster. And, as before, the people assumed that

³ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 4.

this natural disaster occurred because the **eighteen were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem.**

The people in Jesus' day thought that misfortune was the result of misdeeds. The tower fell because they were sinners.

Today people would probably blame God for what happened. Why didn't God stop it?

In the wake of natural disasters, such as the December 26, 2004, tsunami in Southeast Asia that killed more than 100,000 people and left massive destruction, columnist Eric Zorn asked and answered questions about God's role in the tsunami:

Did the tsunami reflect the will of God? Or was God powerless to stop it?

If it was God's will, what moral lesson can we possibly accept from an entity for whom individual human life is evidently so expendable?

Why isn't constant fear the only sensible attitude toward such a being?

Either way, what does it mean to trust God or have faith in God when in seconds on a sunny day a crushing wave from the deep can snatch a loved one literally from your grasp and drown him?

Trust that it's all part of some bigger plan that mere mortals cannot begin to access or comprehend?

The grand mystery notion fits well enough for me. . . .

I call my outlook indifferent agnosticism: I don't know if God exists and I don't care. God's will and design for this temporal and spatial vastness, if any, is so patently, deliberately impenetrable that I doubt any mortal has a grasp on it.

The very inexplicability of sad events like the tsunami, like the AIDS crisis or even like the cancer death of the father of one of my daughter's 2nd-grade classmates last week are, to me, reminders to focus on our obligations to one another, not to the infinite; to honor the creator, if any, by honoring creation itself and hoping that's good enough.⁴

⁴ Eric Zorn, "Tsunami Levels a Challenge to All Our Beliefs," *Chicago Tribune* (12-04-05).

We live in a fallen world. God is in sovereign control over every single molecule in this entire universe. Nothing takes place apart from his approval. We don't know why natural disasters occur. And, interestingly, Jesus does not answer the question about why natural disasters occur.

Instead, he directs his listeners to consider their own eternal destiny. Again, as he did previously, he says in verse 5, **“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”**

Yes, natural disasters occur. But, the wrong response is the one given by Zorn: to simply honor creation and hope that is good enough. I can tell you it is not good enough. No, the correct response to any and every natural disaster, just like the correct response to any and every human atrocity, is repentance.

But what is repentance? *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* defines repentance as follows: “Repentance unto life is a saving grace, whereby a sinner, out of a true sense of his sin, and apprehension of the mercy of God in Christ, doth, with grief and hatred of his sin, turn from it unto God, with full purpose of, and endeavor after, new obedience.”⁵ Simply, repentance is a change of mind *and* a change of action.

Have you repented? Have you turned from your sinful ways and started following Jesus Christ? Philip Henry put it this way, “Some people do not like to hear much of repentance. But I think it is so necessary, that if I should die in the pulpit, I should desire to die preaching repentance, and if I should die out of the pulpit, I should desire to die practicing it.”⁶

⁵ *The Westminster Shorter Catechism: With Scripture Proofs*, 3rd edition. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

⁶ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke*, vol. 2 (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1879), 112.

II. The Urgency of Repentance (13:6-9)

And second, notice the urgency of repentance.

To stress the urgency of repentance, Jesus **told this parable** (13:6a). He said that **a man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard** (13:6b). The tree grew and when it was old enough to bear fruit the man **came seeking fruit on it**, but to his disappointment **found none** (13:6c). This was unexpected. Fig trees normally bear fruit every year, and this particular tree was in an excellent location in the man's vineyard.

And so the man 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?" (13:7). The man was not concerned that the tree was using valuable nutrients that the other plants could use. Instead, he was disgusted that the fig tree was useless by not producing fruit.

But the vinedresser interceded **and he answered him, "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down"** (13:8-9). The vinedresser said that he would pay particular attention to the fig tree during the coming year by loosening the soil around it and fertilizing it. If that did not work, then the owner could cut down the tree.

There are several lessons to learn from this parable.

The first lesson is that those who fail to produce fruit in keeping with repentance will be cut down in judgment. Merely professing faith in Jesus and voicing repentance, even if accompanied with contrition, is not enough. Genuine repentance will result without fail, as *The Westminster Shorter Catechism* says, in a "new obedience."

The second lesson is that judgment is near. Jesus says that it is **next year**. That does not mean that a person has 365 days.

Rather, it means that judgment is inevitably coming, and in terms of eternity it is not far off.

The third lesson is that the delay in judgment is not due to any worthiness in us. The vineyard's owner asked about the useless fig tree, **"Why should it use up the ground?"** Let us not make the mistake of thinking that we are so worthy that God will not judge us.

And the fourth lesson is that God's patience toward unrepentant sinners is not permanent. A day is coming when he will carry out his judgment against all unrepentant sinners. R. C. Sproul wrote that "Jonathan Edwards once asked his congregation to give him one reason why God hadn't destroyed them since they got up that morning. He asked them to consider that every moment that we live, every luxury that we enjoy, every blessing that we participate in, is a matter of receiving the grace of God, that it represents God's willingness to be patient with a race of people who have rebelled against him. God has called every human being to perfection. We are not allowed to sin. The penalty for sin is death, and yet we continue to sin and become astonished and offended when God allows suffering."⁷

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed the topic of repentance as set forth in Luke 13:1-9, we should repent and produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

We have a tendency to confuse justice and mercy. That is perhaps why there is so much misunderstanding about suffering in this world. People think that God should not cause suffering and that he is obligated to be kind to us. But, if we think that God is obligated to be kind to us, then we have confused mercy and justice.

⁷ R. C. Sproul, *A Walk with God: An Exposition of Luke* (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 1999), 277.

Justice describes what ought to be done to reward the righteous and to punish the wicked. Sometimes, justice is done in this life. But, justice will always be carried out on the Day of Judgment. And justice will be carried out because God is obligated by his very nature to do so.

But mercy, by definition, is never an obligation to God. Again and again God says, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy" (Romans 9:15; cf. Exodus 33:19). Mercy is gift that God offers to unworthy sinners.

When dealing with God we should never ask for justice. If we receive justice, we will perish in hell for all eternity, because that is what our sins deserve.

No, we should ask God for mercy. If we receive God's mercy, we will receive what we do not deserve, which is faith and repentance.

Do you think the Galileans would have gone to the temple if they had known that they would have been killed that day? Or do you think that the eighteen would have gone to the tower of Siloam if they had known that they would have died that day? Obviously, they did not know the disaster that was going to befall them.

However, God in his mercy has warned us about the coming judgment. He has even provided a way of escape! "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Let us repent of our sin and believe in Jesus so that we shall not perish but have eternal life instead. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the warning of Jesus. Jesus warned us in the clearest possible terms that human atrocities and natural disasters should cause us to repent.

Help us to distinguish correctly between justice and mercy. Help us to recognize that you are patient toward us, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance (2 Peter 3:9). Will you grant repentance and faith to anyone who has not yet repented and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ?

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!