

Sermon 3, The Meaning of Judgment: Repent, Luke 13:1-9

Proposition: Every disaster demands that you and I repent and bear fruit.

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Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, we have seen the necessity of keeping the right attitude during judgment. We have seen the origin of judgment in the Garden of Eden. And this morning, we will look at the meaning of judgment.

When I say "This is a judgment," I make people nervous. They think I'm going to add something stupid, like "for all the homosexuals in New York." We rightly find such reasoning absurd. Brothers and sisters, in this passage our Lord Himself tells us that we are absolutely forbidden to call out particular groups and reason that because judgment is coming they brought it on us, whoever they are. While it is appropriate to say that the homosexuals in New York need to repent, it is equally imperative to say that the porn-watchers in Gillette need to repent, and that the men everywhere who yell at their kids need to repent, and that the wives who hold grudges against their husbands need to repent, and on and on and on. Jesus tells us in the passage before us that every judgment, every problem, every disaster means the same thing: Repent and bear fruit in keeping with repentance! The passage shows this by giving two examples and then a parable, all three of which make the same point. Repentance is always necessary, and judgment merely highlights how necessary it is.

I. The First Disaster: Pilate's Perfidy, vv. 1-3

Luke tells us that Jesus was in the presence of a crowd so large that people were trampling one another. In a group like that, the latest news is quick to spread, and this was no exception.

A. The Event: Galileans Killed While Offering Sacrifices, v. 1

There were some people there who brought up the latest political scandal to Jesus. That scandal was this: some Galileans, people from Jesus' region of Israel, had been offering sacrifices, presumably at the Temple. Pilate had ordered them killed, and the result was that the blood of the Jewish worshippers mingled on the floor with the blood of the lambs, cattle, and doves they were sacrificing. This is the kind of thing that imperial occupiers do. And this is the kind of thing that makes occupied peoples very upset.

B. The Popular Explanation: These Galileans Were Exceptional Sinners, v. 2

However, I want you all to notice the direction Jesus takes this event. While all kinds of political lessons could be drawn here, He doesn't go there. He doesn't talk about the socio-political implications. He doesn't condemn Pilate for being such a rotten dirtbag. Instead, He asks a question about the victims. Specifically, what kind of people were they? Do you, Joe Israelite, comfort yourself in the face of this senseless tragedy with the idea that these people had it coming?

Now, in one sense such an idea may have been more common in Jesus' day and among His countrymen than it is today among Americans. We have been assured since the Enlightenment era that tragedies and disasters are part of the human condition, and that rather than these Galileans being worse sinners than the rest, it was just dumb luck. The problem is not the Galileans, but Pilate, and the solution is not to blame the Galileans for being bad sinners but to get rid of Roman imperial domination and replace it with liberal democracy for all. But brothers and sisters, Jesus asks us not to examine Rome's record but to examine our own hearts. Do you carry within you the idea that the reason you're doing well is your own good choices, and that the reason other people are suffering is that they didn't make as many good choices as you did? That's the question Jesus is asking. Are you proud? Do you assume that those who are suffering didn't do it as wisely as you? That's the attitude he confronts in his listeners. Stop thinking that you are better than the people around you, that they are not as smart, wise, and put-together as your noble self.

In other words, when you read about evil dictators doing evil dictator things, how do you respond? With self-importance and self-righteousness? Do you thank God that you haven't made the evil decisions that would put you where an evil dictator could mingle your blood with sacrifices?

C. The Real Lesson: Repent, or Perish, v. 3

Jesus says emphatically and explicitly that the real lesson here is not directly about the dark underbelly of imperialism, and that it is definitely not that exceptionally wicked people meet an exceptionally wicked fate. Rather, the lesson is for all of us, and especially those of us who think that we are smarter and better than average. The lesson for us is to repent. That means to turn

away from sin and toward God. It means departing from ungodliness and moving towards God. It means giving up wrong ways of thinking, speaking, and acting, and instead wanting what's right with your whole heart.

If you don't do this, you will perish. Maybe it won't be on the point of a Roman sword, but it will happen. Death is coming for everyone who will not turn toward God. This is the meaning of Proverbs' repeated insistence that the wicked perish and the righteous last. That may be imaged here on earth at times. But its total fulfillment comes in the distinction between Heaven and Hell. If you don't repent, you will die the second death. If you do repent, you may still be killed by an Imperial overlord — but you will live eternally in Heaven.

II. The Second Disaster: Toppling Tower, vv. 4-5

Well, Jesus then brings up another local disaster.

A. The Event: Tower Collapses; 18 Dead, v. 4a

This is a well-known tower collapse. It took place in the Siloam neighborhood of Jerusalem. Many of you likely remember the hotel collapse in China a few months ago. These things happen, particularly when builders are lazy or cut corners that they shouldn't be cutting. Again, the modern approach is to say, "Yep, we need better building codes and inspections." Unless you enforce building codes, you will all likewise perish.

B. The Popular Explanation: The Victims were Exceptional Debtors, v. 4b

Well, that was not the word on the street in ancient Palestine, where the locals would have thought that a building code was the strangest idea they had ever heard of. Jesus, reading the hearts of the crowd, asks how many think that the eighteen dead were worse sinners, or literally "debtors more than all" in Jerusalem. In other words, the popular conception was that if you died in a tower collapse, that was merely God's justice catching up with you and you probably needed killing.

Now, we may not believe this explanation in such a crude form. We are more likely to put it the other way: I am better than those who died. I am safe because I do things the right way and the smart way. But Jesus once again rejects that explanation.

C. The Real Lesson: Repent, or Perish

The real lesson here, from a spiritual point of view, is not the need for building codes. The real lesson for the individual is the need to turn away from sin. Disasters are a reminder that we are all going to die, and that if it's not a collapsing building or a car wreck then it may be old age or cancer or Covid-19. Jesus is not opposed to building codes and fair political systems. But His goal while here on earth was to get people's minds onto something more important — not their temporal welfare, but their eternal destiny. That doesn't mean that we should take no thought for our temporal welfare. But in the modern era, we have let considerations of it swell so large as to completely obscure our vision of anything beyond it. If Jesus' refusal to bring up better systems than imperial domination, or His silence on the topic of building codes and inspections puzzles you; if you feel that it's not helpful to talk about repentance at a time when people are literally dying from preventable causes — then you haven't understood the real cause of death. Sin brings

death. The solution to sin is not building codes or liberal democracy. The solution to sin is repentance and cleansing by the blood of Jesus Christ. Liberal democracy and building codes are proximate solutions, but no amount of them can prevent people from dying. Indeed, if they could save us, morticians would have closed up shop long ago. But undertakers are still in business, and will be while the world lasts, because sin brings death and sin infects us all. The only way to get rid of it is repentance: Going to Jesus in sorrow for your sins and turning away from them towards Him.

III. The Third Disaster: Fruitless Fig, vv. 6-9

Well, Jesus explains what He means by repentance in a final parable about the fig tree.

A. The Event: The Fig Tree Given a Final Chance, vv. 6-9

In this parable, a man finds no fruit on his fig tree for three years in a row. So he decides to have it cut down. The gardener demurs and asks for one more year for the tree. The man accedes to this request, but repeats his threat that the tree will be cut down if it doesn't bear fruit.

B. The Meaning: Israel's Precarious Status, vv. 6-9

Well, the point of this story is rather obvious to the biblically literate hearer.

1. The Vineyard, a Symbol of God's People, Isaiah 5, Psalm 80

Over and over the Bible calls Israel God's vine or His vineyard. Isaiah 5 has a long description of Israel as God's vineyard that brought forth wild grapes, while Psalm 80 also speaks of God bringing a vine out of Egypt and planting it in the land. Jesus goes out of His way to mention that the fig tree is in a vineyard. If you needed any help to guess that this fig tree symbolizes Israel, He gave you that final hint by saying "vineyard."

2. The Three Years: The Minimum Time Required for a Fig Crop

Well, the landowner — God the Father — determines that there has been no fruit in three years. What I found online indicates that a fig tree takes a minimum of 3 years, and often up to 5 years, to bear its first crop. In other words, Israel had had enough time to start producing some fruit. What is the fruit? Good works! Israel had had time to bear the fruits of love, joy, and peace. They had had plenty of opportunity to produce the figs the landowner loves to eat. Instead, they had grown nothing. They had simply taken up land area, wasting perfectly good ground.

3. The Gardener: Christ Intercedes, v. 8

Yet that's not where the story ends. Right? If the story ended with v. 7, what would we say? "Wow! God is really serious about this fruit thing. Three years and you're out." But instead, we see the gardener interceding for the tree. This is our Lord Jesus, brothers and sisters. He is the husbandman, the gardener who tends the Lord's vineyard. He is willing to do another year's work for this fig tree, getting oxygen to the roots, fertilizing it, and generally giving it all the help that gardener can give a tree.

What did Jesus do for Israel? Everything, right down to coming in person to plead with them and warn them. And of course, what's true of Israel is also true of God's people in every era. Christ intercedes for us, fertilizes us, helps us. We have everything we need to bear the fruit of the Spirit, for He has purchased the Spirit for us and poured Him out upon us.

4. The Final Outcome: Fruit, or Uprooting, v. 9

But if the fruit is not forthcoming, particularly in this time of judgment, then the only other option is uprooting. If there is no fruit, cut it down, the gardener says.

C. The Real Lesson: Bear Fruit in Keeping with Repentance, v. 9

Brothers and sisters, we need to bear the fruit in keeping with repentance. That means that we need to stop sinning and start doing what's right.

How do you repent? Turn from your sins. Turn toward God. Tell Him what you did, why it was wrong, and how you plan to change. Ask His help. Beg for it. And ask His forgiveness too. That's repentance. It's hard. In fact, it's impossible without the Spirit's help. But you have the Spirit and you have His help. And when you have Him, you can repent. So do it. That's the correct response in a time of judgment. Don't wonder whether better prevention efforts could have stopped Covid. Don't wish for temporal solutions first and foremost. Those are great. But far more important is the need for permanent solutions, solutions which address the root of the problem. The root of the Covid problem, the root of every cause of death, is sin. Turn from sin, and you will live. Amen.