# Third Sunday in Lent March 24, 2019

 ***A REALISTIC REFLECTION***

***ON REPENTANCE***

**(LUKE 13:1-9)**

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 1 Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

 2 Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them--do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

 6 Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree, planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. 7 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?'

 8 "'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'"



**Introduction**: When things go wrong, how do you and I respond? What goes through our minds when we hear of some dire tragedy occurring? Why do these things have to happen anyway? Where is God?

 These are some of the questions that relate to the subjects dealt with in today’s Gospel reading. May we realistically reflect on the important issue of repentance, as well as making some sense when tragedies come our way.

**I. The Setting – A Gruesome Issue (13:1)**

13:1 – **“Now there were some present at that time”** implies that the people making the comment in this verse had heard Jesus’ teaching in chapter 12. The theme of judgment is the last point He had made in 12:59: “I tell you, you will not get out [of prison] until you have paid the last penny."

 Pontius **“Pilate”** was sent from Rome and ruled **“Judea”** (a province of Palestine) A.D. 26-36. He was the fifth Roman governor of Judea and was removed from office, because he tended to react with too much force and violence.

 This killing of **“Galileans”** may have taken place during the Feast of Passover, since this was the only time that people other than the priests could offer **“their sacrifices.”** There is no reason given for why their executions took place while they were worshiping, but it must have been serious (like planning a revolt against Rome) to have occurred at such a religiously offensive time. Jesus Himself was from Galilee.

 **QUESTION**: Why is this rather gruesome and tragic event brought up to Jesus in 13:1? It seems so unrelated to what He had been teaching earlier.

 **ANSWER**: Jesus’ teaching on judgment in 12:59 triggered these people to bring up some men who must have been terrible sinners  those who died gruesome and terribly offensive deaths at the hands of Pilate! In other words, they felt that when something bad happened to someone, it was the result of some personal sin in his or her life.

**** It is so easy for you and me to hold personal opinions that are simply wrong. Oftentimes our views have no solid basis whatsoever from Holy Scripture. This is why it is so important to be “People of the Book,” as Martin Luther emphasized. The Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura* (Latin for “Scripture Alone”) is so relevant for us today in 21st century America, as it was for the people of 16th century Europe. When our thinking ignores or departs from the Word of God, we are opening ourselves up to all sorts of foolish and even harmful ideas. Unfortunately, people are so blinded by their own ignorance that they do not have a clue that their world views are so off base and filled with error. This story illustrates how even well meaning people can get a notion in their minds, research the subject, and still be way off base:

 A retired couple in the 1980s was s alarmed by the threat of nuclear war, that they undertook a serious study to find the safest place on the globe. The studied and traveled, traveled and studied. Finally, they found THE PLACE. And on Christmas they sent their pastor a card from their new home – in the Falkland Islands – just prior to the conflict between Argentina and Great Britain in 1982.

 [Taken from *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking*, p. 365]

**II. An Answer that Gets to the Heart of the Matter (13:2-5)**

13:1-5 – The terrible physical deaths recorded in verses 1 and 4 are contrasted with spiritual death for all those who do not repent in verses 3 and 5.

13:2, 4 – Jewish thinking at this time saw a very close connection between sin and suffering. This is clearly brought out in John 9:1-2 with even Jesus’ own disciples:

 As Jesus passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?"

Also, Rabbi Ammi affirms: “There is no death without sin, and there is no suffering without iniquity.” This is the same point of view that Job’s three “friends” held – that all suffering is the direct result of sin (see the book of Job).

13:3, 5 – These verses are exactly the same in the Greek text except that different words for **“too”** are used (*homoios* and *hosautos*, both of which mean “likewise”). Both of these Greek words point to a similarly tragic end.

13:4 – **“Siloam”** was the name of a reservoir for Jerusalem which was located near the intersection of the south and east walls. What a tragedy that the **“tower”** accidentally **“fell”** on so many people who happened to be at the wrong place at the wrong time!

 **“More guilty”** (*opheilētes*) is literally “debtors” (sinners who owe a debt to God). This is the same term used in “The Lord’s Prayer” in Matthew 6:12: “Forgive us our trespasses [debts], as we forgive those who trespass against us [debtors; *opheilētes*].”

**** Trusting in our ideas or the opinions of others is like what this poor woman experienced:

 Poor Mrs. Dora Wilson! On February 18, 1981, this English homemaker looked out her window in Harlow, Essex, and saw a group of men loading her neighbors’ priceless collection of Persian carpets into a moving van. Knowing that her neighbors were on vacation, Mrs. Wilson called out, “What are you doing?”

 “We’re taking them to be cleaned, madam,” the men replied.

 Quick as a flash Mrs. Wilson decided to take advantage of the service they offered. “Will you please take mine, too?” she asked.

 The men obliged. You guessed it; they were burglars.

 [Taken from *1001 Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking*, p. 365]

**III. A Parable with Practical Implications (13:6-9)**

13:6 – The **“fig tree”** was used at times in the Old Testament to represent Israel’s relationship to God (Jeremiah 8:13; 29:17; Hosea 9:10).

 The **“vineyard”** was used as a symbol for Israel in the Old Testament (Psalm 80:8-16; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 2:21). This verse is probably an allusion to Micah 7:1, because both the vineyard and figs in that passage represent ungodly Israel.

13:7 – Fig trees bore fruit annually, so **“three years”** is a long time to have gone without figs. It took about three years for a vine to start producing grapes, so this fig tree was taking up much needed space and nutrients from **“the soil.”** To **“cut it down”** would be the best thing for the **“vineyard.”**

13:8 – It is unlikely that **“one more year”** will make a difference in a tree that has been unproductive for three years. This “second chance” reflects God’s amazing grace and mercy extended to His rebellious, unrepentant, and unfruitful people.

13:9 – There are two possibilities listed in this verse: [1] It will be **“fine”** if the tree **“bears fruit,”** and [2] it will be tragically **“cut down”** if there is no fruit.

 **QUESTION**: How does the parable in 13:6-9 relate to 13:1-5?

 **ANSWER**: The word “perish” in 13:3, 5 which refers to spiritual death ties in with the proposed killing of the fig tree in 13:7-8. Since both the fig tree and the vineyard were common images for Israel, 13:6-9 vividly illustrates the Jews’ need to repent before God – especially regarding Jesus as the Son of Man (the Messiah).

**Personal Application**

 When things go wrong for us, it does not necessarily mean that we have sinned or God is punishing us. In the same way, when things go well for others, that does not necessarily mean that God is blessing them. Using this same logic we could say that Jesus was not right with God because He suffered death on the cross. Or what about the Apostle Paul who had undergone so many troubles, or the other apostles/disciples who suffered and experienced tragic deaths as martyrs? What about so many wealthy people who don’t care at all about a relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ? Are they right with God just because they are so wealthy? Of course not.

 As believers, we need to repent from having cock-eyed notions that question and complain about how God is running the universe. Yes, sin is here and it causes all sorts of problems. You see, God gives us so many truths and answers in His Word, yet we still have the capability of gumming everything up, as this illustration points out:

 An elderly man was taking his first flight on an airplane. He was much more relaxed than he had expected – but there was one problem. His ears would not stop popping. He mentioned this to the airline steward. The steward returned momentarily and explained that chewing gum would keep his ears from popping and handed the man some gum.

 At the end of the flight the man thanked the steward: “The gum worked fine; I did not notice any more pressure in my ears, but I have another problem now. I’m having a terrible time getting this gum out of my ears. Could you help me?”

 [Taken from *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking*, p. 299]

The key for us is to focus on God’s Word of truth and His Son Jesus rather than external circumstances and our own unreliable opinions. This is so hard to do, because we naturally take good things as blessings from God and bad things as resulting from evil. That’s what repentance is all about – trusting in our Heavenly Father and His Word rather than putting our trust in what others say, as well as our own feelings and limited notions of reality.

 A key word in the Scriptures related to repentance is TURN, especially in the Prophets. For example, in Isaiah 56:11 even those who on the surface appear to be quite religious are all botched up because “they all TURN to their own way, each seeks his own gain.” On the contrary, in Isaiah 45:22 Yahweh gives this command with solid reasons for doing so: “TURN to Me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”

 Do you and I really believe that God has the best for us, even when external circumstances are difficult, challenging, even tragic? An honest answer is this: “Lord, I believe; help my unbelief” (the heartfelt cry of a father who loved his distraught son in Mark 9:24).

 In the spirit of true turning, sincere repentance, let us grab a hold of Proverbs 3:5-6 more fervently in our daily lives: “Trust in the LORD with all your heart and do lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will direct your paths.”

Pray this prayer with me: “Father, please give me the insight to know what is from You and the wisdom to keep submitted to the loving and awesome rule of Your dear Son. Thank You.”

Committed to the truth of our merciful Savior,

Pastor Steve Waterman