

Jesus' Call to Repentance

Our New Testament reading is Luke 13:1-9. Jesus is approached by some unidentified interlocutors who inform Jesus about an atrocity committed by the cruel Roman governor, Pontius Pilate (AD 26-36/37). The way Jesus is approached publicly with this question reminds me of typical news journalists who are anxious to interview a well-known public figure, hopeful that he'll say something controversially newsworthy.

In his reply Jesus issues a call to them and to us today about repentance. Follow as I read **Luke 13:1-9**.

At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans?" ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem?" ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did."

⁶ Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, 'See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?' ⁸ He replied, 'Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it.' ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

This attack by Pilate on the Galilean Jews offering sacrifices in the temple was an atrocity but was not widely reported because the Jews were becoming accustomed to Pilate's acts of cruelty toward their Roman occupied nation. Such an atrocity would have been as newsworthy today as perhaps another suicide bomb attack in Syria. Although not surprising, this atrocity was chilling news to the Jewish community; and these "news reporters" asked Jesus what he thought about it. In essence, Jesus replied that this event was to be viewed as a "wake-up call" to the nation. And then, to accentuate his point, Jesus added another "current event"—the collapse of a tower in the Siloam section of Jerusalem, which resulted in 18 deaths.

I preached this text on Sunday morning, September 16th 2001. You can deduce what was on everyone's mind that Sunday morning, since the previous Tuesday was September 11th, referred to since as "9-11," the Attack on America by al Qaeda. During that dreadful week, I heard numerous preachers in rallies across the nation and even in our own city refer to this event as "God's Wake-up Call to the Nation." Since "9-11" America, in some ways, has never been the same. We've come to see our nation as more vulnerable to terrorism, and demagogue

politicians say we should live in fear until we elect them as President, after which all our enemies will soon be destroyed. A false and foolish promise indeed!

Jesus says, instead of fear in the midst of the tragic events of life, the most important thing is for us to awaken to his call for repentance, which is a universal call (1-5). Jesus avoided commenting on the specificity of the victims in this case, and instead issued a call for everyone to repent.

These interlocutors were perhaps engaging Jesus in the age-old debate surrounding the question, “Why does a good and all-powerful God allow suffering?” When we look daily at all the images and reminders of horrific suffering in the world, we need to look again in the first chapters of the Bible to remember that suffering was not in God’s original plan for creation. God created a paradise for humankind. It was sin that drove us from the garden and that introduced separation from God, alienation from one another, hostility and conflict, and the struggles and sorrows in the entire creation, which continues to “groan” until the final Redemption (Romans 8:22).

Although we don’t know the identity of these bearers of bad news to Jesus, we can surmise something, based on Jesus’ reply. Jesus knew that these reporters were thinking secretly that these murdered Galileans must have been worse sinners than they were, since these “sinners” were slaughtered and they were spared a similar fate. In this fallen world, suffering and tragedy are not confined to the wicked nor are temporal and general blessings reserved only for the righteous. As Jesus said, the heavenly Father “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). We must not therefore be simplistic and judgmental toward those who suffer tragedy and misfortune, which is to be like “Job’s miserable comforters.”

Kenneth Bailey, who served for decades as a Presbyterian missionary in the Middle East and was a New Testament seminary professor in Beirut, Lebanon. Whenever he taught our text for today, the students in Beirut marveled that Jesus was not lynched on the spot for his reply to this news of Pilate’s slaughter of the Galilean worshipers. During this time of Bailey’s teaching, Lebanon was in the midst of civil war. He noted that in a land of constant war and strife, the repressed people develop a self-righteous mindset of always being the victims at the hands of always-wicked repressors. In Jesus’ day, Pilate was the epitome of all that the Jews hated—a cruel tyrant who worked for the Roman occupying forces. So when Jesus was told about the latest atrocity committed by the hated Pilate against their fellow repressed Galileans, everyone would have expected Jesus to express sympathy. Instead, he called everyone to repentance. Jesus’ courageous reply implied that these, who had become self-righteous victims of oppressors, were also raising the wrong questions. Whether the reporters were implying that they were spared the tragedy because they were righteous or whether the implication was that their people were suffering unjustly at the hands of a hated enemy, they were missing the point.

And the point is, Jesus says, all of them, the self-righteous fortunate or the suffering unfortunate, must hear the call to repent. The real question is not the “Why?” of suffering, but rather, in the face of life’s tragedies, atrocities and uncertainties, “*What must I do?*” Jesus dared to tell the reporters and all who were standing around him that they had been ignoring the real problem, which was their urgent need to repent.

We should pray and work for peace and justice as God’s representatives of his kingdom of perfect peace and justice. We must give the Gospel credibility in the eyes of a hurting world that wonders if we really care. We must do what we can to help the needy and intervene in behalf of victims of injustice and oppression. Yet we must bear in mind that the most urgent need remains—the need to repent and receive God’s forgiveness. How tragic, if in our zeal for change and relief from human misery, we forget the call of Jesus, a universal call, for repentance.

Jesus issued the call to those who were blinded to the reality of sin or who were questioning the justice of God. They thought they deserved God’s grace and were offended to think they might be under God’s justice. To accentuate the truth that we are all sinners in need of repentance, Jesus added another current event, the collapse of a tower in Jerusalem that killed 18 people (4). And he repeated his message: “Unless you repent, you will all perish” (5).

Amazing Grace, that great hymn by John Newton, at least unofficially, seems to have become the new national hymn. Yet, as it is sung, I cannot help but wonder how many who sing it miss the point. Grace brings true repentance and not just relief from suffering.

RC Sproul says we have begun to take God’s grace for granted, and no longer are amazed by it. In fact, we think God owes us perpetual mercy. Sproul says we sing the song, “*Amazing Justice*,” and our lyrics tend to go like this:

*Amazing Justice, cruel and sharp
That wounds a saint like me:
I’m so darn good it makes no sense—
The tower fell on me!*

When Jesus issued this call to repentance, he understood that looming on the horizon was the impending Roman-Jewish War of AD 66-70, culminating in the destruction of Jerusalem. But even before that time, most of his hearers would face death and be unprepared to meet God in judgment. His message was that the atrocity of the murders in the temple and the collapse of the tower were God’s call to all to repent.

CS Lewis wrote that we cannot ignore suffering. Pain “insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in

our pains. It is His megaphone (microphone/amplifier) to rouse a deaf world” (*The Problem of Pain*). We all know share the experience of having our silence interrupted with an urgent message. When the airplane is preparing to land, you may be watching a movie on the television monitor, but suddenly the sound and picture are shut off. Then the voice of the flight attendant on her microphone tells you to shut the drop-down table in front of you, return your seat to its upright position, make certain your seatbelt is tightly secured. It’s time to prepare for landing.

Jesus told the parable (6-9) about a man who owned a vineyard that also had a fig tree growing in the midst of it. Jesus’ audience and Jewish readers perhaps would have recalled the Prophet Isaiah’s “Song of the Vineyard,” which laments that the nation of Israel had failed to meet God’s expectations and to bear the fruit of justice and righteousness (Isaiah 5:1-7). Jesus demands that we have a righteousness that surpasses the piety of the religious leaders and the legalistic law-keepers (Matthew 5:20). He demands the righteousness of justice, mercy and love. And Jesus looks for not just the initial act of repentance but an entire lifetime of repentance toward God and faith in Christ Jesus, who enables us to live like him (Acts 20:21).

God, the Creator and heavenly Father, the Owner of his vineyard, looks at us in our sinful unfruitfulness and he says to his gardener, “Cut it down!” (7). Without the fruit of godliness, our lives are not only “taking up space,” but also become a detriment to those around us. The fig tree had ample time to bear fruit. If our lives are not bearing fruit for God they are not merely neutral, but are at cross purposes with him. The fig tree, allowed to stand in the middle of the vineyard, would rob fruitful grape vines of needed nutrients from the soil and light from the sun.

But the gardener says, “Sir, let it alone” (verse 8). And he offers to dig around it to loosen the hardened soil and “manure” it, giving it another opportunity to bear fruit. From before the creation of the world God designed our rescue from judgment that we might once again become fruitful as he intended.

What is the way to receive the mercy and grace of God that suspends his judgment? We go back to Jesus’ words in reply to the atrocity and disasters that were reported: “Unless you repent, you will all perish” (3 & 5). Repentance is not a one-time experience, but becomes a way of life. Repentance, which at first opened the door to our conversion to Christ, becomes the daily discipline that continues to make us more like Christ. It’s not just feeling guilty for our sinful failures, but repentance is a change of mind and direction in our lives. This lasting attitude of repentance is the key to fruitful living.

Thus, the Savior, the Gardener of the vineyard, continues to intercede for us, that we might bear fruit that passes inspection (Hebrews 7:25). And, in answer to his prayer, we realize the urgency of bearing the fruit of the Spirit, as we live in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25). We are called to produce the fruit of godly

character, faithful witness, praise and good works that bear witness to our glorious God (John 15:5,8,16; Hebrews 13:15; Colossians 1:10).

Grace can lead us to repentance even before a traumatic wake-up call. It wasn't the tragic current events of the slaughter by Pilate and the collapse of the tower that brought repentance. It was the word of the Lord Jesus that calls us to repentance. We've had a sufficient number of tragic events to awaken our minds and hearts to our need for God's amazing grace. There will always be political, social and personal tragedies, and even an increasing number of natural disasters before the final day of the Lord. We all know that we live in an ever-increasingly dangerous world. But the wake-up call to repentance that we need is simply the gentle whisper of his word, calling us to live fruitfully in this broken world.