

Luke 13:1-9
A Call to Repentance

One of the great philosophical and theological challenges to the Christian faith is the problem of evil. If God is perfectly good (and He is), and if He is all-powerful (and He is), then why does evil exist. Is God goodness not sufficient to make Him care? Is His power not sufficient to do anything about it? Is God unwilling or is He unable? As the ancients put it *unde malum*?

That evil does exist is irrefutable. Throughout history bad things have happened. Be they natural disasters such as earthquakes and floods, or personal tragedies such as infant mortality or catastrophic accidents, bad things have always happened. Such terrible events were something the ancients pondered. Much of Greek, and later Roman, philosophy was devoted to trying to understand the source of evil. But for the ancient Jews, the problem was more significant (and troubling) because of their preconceptions of their God. They, as do we, believed in a God that was perfect, all-powerful and personally involved in our daily welfare.

Therefore, when bad things happened, the Jews were forced to conclude that God had turned away from them. “Why do You hide Your face, and consider me Your enemy?” (Job 13:24), Job asked. The psalmist echoed that sentiment, “why do You stand afar off, O Lord? Why do You hide Yourself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1). But why did God turn His back? Why did He ignore the pleas of His people.

The answer could not be that there was fault in God. He was perfect. He was holy. Therefore the answer had to be that God turned His back because of the something man had done. Man was sinful, and it was that sin that demanded God turn His holy and righteous Self away. It was a given in Jewish theology that “there is no man who does not sin” (1 Kings 8:46). “There is no one who does good” (Psalm 14:1). “There is not a righteous man on earth who continually does good and never sins” (Ecclesiastes 7:20). These are just a few examples of this teaching in the Old Testament. This was a truth embedded in Jewish understanding. So ingrained was this truth, that even the disciples thought according to this paradigm. One day as they were walking with Jesus. “¹As He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. ²And His disciples asked Him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he would be born blind?’” (John 9:1-2).

Today we have a more matured theological understanding of why evil exists. We know that the Bible teaches that God has many good reasons for permitting evil to occur. For example,

God allows evil because it gives people the opportunity to truly discern what is in their hearts.

“You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you in the wilderness these forty years, that He might humble you, testing you, to know what was in your heart, whether you would keep His commandments or not” (Deuteronomy 8:2).

God allows evil so that we learn to depend not on ourselves but on Him.

⁸“For we do not want you to be unaware, brethren, of our affliction which came to us in Asia, that we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life; ⁹indeed, we had the

sentence of death within ourselves so that we would not trust in ourselves, but in God who raises the dead” (1 Corinthians 1:8-9).

God allows evil so that we may learn obedience.

“Before I was afflicted I went astray,
But now I keep Your word” (Psalm 119:67).

God allows evil so He can show us His compassion.

“³Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, ⁴who comforts us in all our affliction so that we will be able to comfort those who are in any affliction with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. ⁵For just as the sufferings of Christ are ours in abundance, so also our comfort is abundant through Christ” (2 Corinthians 1:3-5).

And God allows evil to equip us to better serve others.

“³¹Simon, Simon, behold, Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat; ³²but I have prayed for you, that your faith may not fail; and you, when once you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:31-32).

Each of these reasons has as its ultimate goal the salvation and sanctification of those whom God has chosen. But this is a modern understanding. To the disciples, and the other Jews of Jesus’ time, when evil occurred to someone, it was because they had offended God through sin. Evil was God’s judgment. In the passage before us, Jesus tries to disabuse people of that misunderstanding and explain to them that all have sinned and are under God’s righteous judgment. The issue is not sin, but repentance.

Be Converted

There is a twofold connection between this and the previous passage. First the topic of the urgency of salvation is continued. Second, the dialogue continues that began in Luke 12:1. Luke writes that “now on the same occasion” (v. 1). That is, Jesus was continuing His dialogue when He was interrupted for a third time. The first interruption was recorded in Luke 12:13, when a man had asked Jesus to intervene in a family dispute over inheritance. The second is found in Luke 12:41 when Peter asked Jesus if His teaching was for the disciples themselves, or all who were within earshot. In this instance, “there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices” (v. 1).

Luke gives us no other details about the event. All we know of what is reported is that some people from Galilee had made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and were offering their sacrifices when they were killed. The when and why are not explicitly stated by Luke. We do understand from other historical sources that Pilate was not known for his love of the Jews. When he took command of Judea as Roman governor in 26 AD, he marched his army into Jerusalem carrying banners which bore images that the Jews considered idolatrous. He later threatened to execute those who protested, though he backed down from this when he realized it was likely to arouse more negative attention than he wanted from the Roman authorities.

Some have argued from outside sources that the atrocity occurred during the Feast of Dedication, though others suggest it was during Passover. Perhaps the men from Galilee were zealots who had pushed Pilate

to far. Galilee was rife with political zealots among the Jews. It is clear that the event took place on the temple grounds, since that was the only place at which sacrifices could be offered.

In any event, some Jews had been killed while offering sacrifices in the temple, and this story was reported to Jesus. Interestingly, those who brought forth the story did not have as their main purpose a testimony against Pilate of cruelty. Instead their focus was on the sins of the victims. Their argument was that the victims must have been very wicked indeed for God to have allowed them to suffer such a cruel death while in the process of offering sacrifices (repenting) for their sins. We must pause to reflect on the fact that some people are always more concerned about the religion of others than their own. The state of our own souls ought to be our primary concern. Are we saved? Are we growing closer to God?

As we have seen Him do before, Jesus made use of an interruption to foster a teaching moment. Jesus responded to this accusation, for an accusation it was, by asking a rhetorical question, “do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate?” (v. 2). Not waiting for a response, Jesus continued, “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (v. 3). The word ‘no’ is emphatic. Jesus was challenging their faulty theology that evil was always God’s judgment on sin.

This is not to say that God never immediately judges someone as a consequence of their sin and punishes them by a sudden and unexpected death. Herod was an example.

“²¹On an appointed day Herod, having put on his royal apparel, took his seat on the rostrum and began delivering an address to them. ²²The people kept crying out, ‘the voice of a god and not of a man!’ ²³And immediately an angel of the Lord struck him because he did not give God the glory, and he was eaten by worms and died” (Acts 12:21-23).

Also, this is not to say that there are not natural consequences of sinful behavior. For example, continued alcohol abuse can lead to liver damage and other health problems. Adultery can lead to divorce. But that was not the issue here. Jesus was not talking about the inevitable results of sin, but rather the theological assumption that personal calamity was always related to personal sin.

That repentance, and not sin, was the issue was evidenced by the fact that Jesus continued, “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (v. 3). The word ‘likewise’ does not mean “in the same manner” but rather it means ‘also’. That is, Jesus was not stating that the fate of every sinner will be the same cruel death suffered by the Galileans, but rather that just as suddenly all men might die. To be sure the Galileans who were massacred were sinners, but that is not why they were massacred. All men are sinners, so the real question for those who brought this matter before Jesus, was why did others who were just as sinful survive?

The answer, of course, is that God, in His grace and mercy, withholds judgment. God is compassionate and “is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9). Those who died were no worse than those who lived. God chose to allow some to die and others to live according to His sovereign, inscrutable purpose. This was not about sin, it was about the chance for repentance.

Then Jesus continued with an example of His own. Thinking, perhaps, that the illustration chosen by His visitors had to do with the fact that Galileans were generally looked down on by Judeans (as indeed they were), Jesus drew upon an example closer to home. “Do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem?” (v.4) And again, not pausing for an answer, He concluded, repeating the same phrase He had just used, “I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (v. 5).

As with the massacre of the Galileans, we know little more about this incident than what Luke relates. The section of Jerusalem known as Siloam was located near the southeast corner of the city and had a pool at which Jesus had healed a blind man (John 9:1-12). The pool was fed by springs in the nearby Kidron valley. Tunnels had been built during the reign of Hezekiah to bring in water to the city.

At some point in the past, a tower, perhaps associated with a Roman aqueduct along the same lines as the tunnels, had collapsed. In this accident eighteen people had died. Jesus made the point that they did not die because they were worse sinners than anyone else. They were no more guilty than another. Whether they were from Galilee, Judea, or anywhere else, all people are sinners and owe God the same debt.

The real issue of course was not the massacre or the falling tower. Those are simply examples of the evils in this world. The real issue was the fact that, as Jesus said, “unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (v. 5). Everyone eventually dies, it is what comes next that is of eternal significance, “and inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment’ (Hebrews 9:27). As Jesus had stated earlier in this very dialogue, “⁴I say to you, My friends, do not be afraid of those who kill the body and after that have no more that they can do. ⁵But I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who, after He has killed, has authority to cast into hell; yes, I tell you, fear Him!” (Luke 12:4-5).

Repentance was what was called for. Not a works-based righteousness that the Jews believed. Like believers today, the Jews to whom Jesus spoke must begin by understanding that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). Repentance always begins with the knowledge of sin. They must recognize that God’s law applies to them, that they have failed to keep it, and that the consequences of this is eternal separation from God, “for the wages of sin is death” (Romans 6:23). Then they must demonstrate genuine sorrow for their sin. Repentance can ever be a ritual. The confession of sin must be from a heart of contrition and brokenness, “the sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, You will not despise” (Psalm 51:17). Finally there must be a commitment to a breaking away from sin. This is a lifelong habit. There will always be sins to repent of.

But repentance was not just turning away from sin. It was turning to Jesus as Savior and Lord. As Paul praised the church at Thessalonica because it was known that “⁹they themselves report about us what kind of a reception we had with you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, that is Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come” (1 Thessalonians 1:9-10).

Be Converted Now

To bring home the sense of urgency, Jesus told a parable.

“⁶A man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and did not find any. ⁷And he said to the vineyard-keeper, ‘behold, for three years I have come looking

for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?’⁸ And he answered and said to him, ‘let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer; ⁹and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.’” (v. 6-9).

This parable was the concluding statement to the entire dialogue. Jesus finished this sermon with a call to repent - and to repent now. As usual, He chose an illustration that everyone listening would be able to relate to.

Fig trees were abundant in Palestine. Some grew naturally, but they were also cultivated for their fruit. They grew to a height of twenty-five feet and provided both fruit and shade in the hot desert. In this case, a tree had been planted carefully, and apparently been well tended. When the owner came to inspect his crop, he had to look closely because the fruit on a fig tree is not visible from a distance. So the owner looked carefully under the branches to see evidence that his tree was being productive. He apparently repeated this performance for three years. Since most fig trees do not bear fruit of the first three years, perhaps the owner checked the tree more to determine the progress of growth than in a true expectation of seeing any fruit. But finally, the owner decided that the tree was not only useless, but was taking up space that would be better used by another new planting. He wanted the tree destroyed.

At this point the vineyard-keeper, being merciful, begged for another year. Perhaps he had become attached to the plant. Perhaps he hoped one more year would be sufficient to allow fruit to finally appear. He even had a plan to produce the fruit. He hoped to loosen the soil by digging around the tree and also he planned to give it extra feeding. The owner agreed, but demanded results. The vineyard-keeper understood that if the tree did not bear fruit the following year, it would be cut down. It is curious that in the original Greek, the first conditional clause “if it bears fruit next year” expresses a condition which is not expected to occur, but the second conditional clause, “if not, then cut it down” expresses a condition which is much more likely to occur. That is, even the vineyard-keeper has his doubts.

This delightful story has two particular applications. First, the fig tree represents the nation of Israel. The Bible often refers to the nation of Israel as a well-planted vine,

“¹Let me sing now for my well-beloved
A song of my beloved concerning His vineyard.
My well-beloved had a vineyard on a fertile hill.
²He dug it all around, removed its stones,
And planted it with the choicest vine.
And He built a tower in the middle of it
And also hewed out a wine vat in it;
Then He expected it to produce good grapes,
But it produced only worthless ones” (Isaiah 5:1-2).

We know that where God gives privileges, He expects returns. As Jesus had recently emphasized, “from everyone who has been given much shall much be required” (Luke 12:48). Israel had received great privileges. They had been chosen of all the nations of the world. They had the Mosaic Law. They had the best land. They had the temple. They had the prophets. None of this had been given to the

Egyptians, or the Assyrians, or the Hittites or the Babylonians. Yet Israel rejected their God time and time again. When the Messiah came, they rejected him as well.

But this illustration applies to us as well. Today we have great light. We have the Scriptures. We have the testimonies of the saints through the ages. We have a solid Bible-teaching church and freedom of worship. We cannot be unfruitful with such privileges without risking our peril.

Ceremonial religion will not do. Avoiding open, flagrant sin will not do. We must manifest the fruits of the Spirit. We must move the kingdom of God forward. Our religion must not be simply the avoidance of the negative, but it must produce a positive good, “let us not lose heart in doing good” (Galatians 6:9).

We know that God is merciful. It began when God did not cast Adam and Eve into hell immediately upon their sinning. His mercy continues to this very day. But though God is longsuffering, His patience is not infinite. There will be a judgment. The time to repent is now.

Interestingly, we never learn if the tree bore fruit and survived, or was cut down into firewood. That was not the lesson Jesus wanted to teach. Jesus wanted to emphasize the urgency of the need of salvation. We do not know how many more opportunities we have; we do not know when our final “year” begins.

Takeaways

If we have not received Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, the time to do so is now. There is no wisdom in delaying. If we have received Him, then we must “bear fruit in keeping with repentance” (Matthew 3:8) and further the kingdom of God by sharing the gospel with unbelievers.