

When Disaster Strikes...

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Luke 13:1-5

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If you have your Bible with you this morning, please open it up to Luke 13.

This morning we find Jesus in the region of Galilee surrounded by a large crowd of many thousands. So far it has been a busy day. The day began with prayer and time spent teaching his disciples. (11:1-11) Then as the people began to find their way to Jesus that morning, he casts out a demon, and is accused by some of doing it by the power of Satan (11:14-26).

Then comes the mid-morning meal, where Jesus is invited to the home of a Pharisee. He neglects to do the ceremonial washing of the hands to the surprise of his host. Jesus then spends his brunch-hour calling out the Pharisees and teachers of the law for their hypocrisy (11:37-52).

Then Jesus leaves the house and goes outside where the Pharisees and teachers of the law begin to “oppose him fiercely and to besiege him with questions, waiting to catch him in something he might say” (11:53-54).

Luke sets the scene for us in 12:1:

“Meanwhile, when a crowd of many thousands had gathered, so that they were trampling on one another, Jesus began to speak first to his disciples...”

So the crowd is pressing in tightly, Jesus begins by teaching his disciples, and he goes back and forth between speaking to the crowd and speaking to his disciples.

***Luke 13:1** Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.*

Even though Jesus is teaching, it’s not uncommon for someone in the crowd to speak up and sort of steer the conversation in a different direction. So these guys are like, “Hey Jesus, did you hear the news this morning? Some Galileans were executed and Pilate the Roman governor mixed their own blood with the sacrifices that they were offering at the temple!” Isn’t that something?!

Jesus’ response gives us a clue as to what these guys were thinking as they informed Jesus of this news.

² Jesus answered, *“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?”^a*

In other words, Jesus knew that as they shared this latest piece of news, that they had already drawn their own conclusions about it. They had an attitude of condemnation beneath their little news report: Wow! They must have done something dreadfully wicked that this happened to them!” “I wonder what God was *punishing* them for?”

Jesus’ responds immediately to challenge the thinking of those who shared this news:

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.*

Right about here, I imagine that Jesus’s disciples are blushing, and doing the “gulp”. Like, woah Jesus. Settle down here...Let’s not offend *everyone*. Some of these people are good people that might want to join us! Besides, they kind of have a point don’t they?

Do you really think that God would let something like that happen to them if they weren’t guilty of doing something terrible? You can’t really mean that innocent old Joseph the Galilean blacksmith over here is as bad as them???

But Jesus is pretty emphatic and quite clear...I tell you, no! No! Those Galileans who were executed and had their blood mixed into their own sacrifices were’t any worse sinners than all of you Galileans...

To drive his point home Jesus gives them another example - vs. 4:

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?*

“You can just imagine what some were thinking. Well, surely they must have been to have some kind of tragic disaster like that happen to them.” “It was the punishment of God on them” “...in fact, I was talking to so and so and I heard that one of those men who died when the tower fell had been...(fill-in-the-blank)”.

Jesus says, “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."*

What are you saying, here, Jesus? What's your point?

Are you saying that those guys who died in that tragic accident aren't as bad of people as we think they are? Or are you saying that all of us aren't as good as we think we are?

Are you saying that they didn't deserve what happened to them? That it was truly a tragedy? Or, are you saying that we also deserve to die just as they did?

It's pretty hard to get around the straightforward point that Jesus makes here. He doesn't leave us any wiggle room. "I tell you, no, those Galileans who were executed were no worse of sinners than the rest of you Galileans, and unless *you* repent, you *also* will perish." "I tell you, no, those 18 died when the tower of Siloam fell on them weren't any more guilty of sin than the rest of the people living in Jerusalem, and but unless *you* repent, you too will all perish, will eventually meet a similar fate as them."

One of the things that concerns me as I listen to what Jesus says here is how so many times, I have heard Christians say and express the very same attitude of judgment towards others as Jesus is calling them out on right here.

How many times have I heard that some awful tragedy has occurred somewhere...and for almost every one it seems there is a Christian in a church somewhere saying... "It's God's judgment on them. It serves them right for (fill-in-the-blank).

In 2005 it was Hurricane Katrina which devastated the city of New Orleans. Christians were saying it then...they got what they deserve! That's the place where Mardi Gras happens every year, and it's a wicked and immoral place. And so they got what was coming to them.

In 2010 it was Pat Robertson attributing the devastating earthquake in Haiti to God's curse on them because of the Haitians making a pact with the devil.

Even today I've heard it said many times that our own country or the U.S aren't doing as well as they otherwise would be because God has his hand against us, and is punishing us for embracing various kinds of immoral behaviour.

The sad reality is that when disaster strikes, many Christians today are quick to point the finger, and look for blame...who sinned? Who is responsible for this? Were those affected guilty of some terrible sin? Was the nation that this took place in friendly or hostile to Israel? There's gotta be some reason why God would bring this disaster on them...it's punishment for

something...

There's someone else I've heard say the exact same thing...the friends of Job...

Job had just lost his livestock, his servants, and all his children to raiders, fire from heaven, and a desert storm. And then something happened that his body became covered with painful sores.

Eliphaz

"Who being innocent has ever perished?
Where were the upright ever destroyed?

As I have observed, those who plow evil
and those who sow trouble reap it." (Job. 4:7-8)

In other words, you must have done something to deserve all this...You must be guilty of some secret sin.

Bildad

"Does God pervert justice? When your children sinned against him, he gave them over to the penalty of their sin...But if you will seek God earnestly and plead with the Almighty, if you are pure and upright, even now he will rouse himself on your behalf and restore you to your prosperous state...."

Translation...all of this has come on you and your family because you and your children are guilty of sin...Repent and God will restore you!

Zophar

Come on Job!...

"If you devote your heart to God and stretch out your hands to Him, if you put away the sin that is in your hand and allow no evil to dwell in your tent..."

Without Reason

And on and on they go...and all this while we know right from the beginning of the story that Job and his children did not receive all of this calamity as punishment for their sin...The LORD himself speaking to Satan said in Job 2:3, "You incited me against [my servant Job] to ruin him without any reason." In other words, the LORD permitted Satan to bring calamity on Job without any fault of Job's.

The LORD's purposes in disaster and calamity aren't always what we assume. In God's perfect plan and purposes the righteous sometimes suffer, and the wicked sometimes prosper for a season. We should take a lesson from Job, and be slow to speak about *why* God is doing what He is doing, and current events in the news are owing to.

The LORD

When the LORD finally speaks into the story of Job...the first thing He says is this:

"Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me." (Job 38:1).

And then the LORD goes on to ask him a whole slough of rhetorical questions to illustrate just how little we know even how the ordinary stuff of earth works...and by contrast makes the point that He, the LORD, alone has all wisdom and insight, and understands what's going and why.

In my experience many of us are like the friends of Job, going around pointing the finger at other people and countries and ethnic groups and saying...disaster has come on you?, it's because you are guilty of sin.

That was the attitude of these men who told Jesus about the Galileans who had been executed...that was the attitude of many who heard the news that the tower of Siloam fell on 18 and killed them.

But let's learn from Jesus...what should we think about these kinds of events and disasters? What does Jesus say?
Let's start with that little word: "all". Jesus uses it twice.

Example from the text: vs. 2 (Jesus is in Galilee so essentially all of *you* Galileans) and vs. 5. (All Jerusalem -> *you*!)

Jesus point is simple: **All** of us (not including Jesus) are sinners and guilty of sin against God. We all deserve the just punishment of God for our sin, just as much as anyone else on this planet.

But Jesus gets even more personal and specific. He goes from *all* to *you*. He takes the finger

which is pointing at others and turns it back to *you* and *me*. “Rather than wondering with surprise what others have done to deserve this...consider the fact that you too generally deserve the same as what happened to them. Rather than skimming through the news article to see whether they were Muslim or atheist or pro-choice or pro-Israel or homosexual, take a spiritual skim through of your own life and remember why you too deserve generally the same as what just happened to them.

It may have happened in Jerusalem...but don't allow yourself an us and them mentality here... *You too* will perish unless you repent.

Jesus made it personal, so let's it make it personal this morning.

If Jesus had come in our day...I have no doubt if we would have told him about the earthquake in Haiti and the Hurricane in New Orleans...and all kinds of other disasters...and He would say the exact same thing to us today...Do you think they are worse sinners than the rest of you? Do you think they are more guilty than the rest of you? Unless, *you* repent...you too will perish. The Larger point that Jesus is making here is simply this. All of us are sinners and guilty of sin against God.

What Jesus says here, absolutely flies in the face of what many in our world believe. Many believe that with the exception of some, we are all essentially good people. But Jesus, the Son of God, doesn't agree with that evaluation.

He brings the true evaluation of God. The correct diagnosis of our condition. We are all *sinners*, We are all people who have *sinned* against God and are *guilty* before Him. We are all people who deserve to be struck down and perish in the next tragedy and calamity that we read about in the news...Do hear what Jesus is saying about you? You and I have a big sin and guilt problem with God! And you too will perish....

...Unless you repent. Unless you repent. That's the gospel in just 3 words. Can you imagine if this little 3 word sub-clause wasn't there? If he just said..."I tell you, no! But you too will all perish. Period." ?! But he doesn't! He gives us and the people that day these 3 wonderful words of hope.

There is an "unless"! An exception to the general truth that all of us are doomed before God because of our guilt and sin...There is a way to *not* perish like we deserve to! There is a people who will *not perish* as they rightfully should because of their sin and guilt before God. Unless you repent...by the mercy and grace of God there is way out! A way to not get what we deserve!

What is that way? Repent says Jesus. Repentance has several dimensions to it:

Repentance has a relational dimension to it.

Luke 17:3 ...“If your brother or sister sins against you, rebuke them; and if they repent,

forgive them.

⁴ Even if they sin against you seven times in a day and seven times come back to you saying 'I repent,' you must forgive them."

Repentance is what you do to make right a relational wrong. To repent means that you take responsibility, and own the wrongs you have done to another. And you confess, admit them to that person, and apologize to them for what you did.

Perhaps the best picture of what repenting looks like is the one Jesus gives us in the parable of the Prodigal Son. After dishonouring his Father, squandering his inheritance, and living in all kinds of way dishonourable to his Dad, he comes home and admits his wrong:

He says, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." (Luke 15:21).

He admits that he has sinned against his Father, and that he is unworthy. To repent means that we humble ourselves before God, and own our sin, that we own the ways that we have wronged Him, and confess and admit and apologize to Him. Repentance also has an inward dimension to it.

True and sincere repentance starts in the heart and in the mind. It's a change of heart and a change of mind. Even before we admit and confess we must first have that change take place in here, where we accept and take responsibility for, and own what we were unwilling to before. We humble ourselves before God and his Word in here, we admit that we've blown it in here.

Acts 20:26 - Paul says, "First to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and then to the Gentiles, I preached that they should repent and turn to God and **demonstrate** their repentance by their deeds."

This is one of several places in which repentance is spoken about as an inward thing. Something that happens inside of us. The change of behaviour that follows, as we see here, is the evidence of the inward reality of repentance. Repentance also has an outward dimension to it.

While repentance at it's core is a relational thing, and an inward thing...it also has an outward dimension to it. If you are sincerely sorry or repentant for the wrong you have done, and you have had a genuine change of heart and mind...then it follows that your behaviour will also change. This is perhaps most powerfully spelled out by the author of Hebrews:

He points out that some of his readers need to "re-lay" their foundation of repentance... Because, if you are truly on the whole repentant for your sins, you will not continue to wilfully do them over and over and over again. To do so is to mock God and his forgiveness and mercy. In the words of the author of Hebrews to sin continually deliberately and wilfully against God is like "crucifying the Son of God all over again, and subjecting Him to public disgrace" (Heb. 6:6).

It's like trampling on Jesus, treated his blood which was shed for your forgiveness as if it were nothing, and insulting the Spirit of grace. (Heb. 10:26-27).

Real repentance has an outward change of behaviour that goes with it.

The Relational Dimension

And each of these three dimensions is important. Repentance that has no relational aspect isn't genuine. Paul tells the Corinthians that it's little more than worldly sorrow...sadness that you were caught or exposed to shame, or that you let yourself down. Real repentance is sorrow because you realize and admit that you have sinned against God himself.

Repentance is relational...it's something you personally express to God. It's not a mechanical thing or a formulaic thing like penance - where you do enough good works to "pay for your wrongs or prove that you're sorry"

The Inward Dimension

Real repentance has to have an *inward* dimension to it. The kind of repentance that God is looking for is that of the heart and mind. Without that it's meaningless to God. It's a sham that God sees right through! As the prophet Joel said:

*Joel 2:12 "Even now," declares the LORD,
"return^a to me with all your heart,^b
with fasting and weeping and mourning."
13 Rend your heart^a
and not your garments.^b
Return^c to the LORD your God,
for he is gracious and compassionate,^d
slow to anger and abounding in love,^e
and he relents from sending calamity.^f*

Don't just tear your clothes and put on the sackcloth and ashes, and give me the outward show...tear your heart, and return to me with all your heart...Real repentance has to have that *inward* dimension to it.

The Outward Dimension

And real genuine repentance will have a change of behaviour - away from sinning and disobedience to God, and toward righteous living and obedience to God. This has to be there because the fruit that the tree bears is evidence of what kind of tree it is. The outward behaviour comes from the inward reality. If you are asking God to forgive you before or at the same time as you are knowingly sinning against him...you can be sure that you are not truly repentant. If when you admit and confess, you are in the same moment deciding that you will do it again, not too soon but soon enough, then you are not truly repentant. The Lord is

merciful and He forgives countless times yes...but a real change of heart and mind toward God will evidence itself in a real change of behaviour.

Back to Jesus and his good news in a nutshell. "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." Some of us as we hear that will hear nothing but condemnation. And as people who like to hide our sin, and hide our faults, and cover up our mistakes it's natural for us to recoil from these words. I don't like them anymore than you do...

But for us this morning I'm praying that you will see and hear not just the condemnation that we all deserve, but the incredible gift of grace that is bound up in these 3 little words: Unless you repent.

Let me phrase it differently...If you repent you will not perish with the rest. If you simply come to God, and own your sin, and admit and confess it what You've done to Him *against* Him...You will not receive what You deserve...You will not in the ultimate sense, perish with the rest...You will not be held guilty for what You have done, as the rest will be...

What's implied here is simply this: If you humble yourself before God and admit that you've blown it that You are on the hook for your sins, and that You are sorry. I have sinned against heaven - against You!" God will forgive You. And Jesus would later go on to himself *be executed* - his blood a sacrifice on your behalf - to make that forgiveness possible in a just way.

Do you want the forgiveness of God? Then repent and confess your sins to God. And He will forgive you.

In the words of Joel again:

Return to the Lord Your God with all your heart...for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love.

What should we do in light of all this?

1. Thank and Praise God

For starters **thank and praise** God that He forgives us of our sins we we repent.

2. Repentance is a lifelong thing

Next, we should remember that repenting isn't just a one and done thing. It's a thing we do throughout our lives, again and again when we sin and stray. It's not just something for unbelievers...Jesus himself commanded his own people, the 7 churches of Revelation to repent!

He said, "Those whom I love, I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent." (Rev. 3:19).

Is your heart fully given over to the LORD this morning? Today is the day to repent!

“Today if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as the Israelites did in the wilderness...” (Heb. 3:7-8)

3. Repentance is essential to understand and communicate

Third, repentance is absolutely essential for all of us to understand and to communicate as we share the good news of Christ.

Luke 24:47 ...and repentance for the forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem... said Jesus.

God’s forgiveness will not be given to those who do not humbly own and admit that they’ve blown it to God. And we are responsible as ambassadors for Christ to let people know that, and of course as we do to tell them the *good news*, that when we repent, God will forgive.

4. Regarding natural disasters in the news

Finally, when it comes to natural disasters and tragedies that we read about in the news. Let’s not be like the people in this story whom Jesus rebukes. Let’s not be like the friends of Job...If all we can think to say is, “Gee...I wonder what they *did* to deserve that....or point to some sin that someone in their region has committed.” Then we’d be better off to say with Job, “I will put my hand over my mouth...I will say no more.” (Job 40:5). Lest we be guilty of obscuring the plans and purposes of the LORD with words without knowledge.

Unlike the inspired authors of the Scriptures we do not know precisely *why* God allows, permits or causes each thing that happens here on the earth. And so we would be wise to listen to Jesus, and make it our habit instead that when we read about a disaster, the first place you go is: Wow, Lord, that should have been me that died there...they got what *I* deserve.

Let’s not be self-righteous and deceived, thinking that we are less guilty and less sinners than they. We are all sinners in need of God’s gift of salvation. And God does not save on the basis of our perceived “righteousness” or on the basis of how we have tried to keep his commands. Let’s remember that Abraham himself grew up as a pagan worshipper of other “gods” before God chose him. Let’s remember that Saul persecuted the church right up to the day that God mercifully saved him. Our “good works” do not bring us any nearer to salvation. And the sinful deeds of people no matter how heinous they be, do not put us beyond God’s reach - His mighty power to save.

Let’s pray.