



Sunday School Lesson Summary for February 10, 2008

Released on February 6, 2008

"Summoned to Repent"

Printed Text: Luke 13:1-9

Background Scripture: Luke 13:1-9

Devotional Reading: Psalm 63:1-6

Luke 13:1-9

1 There were present at that season some that told him of the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.
2 And Jesus answering said unto them, Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners above all the Galileans, because they suffered such things?
3 I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.
4 Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell, and slew them, think ye that they were sinners above all men that dwelt in Jerusalem?
5 I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.
6 He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and sought fruit thereon, and found none.
7 Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground?
8 And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it:
9 And if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Tell what Jesus said about repentance in light of tragedy and the need to bear fruit.
2. Articulate the biblical connections between sin, repentance, and spiritual fruit.
3. Address one area of his or her life in which repentance and/or the bearing of more fruit is needed.

Introduction

"If I have offended anyone by what I did, I'm sorry." In today's world, we often hear this type of apology. While this may be sincere, these words express no regret or remorse for the actions that offended. The only regret is that someone was offended. This is a far cry from apologizing by saying, "I'm sorry for what I did. It was wrong, and I regret my actions and the damage they have caused. Will you forgive me?" The difference between these two kinds of apologies is repentance.

Repentance is a major topic throughout the Bible. Sin is rebellion against God; it is disobedience to His will and commands. Because God is merciful, His primary reaction to our sin is not to punish immediately, but to call for repentance. A

constant refrain of God's Old Testament prophets was, "Turn ye again now every one from his evil way, and from the evil of your doings" (Jeremiah 25:5).

A prayer of Solomon describes the first step in repentance: "We have sinned, and have done perversely, we have committed wickedness" (1 Kings 8:47). Repentance begins with recognition of sin. We should not assume that we can determine what is sin by our feelings. The Bible contains many clear statements as to what constitutes sinful behavior.

A second aspect of repentance is to experience a deep-seated sense of sorrow and regret for our sin. This is much more than regret at being caught or sorrow that comes as a result of disastrous sin. It is, rather, a soul-searching realization that our rebellious actions and attitudes shows a lack of respect for our loving Father in Heaven. Paul describes this as sorrow "after a godly manner" (2 Corinthians 7:9).

A third aspect of repentance is replacing sinful actions with righteous actions. "If the wicked turn from his wickedness, and do that which is lawful and right, he shall live thereby" (Ezekiel 33:19). John the Baptist called this the fruit of repentance (Matthew 3:8). True repentance will have tangible results in our lives.

The New Testament uses two concepts to express the idea of repentance. The first is the idea of a change in thinking processes, a renewal of mind (see Romans 12:2). A second way of expressing the idea of repentance is to use the metaphor of the physical act of turning around. The principle is that we cannot be chasing sin and pursuing God at the same time. Paul expressed both of these ideas when he reported that the Gentiles had repented and turned to God (Acts 26:20).

In our world today, repentance seems to be a sadly lacking and increasingly rare commodity. Today's lesson gives us insights into the high level of importance that Jesus placed on repentance. As His followers, we should hear His words carefully.

Lesson Background

Today's passage from Luke is set during what has been called "the later Judean ministry" of Jesus. Combining Luke 10:1-13:21 with John 7:11-10:39 will give us the fullest picture we can have of this particular facet of Jesus' work. The Gospels of Matthew and Mark do not record Jesus' work during this period.

A theme of Jesus in the two chapters immediately preceding Luke 13 is the need for spiritual preparedness. He taught the necessity for living lives of light, not darkness (Luke 11:35). He exhorted the crowds to realize that they could not hide sin from God (12:2, 3). He warned of the sin that could not be forgiven (12:10). He promised strength and words from the Holy Spirit in the time of trials before the religious authorities (12:11, 12). He illustrated the folly of a man who cared more for his wealth than for his soul (12:16-21). He instructed His followers to be ready for any coming crisis (12:35).

There is no more significant aspect to spiritual preparation than repentance. The fruitful spiritual life cannot be found without consistent self-examination and purging of sinful attitudes. We cannot love sin and God at the same time; He will not stand for it. God is a jealous God (Deuteronomy 4:24), one who will have nothing to do with the devotion of His people to fictitious gods.

Jesus understood the preaching of repentance to be at the core of His ministry (see Luke 5:32; 24:47). The thirteenth chapter of Luke contains important teaching on repentance. Here we find the words of our Savior on this matter, a man who needed no repentance because He was without sin.

Sin, Tragedy, and Repentance (Luke 13:1-5)

When a great tragedy occurs, is it God's punishment for sin? Is catastrophe God's way of bringing people to repentance? These are two very different questions. The assumptions behind them are the focus of this section.

1. What tragedy befell some Galileans as they worshipped? (v. 1)

As Jesus was teaching, some came to inform Him that Pilate had brutally massacred some Galatians. The verb "were present" implies that they had just arrived, and "told" implies that they made an announcement. So they were probably coming to give Jesus news of an event that had just occurred.

The tragedy had happened in the temple area in Jerusalem. Some Galileans had gone there to offer sacrifices, and Pilate had killed them as they were doing so or preparing to do so. This was vividly described as mixing their blood with their sacrifices.

The incident is offensive in two ways. First, the brutality of a Roman massacre of Jews is a reminder of the fact that the Jews are not free; they are captives in their own land to the Roman overlords. Thus it is a political outrage. Second, the fact that the incident took place within the temple is a sacrilege, possibly involving the presence of Gentiles (the Roman soldiers who did the killing) in forbidden parts of the temple. Thus, it is also a religious outrage.

Those reporting it to Jesus probably wanted to get His opinion about such blasphemy and the political consequences for such blasphemy. They probably expected Jesus to avenge the death of His fellow Galileans since He had the power, or they may have wanted to know the theological interpretation of such an event.

2. What theological question did Jesus raise that was based on this tragedy? (v. 2)

Jesus responds by turning the focus from the perpetrator (Pilate) to the victims (*these Galileans*). Jesus wants His listeners to consider why this incident happened. Were the victims more sinful than the general population, thus deserving of God's punishing wrath? Were the Romans being used as an instrument of God's justice? The issue thus ceases to be a political question. It is now a doctrinal question.

Jesus raised the theological question, "Suppose ye that these Galilaeans were sinners above all the Galilaeans, because they suffer such things?" The common response to Jewish tragedy is to assume that the victim or the victim's parents sinned (cf. John 9:2). The belief was that bad things happened because someone sinned.

Job is an excellent example of this Jewish mentality. When Job was being tested through suffering, his friend, Eliphaz attributed Job's suffering to sin. "Is not thy wickedness great?" he asked, "and thine iniquities infinite?" (Job 22:5; cf. 4:7; 8:4-6, 20). Even some Scriptures, taken by themselves, would seem to associate sufferings inflexibly with personal sin (cf. Exod. 20:5; Prov. 10:24-25). But Jesus would have a surprise for his audience.

3. Is God's judgment reserved for the worst sinners? (v. 3)

Jesus denied the reasoning of calamity based on the severeness of sin: "I tell you, Nay" (Luke 13:3). He did not deny the general connection between a sinful world and the tragedies that befall human beings, nor did He rule out the possibility that in specific cases tragedy was a punishment for personal sin. But He did reject the judgmental attitude that labeled victims as worse sinners.

James 2:10 reminds us that if a person obeys the law and sins in one area, then he or she is guilty of breaking all of the law. In other words, the person who sins is a law breaker, which includes all of us. All unrepentant sinners will eventually perish, for the only eternal reward for sin is death (Romans 6:23).

4. What are some areas in which we as individuals need to repent? What about as a church? What will happen when we do?

All of us have prideful habits in our lives that need correcting. Repentance has to happen for pride to give way to humility.

For some, the things of this world have become the driving force for living. To turn from these requires that we trust the promise of Scripture that when we seek first the kingdom of God, He will provide our needs (Matthew 6:33). As individuals and as the church, prejudice and racism may be sins that call for repentance. Gossip needs to be replaced with gracious speech. The list here is potentially quite long!

Remember that Jesus cursed a fig tree for failing to bear fruit (Mark 11:12-14, 20, 21). Jesus also threatened to remove the light of an unrepentant church (Revelation 2:4, 5).

5. How did the second tragedy to which Jesus referred differ from the first one? (v. 4-5)

Jesus tells of another tragedy to emphasize His point. The lesson of repentance must be important for Him to immediately repeat this same lesson. The point of this tragedy is the same as the first tragedy. He wants His listeners to fully comprehend this lesson and take it seriously.

Jesus tells of the second tragedy about the collapse of a tower in Siloam, which caused the deaths eighteen people. Was this accident, then, divine retribution on men who were perhaps the greatest sinners?

Jesus again answered with an emphatic No! He repeated His warning that apart from repentance, all would perish and not enter the presence of God. God was not weighing the relative enormity of human sins; even the slightest affront to His holiness was sufficient to condemn the sinner. All stand condemned, for all sin (cf. Rom. 3:9-20, 23).

6. What attitude should we avoid when hearing of calamities?

Jesus' teaching has lessons for us today. One of these involves the temptation to become self-righteous when calamities fall upon others. How often have we interpreted natural catastrophes to be God's judgment on a city, a region, or a country? How often have we thought when individuals suffer tragedy, "I am not surprised at what happened; I could see it coming"? Conversely, we tend to think our health and prosperity prove that we are better than they.

We must beware of smugness. It is not our superior righteousness but the grace of God that preserves us physically and spiritually. Paul's advice is necessary: "Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10:12).

Repentance, Fruit, and Patience (Luke 13:6–9)

If personal tragedy and pain are not God's ways of punishing sin, then why do we suffer? Does God ever use our misfortunes to accomplish His purposes? These are the questions that Jesus now explores in His Parable of the Barren Fig Tree.

7. Why did the owner in the parable want the fig tree removed? (v. 6–7)

Jesus tells of a fig tree that has not produced any fruit for three consecutive years. The fig tree was not fulfilling its purpose. Since the fig tree is not being fruitful, the owner wants it removed. The tree is taking up space and using precious resources from the soil. The garden would be better off without it. The tree could be replaced with new crops that will produce fruit.

The tree had three years to produce fruit. If it was going to produce fruit, then it should have done so within this time period. The owner could understand one fruitless year, maybe two. But three years of unfruitfulness is unacceptable to the owner, and he desires to take action.

Through this parable Jesus taught that God had every right to expect the fruits of repentance from the people in His audience. Indeed, the fig tree probably represents the whole nation of Israel, planted on earth to bear fruit for God. The story resembles Isaiah's song of the vineyard (Isa. 5:1–7), in which Judah, instead of bearing good grapes, produced worthless ones. The Lord therefore decreed its destruction.

8. What did the winedresser propose to do instead of cutting the tree down? (v. 8–9)

The winedresser (Jesus) makes an interesting proposal. He suggested that the owner (God) give the tree one more year to produce figs. During that time the winedresser would "dig about it, and dung it." Loosening the soil around it would make it possible for moisture to reach the roots, and fertilizing it with manure would provide nutrients that may have been lacking. The tree was given every advantage it needed to bear fruit.

If the tree would produce fruit, then the tree is in good shape. However, if the tree does not produce fruit, then the tree will be cut down.

9. What can we learn about the vinedresser (Jesus) that should serve as a model for us as we interact with those caught in lives of sin?

The vinedresser had a heart of compassion and concern. As we deal with those caught in sin, we can demonstrate an attitude of love and care. The vinedresser asked the Lord of the vineyard for permission to work. We too can seek God as we work with those in sin. We do not approach them with our own strength, but in the power of the Lord.

We also can provide some "cultivation" in the life of the person for whom we have concern. This may include holding them accountable and offering holy alternatives. We can pray for them and with them, study God's Word together, and offer words of encouragement as ways to foster spiritual productivity.

10. What lesson does Jesus' parable have for unrepentant sinners?

The lessons of this parable extend beyond Israel to human beings in general. Every one of us, like the fig tree, has been created to honor, glorify, and produce fruit for God. Time after time He comes looking for fruit, but finds none. He is patient and gracious, withholding judgment from those who deserve it. The forbearance of God is truly amazing, as manifested even in His sparing of wicked king Ahab from judgment (1 Kings 21:29).

Careless sinners misunderstand God's patience, seeing it as a sign of weakness or a lack of resolve. So they exploit it and ignore the other lesson of the parable—that judgment will surely come. Paul stated it clearly. Refusing to believe that God's forbearance is designed to lead them to repentance, they despise the riches of His goodness. And the only riches they store up are the judgments brought by God's wrath (Rom. 2:4-5).

God is love, and in His love He sent His son to be the Savior of sinful mankind. Jesus did everything necessary for sinners to be reconciled to God. How it must grieve Him to see people despise His gift! He is also holy, and His holiness demands that sin be punished. If sinners refuse to accept the forgiveness purchased by Jesus' blood, He has no choice but to punish. But He waits and warns. How seriously do we take His warning?

Conclusion

Why do bad things happen to good people? Some may think that Christians should be entitled to a special, protective relationship with God that exempts us from personal pain and tragedy. Yet the people of Christ's church live with heartbreak on a continual basis. The joy of childbirth is changed into the grief of crib death. A family's normal existence is shattered by a drunk driver. Financial stability is lost due to unemployment. The list goes on.

A few years ago, a good friend's house was destroyed when a windstorm caused a tree in his neighbor's yard to fall on it. Fortunately, no one was hurt, but there was no way he could have foreseen or avoided this accident. He is a fine person, a leader in his church, a faithful husband, and a wonderful father. Why did this happen to his family?

When we evaluate such tragedies, there are two big mistakes we are likely to make. First, some believe that God causes such events as direct punishment for some type of hidden sin. Today's lesson is a rebuttal to this way of thinking. We are all sinners. If God were constantly punishing sin with tragic consequences, we should be suffering the unspeakable on a daily basis. To believe that God immediately punishes sin with pain is to misunderstand His patient desire for us to repent.

Second, some think that God is unable to prevent our misfortunes and doesn't really care about our suffering. It is easy to feel abandoned when we are in the deepest abyss of sorrow or fear. But this also misunderstands the nature of God. God is sovereign, the master of the universe. Nothing is beyond His control. God is loving, the Father who sacrificed His own Son for us. He will not abandon us in the time of trial (see Deuteronomy 4:31).

In the end, we may not completely understand the why of tragedy, except to remember that we live in a sinful, rebellious, and imperfect world. There is no simple answer, because sin can have both direct and collateral damage to our lives.

We must remember that almost all people will eventually suffer in a way that rocks them to their emotional core. Will we respond by shaking our fist in anger at God? Or will we better understand our utter dependence on Him and turn our wayward hearts toward home? Will we accept the reality of life's pain and turn to the one who gives comfort and perfect peace (Isaiah 26:3)?

Yes, we cry when our friend dies because it hurts us deeply. But we must hold on to our eternal hope (Titus 1:2). We are to be in constant self-examination for those actions and attitudes that separate us from the one who will comfort us the most. This is the fruit of repentance.

The words of the prophet Joel are particularly eloquent for bringing this lesson to a close: "Rend your heart, and not your garments, and turn unto the Lord your God: for he is gracious and merciful, slow to anger, and of great kindness" (Joel 2:13).

Prayer

Merciful Father, we confess our lack of repentance. We confess that there are areas in our lives that we have not totally allowed to come under Your control.

Most of all, we confess that Your patience with us is far more than we deserve. Your mercies are everlasting. Your steadfast love endures forever. Through Your power and presence, give us hearts of repentance and grant to us the capacity to produce fruit in our lives. We pray this in the name of the one who bore the guilt of our sins on the cross, Jesus Christ, amen.

Thought to Remember

God awaits life-changing repentance.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

There is a compelling desire in our world to achieve success. People in general seem to yearn for prestige, power, money, and material things. Those who try to be humble and preferential are labeled meek, mild, and ineffective. Study Luke 14:1, 7-14, where Jesus promotes humility as a precursor to divine exaltation.

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