

The Third Sunday in Lent

Text: Luke 13:1-9 (NIV)

¹Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. ²Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? ³I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴Or 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? ⁵I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish." ⁶Then 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. ⁷So 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. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'

Theme: God Desires Repentance not Judgement

Back when I was in seventh grade, I remember a saying that our teacher Mr. Saeger used time and time again. Whenever we were impatient he would say, "Patience is a virtue." At the time I didn't even know what the word "virtue" meant. But I guess that after hearing it so many times we got to understand that patience is a good thing. Maybe patience is a virtue because true patience is an example that we follow from our heavenly Father. In these verses we see God's patience as He desires repentance and not judgement.

I. Here Jesus talks first about the problem of disasters.

At that time people thought that bad things happened to bad people. So the men who were slaughtered at the temple or the men who were crushed by the tower must have all done something bad to deserve such a terrible fate. The people saw any kind of disaster-- natural disasters, sickness, sudden death, or financial woes as punishments from God for a certain sin or sins. That meant that people would point the finger at such people as being terrible sinners, but it also meant that those who didn't have such misfortune felt that God approved of them more than other people. There was more contempt than compassion for those who suffered, and a feeling of self-righteousness by those who had relatively few problems.

We are tempted to have similar ideas today. When terrible things happen to us, the first question that we often ask is, "What did I do to deserve this?" If someone else is suffering from financial problems, sickness, a death in the family, or any kind of disaster, do we ever wonder whether they deserved it in some way? We often look for a connection between the suffering and what the person might have done to deserve that suffering. On the other hand, when things are going well for us, we might be tempted to think that God must really like me. This is the point of the prosperity gospel that is preached in our country today. If you really have faith, your life will be prosperous, healthy, and happy. If you have problems, they are looked at as a result of a lack of faith. But this makes us look at those who are suffering with contempt rather than with compassion. An example of how this happens was one well-known preacher who recently said that the earthquake struck Haiti because of their sin. It makes us more judgmental than merciful.

But our Lord is slow to punish and long on mercy. The Scriptures often point out that we should not draw a connection between how much someone suffers and the greatness of their sin. The entire book of Job makes that point. As Job suffered, his friends told him time and time again that he must be suffering for some great sin that he did. If he would just figure out what the sin was and repent of it, his suffering would end. God showed what they said was false when he said to them in 42:7, *"I am angry with you ... because you have not spoken of me what is right as my servant Job has."* God made it clear that there was no connection between Job's suffering and a great sin he might have committed. The Scriptures show us that all suffering is a result of sin. If sin never came into the world, there would be no suffering. But we cannot say that because a person is suffering, he must have committed a great sin. For instance, with the recent earthquakes in Haiti and Chili, we can't say that those people deserved it because of a great sin they committed. We can only link suffering and sin when the Scriptures give us such a link. For example the Egyptians lost their firstborn in the Passover because they refused to let God's people go. There are also times when the suffering is a direct consequence of a sin that a person committed. For instance, if you drive drunk, you might hurt yourself in an accident or spend many years in jail for hurting someone else. There are sufferings that people have as a consequence of a certain sin, and there are a few instances where God said that this disaster came because of a certain sin, but normally God does not want us to draw a connection between the degree of suffering and the degree of sin.

II. Our Lord is not quick to judge, but patient.

To show God's patience, Jesus told this parable of the fig tree. He told about a man who went to look for fruit on his fig tree. The tree had been in His vineyard for 3 years and it still didn't bear any fruit. The master told his servant to cut the tree down. He was tired of coming to this tree just to be disappointed. It was wasting his soil. But the servant intercedes for the tree. He pleads with the master to leave the tree alone for one year. He'd give it special care in that year, and if it doesn't bear any fruit in the next year, it could be cut down. The story reminds me of the apple tree in my back yard. I planted it four years ago. I was starting to lose patience with it, but kept it for another year, and last year I had my first crop of apples from the tree.

That kind of patience and care is how Jesus looks at us. That mercy of God is shown in Ezekiel 33:10 where God said, *"I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live."* God doesn't enjoy judgement. He enjoys showing mercy. So Jesus also urges the people to repent here. In vs. 5 He says, *"Unless you repent, you too will all perish."* Our Lord doesn't want any to perish, He wants us to confess our sin and believe in His forgiveness. St. Paul also showed this longing for mercy and not judgement from God when he wrote in 1 Timothy 2:3, *"God our Savior... wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."* It's interesting that in every case, before God unleashed a great judgement, He first sent a preacher of repentance. Noah preached before the flood: Jeremiah preached before the first fall of Jerusalem. John the Baptist, Jesus, and the apostles preached before the second fall of Jerusalem. God desires that people repent and are saved rather than that they perish in their sins.

This parable applied to Israel. For hundreds of years. God had nurtured his people through the words of the prophets and many special signs and wonders. But they bore no fruit. At first they followed other gods, and in Jesus' day, they began to trust in their own works instead of God's grace through the coming Messiah. When Jesus was on earth, Israel was living in the period of grace. The first

order of, "Cut it down," had already come. Now Jesus was trying especially hard to bring the people to repentance. First John the Baptist preached, "Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand." Then Jesus preached the same message. After His ascension, the disciples preached repentance and faith in Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. There was never a time of so many signs or a time when God's Word went out in such force as the time of Jesus and the apostles. But the tree continued to bear no fruit. Most of the people rejected the Messiah. The tree was cut down. Jerusalem was completely destroyed by the Romans in 70 AD. God period of grace, His time of patience had run out.

This parable also applies to us. The Gospels often show that the destruction of Jerusalem as an example of the judgement at the end of the world. We are living in God's time of grace. Since Jesus ascended, we are living under the first verdict: , "Cut it down." But we don't know when the final judgement will be. We see how the word of God is going out to so many people in the world. Almost the whole world has heard the Gospel. God is opening up many new doors for us to share the Gospel. Jesus is certainly nourishing the world with His word. We can praise and thank Him that many in the world are coming to faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior. The Word of God is bearing much fruit. It gives our Savior much joy whenever a sinner repents and believes in His forgiveness. In Luke 15:7 Jesus said, *"I tell you that ... there will be more rejoicing in Heaven over one sinner who repents that over 99 who need no repentance."* Through the preaching of the word, Christ is fertilizing the vine. He is bringing about salvation that many will be saved. But it is a temptation to become apathetic and lazy in our faith. It is tempting to love the things of this world more than God. Especially toward the end of the world the faith and love in Christ will grow cold. Christ's efforts will bear less fruit, and when His time of grace ends, the vine will be cut down. That is when He will return to judge the world. He promises that His second coming will be a time of salvation for His faithful people, but a time judgement for those who have rejected Him.

Here Jesus gives us a glimpse of God's patience. He shows that there is no connection between suffering and sin. He also shows how God is patient and gives a time of grace before the judgement. In this time of grace, may God help each of us to be part of God's repentant people, and may that faith bear fruit in our lives as we share Christ's love in word and deed with this world.. God never desires the judgement of a sinner. His hope is that we come to repentance that we may withstand the judgement and receive our Savior's eternal salvation. Amen.

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