

“Repent and Be Free to Bear Fruit”
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Luke 13:1-9

They were shocked, horrified. It was an outrage. Pilate had killed a group of Galilean pilgrims and mingled their blood with the sacrifices they had brought to offer at the Temple. A more terrible desecration could hardly be imagined. But they must have deserved it.

Ancient Hebrew culture operated on the concept that bad things happened to bad people. A physical disease or a natural disaster was an outer and visible sign of an inward and spiritual malaise. A person’s sin resulted in God’s wrath. How else to explain why those Galileans died, and the awful sacrilege Pilate performed?

Jesus would have none of it. He did not deny that those Galileans weren’t sinners. He didn’t even suggest that their sin was irrelevant to what had happened. Instead, he told those who bore the news of bad tidings not to think they were superior, for all need to repent of their sins.

Jesus referred to a recent tragedy. A tower at Siloam had fallen, killing eighteen people. Again, Jesus will not separate the sin from the situation, but he indicts those who survived, who believed that their superior righteousness had saved them. By pretending to have escaped harm because of their superiority, they implicitly judged those who had been less fortunate.

Of course, it’s not unusual for people to wonder why some suffer while others do not, especially when we believe that God is loving and just and powerful. There must be some reason why those people suffered, and to pin the blame on them made just as much sense as any other reason. And there had to be a reason. None of us wants to live in a world of chaos, where

death and destruction strike at random. In the mindset of those around Jesus, a person reaped what they sowed. Therefore, a gruesome death by accident or violence was the victim's fault.

It is an attitude that has sadly not expired. We often blame ourselves when bad things happen, when in reality much of what occurs is beyond our influence or control. More frequently, we share a tendency to blame others when tragedy strikes. Just consider last year's economic meltdown. There is no shortage of culprits, from irresponsible bankers to an inefficient government bureaucracy to people seduced by the dream of homeownership, regardless of their limited means and apparently oblivious to the risks.

Closer to home, we often figure that those who go to jail or lose their job or see their savings wiped out have only themselves to blame. They made bad choices. They weren't smart enough or talented enough. They didn't work hard enough. We judge by assuming our own superiority, which makes it easier to forget about our own shortcomings and excesses, our own vulnerabilities; because to be aware of those things makes us worry that perhaps we will be next.

We rarely know people in such circumstances personally, and when we do, if we like them, there are plenty of excuses to deflect the blame away. But we still try to find a reason, when bad things happen, because we need a reason to palliate our fears and help explain why it wasn't me, instead of them.

However, the tragedy that befalls so many can strike us, too. If we place the blame on the victim, no mercy will be shown to us either. Jesus warns against assuming a superiority that simply does not exist. We are all sinners; none of us immune from the wrath of God. And the wrath of God, far from being a direct malicious intervention of God, almost always amounts to nothing more or less than the natural consequences of our sin, which combined with the sin of others, creates a maelstrom that threatens us all.

This is why repentance is so important. Sin is a disruption in our relationship with God. This broken relationship makes it impossible to be the type of people we are meant to be, sort of like a fig tree that doesn't bear figs. Sin prevents us from living fruitful lives and seriously endangers our spiritual ability to endure.

But Jesus encourages us to repent, to literally turn our lives around, so that we may enjoy unfettered communion with the God of love. Repentance involves a disposition of the heart that resists the temptation to feel superior, because exposure to God's love brings forgiveness, which in turn elicits a humility that helps us accept others for who they are, without the need to judge harshly by blaming the victim for their plight.

Repentance renews our lives, allowing us to bear fruit that carry seeds of promise; fruit that nourishes. And all repentance requires of us is a desire to resist temptation and follow the truth as revealed in Jesus Christ: the truth of love. When we repent and are forgiven, we become aware of God's peace that liberates us from the pangs of guilt and shame that can be so corrosive of our souls.

None of this is easy to experience. Indeed, the continual cycle of repentance, forgiveness, and renewal is a great mystery, beyond our capacity to understand fully. Yet through grace, we can participate in this cycle of salvation and learn how to share these blessings with others, so that our lives can be rescued from the deadly threat of judgment and supremacy that rules the hearts of so many.