

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 03/23/2025



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Third Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, March 23rd

Luke 13:1-9

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A call to repentance

What could easily become a tangential conversation about sin and suffering, the two passages in this week's Gospel lection are a clear call to repentance and an apt choice for this Third Sunday in Lent. John the Baptist's announcement to "*Bear fruits in keeping with repentance*" (Luke 3:8) is given fuller expression by Jesus. There are clear implications for us - as individuals and as a nation.

Luke 13:1-9 Commentary

This week's text is located within the first third of the Travel Narrative (9:51-19:27) as Jesus is teaching and healing His way to Jerusalem. A few verses earlier, Jesus admonishes the crowds for being able to read the appropriate signs in the sky to predict the weather yet were unable to interpret the signs of the time (12:54-56).

¹ There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

The words "*at that very time*" suggest the connection to the earlier verses concerning reading the signs. Perhaps this caused some in the crowd to bring up the story of Galilean pilgrims being murdered in the middle of their sacrifices from the perspective of why God let this happen. There is no definite information about this event. William Barclay speculates this trouble could have occurred because of Pilate's decision to improve Jerusalem's water supply and finance it with Temple monies. The use of Temple finances caused the Jews to be up in arms. Roman soldiers disguised as members of the mob violently broke up the protest killing many. Since the Galileans were notoriously involved in political trouble, it is likely Galileans were among the protest. Similarly, there is nothing further known about the other story involving the collapse of the tower in Siloam killing eighteen people.

Regardless of the unknown historical background to these stories, the Jews had a very rigid understanding that individual sin caused individual suffering. In other words, personal tragedies and illness were the result of personal sin. It was Eliphaz the Temanite who said to Job, "*Remember: who that was innocent ever perished? Or where were the upright cut off?*" (Job 4:7). Unfortunately, this view still widely persists today among Christians.

Jesus very clearly refutes this hurtful doctrine that individual sin leads to individual suffering in this world. Furthermore, Jesus goes on to talk about actual judgment - "*but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish*" (v.3 and v.5). This phrase is repeated two times, word for word, in a span of three verses. When words and phrases are repeated in Scripture it is to emphasize the importance. In this case we have the equivalent of bold, underlined, in all caps and highlighted - repent or perish!

⁶ And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷ And he said to the vinedresser, 'Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?' ⁸ And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹ Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.'"

The narrative transitions to the parable of the barren fig tree. It begins with judgment but ends with grace. The fig tree was often used as a symbol for the nation of Israel. Therefore, this parable describes how the man who had the fig tree planted in his vineyard (God) had allowed three years for the tree to produce fruit (Leviticus 19:23-25). The three years alludes to ministry of Jesus (the vinedresser). Having failed to produce fruits of repentance, the nation of Israel is justly threatened with the ax at the root. Jesus intervenes and pleads for more time. He offers to continue to feed and nurture the tree. **God responds with patience, but this patience is not infinite.**

Reflection and Application

Jesus, a Galilean, discusses some apparently well-known events affecting other Galileans in Jerusalem (unique to Luke's Gospel), one of them involves violation and injustice at the hand of Herod, the puppet king of the Romans. Yet Jesus does not insight the crowd to seek to change the government, to overthrow the Romans and their puppet kings. Rather, He urges them to change their minds. He urges *metanoia*, repentance, to turn back to God.

The text this week discusses individual and corporate repentance:

- (1) For the disciple of Jesus, we are called to daily repentance and renewal. Each day we are granted is a result of God's grace for the purpose of bearing fruit. This fruit may be the fruit of the Spirit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23) as well as a harvest for the Kingdom.
- (2) For the unconverted, Jesus was quite clear: repent or perish. As Christians, in seeking to bring about social justice we must not seek to improve people's worldly existence while ignoring their eternal one. The plight of the unconverted is perhaps best described in an excerpt from the famous sermon of Jonathan Edwards from the period of the First Great Awakening - *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (1741):

"O Sinner! Consider the fearful Danger you are in: 'Tis a great Furnace of Wrath, a wide and bottomless Pit, full of the Fire of Wrath, that you are held over in the Hand of that God, whose Wrath is provoked and incensed as much against you as against many of the Damned in Hell: You hang by a slender Thread, with the Flames of divine Wrath flashing about it, and ready every Moment to singe it, and burn it asunder; and you have no Interest in any Mediator, and noth-ing to lay hold of to save yourself, nothing to keep off the Flames of Wrath, nothing of your own, noth-ing that you ever have done, nothing that you can do, to induce God to spare you one Moment." [\[Full Sermon Text\]](#)

- (3) For our respective nations, how far are we willing to test the patience of God? How long will the root be spared from the ax? Let us pray for another great awakening in our time.

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