

Lent 2019
For God So Loved - 3
Luke 13:1-9

1. When disaster happens

2. Jesus' response to disaster

- *John 16:33; Luke 13:6-9; Luke 3:8-9*

3. Our response to disaster

- *Galatians 5:22-23*

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



West Valley Church
Michael W. O'Neill
3/26/19

Lent 2019: For God So Loved 3¹

Luke 13:1-9

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 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? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So 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?' "Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.'" (Luke 13:1-9,niv)

Thank you; you can be seated. Keep your Bibles open to that passage, because we'll be going through it today.

Some of us are old enough to remember the San Francisco earthquake of October, 1989. You might remember that game three of the World Series of the Oakland A's and the San Francisco Giants was set to start when the quake struck.

I was a youth pastor at the time, and the National Youth Worker's Convention was to begin in San Francisco just a couple days later. Over 1,000 youth pastors from all over the country would attend these conventions, but because of the quake, it was cancelled, so I didn't go. Another youth pastor friend of mine was in San Francisco early, because he was part of the leadership that was preparing for the convention. He told me that it was during a break in their meetings that he went into the hotel restroom and took a seat, when the earthquake hit. He said that he could honestly say, quite literally, he got the "stuff" scared out of him.

That earthquake was a devastating 6.9 magnitude, killing 69 people and causing \$5 billion in damages.

What was interesting to me is that the dust hadn't even settled on that earthquake when Christians across the country were claiming that the quake was God's

¹ Copyright 2018 The Foundry Publishing. Permission to print, distribute, and copy for church use only. All rights reserved. The message is adapted from the "First Sunday of Lent" sermon, *For God So Loved* Lenten resources.

judgment against the sins of San Francisco, quoting passages of Scripture about Sodom and Gomorrah as their proof.

Many of us also remember, after Hurricane Katrina, religious leaders declared that the sins of New Orleans were the reason for the destruction. It was declared an “immoral city,” and they claimed that God caused the hurricane in order to spark a revival in the area.

After the mass shooting in Las Vegas, people were quick to point out many of the same issues, declaring that Las Vegas deserved it and what happened there was an example of God’s second coming and the ways people were being judged for sin.

But we don’t have to reach even that far back into history to find examples of this kind of attitude. I know many people – some I would say are good friends – who consider this week’s victims of the mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, as getting what they deserve, because they were Muslims. Some people figure that at least the shooter did us a favor by removing more Muslims from the earth – at least if we are to believe people’s Facebook posts and memes, anyway. I know some people who think that the immigrants who have died in their attempts to get into this country, or who have died while in Border Patrol custody are simply getting what they deserve because they are “illegals.”

For some reason, whenever natural disasters or death happens, we are quick to pin responsibility on the victims, as if their sins are to blame for their death and destruction. Even human-caused destruction, like crime and war, is often declared an act of God. Every time calamity happens, someone somewhere declares it a judgment – that God is punishing people for their sins.

Apparently this response to both natural and human-created disaster is nothing new, since the passage in Luke that was read for us today points to two different events in which it seems people were looking to find the sins of the people. The first, Galileans who had been killed at Pilate’s hand. The second, eighteen who died when a tower fell on them.

Are these catastrophes due to the sin in the lives of the victims?

These are not new questions, and while some of us move into the realm of the wrath of God with swift certainty, Jesus’ response is *different*. He declares with authority that it is *not* the fault of the victims and that they are *not* being punished for their sins. He then turns the question around. I think we had better pay close attention to what Jesus tells us about God the Father, about disasters, and about ourselves.

Are you ready? Better take a deep breath and pray: tell God you are willing to hear what he has to say to you, and that you will take it to heart, you will repent if necessary, and you want your heart to align with his.

Alright – so to begin, let’s see what this passage tells us about...

1. When *disaster happens*

The passage that was read for us refers to two different, significant disasters.

The first is the Galileans killed at the hands of Pilate. We don't know much about this event because it's not recorded anywhere else in Scripture, and it can't be found in secular history. But there is an incident that history records that *might* be what they're talking about.

Here's what we know: we do know that Pilate was a Roman ruler placed in charge over Jerusalem to keep the peace at the center of Jewish worship. At one point, Pilate decided that Jerusalem needed a new and improved water supply, so he embarked on this costly but needed, civic project. In order to help fund it, he decided that a portion of the Jewish Temple money would be used. This would be like the city of Yakima deciding we needed to upgrade our city water lines, so they would take a portion of our church offerings to help pay for it. As you can imagine, that didn't go over well with the Jews. Not to mention that the Galileans had a reputation of getting involved in political protests and riots, and they were never on the side of Pilate or Rome.

So one day the Jews had gathered to make their sacrifices at the Temple, and they were pretty hot about the use of their Temple money, so they became an angry mob. Pilate got wind that there might be an insurrection over this, so he sent soldiers dressed like Jews into the crowds of people who had gathered at the Temple. These soldiers carried cudgels under their cloaks. A cudgel is like a baseball bat with metal spikes sticking out of the end. At a certain point, the soldiers attacked, severely beating many of the Galileans to death, so that their blood mingled with the sacrifices they were going to offer. It was assumed that the Galileans were guilty of sedition. We don't know if this is the event that is being referred to or not, but it could be.

We also know that Jesus was a Galilean, so this news would be something he was probably familiar with at the time – a story that Jewish Galileans probably kept talking about with each other.

The second story is about the tower of Siloam falling and killing eighteen people. We really don't know anything about this event because there isn't a reference to it anywhere else at all. Siloam was a neighborhood south of Jerusalem. We can safely assume though, that—whether by earthquake, time, wind, or faulty building—a tower fell, killing eighteen people when it the collapsed.

We don't know what the tower was for, but we do know that towers like it were built for agricultural reasons – kind of like modern-day silos, and that these kinds of towers were also being built as part of Pilate's massive aqueduct expansion. If so, then the Galileans could have been workers on the project, and were being paid out of the money taken from the Temple, which means they were guilty of accepting God's money; money that they should have given back to the Temple. The Jews would've been angry about that, so popular gossip would've been that the 18 victims deserved what happened to them.

But unlike the first disaster, which was human-caused, this seems to be purely accidental.

These two disasters are being talked about in very much the same way that we see disasters talked about today – they seem to be fairly common knowledge. These were probably events that people were talking about and speculating about among themselves, just like people do today in social settings and social networks.

So the questions begin to arise: Why? Why did this happen? They must've deserved what they got.

These are not unlike the questions *we* ask and the judgments *we* make when disaster happens. So we'd better pay really close attention to...

2. Jesus' *response to disaster*

When the people ask Jesus about the victims of these disasters, they aren't asking; they are insinuating – in fact, they seem to speak as if it's a foregone conclusion that these people *deserved* the disasters that happened to them.

But Jesus definitively declares that it is **not** the fault of the people killed. The crowd was saying these disasters were due to the victims' sins, *but Jesus said that it absolutely, definitely, was not*. He does *not* blame the victims.

When Jesus asks the rhetorical question, he's simply saying what they are thinking. You know what a rhetorical question is, right? It's a question that does not expect an answer; the answer should be obvious.

Jesus is challenging once and for all the idea that when bad things happen to people, it is because they deserve it, or because they've sinned. This line of thinking is what Job's lousy counselors accused him of when he was going through his difficulties (and God and Job proved those guys wrong). Yet we still come to those same judgmental conclusions.

Years ago when we were at our other church, there was a woman in town who considered herself a prophet. The only problem was, she didn't like me, because when she spoke her "prophetic words," and they were contrary to Scripture, I would gently confront her on that. So her "prophecies" against me became more and more angry.

There came a day when our church needed to be re-roofed; it had a shake roof. So we hired a guy, who stripped all the shakes off, but didn't cover the roof. That night, a huge wind and rainstorm hit, and it caused about \$35,000 in damage to the church. She heard about it, and immediately declared to anyone that would listen that it was God's judgment against me, so he was punishing the church – the water damage was a sign from God.

Well, she lived in a two-story house, and ironically, about a month or two later, her house caught fire and the entire second floor was destroyed. Of course, I told Shelly I was going to go over to their house and, in all Christian love, I would ask her what kind of a sign it was that her house burned up. Shelly said, "You will do no such thing! We are going to buy groceries and take them over to them." So we did that, instead.

But from Job's day to present day, we *still* want to assign judgment to tragedy and disaster, and yet *Jesus rebukes that kind of thinking*. Do you hear that? Jesus declares that those things happened because they are part of life. In fact, in John 16, Jesus tells the disciples that he is going to be put to death and then rise from the dead. Then he tells his disciples that they will be scattered and persecuted. Then he said:

“I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world.”
(John 16:33, niv)

Notice Jesus didn't say he'd take away your troubles. He said you'll outlast them; because things happen in this life; it's part of living in a fallen world. So stop attaching blame and judgment to the suffering of people you don't like, or to people and places that you think deserve it. Did you hear that? Is the Spirit speaking to you? He should be convicting us right now, because Jesus turns the questions around to those asking the questions. Instead of focusing on the victims of the disasters, he focuses on the response of *the people talking about the disasters*. He tells *these* people to repent.

He's saying that all disasters, all tragedies, whether they happen to us or to others, ought to be a reminder to **us** that judgment for all of us is one day coming. Every death is a call to remembrance of our *own* death and a call to a renewed spirit of repentance in **us**. *So when we hear of disasters, WE ought to repent*. What does “repent” mean? It means more than just confessing sin and being sorry for it; it often means *to view things with new eyes, to have a new heart, to turn in a new direction*. And then it means a different attitude and actions.

The focus, then, Jesus says, is not on what others had done but on what those who are talking are doing. *Are they* people of repentance?

Then Jesus tells a parable. Let's take another look at it just to be clear:

“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So 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?’ “‘Sir,’ the man replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’” (Luke 13:6-9,niv)

The story about a fig tree focuses on the production of fruit. If a tree does not bear fruit, you do not just kill it; instead, you tend it and give it another opportunity to grow – when given the right nutrients. *Then*, if the fig tree still doesn't produce fruit, even with the right nutrients, then it is to be cut down.

Nothing that only receives can survive. Nothing that only receives can survive; the fig tree was drawing strength and sustenance from the soil, and in return it was producing nothing. That was its sin.

This is not a parable about the people who died; this is a parable about the people who are *listening to Jesus*; because *they are to bear fruit*. They are to flourish and

grow and produce fruit in the ways of God. *The fig tree is you.* It is *me.* It is any Christian.

Remember what John the Baptist said? He said:

“Bear fruits in keeping with repentance...Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” (Luke 3:8-9, niv)

The question of calamity then becomes less about the victims and more about ourselves. Catastrophe happens, but *we* are the ones who are called to repentance. We are the ones who are called to be prepared in case of disaster. We are the ones who are called to bear fruit.

So Jesus does what he always does so well: he says, in essence, “Quit thinking you have any right to judge anyone for anything; instead, focus on yourself: are *you* living a life of repentance, with the right attitudes and the right actions – producing good fruit for the Kingdom of God in this world? Because God will do all he can to get *you* to produce fruit, but at some point, there’s no more that can be done except to judge *your* life. Then there are no more second chances.”

So then, from this passage, what is...

3. Our ***response to disaster***

When disaster happens, are we quick to blame victims? Do we examine or worse fabricate the sins of those who have died? Do we dismiss their tragedy because we think somehow they deserved it? Do we ask why is this happening?

Instead, how often do we examine our *own* hearts? The parable of the fig tree is a lesson for *us*; *we* are people who are supposed to bear fruit.

The fruit we are supposed to bear is the fruit of the Spirit, according to Scripture:

“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22-23, niv)

The result of these in our lives is that we will be a blessing to those around us, serving them, and we will share the Gospel with them in our words and actions.

As you look at that list, are you lacking or weak in these? If we are not bearing the fruit of the Spirit, then we need to ask ourselves, “What must we do to ensure that we are repenting and being fertilized for growth?”

Maybe there are things in our lives that need to be pruned away. This is a key part of Lent, stripping things away that are keeping us from life with Jesus and from bearing fruit in this world for him. Maybe we need to add nutrients, spending more time with the Scriptures, in prayer, or in a small group. Maybe we need to spend more time in self-reflection instead of focusing on what others are doing or not doing to our liking.

We often worry and fret over the lives of others without examining our own hearts. Jesus' words are hard here: about how the focus should be less on what others have done and more on the type of people *we are supposed to be*. We are supposed to be people of repentance who bear fruit of love and grace to the world around us. When our boys were little, and they saw one of their brothers benefiting in some way that they thought wasn't evenly appropriated, we would hear that inevitable phrase that every child learns to say before he or she can even speak: "That's not fair!" Our response would be, "Nobody ever said life would be fair. But God is good. Worry about yourself." It would be good for us this Lenten season to do the same: worry about yourself. To take time to repent of the things that are holding you back from a full relationship with Jesus and determine to grow the fruits of love, grace, and peace that God is asking us to grow, so that we can be witnesses of the Gospel through what we say and how we act.

Pray