

## 3<sup>RD</sup> SUNDAY IN LENT

MARCH 3, 2013

### ON WHICH SIDE OF THE DEBATE ARE YOU?

Pastor Jim Dunn

#### **Luke 13:1-9**

#### **Repent or Perish**

**13** 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 Parable of the Barren Fig Tree**

**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.'"

In a hotel ballroom, a conference was being held. The mood in the room was tense like an alley cat watching a stray dog come into its territory. The audience was tense. They'd been fighting this battle for so long against a much stronger opponent. Their cause was just; it was for the good. But they'd been opposed and debated at every turn. You could characterize the opposition only as ignorant, at best.

---

However, the latest incident was the last straw. It had not been done out of ignorance. It was evil. It had been done without any respect or consideration. The folks in the audience had had it. They were tired. One speaker after another came to the podium and encouraged this group to not give up. The fight was not lost.

Then, to the podium came a crowd favorite. He was a hero in their eyes. He stood at the podium and looked out at the crowd with unwavering determination, his eyes on fire. And he began by saying, "Let us not forget." The audience was quiet, thinking to themselves, "Yes, let us not forget...what is at stake and how hard we have fought and how far we have come." The speaker repeated firmly, "Let us not forget that our hands also are not clean." How do you think that comment went over with the audience? Like someone had taken the hamburger off of their plate and spit on it before handing it back.

It is often the case that when sides are drawn on either side of a debate and the issue is one of oppression, whether it's by Pontius Pilate and the Roman government of Jesus' time or by any group for that matter, that those who are the oppressed see their cause as righteous. Thus, they are righteous. So, they are not open to criticism. They are not open to any call for internal reform. Any such message is not likely to be well received.

So, it would take a lot of nerve for someone to give such a message.

But Jesus did. Those gathered around Him had just brought Him news of the latest incident of Roman oppression. "Listen to this, Jesus! Some Galileans were at the Temple, offering their Passover sacrifices. Then, Pilate's mercenaries stormed in and massacred them right there in the Temple! They became dead like their sacrifices! Jesus, this is the last straw! This wasn't done out of ignorance for our laws. It was sheer evil. What do you think we should do, Jesus?"

Instead of encouraging them to not give up the fight, He in effect said to them, "Don't forget. Your hands also are not clean." Jesus turned the debate from Roman oppression to the issues of sin, punishment, and repentance. He answered them, "Do you think, underneath all of your anger towards Pilate, are you thinking that this horror

---

happened to those Galileans instead of to you because they were less righteous than you, worse sinners than yourselves? No, I tell you. They were not worse sinners than you. So, unless you repent, you will be destroyed eternally. Whenever a tragedy like this occurs, such as a tower falling on and killing 18 people, do you automatically think that it's a punishment from God? Do you think that God is trying to send someone a message?

No, I tell you! That's not how God operates. But unless you repent, you will be destroyed eternally."

Jesus then reinforced the need for repentance in the face of judgment. He told a parable about a fig tree planted in a vineyard, taking up valuable soil because it is not bearing fruit. For three years the owner of the vineyard has patiently waited for the tree to bear fruit, just as God patiently waits for us to bear the fruit of repentance. To stop thinking of others as worse sinners than ourselves, regardless of their sin or their circumstances. But eventually his patience comes to an end. The day of reckoning comes. The owner of the vineyard will not wait for fruit any longer. "Cut it out," he says to the vinedresser. "Why should it use up the ground?"

With these very words, Jesus calls us to remember that all of us will face the day of reckoning. All of us will be judged. What is our response to when bad things happen, particularly in matters of oppression? We naturally want to blame someone else, namely the oppressor. Jesus is saying that, instead, such bad things should remind us that the Last Day will come. Therefore, we need to repent.

That's not necessarily what we want to hear. That's about as welcome as someone spitting on your hamburger. Sides are drawn and if it is debates; battles for fairness; battles for rights; or battles for doing what's right, we find ourselves on one side or the other. Our cause is righteous. Thus, we are righteous. This makes us not open to criticism, resistant to see those places where our own hands are not clean, where we need to change. We must produce the fruit of repentance, but is it in us to do it?

---

This is where Jesus turns the debate one more time. On the issues of sin, punishment, and repentance, Jesus turns to a debate that occurs deep within the heart of God. That is the debate between judgment and mercy.

Within the heart of God, judgment says, "Cut it out. Why should the fruitless tree live?" "Let it alone this year also," replies mercy. "Let it alone." In other words, "Forgive," says mercy deep within the heart of God. "Forgive, because I will give another Galilean whose blood Pilate will mingle with the Passover sacrifices. Sin must be punished, but I will put it to death in My Son."

That's what would happen, exactly as Jesus indicated in the second part of the parable. He would absorb God's judgment, God's punishment for our sins. Jesus was the tree cut out in our place.

But that complete being cut out in our place was barely finished, when God in His mercy rushed the blessings of Jesus' death to us – the digging around us and the manure that enable our repentance. God rushed to raise His Son from the dead. He restored life to Him, so that the life Jesus gave at the cross God would now give to us in the garden of the empty tomb. New life – in a "gardeny" sort of way – He is digging around and placing manure. "Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure." Like a vinedresser digging around a tree and placing fertilizer around it, God gives us help from outside of us. It is not in us to repent, to bear the fruit of repentance. But God in His mercy gives us help from outside of us. He is digging around us and placing manure – giving us the new life of Jesus' resurrection, and the fruit of repentance will blossom forth from it.

It may not happen as quickly as we think it should. It is still our nature to think that others are worse sinners than we are. To think that our side is all angels, and the other side is all devils. But the Lord will plop that manure on us to keep us from getting too uppity. Through the new life He gives us in Jesus' resurrection, He will grow in us a humble thinking of ourselves as not more righteous than others. He will grow in us a humble repentance that relies on God's mercy, that stands on the mercy side of God. Amen