

ARGUING WITH JESUS: HIS MOST SCANDALOUS STORIES
WEEK 1: NATIONAL TRAGEDY AND GOD
LUKE 13.1-9

This series is called *Arguing with Jesus* which may sound strange but it really is my goal to get you arguing with Jesus—you have to hear Him first, really hear Him. This is why Jesus would always walk around saying, “He who has ears to hear, let Him hear (Luke 8.8).” If you’ve never argued with Him, you’ve probably not really understood Him. **Ex. Pre-marital counseling.**

My goal for this series is that we come to hear, obey, know, and understand Jesus in ways that we never did before. I never read the Gospels without being taken back by His depth, His penetrating words, His odd answers to questions, His mysterious stories and parables, His completely unexpected responses, the things he does and says that I would never do and say, the reactions He generates from those who come in contact with Him. My goal is that we would be given ears to hear and hear Him. The great pronouncement from God on the Mount of Transfiguration when He affirmed the glory of Jesus as the culmination of the Law and Prophets, the Chosen Messiah, He said two words, one command to Peter, James, and John and they passed this command to us—“Hear Him.” Why does He have to command this, to tell us, why so central? B/c we are so prone to think we hear without hearing. The most powerful and transformative words ever spoken were spoken by Jesus Christ—if our lives aren’t bearing out the real-life, living transformation he came to bring, then we haven’t heard Him or we are hearing Him and not responding.

Every time I think I have Jesus figured out (mistake in itself), I get astounded and blown away by His words and actions; I get challenged to repent; I come under the spell of His amazing grace again; I see again how different He is than my weak expectations. If anyone ever says to you, oh, I believe in Jesus too I think he was a healer, a nice example, a good teacher, a wise sage then they haven’t heard Him. All you have to do is ask one question—if that’s all Jesus was, then why did they hate Him, plot against Him, and then sentence Him to the most cruel and shameful death possible? Those two things cannot be reconciled. So he must have said some pretty scandalous stuff. One of the most scandalous and difficult I think comes in Luke 13 which raises the question of national tragedy, terrorism and God’s role. I picked it specifically for today, commemoration of 9/11.

10th Anniversary of 9/11—Where were you? When you first saw or heard that terrorists had slammed planes into the Towers and the Pentagon, what was your initial reaction? What did you expect leaders to say and do?

In Jesus’ day, the realities of terrorism, of religious and political attacks were a constant. Pontius Pilate was essentially the Osama bin Laden of Jesus’ day. He was constantly agitating and attacking the Jewish people. Once he stole the money from the Temple treasury, used it to build a new aqueduct, then brutally crushed those who opposed it. Now in Luke 13 we get another story of his political and religious terrorism. Jesus is in the middle of a long section of teaching and suddenly he is interrupted by the latest news report, verse 1: “There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” What has happened here? How would you expect Jesus to respond? Could have easily quoted a Psalm like 94.1-5, 23. He pushes back and pushes deeper and sets up our whole class for today: 3 simple points: Comfort for bad times, warning for good times, promise for all times.

I. COMFORT FOR BAD TIMES

- A. Going Deeper.** Jesus looks deeper b/c what's the first thing we all want to know when global, national, or personal tragedy strikes? The first thing is 'why?' Who do we blame? Where was God? Are we being punished? **Ex. Mary and Martha with Lazarus.** Wasn't this the exact question after 9/11 and every tragedy? What were some of the answers we got back then?

"I really believe that the pagans, and the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way—all of them who have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'" (J. Falwell)

"Inside my heart, I don't believe. God has failed us. He was supposed to be our Protector and Guide. He took a vacation or something." (Bernie Sayone, Jewish survivor of Auschwitz)

- B. Expecting the Unexpected.** Jesus responds not with blanket condemnations or finger pointing but like this: 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."

- C. Christianity vs. Religion.** Question: Should people get what they deserve? What are the assumptions of the people giving this report to Jesus? What are Jesus' assumptions? Religion says you can evaluate your morality or your standing with God by evaluating your life. If you have a superior life then you must be a superior person. If you have an inferior life, then you are an inferior person.

A.C. Grayling just published a "secular Bible" that contains readings interwoven from all sorts of different people and faiths. Grayling is an atheist philosopher and here's what he said about God. "Some of the stories in the Bible are inspiring moral tales but the notion that we need to submit ourselves to a deity in order to keep down the hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquakes, and plagues is silly." Religions have to bear this scrutiny with shame but Christianity does not work like this. What did Jesus say? Were they being punished? Were they not submissive enough? Jesus says, and this will be a source of great comfort to many of you: "I tell you NO!"

Why would this be a comfort? Because some of you are going through great trials right now. And you want to know, is God angry? Is He punishing me? Is there something I need to fix so God can bless me again? Have I done something to bring God's judgment? Jesus says to you, "I tell you, No." How do we know this for sure? Well, who is the best person to ever live, the most moral person ever, the person least deserving of suffering? Jesus is. And who suffered most and had the most difficult life? Jesus. The books have not been balanced yet, these comparisons you and I make are not the balancing of the books. That is yet to come...warning too.

II. WARNING FOR GOOD TIMES

- A. More than Meets the Eye.** Jesus says twice, "Unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish." When you see tragedy and suffering and it's not happening to you, the last thing you should get is

proud. The last thing you should do is look around and say, my kids are doing great but look at her kids; my career is blowing up and look how he can't even find a job; can you believe what that politician or pastor just did, I would never do something so terrible; my life is really popping so I must be doing something right. Jesus says, this is not balancing the books; this is not God getting even BUT it is a somber picture of the fragility of life and that there is a balancing of the books that awaits. The one that awaits will be more tragic, more terrible, more painful, more awful than the worst of what we see today.

Is it true that "what goes around comes around?" Most of us really believe in Christian Karma, that we sort of work hard to build up this Zen force in the universe and that it will provide protection, that it will inoculate us against harm, suffering, and tragedy. And when it comes we are totally unprepared, how can you respond? You can either blame yourself or you can say that God is unfair or you can give up believing in God.

B. Most Dangerous Times. You are never in more spiritual danger than when things are going well for you. See how those who approach Jesus are so excited for him to condemn others and at least by implication affirm them but He does the opposite. "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." When things are going smooth, you are most likely to be self-satisfied, become complacent, and find your heart embracing the good things as the only things. Now I know some of you are saying, but I worked hard to get where I am and to have the success I have and I'm not denying that but listen have you ever known anyone to find lasting joy in that? To finally get what you've been working for and then say, "It's about time." Where's the joy in that? But to know that everything good in your life is by sheer grace, to fall on your face and say this is amazing I don't deserve it; God's grace is overwhelming—that is fun, that will bring humility and a child-like joy about life. It also builds up equity with God. If all your good stuff you receive by your own merit, then when the bad stuff comes, you will have no trust equity, no capital reserves with God to spend. **Ex. My life over the past year.** This is why Jesus says, in good times and bad the only right response is 'repent.'

But that sounds weird b/c what is repentance? Vague sense of guilt? Self-loathing? Lord Byron said "The weak alone repent." But let's imagine that Jesus, who is at the very least the greatest religious figure in history, might have some insight on this that we don't have. In fact he gives us a Hope for all times.

III. HOPE FOR ALL TIMES

Look how he sums it up with this little parable: 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.'"

A. Challenge the standard assumption. Why do bad things happen to good people? You can't repent like that. Why does nobody ever say, why are such good things happening to a sinner like me? Jesus has said God made you and planted you and you were supposed to honor him first and you didn't. Tree is hopeless—9th year without fruit. We all deserve the tower but God longs to give us what we don't deserve. Righteousness is not in my nation, not in my goodness, not in my

lineage or history, not by being right, not by vilifying “those people out there.” Our sin is not just the little peccadilloes we have and we need to try to remember those and confess them. Sin is substituting you for God, it is being the captain of my own ship, the master of my own destiny.

B. Salvation is Outside-Inside-Outside. What is the tree going to do to save itself? Look at it—9 years of nothing, it’s puny, scrawny, roots don’t go deep, no fruit. Without repentance, this will be the picture of our lives, we won’t have depth, substance, strength (the slightest storm will blow it over), and there will be no meaning, nothing lasting. The tree can only hope it will be saved. Someone has to come from the outside, restore it at its deepest internal core, and only then can it start to produce fruit.

C. Repentance for all—Mark 1.15 and Martin Luther. God will not know you or deal with you without repentance. Lord Byron: “The weak alone repent.” But Jesus says repentance brings strength; it brings lasting fruit, sweet fruit. When things are going well, you will be joyfully humble and when they are going poorly you will still be affirmed and loved. **Ex. I’ve never drawn closer to my wife than when I’m repenting.**

D. The True Vinedresser. So repentance is just seeing how terrible you are and getting mired in that, right? No, nearly the exact same parable is told in Isaiah 5 and when the vineyard has no fruit the result is: ⁵ And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. ⁶ I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and briers and thorns shall grow up; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it. But in Jesus’ parable, another character enters the story, Jesus Himself, the vinedresser, and He says, “Sir, let it alone (literally forgive it) this year also until I dig around it and put on manure.” Only when the tree really yields and gives itself to the vinedresser and His care will its roots get strong and deep. Only then will the tree become healthy and beautiful and begin to bear fruit.¹ Everything in your life is redeemable, healable except the lack of repentance. Repentance is now (v. 9).

“The Gospel makes the worst times bearable and the best times leavable.” (John Newton)

“As there is no sin so small, but it deserves damnation; so there is no sin so great, that it can bring damnation upon those who truly repent.” (WCF 25.5)

¹ The term “fruit” is Christianese—what does it really mean? It is a metaphor for your life. A healthy, mature apple tree produces juicy beautiful apples that are good for feeding and nourishing others. When the Bible talks about “fruit” in your life, what it says is that God’s purpose for a person is to thrive, to grow, to live well, to last, to have substance, to produce good things in life. A healthy tree has a healthy root system and the good fruit proves that whatever is nourishing the tree is amazing—a true Christian is living a life that makes it obvious that the One who is nourishing him/her is amazing.