

## Whose Fault Is It, Anyway?

Luke 13:1-9

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

March 3, 2013 – Third Sunday In Lent



Grace to you and peace, from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen. As you listened to this morning's Gospel, did the same question pop into your mind that prompted the Jews to ask what they asked of Jesus – that is: "Does God send disaster on people as punishment for individual sins?" In an alleged effort to learn the answer, these Jews had come to Jesus with an account of a horrible incident where Pontius Pilate had murdered a group of worshippers who had gathered together in the Jerusalem temple. Not only had Pilate murdered these people, but he also then desecrated their bodies by mixing their blood with the blood of their sacrifices – mocking both their worship and their God. "What did these fellows do," they asked, "to deserve such a violent, unthinkable end?"

Jesus gave His answer by pointing to yet another disaster – behind which there was no murderer such as Pilate – an event which appears to have been more "natural" and therefore more "uncontrollable." He called to their remembrance an event which took place at a certain "tower in Siloam" – a tower which had unexpectedly collapsed, and in its fall to the earth crushed eighteen people beneath the rubble. Then Jesus asked them: "Were the people who died in this disaster somehow worse sinners than all the other people in Jerusalem?" "Were they perhaps guilty," He queried, "of some far greater crime than all the rest of humanity that they should be chosen for such a sudden, terrible, unfortunate death?"

In our own day countless other disasters could undoubtedly be added to these. What about all those people who have been killed over the years by the senseless violence inflicted on our world by Islamic terrorists? Did all those people deserve death more than all the others who may have been standing nearby in the very same place? And what about all the thousands of soldiers who've been killed in the war on terror since its beginning? Were all of them so much worse sinners than the rest of us that God would've required their blood? Why do more people die in foreign earthquakes than here in America? How is it, even with the power of modern medicine, some children and mothers survive pregnancy and childbirth, while others don't?

The fact of the matter is that questions such as these are rooted in a gravely mistaken notion – a notion held not only by the people of Jesus' day, but by many in our day, as well – that disaster often befalls people as punishment for a particular sin. If a person commits an ex-

ceptionally grievous sin, they'd better watch out, because God is going to get them. If someone is suffering, there are some who will believe their suffering came about either as a result of something they did, or failed to do. It's almost as if people think God is some sort of schoolyard bully who's going to make you pay dearly if He doesn't get His own way.

And it isn't only the unbelieving world that does this. A goodly number of Christians have also fallen into this trap. When things go wrong in their lives – such as during a family breakup, when financial pressures threaten to overwhelm them or medical emergencies arise – they're tempted to ask, "Why me? What did I do to deserve this treatment? What is God trying to tell me?" Indeed, there are increasing numbers of Churches today perpetuating this false, damning belief. They tell you God wants you to be healthy, wealthy, happy and wise – and that if you aren't enjoying these things, then God must not be pleased with you. But what about those times when your life is falling apart? What happens when you're enduring some kind of hardship? Something's wrong with you – that's what! You'd better get your life straightened out before things get even worse – before God *really* lets you have it!

But is that what the Scriptures teach? Of course not! Indeed, Jesus absolutely rejects this way of thinking. "Do you think these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?" Jesus asks, "I tell you, *No!*" But unless *you* repent, *you* likewise will 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* likewise will perish." When sudden, unexpected disaster strikes, God doesn't want you looking on it as a judgment directed toward one particular sinner, but to understand disaster as a warning of the judgment of the Last Day. There is no need, you see, for God to punish your sins in such an arbitrary, disastrous fashion, because Jesus, on the cross, already fully suffered in your place the punishment you deserve by reason of your sin. As Isaiah prophesied: "He was bruised for *our* iniquities and crushed for *our* offenses – and the punishment which brought *us* peace was upon *Him*." God isn't some kind of vindictive mafia boss. He doesn't cause people to die tragically just so He can send a message or punish them.

To be sure, if that's what God was doing, it would be a tacit denial of the punishment Jesus already bore for us all. Such things, rather, happen for your benefit, and are to serve as a warning that, "Unless you repent, you too will perish." So, the next time you hear about someone suffering from an unfortunate occurrence, don't jump to the conclusion that they must have "deserved it." Instead, say to yourself, "That could have been me. God is calling *me* to repentance and sorrow over *my* sin. He's calling *me* once again to faith in Jesus." But as you do that, don't fall into the second error of thinking repentance is something you do for God. Many believe repentance is precisely that – something *they* have to do to prove to God they're ready and willing to follow Him anywhere. They look at Bible passages such as this Gospel reading and conclude, "There! See! Jesus tells me *I have to repent* or else I'll perish. Repentance *is* something I need to give to Him. *I must* feel sorry for my sin. And *I must* desire to do better. My Lord requires it!"

Quite true! Our Lord *does* require your repentance. But repentance is not something that comes from within you. It's not a muscle *you* flex, an emotion *you* conjure up, a gift *you* give, a spring welling up deep down in *your* soul, or a response *you* make. If you feel you have to trust yourself for anything – including, and especially, repentance – you're in for a fall. The Bible clearly teaches that repentance is not something *you* give to God, but instead something *God* gives *to you*. St. Peter teaches in Acts, the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter, that "God exalted {Jesus so} that *He might give* repentance and forgiveness of sins." In chapter 11 of the same book, Peter again writes: "*God* has granted repentance." And St. Paul also teaches this in his letter to the Church at Rome, where he writes: "*God's kindness* leads you toward repentance." And finally, Paul writes to Timothy and prays for those who oppose him, asking – "that *God* would grant them repentance." So then, it's clear from these Bible verses that repentance isn't something *you* work up in response to God – but that repentance is what *God* gives you as a gift.

So, then, what are we to do with Jesus' words from today's Gospel, where He says: "Unless *you* repent, you likewise will perish?" It's quite simply this: you have to remember who's speaking. These words come from the lips of the One who is much more than a mere prophet, more than a common "miracle worker," and more than a great example of holy living. These words come from the human mouth of God! They're spoken by Jesus, the flesh-and-blood Presence of God here on earth – the visible Image of our Creator and Lord. This is the One who tells cripples to get up and walk, the One who orders the blind to see, the One whose speech makes the deaf hear. Jesus' words are powerful words!

So when Jesus says to you: "Unless *you* repent, you too will likewise perish," the very words He speaks will also enable you to repent. Just as Jesus' command to walk makes walking possible, and His charge to see and hear make sight and hearing possible, so also His demand that you repent makes repentance possible. It all happens to and for you solely by the miraculous power of Jesus' Word. To put it even more plainly, you repent, not because *you* have the ability, but because *Jesus* gives you the ability. That's what St. Peter means when he says Jesus gives repentance. Think of electricity. You can't see it, nonetheless it still enables all the electrical appliances in your home to operate. Without electricity nothing that requires electricity would ever run again. In the same way, God's Word empowers your sorrow over sin and your trust in Jesus as Savior. Without this Word you too would be useless.

But you also must realize that feeling sorry for one's sins isn't uniquely Christian. Anyone can feel sorrow over their actions. The world is filled with people who recognize their errors and failures – people who feel sorry and even guilty for their shortcomings. But this kind of sorrow doesn't make them Christian! Nor is it enough to try to turn away from one's sins – or to try and stop sinning. Again, there are plenty of people who've ceased destructive behaviors, overcome addiction, and "turned over a new leaf." But again, such efforts don't make them Christian any more than feeling guilty about one's behavior does.

True repentance comes *only* from God. True repentance isn't something *you* give to God, rather it's a great and precious gift *God* gives you. True repentance is God's act of opening your eyes to the reality of your sin, so you cease trusting in yourself and learn to trust only in Jesus. True repentance is God's act of piercing your self-centered deafness and opening your ears to hear His promises – to both hear and believe the solution He's already provided for your salvation, even "Christ crucified." Only by stripping you of everything – every boast, strength and ability – only by taking away everything you trust in other than Him – will God finally be able to focus your attention on the one thing needful, Jesus, His Son.

Only then will you be able to look upon disasters and yet not fear – even saying in spite of them with sainted Job: "I know that my Redeemer lives." Quite simply, *God* gives you repentance because He is gentle and tenderhearted. He wants nothing more for you than that you rely fully on Him – and not on yourself. And He's going to do whatever it takes to give you the gift of faith and trust in Jesus – and having given you this gift, He wants you to know that He will never take it away from you so long as Your hope is stayed in Him to whom alone belongs all glory, praise and honor – even our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.