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Luke 13:1–9, ESV.

13 *There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. ⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”*

⁶And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷And 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?’ ⁸And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ ”

Grace on a fig tree.

Luke Chapter 13:1-9 contains two related stories. The first forms three verses:

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We don't know what terrible thing happened to these Galileans. But apparently a group of them were killed somehow. Then Pilate - the man who would order the death of Jesus - took their blood and mingled it with the sacrificed animals that

these dead Galileans were about to offer up to God. A logical guess is that Pilate murdered them while they were at the Temple. As some background, there was a Jewish man named Josephus, who lived from the year 37, around the time Jesus died, to about the year 100. He was a soldier and a historian who happened to write about the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 A.D. Importantly, he also wrote about hostile and violent acts performed by Pilate against the residents of Jerusalem. Mixing their blood in with the blood of the dead animals would have been a great dishonor to them, and it would also have defiled their offering. In these verses Jesus speaks to the group of people who have just told him about this brutal incident. Jesus asks them if they think that these specific Galileans are worse sinners than most Galileans because they have suffered in this fashion and have had their bodies desecrated after death. Is this a punishment from God? Remember that Jews of this time have a longstanding tradition in Scripture of God using evil people to punish those who have sinned. Jesus, however, says that in this case, this is not true. He does warn them that if they do not repent of their sins, the day will come when they die, and they will perish. We take this to mean that dying physically will be accompanied by dying spiritually. Jesus continues on, talking about another horrific event, one that sounds like an accident, although again, we don't have any details:

⁴Or 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? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

18 people fell from a tower and were killed. Siloam is the name of an area and a pool that was in the southern part of Jerusalem; scholars believe that the tower was embedded in the city wall; it would have served as an observation tower as part of the city’s defenses. We could guess that the tower was poorly constructed or that the 18 were in the process of working on it. Jesus says that no, they were not any worse morally than their peers. Again, Jesus says that if you don’t repent of your sins, you might suddenly find yourself dead – and no longer have a chance to repent.

It’s intriguing that Jesus takes a murderous event and an accident and treats them as being comparable. Jesus makes the point that disasters that happen to people do not always indicate that the victims are great sinners. The subtlety is that Jesus is saying that the people who are talking to him right then are probably just as sinful as the dead people. They better not strut around claiming that since nothing happened to them, they are clearly sinless. The bottom line, and what Jesus is telling these people, is that all of us will die at some point – and you had better repent soon, because you could die at any time. There are also many ways in which you can die, and you cannot control when or how. Here are verses 6 to 9:

⁶And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. ⁷And 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?’ ⁸And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. ⁹Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’ ”

A man has a fig tree and for three seasons in a row, it does not bear fruit. Careful records have apparently been kept about which trees bear fruit and which ones do not. The owner tells a fieldhand to cut it down, and presumably replace it with a sapling. The fieldhand asks the owner to give him a chance to first fertilize the tree, and if it does not bear fruit the next year, then yes, they will cut it down. This is a fun parable. God’s grace is apparently compared to manure. The point is that it is risky to live year after year without being productive. At some point, we all die, and we will never have another chance to serve God. But God is generous and kind. God wants us to be productive spiritually. All we have to do is accept God’s grace.

One of our passages tells us that we shouldn’t wait forever to repent of what we’ve done wrong and come before God for forgiveness. The other says that we shouldn’t wait too long to proactively carry out God’s work. God will shower us with grace. While we are alive God gives us every opportunity to be faithful.

The Greek word that is translated as “repent” in this passage is “*metanoëó*”. It means to turn away or to have a change of heart. If we are to turn away from sin

or have a change of heart from our sinful ways, we must turn toward something else or change and become something else. If we are going to be fruitful for God, we must bear some sort of fruit. So, concretely, what do we do when we repent and become productive? We can show love for others. We can offer forgiveness. We can exert self-control. We can be kind, respectful, and gracious. We can seek out people we have wronged and right what was done. Ours is not a works-based notion of redemption; that is not the point. We don't do good to earn salvation. But when we turn away from what is wrong, if we don't turn toward something else, we'll fail. Good works keep us busy so that we aren't busy being sinful.

I met a man recently who said that he had a serious problem with addiction. Cigarettes, gambling, alcohol, video games, whatever it was, he couldn't just do a little. He said that after years of moving from one addiction to the next, he found one way to stop his addictive behavior. He presented himself to God. He asked God for forgiveness and for the strength to change. Then he discovered that he needed to distract himself in a positive way. During the time when he would normally be glued to a video game or gambling online, or when he would be at a bar drinking and smoking, he would first cook meals and package them, then drive around town handing them out to homeless people. He said that even considering the money he spent on ingredients and gas, it was far cheaper. He said that he felt

a little weak, though, even guilty, that he couldn't just stop doing addictive things without distracting himself. I said that for one thing, addiction is a disease, and the mere fact that he could heal himself was a beautiful thing. And second, he was just doing what God wanted him to do, to turn away from doing wrong to doing things that were fruitful in God's eyes. Let's call this man Lenny. I'll get back to him.

Sin is not a popular word in our society. It's not even a popular word in Christian churches today. We want to focus on God's blessings, on being saved, on feeling secure and joyful. There is nothing wrong with this. It's important to remember gifts from God. But we must keep sin in mind. The Greek word for "sin" in the New Testament, and which serves as the root of the word "sinner" in our passage, is "*hamartia*", and it means "missing the mark" or "to fail". The sins or failures to which Jesus reacted most harshly were those of the seemingly righteous. He despised religious authorities who were guilty of gross, repetitive sins. In Mark, Chapter 12, Jesus says: "*Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces ³⁹ and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, ⁴⁰ who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.*"

The hardest time is the first time you turn away, the first time you have a change of heart. For many of us, we think that we've done this, over and over. We

believe that we have turned to God and said that we regret what we have done. But often, we've really been saying it to no one. Many of us have yet to truly repent. Once we do deeply repent, embrace God, and commit ourselves to follow in the footsteps of Jesus the Christ, we are forever in God's grace. From there on out, we are in maintenance mode, doing our best to stay ahead of sin, to live in a way that is consistent with those who are believers. We will lose battles along the way, but we are never again at risk of losing the war. What our passage has to do with is that first commitment, that repentance that leads to eternal salvation. However, the reality of daily life is that sin never goes away.

Those scribes that Jesus spoke about had presumably never repented for the first time. They were not in maintenance mode. They are at great risk of dying and having their souls perish for all of eternity. God embraces those who make that first, great transition. The story of the prodigal son in the Gospel of Luke, is an allegory. The father of the prodigal is God, and we are that prodigal son. The father has a truly abundant ability to forgive. God can forgive anyone, no matter how badly we have failed, how far off the mark we have found ourselves. Here is another story from Luke, from Chapter 19:

***19** He entered Jericho and was passing through. **2**And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. **3**And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because*

he was small in stature. ⁴ So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. ⁵ And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. ⁷ And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." ⁸ And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." ⁹ And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

God wants to greet the sinner. Grace is given in greater quantities to those who are repenting for that first time than to those who are in maintenance mode.

Lenny told me that battling addiction is a nonstop job. He said that he buys food, blankets, gloves, knit hats, and socks, and puts them in his car. He keeps a stack of them on the back seat. Whenever he feels the urge to fall to addiction, he jumps in his car and starts driving his route, looking for homeless people. He lives in Denver, and he has about a dozen places he stops at. He keeps going until he feels the desire to fall to one of his addictions subside. The biggest addiction has been gambling. He told me that he knows that if he takes a thousand dollars that he would have lost gambling and spends it on the homeless, then he has succeeded, that he has turned his addiction on its head. Now, again, I do not equate addiction with sin. Addiction is a disease. But Lenny does understand that it is his duty to recognize his disease and do his best to fight it. Refusing to address it, to seek a way to overcome it, that would be a sin. Even if he fails at overcoming addiction, if

he tries, if he puts his heart into the effort, then he has succeeded, he has not failed.

When I am tempted to do something that I know I should not do, I think of Lenny.

Lenny told me that he lives alone and that I was the only person, other than his therapist, whom he had told about his driving around and serving the homeless. He said that it would spoil the power of what he did if he used it to glorify himself instead of God. He also told me that his driving around and serving people has had a greater impact than simply helping him fight addiction. He finds that he doesn't get angry at people anymore, that he's calm. I think that when he went before God and asked for help, and then started to carry out God's work, he lost any anger, vindictiveness, or bitterness that had haunted him. My goal is to emulate Lenny, and when I am tempted to sin, instead, I do something good for another human. I want to be free like Lenny. Remember that we are the fig tree that is struggling to produce good fruit. God will always be there to put manure, that is, grace, on the fig tree and guide us toward freedom. Please pray with me.

God, help us be certain that we truly have made that first, major act of repentance. Let us know with confidence that we are truly walking in the Kingdom of God. Guide us every day of our lives to combat sin, to refrain from going against your will. Let us turn every temptation into an opportunity to serve you by serving your people. Amen.