

Commentary on Luke 13:1-21

We pick up in today's verses with the continuation of Jesus engaged with the pressing crowd (see 12:1). Some in the crowd come to Him to tell Him a harrowing story. Pilate had mingled the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices. What? Later Jesus points to another shocking event when he mentions eighteen who were killed when the tower in Siloam fell. Ugh! As we dig in here, let's look at a little background to understand the meaning.

Pilate (aka Pontius Pilate) is first mentioned in Luke 3 when Luke sets the historical context of the narrative. He is not brought up again until Luke 13. Pilate was the Roman governor or procurator of Judea which is the region where Jerusalem was located. He plays an extremely significant role in the death of Jesus which we will see in Luke 23. Pilate's rule was noted as one filled with greed and cruelty. He did several highly insulting things to offend the Jews which revealed the kind of character and weak leader he was.

The events referenced in these verses regarding the Galileans and the tower of Siloam are not recorded elsewhere in Scripture or in other sources. The Galileans were likely pilgrims who came to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the temple. Some think the reference to this event points to Pilate's ruthlessness in killing these pilgrims as they were sacrificing in the temple. The reference to the fall of the tower of Siloam perhaps points to the tower in Jerusalem's city wall above the pool of Siloam.¹ Pilate embarked on a construction plan to build an aqueduct in Jerusalem misappropriating funds from the temple to finance the project which led to a riot leaving many Jews dead.² It is possible that Jesus is referencing this event, but we do not know for sure.

So, what's the point of these two events being mentioned? There was a cultural misunderstanding that when something bad happened to someone, others wondered what they had done wrong to deserve the "something bad." Some would call this idea "karma" which Jesus wholeheartedly rejects.³ But Jesus uses these examples to clarify and teach about the nature of sin and the dire need for repentance.

With both examples, Jesus asks, in effect: do you think their sin is any worse than others? What He is teaching is that sin is sin is sin is sin. There are no degrees of sin which result in a harsher punishment than another. The important part of the teaching comes in Jesus' command to repent and the result of the failure to repent of sin results in death. Also note, Jesus repeats this command and teaching two times. He wants to make sure they and we get it loud and clear. Repent or die!

But, what does it mean to repent? The word repent comes from the Greek *metanoēō* which means "to change one's mind for the better or heartily to amend with abhorrence of one's past sins."⁴ A changed mind leads to changed actions. In repentance we turn our hearts from sin to God and in so doing God works within us to pour out His forgiveness and reconciliation upon us. Jesus'

¹ Intersociety Press Bible Background Commentary on Luke 13:1-5.

² Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible: Pilate, Pontius.

³ Edwards, James, "The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Gospel According to Luke." Eerdmans Press, 2015, p. 392.

⁴ www.blueletterbible.org entry on Luke 13.

teaching and warning here invokes an invitation of transformation. “A problem exists between humanity and God that necessitates both acknowledgment and corrective action. An abrupt course change, an about-face, is required not simply to rectify a bad conscience, but to take the first step in faith in order to receive the promised reconciliation of God.”⁵

Jesus' teaching on repentance continues as He tells them the parable of the barren fig tree. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard but when he came seeking fruit from it, he found none. He told the vinedresser, his hired hand, that the tree hadn't fruited in three years, and it needed to be cut down. The vinedresser pleaded for one more chance for the tree imploring that they keep it for a year. He suggested digging around it and fertilizing it with manure. If it bears fruit next year, then good; but if not, then cut it down.

The fig tree symbolizes Israel and the teaching shows both a warning and the extension of God's grace. The vinedresser proposes digging down and fertilizing the root where repentance must take place.⁶ In this parable, we see God's severity but also His kindness and mercy. The fig tree is given one more opportunity to bear fruit – even when it had not done so in three years. But the extension of time to bear fruit is not everlasting. God wants our obedience, not just because He wants us to act right or do the right thing. He wants us to repent and turn back to Him so we might enjoy our relationship with Him and the abundant life He has given us through Christ, our Savior. How amazingly loved are we!

As the next set of verses pick up, we see a transition – a change in venue as we find Jesus now teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. Let's look at these verses from the perspective of each of the characters mentioned.

Let's start first with the woman. She had a disabling spirit for 18 years and was fully bent over and could not stand up straight. Can you imagine the pain and shame she must have felt? She had a double whammy against her which exacerbated her outcast status – she was severely disabled but she was also a woman. “People with physical deformities were expected to remain socially invisible, especially if they were women. Women rarely if ever approached rabbis, nor did rabbis as a rule speak with women. Personal encounters between rabbis and women were consequently rare occurrences in Judaism.”⁷ Yet, she is seen and summoned by The Teacher who tells her that she is freed from her disability and He lays His hands on her and she immediately stands straight up. How does she respond? She immediately begins glorifying God. Later we find out she is a daughter of Abraham which is significant because even though she was treated as an outcast she was actually indeed a part of the covenant community.

Next, let's take a look at Jesus. We find him guest preaching/teaching in the synagogue. No telling how often the woman felt hidden, inconsequential and unseen, yet, Jesus sees her and He calls her to Him. He declares that she is freed from her infirmity – she is loosed from bondage of the disability and her body straightens. The synagogue ruler calls Jesus out for healing on the

⁵ Edwards, 393.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Edwards, 395.

Sabbath. Jesus immediately responds by calling him a hypocrite which harkens back to some of the call-outs we saw Jesus make against those who oppose Him in Luke 11-12. He calls out the synagogue ruler and His hypocrisy pointing out that they untie their animals and lead them to water on Sabbath. And so, how much more should this woman – a daughter of Abraham – who is a part of the community be untied and loosed from the bonds of her infirmity on the Sabbath day.

Next, there is the synagogue ruler who is clearly a strict rule follower. He is standing by watching all of this take place in his synagogue. When he sees what Jesus does in healing the woman, he becomes irate and begins fussing at Jesus about the rules of the Sabbath and testing His authority in front of everyone gathered. “There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath.” Jesus responds to him and puts the synagogue ruler and His other adversaries to shame proving that He is not only Lord of the Sabbath but also defines the true meaning of the Sabbath. The Sabbath isn't about following all the rules and doing things right, but about the presence of Jesus and the inauguration of His healing and transformative power that comes in His Kingdom.

We don't learn much about the congregation gathered at the synagogue, but we know they were watching all of this play out between Jesus, the disabled woman and the synagogue ruler. We are told that they rejoice at all the glorious things that were done by Jesus. Isn't that a sight to ponder... God's people rejoicing in acknowledgement and praise for what He has done! One way we see something similar happens at Southwood Pres every Sunday morning!

We are reminded here once again that Jesus is the Lord of miracles and of healing. He heals in order to restore the woman back to the community and to exhibit His defeat over Satan and the binding of the woman. We've seen before that Jesus is the Lord of the Sabbath, but here He gives us a bigger picture of what that means. Jesus exhibits and fulfills His messianic mission to set the oppressed free.⁸ In contrast to the synagogue ruler who simply wanted to follow the rules, Jesus shows that “the essence of the Sabbath is not the postponement or avoidance of the work of God, but the *completion* of the work of God.”⁹

Our passage concludes with two lovely and short parables that give us images of the Kingdom of God. Jesus asks twice: “What is the kingdom of God like? And to what shall I compare it” He answers first citing a farmer who takes a mustard seed sows it in his garden and it grows and becomes a tree in which the birds of the air make nests in its branches. He answers a second time mentioning a woman who mixes yeast into three measures of flour until it is all fully leavened.

The mustard seed is by far the smallest of the seeds but it grows into a large herbaceous shrub around eight to twelve feet tall. The birds of the air that come and rest in it point to the inclusive opportunity for all of God's image-bearers to participate in and be a part of His Kingdom (Jews and Gentiles alike). We've seen Jesus use the image of yeast before at the beginning of Luke 12 in reference to the yeast of the Pharisees. Yeast is almost microscopic but when mixed with flour, it helps it to rise. Three measures of flour would have yielded nearly 100 loaves of bread. When

⁸ Edwards, 394.

⁹ Edwards, 398.

yeast is used in the New Testament, it typically has a negative connotation (as we saw in Luke 12). But here, it is used in a very positive context in describing the Kingdom of God.

What do we learn about the Kingdom of God through these two short parables? The obvious picture is the image of something that starts in minute, tiny ways but expands and grows to enormity. It's also important to note that there is a balanced picture here of the Kingdom. Jesus uses one illustration involving a man and another involving a woman. Jesus also uses simple, common, every day images to draw the picture of His Kingdom, as opposed to some images of grandeur or luxury or splendor.

Jesus' Upside-Down Kingdom

What do these passages teach us about Jesus and His Upside-down Kingdom?

- 1) In Jesus' Upside-down Kingdom there is no comparison of sin. Sin is sin is sin is sin... We learn here that the punishment or consequence of sin is not based on our idea of justice. Rather, we are invited into and warned against the failure to acknowledge, confess and repent of our sin. We are reminded here of the importance of self-examination and repentance under and in God's Word to seek a change of mind and enact a change of heart in order that we might be drawn closer to Him.
- 2) With the parable of the barren fig tree, we see in Jesus' Upside-down kingdom that we are offered extra chances to repent and turn to Him of which we do not deserve. We are also warned that those chances are not eternal or everlasting because God wants all of us and all of our heart right now!
- 3) In Jesus' Upside-down Kingdom, we see once again that Jesus challenges the distorted religious beliefs of the Jewish religious leaders. He restores the broken and outcasts to the community. In all of this, He shows what His mission is all about.
- 4) The Upside-down Kingdom of God does not exist or did not come into being with some great fanfare, war or grand public announcement or recognition. Rather, it moves from obscurity and insignificance to grandeur, glory and all-encompassing enormity, just as King Jesus sees fit.

Discussion Questions for Luke 13:22-14:6

The Narrow Door – Luke 13:22-30

- 1) How does Jesus answer the question asked in verse 23? What does he tell them in the parable?

- 2) How does the owner respond to the crowds knocking on the door? What does he tell them? How does the crowd respond to the owner?

- 3) Jesus states there will be groups of people in the Kingdom of God? Who are they? Where are they from (Isaiah 45:6, 49:12)? What will they be doing once they are there?

- 4) What upside-down aspects of God's Kingdom do you see in this parable?

Lament over Jerusalem- Luke 13:31-35

- 1) Describe what is happening in the interaction between Jesus and the Pharisees. How does Jesus respond to the news the Pharisees tell him? What do we see in Jesus' response to the Pharisees about His agenda and timetable?

- 2) Compare and contrast Jesus' longing for the people of Jerusalem and what the people in Jerusalem have historically done.

- 3) Jesus refers to Herod as a fox (13:33) and himself as a hen (13:34). Think about the images of a fox in a hen house? What do foxes intend to do when they enter the hen house and how do hens respond if their baby chicks are being threatened? How do we see in these images the contrast between King Herod and King Jesus?

Sabbath Healing- Luke 14:1-6

- 1) Why were the Pharisees watching Jesus during the meal? Where have we seen the Pharisees watching Jesus before? What are they hoping to see?

- 2) What two questions does Jesus ask the Pharisees? What is Jesus trying to communicate to the Pharisees about Sabbath and healing?

- 3) Think back to the story of Jesus healing the woman who was bent over (Luke 13:10-17), the man with the withered hand (Luke 6:6-11) and this story. What do these stories show us about Jesus's Upside Kingdom priorities about the Sabbath and healing? (Also, look up Luke 6:1-5).