

Luke's Gospel: Chapter 13

Repentance, False Religion and the True Way...

“Repent or perish” (Luke 13 v 1 to 9)

To make his point about repentance, Jesus cites two disasters that were well known in his day. One was an evil deed done by the hand of man, while the other was a natural disaster: “eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them” (v 4). “The Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices” (v 1) – we don’t know the details here, but it is consistent with Pilate’s character to slaughter Galilean Jews on their way to sacrifice to the Lord in Jerusalem.

- What is the connection between the warnings in verses 1 to 5 and the parable in verses 6 to 9? What does the parable teach us about the meaning of ‘repent’? See verses 3 and 5.

“Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish” (v 3) – in teaching about repentance, Jesus gets away from the question ‘why did this happen to me?’ and turns it into ‘what does this mean for me?’ It means that we all may die at any time, so repentance must be our top priority. Those who died in both the disasters did not think they would die soon, and we can suppose that at least some of them were not ready. Jesus’ warning was especially poignant: within a generation, those citizens of Jerusalem who had not repented and turned to Jesus perished in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.

“He came seeking fruit” (v 6) – Jesus used this parable to illustrate some principles of God’s dealings with us. The first point is simple: God, as the owner of the vineyard, looks for fruit. The fruit of one’s life shows the character of a person. If a person’s life has really been touched by Jesus, it will show in the kind of fruit that person bears, even if it takes a while for that fruit to become evident (see Luke 8 v 15). What kind of fruit is God looking for? See Isaiah 5 v 7, and Galatians 5 v 22, 23.

“For three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree” (v 7) – here, the owner illustrates the patience of God. He waited three years, and then persuaded by ‘vinedresser’, he gave the fig tree a second chance. The vinedresser, also representing God, did not leave the tree alone, but gave it special care. “If not, you can cut it down” (v 9) – God is also just in his judgment: there eventually will come a day of reckoning.

Jesus heals a crippled woman on the Sabbath (Luke 13 v 10 to 17)

“A woman who had had a disabling spirit” (v 11) – apparently, this woman’s physical condition (“bent over and could not fully straighten herself”) was due to an evil spirit. “Woman, you are freed from your disability” (v 12) – Jesus has no problem ministering to this woman’s need: he shows complete mastery over demons, sickness, and disease.

- In Jesus’ opinion, what was wrong with the ruler of the synagogue’s attitude? How was his reaction to Jesus’ miracle in contrast with that of the woman and the people? What made the difference?

“There are six days in which work ought to be done. Come on those days and be healed, and not on the Sabbath day” (v 14) – the religious leaders objected, saying that Jesus broke the Sabbath. They were more concerned about observing religious traditions and forms than in seeing human need touched by God’s Spirit.

“Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey...” (v 15) – Jesus’ reply is simple: if you can untie an animal on the Sabbath, why can’t you free a suffering person on the Sabbath? “And *ought* not this woman... be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath day” (v 16) – Jesus uses a strong word in the ancient Greek language: he is actually saying that the woman *must* be set free on the Sabbath day.

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The parables of the mustard seed and the yeast (Luke 13 v 18 to 21)

- Some think of the mustard seed growing into a tree as a comforting picture of the church growing and providing refuge for many; but who are the “birds of the air” (see Matthew 13 v 4, 19)? How big does mustard normally grow?
- “Leaven” is an idiom for sin. Why? See Matthew 16 v 6, 1 Corinthians 5 v 6 to 8. “Three measures of flour” denotes the fellowship or grain offering (see Genesis 18 v 6), which was not supposed to contain ‘leaven’ (Leviticus 2 v 11) – so what is this parable really warning us about?

The ‘standard’ interpretation of these parables is that they describe the healthy growth of the church. But it is more likely that these parables describe the corruption of the church by false religion. “It grew and became a tree” (v 18) – in the parable of the mustard seed, Jesus describes abnormal, even monstrous growth. Mustard seed plants simply do not become trees. Trees can be used in the Bible to describe human governments, such as the one Nebuchadnezzar saw in his vision (Daniel 4 v 10 to 16). With the parable of the yeast, Jesus also describes corruption. History proves the dangerous influence that false religion has had on the church, showing itself in political intrigue, lust for power, intolerance, vain superstition, immorality, and greed.

The narrow door (Luke 13 v 22 to 30)

- “Lord, will those who are saved be few?” (v 23) – how does Jesus answer this question?

We may wonder about the salvation of others, but in his reply (“Strive to enter through the narrow door”, v 24), Jesus points back to the only person’s salvation we can really know, and asks, ‘Are *you* saved?’ The door is narrow: we can’t bring our self-centeredness, pride, hate, and especially our self-righteousness, to Jesus. As the famous hymn puts it: ‘Nothing in my hand I bring, only to thy cross I cling.’ Why must we ‘strive to enter’? Because there are many obstacles in the way: the world is an obstacle; the devil is an obstacle; and probably the biggest obstacle is ourselves.

Jesus’ sorrow for Jerusalem (Luke 13 v 31 to 35)

- How does Jesus meet opposition and unbelief? What attitudes and emotions does Jesus display? What can we learn from Jesus’ example?

“Go and tell that fox” (v 32) – why did Jesus call Herod a fox? In this context, fox refers to a ‘cunning but weak ruler’ – it was used as a contrast with a majestic animal like a lion. We need to be aware that Satan can come at us as a fox as much as like a lion. We often just wait for a lion to come along, but a fox deceives us. Herod is also an example of one of the “first who will be last” (v 30): now he sits in power and authority, but that won’t last long. Then, in the last two verses of this chapter, Jesus declares:

- *The purpose of history (v 34a)*: that God would gather his children together (Jerusalem is a synecdoche for Israel). The image of a mother bird gathering and covering her young is a familiar one – Moses used it in his farewell address (Deuteronomy 32 v 11). It is a picture of tender care, and a willingness to die to protect others – and Jesus died for the sins of the world, including Israel, but “his own people did not receive him” (John 1 v 11).
- *The tragedy of history (v 34b, 35a)*: Israel’s rejection of her Messiah (“you were not willing”), followed by God’s judgment (“Behold, your house is forsaken”). May we share Jesus’ broken heart for a lost humanity...
- *The triumph of history (v 35b)*: “until” – Jesus leaves the nation with a promise – he will return, and Israel will say “Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord” (Psalm 118 v 26). See also Hosea 5 v 15 and Romans 11 v 25, again noting the word ‘until’. It will take a great deal to bring Israel to this point, but God will do it: at the end of the Great Tribulation the Jews will welcome Jesus back at his Second Coming, and so “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11 v 26a).