

## Repentance

<sup>1</sup> At that time some people who were present there told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. <sup>2</sup> He said to them in reply, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? <sup>3</sup> By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! <sup>4</sup> Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them —do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? <sup>5</sup> By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!” <sup>6</sup> And he told them this parable: “There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, <sup>7</sup> he said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. (So) cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’ <sup>8</sup> He said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; <sup>9</sup> it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.’” (Luke 13:1-9)

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## Context

This gospel for the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent is a pointed gospel about repentance, bearing fruit, and the time given us – and this well placed for the Lenten season. However, it is far removed from its narrative context. The 14<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time (summer season after Easter) begins in Luke 10. The sequential chapters of Luke are covered every Sunday up through the 20<sup>th</sup> Sunday which completes Luke 12. The 21<sup>st</sup> Sunday, skips over today’s gospel and begins with 13:22-30. So, in addition to its Lenten context, it would be good to review the larger context from the Lucan narrative stream.

All Scripture has a context, this passage included. Most outlines of Luke show our verses as part of a larger whole that begins in 12:1 and concludes in 13:9. A new day and setting is implied in 13:10 where we are told: “*He was teaching in a synagogue on the sabbath.*” Prior to this Jesus had been preaching to his disciples, Peter, the crowds and people who were present. When one considers Luke 12 it is clear that Jesus calls for courage in times of persecution and danger. “Fear” is no longer a synonym for religious awe, but rather speaks to the times present and to come when there is fear of arrest; persecution; lost of position; place and wealth; and fear of death. Jesus speaks to those fears as he points to spiritual freedom symbolized by the generous disposition of possessions. Thus these are times for watchfulness and service – and ultimately a call for decision. It with this background that Jesus provides the warnings for repentance.

Luke 12:1-13:9 contains a number of saying common to or similar to Mark and Matthew. Brian Stoffregen has noted the following (**bolded** sayings are unique to Luke)

	<u>Matt</u>	<u>Mark</u>	<u>Luke</u>
Leaven of the Pharisees	16:5-6	8:14-15	12:1
Exhortation to Fearless Confession	10:26-33		12:2-9
The Sin Against the Holy Spirit	12:31-32	3:28-30	12:10
The Assistance of the Holy Spirit	10:19-20	13:11	12:11-12
<b>Warning Against Avarice</b>			<b>12:13-15</b>
<b>The Parable of the Rich Fool</b>			<b>12:16-21</b>
Anxieties about Earthly Things	6:25-34		12:22-31
<b>Little Flock</b>			<b>12:32</b>
Treasures in Heaven	6:19-21		12:33-34
<b>Returning Master</b>			<b>12:35-38</b>
Homeowner & Burglar	24:43-44		12:39-40
Reliable Manager	24:45-51		12:42-48
<b>Fire on Earth</b>			<b>12:49</b>

Jesus' baptism	20:20-23	10:35-40	12:50
Peace or Conflict	10:34-36		12:51-53
Interpreting the Times	16:2-3		12:54-56
Before the Judge	5:25-26		12:57-59
<b>Repent or Perish</b>			<b>12:1-5</b>
<b>The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree</b>			<b>13:6-9</b>

In the uniquely Lucan sayings there seems to be a special accent on God's gracious actions on behalf of the people.

*"Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom"* (12:32).

*"Gird your loins and light your lamps and be like servants who await their master's return from a wedding, ready to open immediately when he comes and knocks. Blessed are those servants whom the master finds vigilant on his arrival. Amen, I say to you, he will gird himself, have them recline at table, and proceed to wait on them. And should he come in the second or third watch and find them prepared in this way, blessed are those servants"* (12:35-38).

Our verses (13:1-9) contain that same emphasis, e.g., where the gardener seeks to spare the barren fig tree for one more year. It should be noted that the recipients of this divine grace have some responsibilities: not to be afraid, to be prepared and ready, to open the door for the master, to repent and to bear fruit.

## Commentary

The warnings and admonitions regarding the coming judgment that began with 12:1 reach their conclusion with a sobering call for repentance. Just as the debtor on the way to court in 12:57-59 is warned to make every effort at reconciliation, so also Jesus uses the sayings about calamity in 13:1-5 and the parable of the unproductive fig tree in 13:6-9 to make the same point: Repent now, for the time is short.

**Why do bad things happen...** <sup>1</sup> *At that time some people who were present there told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices.* <sup>2</sup> *He said to them in reply, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans?"* <sup>3</sup> *By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!* <sup>4</sup> *Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them —do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem?* <sup>5</sup> *By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!"*

Just Jesus had finished telling the crowds to settle with an opponent before going to the magistrate, the people bring to him news of an incident in which Pilate slaughtered a group of Galileans and then mingled their blood with the blood of their sacrificial offering. Pilate was notorious for his harsh rule and his insensitivity to Jewish religious feelings. No other ancient source reports an event that can be identified with this incident, but Josephus's accounts of Pilate's confrontations with the Jews confirm that such bloodshed was not uncommon: Pilate's troops killed a group of Samaritans climbing Mt. Gerizim; Pilate introduced Roman effigies into Jerusalem, causing a riot and a march on Caesarea; Pilate seized Temple treasury funds in order to build an aqueduct. Why would the people bring this news to Jesus? Did they view Jesus' previous counsel to seek a reconciliation with an opponent as a political statement? Did they think that because blood had been shed the time for reconciliation had passed?

While we are not told the manner in which the story was presented to Jesus, it is not a stretch of the imagination that the people had a point to the telling: the connection of sin and punishment. Remember that in Luke 12, one of the major themes is the coming judgment when people will be held accountable. It

was a popular idea that sin is the cause of misfortune (Job 4:7; John 9:2). This establishes a causality that goes something like this: “If God is responsible for everything that happens, and God is a just God, then calamities must be the result of human sinfulness. The fallacy in such logic is the notion that God is the immediate cause of all events, which leaves no room for human freedom or freedom in the created order, and therefore for events that God does not control.” [Culpepper, 270]

Jesus does not dwell on the particulars of the Galilean event. Instead, to their accounting Jesus add his own newsworthy event: the accidental death of the 18 people in Jerusalem. One set of deaths is caused by evil human choices; the other were accidental. One set of deaths is among people far from Jerusalem; the other happens to people within the holy city’s walls. If the deaths of the Galileans was an atrocity, an act of political violence, then the deaths of the Jerusalemites was sheer caprice, the whim of fate. Were these eighteen worse sinners than all the others who lived in Jerusalem at the time? They are timely reminders of the need for all to repent, for the victims of these untimely tragedies should not be considered outstanding sinners who were singled out for punishment.