

Unless You Repent
Luke 13:1-9
February 28, 2016

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or 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? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." And he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And 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?' And he answered him, 'Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.' " (Lk 13:1-9).

This Gospel reading presents a very hard question. It presents a very important question. In fact, this question is so important theologians have a special name for questions like this. Theologians call this the question of theodicy.

The basic form of a theodicy question is: If God is both almighty and all good, why is there so much evil? There are many variations of this question: 1) "Why do bad things happen to good people; 2) What have I done to deserve this – or as phrased in today's text: *Why did Pilate kill these men and mix their blood with their sacrifices?* Jesus added to his questioners the problem of the tower of Siloam collapsing and killing eighteen people.

The culture of Christ's day taught that bad things didn't happen to good people. They thought if catastrophe struck, it was because you had done something very bad. On the other hand, they thought that if good fortune came your way, you must be leading a very good life. They didn't see God as a God of love. They saw a God of justice – good must be rewarded and bad must be punished.

Other cultures of that day treated questions of theodicy with a different point of view. The Greeks and Romans assumed their gods were flawed and bad. They imagined their gods to have the same weaknesses as humans. If you know much of their mythology, you know that the Greek and Roman gods could be very petty. They were sometimes selfish and immature. They acted like supernatural spoiled brats.

Jesus taught that both of these ideas were wrong. He show the people that we ask the wrong question when we want to know why bad things happen to good people.

To see the error in this type of questioning, we simply have to look at one of the confessions used in our church: *Most merciful God, I confess that I am by nature sinful and unclean. I have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what I have done and by what I have left undone. I have not loved you with my whole heart; I have not loved my neighbors as*

myself. I justly deserve your present and eternal punishment.

If you've been around the Lutheran church as long as I have, you might remember: *I, a poor, miserable sinner, confess unto You all my sins and iniquities with which I have ever offended You and justly deserved Your temporal and eternal punishment.*

With these words, we confess that we are not good people. We are bad people. We deserve nothing but misery on earth and torment in eternity. So, do you see the problem with the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

We confess our sins in this manner, because God's Word teaches us that we are sinful people. Here are some examples:

Psalm 51:5 *Behold, I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin did my mother conceive me.*

Romans 3:9-12 *We have already charged that all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one."*

Romans 3:23 *For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

1 John 1:8, 10 *If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we say we have not sinned, we make [God] a liar, and his word is not in us.*

These are only a few of the times God reminds us we are born sinful and we add to our sinfulness every day of our lives.

Sometimes we use \$10 church words and we forget what they really mean. When we say that we sin, we are saying we are bad people. When the Bible says that all have sinned, it is saying all people are bad people. There are no good people. So, the question of bad things happening to good people is neither helpful or useful.

When we ask about bad things happening to good people, we are assuming there are good people out there somewhere. However, the Bible clearly teaches there are no good people.

In our confessions, we admit that we deserve bad things now and forever because we are bad people. So, the question, "Why do bad things happen to good people," isn't question about real people. Truth is we don't know what would or should happen to good people because there are no good people.

Since we confess that we are bad people and that we deserve nothing but punishment both now and for eternity, we should be afraid to ask why God doesn't just take all the evil out of the world. If God were to take all the evil out of the world, he would have to start with you and me, because we are sinners.

While Satan and his angels are the ultimate source of evil in this world, we humans add a great deal of evil on our own. Maybe we should be asking, “If God is both almighty and all good, why doesn’t he destroy us for being so evil,” or “Why do good things happen to us evil sinners?”

We have confessed we deserve nothing by bad; bad things, bad days, bad lives, but that isn’t what happens. In truth, our normal lives are pretty good. Did you wake up this morning? That was good. If you look at your life from birth until now, I’ll bet most of your life you’ve been healthy and pain free. Everyone gets sick or hurt from time to time, but still, most of your days have probably been pretty good. Some days the car won’t start, but most days it does. There have probably been some tragedies in your life, but not every day.

We can be thankful that although God is almighty and all good, he is also merciful. His just nature demands that evil be punished, but he has worked out a way to punish evil without punishing us.

Instead of asking why bad things happen to good people, we should be asking why so many bad things happen to the one and only good person. There has been only one good person. That person was Jesus Christ. Jesus is God’s answer to the question of evil in the world.

Jesus suffered many bad things; beating, flogging, crucifixion. However, there was something far worse than these things. Hopefully, none of us will ever know the agony Jesus felt when he said: *My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?* (Mt 27:46). When Jesus said that, he was experiencing all of the bad days and all of the punishment that we deserve.

In suffering we can’t begin to imagine, God the Father turned his back on God the Son. These bad things happened to the only truly good person to ever walk the earth. This is what the almighty, good, just, merciful, and loving God did to deal with the problem of evil. He sacrificed himself in order to show mercy to sinners.

Jesus died on that cross, but he didn’t remain dead. He rose. Now he offers forgiveness to us through the work of the Holy Spirit. He and the Father send the Holy Spirit to work repentance in us and thereby forgiveness for our sins. The Holy Spirit works through the Word of the Father to bring faith in the Son.

Jesus is now interceding for us before the Father. The Holy Spirit inspired John to write: *We have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous* (1 Jn 2:1). Jesus illustrated this point with the parable of the gardener. Just as the gardener interceded on behalf of the fig tree, Christ intercedes with God’s justice on our behalf. Jesus intercedes for patience while the Holy Spirit works in us. God is looking for the fruit of repentance in us.

Jesus intercedes, but there is a limit. Twice Jesus said: *Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish* (Lk 13:5). There is a limit to the amount of time God allows for repentance.

There comes a day when every person must leave this world. For those who feel their sinfulness and rejoice in the forgiveness earned for them by Jesus, there awaits the joy of eternity in the presence of the one who loved them enough to die for them. Those who resist repentance will join Satan and his angels in the torment of eternal hell. In his parable, Jesus said: *If [the tree] should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down* (Lk 13:9).

There is one and only one good man, Jesus Christ. We are all bad. Jesus took the punishment we deserve for our sins. Through his suffering, Jesus earned forgiveness for us. Now is the time for repentance. Now is the time of forgiveness. Now is the time of salvation. *Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved* (Ac 16:31).