

Luke 13:1-17

Repentance, the parable of the fig tree and the bent woman

Introduction

As we work our way through the gospel of Luke, we have arrived at chapter thirteen. We are still within a larger section of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God. In the previous chapter, Jesus had been speaking about personal responsibility and the judgement that will fall on those who do not respond appropriately to the offer of God's kingdom. He will give some illustrations of that kingdom later in this chapter, in the passage for consideration next week.

Today's passage breaks naturally into three parts, in each of which, God's thoughts are made known in a different way.

- Section 1 Which consists of verses 1 to 5, is in the form of a discourse, or straightforward teaching
- Section 2 Composed of verses 6 to 9 consists of a parable, and
- Section 3 Formed of verses 10 to 17, is the report of a healing that Jesus performed and the controversy that resulted from it.

In these three sections we are taught three truths:

- Section 1 Judgement is not exceptional, it will fall on everyone, unless they repent.
- Section 2 God is patient, therefore judgement may not be immediate and is never hasty.
- Section 3 Grace and salvation are possible and should not be scorned.

Section 1 A discourse on repentance

Let's read the first part of our text for today.

There were present at that season some who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, *Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; 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 sinners than all other men who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.* Luke 13:1-5

Some people just love to recount the calamities that have fallen on others! They are never happier than when they are recalling other people's woes. Perhaps it makes them feel better about themselves. That seems to have been the attitude of some of those who had been listening to Jesus' teaching in the previous chapter. Frankly, some of what Jesus had been saying about God's judgement and personal responsibility, was rather uncomfortable. In response, these people did what we are very apt to do ourselves; they changed the subject to the perceived failings of

others. It's a great method of turning away the sharp edge of God's word! Peter famously used this approach in John 21:21 when, in response to the Lord's challenging revelations about the end of Peter's own life, he says, referring to John, *But Lord, what about this man?* Somehow it is always more comfortable to look at other people and assess and condemn them, than it is to face our own failings.

They wanted to see the destruction of a group of their fellow Galileans by Pilate as an exceptional act, meted out on a small number of extraordinary sinners. Jesus' response chimes with that well-known verse, Romans 3:23, *All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.* Judgement is universal. The murdered Galileans were no worse, and no better, than those to whom Jesus was speaking. What Jesus says swings the spotlight firmly back on to them, *I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.* You, you, you! In case they miss the point, He repeats exactly the same words a couple of verses later.

Jesus then relates another, similar, account. This time the victims are from Jerusalem, the very city of God, and the disaster is caused, not by a wicked Roman governor, but by the unexpected collapse of a tower – surely an *act of God!* But, as we have just noticed, Jesus conclusion is exactly the same – everyone will perish unless they repent. Galileans and dwellers in Jerusalem; everybody alive, then and today; all are heading for judgement. What is the answer? Everybody needs to repent. This teaching encompasses both the *offence of the cross* and the good news of salvation. Without intervention, everybody is bad, and everybody is going to perish. But God has intervened, and repentance can therefore be more than just a sorrow for what was done in the past: it can be a turning in faith, to a Saviour who has borne the judgement for us.

There is a temptation for us to view God's judgement very simplistically – if bad things happen to someone, then that person must have been very bad. The disciples fell into this trap when they said to Jesus, in John 9:2, *Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?* We must not just say, bad things happened to them, so they must be bad people. But neither should we make the mistake of never seeing God at work in life's circumstances. We should not fail to look for what God is telling us by way of circumstances – but we are wise to focus on our own circumstances, to see what God is saying to us, not the circumstances of others to try and work out what God thinks of them!

Section 2 The parable of the fruitless fig tree

We've arrived at the next part of today's reading.

He also spoke this parable: A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. Then he said to the keeper of his vineyard, Look, for three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none. Cut it down; Why does it use up the ground? But he answered and said to him, Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and fertilise it, and if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down. Luke 13:6-9.

The subject hasn't really changed, we are still confronted with the judgement of God. But now Jesus is using one of His favourite methods of teaching; the parable. He tells them a story with a meaning, to illustrate His point. Sometimes the purpose of the Lord's parables is to conceal His meaning from the general company and reveal it only to His disciples. At other times, as here, the meaning of the parable is plain for all to see, and the purpose is to underline the point and drive the message home.

A man has planted a fig tree in his vineyard and the only possible purpose can be to get figs from it! There would have been limited space, so the fig tree was taking up ground that might have had grapevines planted in it. The vineyard owner has waited patiently for three years and there has

been no fruit at all. There was life, the fig tree was growing and had branches and leaves, but it was failing in its core purpose – it was not giving fruit. The owner has had enough and is ready to cut the tree down, but he is persuaded by the vineyard keeper to persevere for one more year. Every effort is to be made to encourage fruitfulness, but this is the last chance. If this does not work, the fig tree will be chopped down. It may be that the three days represents the ministry of John the Baptist and Jesus, or it could simply signify the very long period of God's patience with Israel, and the extra year may represent the ministry of Jesus. It is best not to push the interpretation of parables too far.

A fig tree is a fairly common biblical symbol of the nation of Israel. It is plain, that the interpretation of this parable is as a picture of God's coming judgement on that nation. In Matthew 3:10 John the Baptist is recorded as saying, *And even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.* He was clearly warning the nation of Israel in general, and the individuals within it, that God was looking for evidence of real faith in Him, and that He would take away those who gave no such evidence. God called the nation of Israel to live for Him, much like He created human beings in the first place, to live for Him and reflect His glory. If the nation will not do that, they will be removed from their special status, at least until a future day.

But there is a wider application. Everyone needs to be aware of God's ultimate judgement, and His demand for repentance. Just like with Israel, God is very patient being *slow to anger*, and the judgement may be deferred until every opportunity for repentance has been given. This can lead some into the error of thinking that God will never intervene saying, in the words of 2 Peter 3:4, *All things continue as they were from the beginning of creation.* They forget that, *[God] is longsuffering toward us, not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance.* In the parable, the tree is granted another year while it is given every possible encouragement to bear fruit. However, at the end of that year, if there is still no fruit the axe will be wielded. Judgement delayed doesn't undermine the earlier point that judgement is, ultimately, universal where there is no repentance.

We should also look for how we can apply God's word to ourselves. Although believers are not subject to God's judgement, we still need to regularly remind ourselves that God looks to see fruit for Himself in our lives. That is why we were created and then recreated in new birth. What evidence of life and growth are we showing to God? He has certainly provided all that is required for this purpose.

One final note about parables. As I have already said, we need to be careful not to over interpret them and seek to find a meaning in every single detail. Parables teach one simple truth. If we insist that the Father is the vineyard owner and Jesus is the keeper of the vineyard, we may start to think that the Father is less patient than the Son and needs to be persuaded by Him to show mercy! That is certainly not what this parable teaches.

Section 3 The healing of the woman bent double

There is one more segment of today's reading remaining, and it is a lovely story of grace and liberty.

Now He was teaching in one of the synagogues on the Sabbath. And behold, there was a woman who had a spirit of infirmity eighteen years, and was bent over and could in no way raise herself up. But when Jesus saw her, He called her to Him and said to her, Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity. And He laid His hands on her, and immediately she was made straight, and glorified God. But the ruler of the synagogue answered with indignation, because Jesus had healed on the Sabbath; and he said to the crowd, There are six days on which men ought to work; therefore

come and be healed on them, and not on the Sabbath day. The Lord then answered him and said, 'Hypocrite! Does not each one of you on the Sabbath loose his ox or donkey from the stall, and lead it away to water it? So ought not this woman, being a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has bound – think of it – for eighteen years, be loosed from this bond on the Sabbath?' And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him. Luke 13:10-17.

After two sections focussing on judgement it is refreshing to encounter grace, liberation and rejoicing! It is the order of the gospel that the need for salvation must be established first. Nobody looks for a saviour until they feel the need to be saved. Warnings of judgement and punishment are solemn but necessary. A careful study of the gospels will show just how often Jesus spoke on these topics: not because He had nothing to say about love and grace – quite the reverse!

The Lord knew that hearts needed to feel their need first, and it was part of His love and compassion to speak honestly about such things. It is part of our duty to men and women, and to the Saviour, to do the same today. But always, as an introduction to the beautiful subject of grace.

As Jesus was teaching in the synagogue He saw this poor woman and the need which she had. She must have struggled desperately for eighteen years in her folded over condition. She somehow managed to get through daily life, even struggling along to the synagogue. Perhaps the synagogue leaders had stopped noticing she was there. Of course, there was nothing they could do to make her well again. Perhaps they thought, like the people at the start of the chapter, that this calamity had been caused by the woman's own wickedness. We are not told how this *spirit of infirmity* had taken hold of her, but it had kept her in a firm grip for eighteen years.

The first thing Jesus does is to call her to Him. She must have shuffled towards Him rather slowly and awkwardly, doubtless wondering what He intended to do. The first thing Jesus does is speak. He speaks with all the authority of God, so when He says, *Woman, you are loosed from your infirmity*, I have no doubt that the words alone were enough to make her well. But, as so often, Jesus also lays His hands on her. I don't think it was essential for her healing, but it put her in direct, loving contact with the One who was setting her free. Using one of his favourite words, Luke tells us that *immediately she was made straight*. Now just think about this! A long time ago I broke my arm and was in plaster for about ten weeks. When the pot was removed, I vividly remember only being able to flex that arm about ten degrees in either direction from the position in which it had been held.

Over time, all the tendons and muscles had stiffened up. It took weeks of painful physio to get full movement and strength back. This lady had been folded double for eighteen years! By rights, it should have taken months to get her moving again, but she straightens up instantly. No wonder she *glorified God*. The glorifying seems to have been as immediate as the healing and was a very suitable response to it.

It would have been a happy thing if this story had ended there, but not everybody was moved to glorify God. One man was extremely unhappy. The healing had taken place on the Sabbath, and the ruler of the synagogue was outraged at this apparent flouting of God's Sabbath laws. He proceeds to quote the law in accusation against the very giver of that law, in whose presence he is unwittingly standing! He doesn't do Jesus the honour of addressing Him directly, preferring to address his remarks to the crowd, He was probably accustomed to giving orders! *There are six days for working, he lectured. Don't come asking to be healed on the Sabbath*. There is an interesting detail in how Luke describes the answer that he receives. We read, *The Lord then answered him*. In the rest of this passage Luke has referred to Jesus as He or using the name of Jesus. Now he speaks about Him as the Lord. The Lord has abundantly more authority than any ruler of a synagogue! He has demonstrated authority over the power of Satan, and now He speaks

with the authority of One who can determine exactly what the law of God does, and does not, command. But first there is a stinging, one-word rebuke for the ruler. Hypocrite!, Jesus says. I suspect it struck this arrogant man like a slap in the face. If the ruler was indignant at Jesus' actions, Jesus is even more indignant at the ruler's words.

This man had taken a position as one of the shepherds of God's people. He should have been exerting all his effort to care for this woman and the rest of the congregation. Instead, he had more care for his donkeys than for the people of God! He, and others like him, thought it perfectly reasonable to loose their livestock and lead them away to drink on a Sabbath day. But he would not accept that this poor woman should be given the same care. In Matthew 23:13 Jesus condemns a similar group of men with these words; *But woe to you, scribes and pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men; for you neither go in yourselves, nor do you allow those who are entering to go in.* Notice the same forceful charge of hypocrisy. They pretended to be one thing when the reality was quite different. They wanted to be seen as godly men, brave defenders of the Law, God's honour and God's people; when, in reality, they were very far away from God in their hearts. They wilfully obstructed anybody else from approaching Him. To make themselves seem godly and important they needed to belittle the actions of other people.

The ruler of the synagogue suggested that Jesus was doing work by healing on the Sabbath. That might just have been true if Jesus had been acting as a doctor, or a paid healer of some kind. Plainly He was not. He was loosing one of God's people from Satan's grip. Jesus describes the woman as a *daughter of Abraham*. You could interpret that as a reference to the fact that she was Jewish. But in Matthew 3 and John 8 Jesus denies that Jews who are acting entirely without faith, can claim Abraham, who is the father of the faithful, as being their father. It seems that in this passage Jesus is using the phrase *daughter of Abraham* to describe the faith of this lady. No doubt her faith was evidenced when she accepted the Lord's word about her healing and then glorified God for it.

Jesus says that the lady has been *loosed from this bond*. At one level, Satan had bound her, and doubled her over. So, she was loosed from Satan's power and loosed from her physical condition. But the Lord was always more interested in dealing with deeper needs than the purely physical. We have a clear picture of the freedom from the twin powers of sin and death by which Satan still binds people today, and from which Jesus still sets people free.

If this lady had shuffled awkwardly towards Jesus she must have paced confidently away with great joy! I picture her looking up joyfully at the trees and birds and sky for the first time in 18 years. How wonderful to be able to look straight into the faces of those around her, rather than squinting painfully upwards. But the first face she looked into was that of Jesus, who had just set her free!

What about us? Are we ever tempted to set standards that are 'higher' than those God actually demands, and then criticise other people for not achieving those standards? We all have some tendency towards phariseeism within us and it is something we need to constantly watch ourselves for. Another characteristic of pharisees is the failure to give thanks for the blessings of others. The ruler took no pleasure at all in the healing of this woman, rather the reverse. Can we rejoice at the blessing of others outside our immediate circle? Twice in the parables of Luke 15 we find the characters in these parables saying *Rejoice with me*, when they have found the things they had lost. Perhaps the Lord Jesus is saying that to us today as we see evidence of His blessing on some other person, or group of believers. Are we able to respond with the same joy that is in His heart?

At the conclusion of this account we read, *And when He said these things, all His adversaries were put to shame; and all the multitude rejoiced for all the glorious things that were done by Him.* It had been the intention of Jesus' enemies to accuse Him of breaking God's law and thus to discredit Him and bring shame on Him. The actual result is that Jesus is honoured, and they themselves are put to shame. Ultimately, God and His servants are always justified, and God's enemies are put to open shame. It may not always happen immediately, or even quickly, but it is always the final outcome. It is good to read about the multitude rejoicing, but the Lord was never swayed by any temporary popularity He had, and we shouldn't think that this was evidence of a widespread belief in Christ. It is notable that the crowd rejoiced in the things Jesus did, not in the things that he taught or in the person of Christ Himself. In the terminology of John's gospel, they were seeing the signs Jesus did, and indeed rejoicing in them, but they were not grasping what the signs actually signified. The miracles were wonderful, and the liberation of this one woman was definitely to be rejoiced in, but they needed to understand what the miracles were telling them about the man who performed them, and they had to grasp their own need of liberation from the judgement that was pending on them.

Thank you for listening to this Truth for Today talk on Luke chapter 13 verses 1 to 17, Repentance, the parable of the fig tree and the bent woman, talk number T1106.

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