

SERMON THOUGHTS ABRIDGED

LUKE 13:1-9
WHAT ABOUT WHEN LIFE "STINKS" ?

There were present at that season some who told Him 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.

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 fertilize it. And if it bears fruit, well. But if not, after that you can cut it down."

A common greeting is: "How's it going?" Most people who ask it, really don't expect the full answer or maybe even want an honest answer. At any rate, there are two extremes. On one extreme, it's the "complainer" answer. Everything's bad. Whether it's really that bad or not, all things are in negative terms. Life stinks. On the other hand, there's the "dreamer" answer. Everything's great! Oblivious to the actual state of affairs, living in their own little bubble, life is unbelievably great. Unbelievable is right. Maybe they're just trying to impress you..

In our text, "How was it going?" People brought Jesus tragic news. It "stunk." The Roman governor Pontius Pilate had interfered with the temple sacrifices of some Jews from Galilee. He hadn't just stopped the sacrifice, he killed the people. And he didn't just kill the people. To scorn and shame them, and their countrymen, and their worship of the Lord, he mixed their blood with their sacrifices on God's altar! Brutal, blasphemous. Human sacrifice was never pleasing to God, nor commanded by God. The Lord had said, "The children of Judah have done evil in My sight. . . . They have built the high places . . . to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I did not command nor did it come into My heart" (Jeremiah 7:20-21). Pilate's deed was offensive to the Jews. It was blatant mockery to God. It made life "stink."

You may ask: Didn't God tell Abraham to kill his son Isaac at Mt Moriah (Genesis 22)?? We do know, in the end, the Lord stopped Abraham and told him not to slay his son. God did not want Abraham to kill Isaac. In fact, God had not instructed Abraham to "kill" his son. He told Him to "offer," to "offer up," his son—which typically meant "slay and offer," and Abraham quite automatically took it that way. However, when God told Abraham to stop and not to lay a hand on the boy, the Lord said, "You have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me." Abraham had in fact already offered the sacrifice God wanted. He had sacrificed Isaac in his heart. Human sacrifice was not, and is not, God's desire.

Back to the text: After the Jews brought news of Pilate's deed, Jesus Himself brought up another traumatic event--the 18 people in Jerusalem who died when the tower of Siloam collapsed on them. It was unexpected, it too was tragic. Life suddenly "stunk" for them, for their families, and for all the rest.

And what about you? Does your life "stink" of late? Did you get hurt, hindering your ability to work—and that is to say nothing of the pain? Have your finances taken a hit by the drought? Did it rain on fields and pastures near you, but not on yours? Did you get hail? What about the trip you were planning, but had to "scrub"? Did death come calling in your extended family? Why do these things happen to make life so hard?

The natural assumption is: Somebody did something wrong. God punishes, if you do badly right? And if you live a good and true life, God doesn't afflict you, right? That's what Job's "friends" thought. "What is it you've done, Job? God doesn't just send suffering in life for no reason!"

What does Jesus say here? *Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, No.* Then He says the same for the tower victims. In other words you cannot conclude anything about a person's status before God by the way they die. Sometimes for His own reasons, God has "good" people, heartfelt Christian people, who know their sin and know their Savior, die young, or in what we could call "tragic" ways. Sometimes, for His own reasons, God allows wicked people, unbelieving people, to live to very old age. You cannot conclude anything about status before God by the way one dies.

Jesus hits the central issue. It is not how one dies, but what is in the heart when one dies. *I tell you, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.* Impenitence! Impenitence in the heart is far worse. To consider yourself a non-sinner, with no need for the Savior, to turn away from Jesus, the One whose holy blood was sacrificed for the sins of the world, is the worst way to die—apart from Him, doing your own thing, not holding to the gift of forgiveness in Christ, bearing no fruit for God. Facing God’s displeasure and anger, receiving physical death and eternal death, *perishing* in total separation from God in the furnace of hell is the worst way to die.

To make that point Jesus told the parable of the fig tree in the vineyard. For three years in succession the owner came and found no figs on his fig tree. The owner was angry. He had not put the tree there to make shade, or to give the landscape a pleasing appearance. It was there to bear fruit! But none. *The fig tree* was having a good time, an easy life! No stink there. But to the *owner*, the life of that fig tree stunk! And that’s what counted. The tree was useless to him, a waste of space and of nutrients in the soil. He wanted to cut it down. The caretaker asked for one more year. He would work with it one more year—specifically digging around it, putting fertilizer—literally “manure”—onto the soil. If after one more year, it still produced nothing, then it was a worthless tree. *Cut it down.*

God looks into your heart. Are you repentant and His child by faith in Jesus? Are you producing fruit in your life as His child in Jesus? Or are you just going through empty motions? God is not interested in outward empty motions, but in fruit from the heart. It’s NOT enough to say, “Look at my outward actions! I drink less than I used to, I have stopped messing with drugs too. I don’t swear nearly as much, I don’t lie much anymore, I strive to stay away from pornography, I’m controlling my temper, I don’t readily badmouth others, I try not to be so lazy, I try not to spend so much time with my phone or watching movies. I’m bearing fruit for God, right?” If these are only outward actions, they are NOT fruit for God. Do they flow from a humble Christian heart of repentance? A repentant heart that says, “Father, in spite of what seems like a few good things, I have sinned against You and others, and I can’t undo what I’ve done. I can’t fix it. Please, Father, forgive me through Your Son who was wounded for my transgressions and sin, who died so that all the world and I would not perish. Please forgive me in Jesus’ name.” And He does! Your un-fruitfulness and unfaithfulness are forgiven. Gone. The guilt that plagues you? In Christ, it’s gone! The Father holds you in His arms. You don’t have to try to prove something to God anymore. It’s given to you as a gift! NOW, with a heart at peace with God through Jesus, and in response to your new status, Christian repentance also includes. “Father, help me to do better. Help me to keep Your commandments. Help me to be *rooted and grounded in Your love* (Epistle reading today). Help me to love You and my neighbor, for “love is the fulfillment of the law” (Romans 13:10). By the Holy Spirit, THIS is bearing fruit for God: sorrowing over sin, grasping forgiveness in Jesus, and living anew for Christ.

But beware, and be **aware**, your sinful nature, still does not want to bear fruit for God. “Leave me alone. It’s my life. In Your face, God. I call the shots.” The old Adam, the sinful nature will fight you every step of the way. It wants you to think, “On the outside, I’ll do what He says, and let it go at that.” But you cannot fool the Lord with admirable works and an empty heart. Jesus said, “You Pharisees make the outside of the cup and dish clean, but your inward part is full of greed and wickedness! (Luke 11:39). And again, “You are like whitewashed tombs, which indeed appear beautiful outwardly, but inside are fully of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness” (Matthew 23:27). Your sinful nature will also want you to think, “I have time. I’ll get back to Jesus later.” I don’t think the tree in the text had any clue how close it was to getting the ax, do you? You cannot trample underfoot the Son of God, and thinks it’s ok. It’s like getting a new shirt for your birthday and then stomping on it with dirty boots. *Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy, who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?* (Hebrews 10:29) Beware! The sinful nature will want you to “lean on your connections”: “My uncle is a pastor. My parents were really big in the church. I belong to the CLC.” Regarding connections, Jesus said, *Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you workers of iniquity!’* (Matthew 7:22-23). Beware lest the day comes when Jesus the caretaker, who pleads for you with the Father, says to His Father, “Enough. Cut it down.” !

Jesus, the dear caretaker, wants to draw you closer to the Father. He wants to draw your heart and your heart’s actions closer to the Father who sent Him to save you. Jesus will work in your life to do this. In the parable the caretaker dug and fertilized—manured—the tree. The tree maybe said, “Ook, that stinks,” but it was for the tree’s own good! Likewise when Jesus works with you in your life, and allows crosses to come which seem to make life stink, remember He is working to draw your heart and soul closer. In Him the real stink, the rot, and decay of eternal death will never touch you. In Christ life always smells good. SO: How’s it going? Indeed, it **is** going great!

So be it! Amen!

Pastor Kanzenbach---