

LUKE 13:1-5

WAKE UP! BEAR FRUIT! THE GARDNER COMES

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A. Introduction

Today, we continue our study in the Gospel of Luke. We are focusing on Jesus' journey to Jerusalem, which covers ten chapters from Luke 9:51 to 19:44. Along the journey, Jesus teaches his disciples some of the most important lessons about walking on the spiritual path. The spiritual path leads back to our home with God.

In some journeys, one person can be substituted for by another. For example, the president of the US can delegate his vice president to represent him if a foreign head of state dies.

However, the spiritual journey cannot be taken by another person. The spiritual journey is a personal experience. It is a journey that every person must make for himself or herself.

Fortunately, we have a guide and that guide is Jesus. Today we hear Jesus talk about two things:

1. How tragic events can awaken us spiritually and lead us to God and
2. How God has not given up on us.

B. Two Tragedies: Wake up!

<p>¹ At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ² He asked them, "Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners [ἀμαρτωλοὶ] than all other Galileans? ³ No, I tell you; but unless you repent [μετανοήτε], you will all perish as they</p>	<p>¹ Παρήσαν δέ τινες ἐν αὐτῷ τῷ καιρῷ ἀπαγγέλλοντες αὐτῷ περὶ τῶν Γαλιλαίων ὧν τὸ αἷμα Πιλάτος ἔμιξεν μετὰ τῶν θυσιῶν αὐτῶν. ² καὶ ἀποκριθεὶς εἶπεν αὐτοῖς· δοκεῖτε ὅτι οἱ Γαλιλαῖοι οὗτοι ἀμαρτωλοὶ παρὰ πάντας τοὺς Γαλιλαίους ἐγένοντο, ὅτι ταῦτα πεπόνηθασιν; ³ οὐχί, λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀλλ' ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήτε πάντες ὁμοίως ἀπολεισθε.</p>
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<p>did.</p> <p>⁴ Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them-- do you think that they were worse offenders ["debtors" - ὀφειλέται] than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ No, I tell you; but unless you repent [μετανοήτε] , you will all perish just as they did."</p>	<p>⁴ ἢ ἐκεῖνοι οἱ δεκαοκτῶ ἐφ' οὓς ἔπεσεν ὁ πύργος ἐν τῷ Σιλωὰμ καὶ ἀπέκτεινεν αὐτούς, δοκεῖτε ὅτι αὐτοὶ ὀφειλέται ἐγένοντο παρὰ πάντας τοὺς ἀνθρώπους τοὺς κατοικοῦντας Ἱερουσαλήμ; ⁵ οὐχί, λέγω ὑμῖν, ἀλλ' ἐὰν μὴ μετανοήτε πάντες ὡσαύτως ἀπολείσθε.</p>
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1. Tragedy is tragedy

We want to make sense of senseless tragedies. We search for reasons even when there are none. Jesus anticipates our questions in this passage.

There are two terrible tragedies. One happened in the Temple; the other near the Pool of Siloam

- In the first case, Pilate, the Roman governor, had killed some Galileans who had come to make sacrifices at the Temple. Pilate may have suspected the Galileans for insurrection against the Roman regime. Pilate mixed their blood with the sacrifices to warn other Jews to remember who was in charge.
- In the second case, a tower fell on people near the Pool of Siloam killing 18 people who just happened to be there.

How can these senseless tragedies be explained?

Jesus asks the question. He asks, "Why' did these things happen?"

- Were the Galilean "worse sinners" than everyone else? Is that why they were slaughtered?
- Were the people killed at Siloam "worse debtors" than others? Is that why they were crushed to death?

Jesus answers his own questions. He says, "No!" to both questions. The Galileans were not worse than others and neither were the people at Siloam. It was not divine judgment against sinners or debtors. Their deaths were tragic, heart-breaking, and unfortunate.

Jesus does not say it was God's will. He does not say God was punishing them for some great sin.

- When Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans in 2004, was that God punishing the people of that city? No.

- When Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson claimed that the terrorist attacks of 9/11 was God's judgment on America for the secularization of society, were they in line with Jesus' thinking? No.

2. Tragedy can awaken us

But then Jesus goes on to say something that makes our heads spin. After he says, "No!" he goes on to say, "Unless you repent, you will all perish as they did." (vv. 3, 5)

Is Jesus contradicting himself? I don't think so.

I think Jesus is simply redirecting their attention away from the two tragedies (over which they had no control) to their own lives (over which they had considerably more control).

In effect he is saying, "Don't speculate about other peoples' lives when your life is what you are responsible for."

- We spend a lot of time speculating about others peoples' problems.
- We worry about people and things we have no control over.
- In this way, we avoid our responsibilities and hide from problems.

Jesus is saying, "Let these tragedies awaken you; let them remind you of your own plight ... your own need for repentance... your own need for God."

3. Repent (*metanoēō*)

Jesus' word is direct. His call is clear. His admonition is simple. "Repent!"

For many Christians—particularly for those who grew up in Christian homes—to repent meant "to feel really, really bad about what a sinful person you are."¹

However, this is not what "repent" means in the Gospels. The word has two basic meanings.

a. Return (to God)

The first meaning is grounded in Israel's experience of exile in Babylon, when they were separated from Jerusalem and the Temple as the place of God's presence.

¹ Marcus Borg, *Jesus* (2006) 219.

“To repent” means “to return,” and in particular to return from exile and to return to the Lord. Linguistically, “to repent” belongs to the same linguistic family as the image of “the way”—the way is the path of repentance, the path of returning to God.²

b. Go beyond the mind

The second meaning is suggested by the root meaning of the Greek word, “repent” (*metanoēō*), which literally means “to go beyond the mind” that you have. To repent is to see with a new or renewed mind.

In this way, the word “repent” combined two elements: *To return from exile* and *to think or see anew*. “It means to return from a condition of estrangement and exile to the presence of God... Both meanings involve centering in God—in God as Jesus spoke of God.”³

Of course, this radical return to God, or renewing our minds in God, necessarily entails a total change of one’s behavior, attitude, and intentions in a way that aligns with God, the God of compassion, justice, and life.

Once we see the radical transformative meaning of repentance—that we must be transformed into the likeness of God in Christ—we understand why Jesus follows up this conversation with the Parable of the Fig Tree.

C. The Fig Tree: Bear fruit!

<p>⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷ So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸ He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”</p>	<p>⁶ Ἐλεγεν δὲ ταύτην τὴν παραβολήν· συκῆν εἶχέν τις πεφυτευμένην ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι αὐτοῦ, καὶ ἦλθεν ζητῶν καρπὸν ἐν αὐτῇ καὶ οὐχ εὗρεν. ⁷ εἶπεν δὲ πρὸς τὸν ἀμπελουργόν· ἰδοὺ τρία ἔτη ἀφ’ οὗ ἔρχομαι ζητῶν καρπὸν ἐν τῇ συκῇ ταύτῃ καὶ οὐχ εὕρισκω. ἔκκοψον [οὖν] αὐτήν, ἵνατί καὶ τὴν γῆν καταργεῖ; ⁸ ὁ δὲ ἀποκριθεὶς λέγει αὐτῷ· κύριε, ἄφες αὐτήν καὶ τοῦτο τὸ ἔτος, ἕως ὅτου σκάψω περὶ αὐτὴν καὶ βάλω κόπρια, ⁹ καὶ μὲν ποιήσῃ καρπὸν εἰς τὸ μέλλον· εἰ δὲ μή γε, ἐκκόψεις αὐτήν.</p>
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² Borg, *Jesus* (2006) 219.

³ Borg, *Jesus* (2006) 220.

1. A parable of judgment

After Jesus calls for repentance, he tells this parable of the Fig Tree. It is a parable of judgment.

It is a parable of judgment for those who *fail to repent*, for those who fail to *turn or return to God*. God is the Source of our life. When we turn away from God, when we fail to connect with the Source of life, we experience existential disaster.

That is, we lose touch with God—the sense of safety, security, and acceptance with God—we compensate by seeking power, possessions, pleasure, and other things that alienate us from God and other people. That misery—that alienation from God and others—is experienced as judgment and condemnation.

When I think of judgment, I do not think of God punishing us—sinners in the hands of a vengeful God wanting to torture people for eternity—though it might feel that way to some people. Rather, judgment is the pain we feel as a natural consequence of being disconnected from God, who is the Source of life.

If we remembered John the Baptist's preaching at the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we could have predicted this parable. John the Baptist called all Israel to repent, to return to God, and to be baptized.

John said, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (Luke 3:9).

Jesus came to John and was baptized. Then Jesus began his public ministry. Three years later, Jesus tells this parable about a man who had planted a fig tree and for three years had come looking for fruit on it, but found none.

For three years, God had waited for Israel to respond to Jesus' message about the arrival of God's Kingdom, but instead of repentance, people resisted. So in the parable, the owner of the fig tree says, "Cut it down!"

But that's not the end of the parable, was it? How did the parable end? The gardener, who the owner had put in charge, makes a plea. He says:

Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down (vv. 8-9).

Jesus is the gardener. He says, "Give me another year. I'm not giving up on the fig tree yet. Let me dig around it, loosen up the soil, put manure on it, maybe even prune it a bit."

- Maybe the fig tree is the whole human race.
- Maybe the fig tree is the church.
- Maybe it's your life.
- Maybe it's mine.

2. A parable of promise

Jesus is not giving up on any of us. But there is a sense of urgency—one more year. The parable contains a warning. But it is also a parable of promise.

Jesus makes a promise: He says, "I'm going to do everything I can to help this tree live and bear fruit. I'm going to dig around it. I'm going to loosen up the hard soil that does let water and air in. I'm going to put manure on it. And, if need be, I'm going to prune it as any good gardener would."

a. The gardener

Jesus, the gardener, wants us to live and bear fruit.

- The gardener comes to us every day.
- The gardener comes to us in the mirror we look at every morning.
- The gardener *prunes* our character defects through our interactions with our loved ones, our colleagues, and our clients.
- The gardener *digs around* us and loosens our soil through the pushy stranger, through the needy person who wants to wash our windshield at the intersection.
- The gardener *fertilizes* us through the smiles and hugs we receive, through our meditation and prayers.
- The gardener knows, if our roots are to go deep, not to water us too much and to let us feel the heat of not always having enough money, not always having good health, not always having the comfort we want.
- The gardener also knows that inexplicable tragedy does not stop him caring.

b. The fruit

What is the fruit of repentance?

1. The Fruit of the Spirit.

Gal. 5:22-23. ²² By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things.

2. Theological and Cardinal Virtues

- Prudence - able to judge between actions with regard to appropriate actions at a given time
- Justice - proper moderation between the self-interest and the rights and needs of others
- Restraint or Temperance - practicing self-control, abstention, and moderation
- Courage or Fortitude - forbearance, endurance, and ability to confront fear and uncertainty, or intimidation
- Faith - steadfastness in belief
- Hope - expectation of and desire of receiving; refraining from despair and capability of not giving up
- Charity - selfless, unconditional, and voluntary loving-kindness; helping one's neighbors.

D. Reflections

Today we heard Jesus talk about two things: (i) how tragic events can awaken us spiritually and lead us to God and (ii) how God has not given up on us.

How can we cultivate the Fruit of the Spirit and the Virtues? One way we can help eliminate negative thoughts and feelings and cultivate positive ones is to use the *Examine*. See the next page.

The Examen of Consciousness

To move along the path of healthy spirituality, Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) taught a daily exercise, which he called the *Examen* or the *Examen of Consciousness*.

Preparation

Find a place where you are least likely to be disturbed.

Step One: Recall that you are in the presence of God

Place yourselves in God's presence in an especially attentive way.

Step Two: Look at your day with gratitude

Give thanks to God for the "gifts" God has given you today.

Step Three: Ask help from the Holy Spirit

Ask the Holy Spirit to look at your actions this day clearly and with an understanding of your own limitations. It is a gentle look at how you have responded to God's gifts.

Step Four: Review your day

Review your day. Notice the details. What happened? How did you act? What did you say? What did you feel? Here are four areas to consider examining:

INNER HARMONY. Look for signs of inner tension or inner harmony. Many situations will show that your heart was divided. Conversely, notice inner peace.

FREEDOM. Look for signs of things where you acted with less than perfect freedom, given the circumstances of your life. Notice where you acted freely, where you were able to pick a course of action that aligned with the Divine Spirit.

HABITS. Look at your daily routine and habits. Are any of them dragging you down? Are any of your daily habits life enhancing?

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT. Look for evidence of the Fruit of the Spirit or the Works of the Flesh (Gal 5:16-24). Where did you observe the Fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? The Works of the Flesh—immorality, lustful pleasures, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, quarreling, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish ambition, dissension, division, envy, etc.?

Step Five: Talk with Jesus

Here you have a heart-to-heart talk with Jesus about what you discovered about yourself.