

1 Now there were some present at the same time who told him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered such things? 3 I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way. 4 Or those eighteen, on whom the tower in Siloam fell, and killed them; do you think that they were worse offenders than all the men who dwell in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no, but, unless you repent, you will all perish in the same way." 6 He spoke this parable. "A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it, and found none. 7 He said to the vine dresser, 'Behold, these three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and found none. Cut it down. Why does it waste the soil?' 8 He answered, 'Lord, leave it alone this year also, until I dig around it, and fertilize it. 9 If it bears fruit, fine; but if not, after that, you can cut it down.' "

One of my distant cousins, Tommy Wayne Clements, was about 6 years old in December of 1953. Like many others in Arkansas, his family had moved to Saint Louis to find work in the automotive industry. I believe at that time there was a Buick assembly plant there. Just before Christmas, they packed up some things and headed to Greene County for the holidays. While they were driving home, another car crossed the center-line and hit their car head-on—killing all three members of the family. His death was still fresh on my parents' minds when I was born about 5 months later, so I was named after a boy who never really had a chance at life.

My uncle Benny was a great guitar player. So great that he was playing professionally by the time he was 13. That year, Jerry Lee Lewis tried to convince my Granddad to let Benny take a year off from school and go on tour as his lead guitar player. Granddad wouldn't allow it, but Benny still played in bands and did studio work in a couple of different studios, including Sun Records in Memphis. When he was 17, he joined the US Navy and when he was in his early 30's he sensed a call into ministry. He decided the best way to serve was to finish his career and retire so that he could use his retirement pay to help him serve in small churches who couldn't really afford a pastor.

When it came time to retire, he decided to play music professionally again. In his letters home, there had been no mention of ministry for some time. He and his wife were on the way to a club to audition and a loaded dump truck lost control and rolled over on their car. Just like Tommy Wayne Clements, Benny died at the scene.

In the passage we read a while ago, Jesus was teaching and some men came up to him—interrupting his teaching. They wanted him to talk about a tragic event—the death of some Galileans who were celebrating a feast day. Maybe they were bringing it up because it was news or maybe because Jesus was from Galilee. They seemed to be seeking some kind of comment or position-statement from him. They got one, but not what they were expecting.

At the end of the 12th chapter of Luke, Jesus has been teaching some hard things—saying, for example, that he did not come to bring peace but division and that he came to throw fire on the earth. In a real sense, the hard teachings continue here.

The first verse says “there were some present” so it is not clear if this event had just happened and they were bringing news or if it had happened a little while before and they wanted him to talk about it as a current event.

Apparently it was something that was already on the minds of everyone there.

So they stopped his teaching either to bring the news or to ask him about the event. We aren't told who “they” were but some scholars believe they were scribes and Pharisees and I think that is a fair guess—because it seems to me that there is a hidden agenda to their questioning.

In the chapter before, Jesus had just called the scribes and Pharisees hypocrites so maybe this was their chance to try and get back at him or trap him. If he condemned Pilate's actions, certainly they would go back and report that. If he publicly agreed with his actions, then the crowd would certainly be upset with him over that. It seems that they had him, so they thought.

Maybe they are like some of us and they wanted to lift themselves up by hearing the Galileans condemned. “What kind of sinners were these?” Remember, in the Hebrew/Old Testament mind-set, you always got what you deserved.

If you were rich, it was because God was blessing you—because you were righteous and God was pleased with you. If you were poor or sick, it was because you were under God's judgment. They had been immersed in this thinking—in fact, the Old Testament is full of it, especially the Psalms and Proverbs. The Book of Job is all about a genuinely righteous man struggling emotionally and spiritually because very bad things happen to him and that isn't how he was taught that things work. The Old Testament is full of this teaching about “retribution” and Job was confused at what was happening.

You can see, though, how the rich and educated Pharisees would hold fast to this mindset—because it made them look even more righteous and they could be even more proud of themselves.

Let's talk a little bit about the incident itself. Apparently there were some Galileans who were at Jerusalem celebrating a feast of some kind—possibly the Passover feast. It is possible that it was Judas Gaulonitus or Judas of Galilee and his followers. He is the one mentioned in Acts 5:37 as having risen up against the Romans in the days of the census and drawing others with him. They were killed—probably by Pilate's soldiers. This incident is not mentioned anywhere else in Scripture nor is it mentioned in any other historical records.

Apparently the situation was a bloody mess—literally. The blood of the men and their sacrificial animals were mixed together in the fight.

So, Jesus comes back with that classic answer—the answer that is not an answer at all, but a question asked right back. No surprise there, is there?

“Do you suppose those Galileans were sinners about all the rest of the Galileans?”

First of all, Galileans were not held in high regard—so in the minds of the Pharisees, the greatest sinners among the Galileans would be great sinners indeed. Not only were they sinners, they were REAL sinners and they were GOOD at it and they got exactly what they deserved.

But before they can answer his question, Jesus answers it himself. “No, nope, no-way, no-how, no, nope...they were not sinners in the first degree—at least no more than YOU are...”

And then he goes on to warn them that if they did not repent, they would face the same fate as the Galileans.

Then he went on to talk about another more-or-less current event—the 18 who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell.

Again, let's try to get a sense of the mindset.

It appears that those who were killed were purifying themselves in the Pool of Siloam. There was a tower built next to or even over the pool and it fell, killing 18 people. Since this pool was one used for healing, then we have to assume that those who were killed were sick or crippled and were seeking to be whole.

So they were ALREADY being punished by God with their illnesses and their handicaps and here God punished them twice-over. As they were attempting to get healing, they were killed. In the mindset of retribution, they—like the Galileans—must have been the greatest of sinners.

Again, the question. “Were these the greatest sinners in Jerusalem?” And again he answers his own question, “No. And if you do not repent, you will perish the same way.” This “repent” and the one before both carry with it the idea of immediacy. Their unbelief, their sin, needs IMMEDIATE repentance. No later today, not tomorrow. Right now!

And then Jesus goes on to tell a parable about a fig tree. If you remember, the parable of the fig tree actually became an object lesson during the passion week—according to Matthew and Mark, later in his ministry, Jesus will find a fig tree on the road to Jerusalem—a fig tree in full leaf but with no figs. When he finds it without figs, he will curse it and it will die.

Anyway, back to the parable. The owner has looked for the tree to bear fruit for three years, which is the outer limits of when a fig tree should begin to bear fruit. According to Jewish farm lore, if it didn't bear in three years, it never would.

So the owner of the farm decides to have the keeper cut it down. Not only is it not bearing fruit, it is also taking up space where they could plant another fruit tree and sucking up nutrients for nothing. But the vine-dresser pleads for more time and effort and the owner agrees. But there we are left hanging. We don't get to know what happened. All we know is that if it doesn't bear next year it will be cut down and burned.

I think that the parable is so connected to the scribes and Pharisees and their actions that I'm not going to waste any more time on making that connection—so let's look back at the first 5 verses to find some truths that may apply to you and me.

First, notice that Jesus threw that proverbial monkey wrench in the idea of retribution. The people believed that you always got what you deserved but Jesus said that is not true, that these deaths were not based on righteousness or unrighteousness.

He bluntly told the scribes and Pharisees that they were in danger of the same fate as those Galileans and those who were killed at the pool. I believe that he was talking about the judgment to come—a deadly spiritual event. Still, history tells us that during the destruction of Jerusalem a few years later, thousands of Jews were killed by the Romans at the feast of the Passover.

Also, in these verses, we see the kind of relationship Jesus expects us to have with him and with others. When it comes to sin and evil and salvation and relationship to God—it is our business to worry about ourselves and let others do the same.

We come to Jesus and point to others and their sins and we say, “they” and Jesus turns and looks at us and he says, “you...”

When it comes to a relationship with God, it is a one-on-one situation. Just you and your God. Just me and my God. No one else matters in that moment, in that relationship. No one else figures into the picture at all.

It won't matter at the judgment if we were better than others—even if we were MUCH better than they were.

When it comes to our faith and our faithfulness and our “Christian-ness” you and I want to look around the room and look for a measuring stick that WE want to be measured by. When we do that, I imagine Jesus getting our attention, [snap fingers, motion]. “Here, look here—look at me, the Son of God. I am your measure...”

It is not possible for human beings to understand and identify the specific judgements of God—especially in the lives of others. BUT we do tend to cling to that Old Testament idea of retribution, don't we? I promise that thinking—about others and especially about the things that happen to us—brings nothing but pain. “Why, why, why did this happen?” We tend to beat others up and to beat ourselves up for no reason.

When death or illness or financial ruin comes to someone, the reality is that we don't have a clue as to why it is happening. Is it POSSIBLE that it is God's hand of judgment? I guess it is possible, but it most likely it is simply a life circumstance. We DO live in fallen creation where things are not the way God initially intended.

When bad things happen to those around us, it is easy to have “holier than thou” thoughts—but our best actions are to put love at the forefront and bring them God's grace in our hands.

In this passage, Jesus steers us away from “works” and retribution and steers us toward love and grace and relationship.

“Here I am, what will you do with me?” In the end, that is all that will matter. That is the only way we can measure up—by allowing HIS works and HIS grace to measure up.

Back to the original stories I told. What did Tommy Wayne Clements do to deserve to die so young—literally before he had a chance at life? Nothing.

Some of my family members believe that my Uncle Benny fell to God's hand of judgement because he was not preaching and had gone back to playing music—ignoring the call of God in his life. You may be able to think of a similar circumstance with a different name and situation. You probably know someone like Benny.

Those things are mysteries, aren't they?

I know, let's ask Jesus if those things were God's hand of judgement—Jesus knows EVERYTHING.

So we bring our question and we interrupt him and ask him about those two and he looks at you and me and he asks, “what about you?” THAT is the business we have with Jesus—us, not everyone else.

That is where you and I are today—it is all about relationship. OUR relationship to Jesus. Personal. Individual. You. And me. No one else to worry about except ourselves.

I saw a little facebook poster this week and I shared it. I think it fits perfectly with the passage today:

Love the sinner, hate the sin? How about: Love the sinner, hate your own sin! I don't have time to hate your sin. There are too many of you! Hating my sin is a full-time job. How about you hate your sin, I'll hate my sin and let's just love each other! Mark Lowry