

A Call to Repentance

Luke 13: 1-9

Some people told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus said to them in reply, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were greater sinners than all other Galileans? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did! Or those eighteen people who were killed when the tower at Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? By no means! But I tell you, if you do not repent, you will all perish as they did!” And he told them this parable: “There once was a person who had a fig tree planted in his orchard, and when he came in search of fruit on it but found none, he said to the gardener, ‘For three years now I have come in search of fruit on this fig tree but have found none. So cut it down. Why should it exhaust the soil?’ He said to him in reply, ‘Sir, leave it for this year also, and I shall cultivate the ground around it and fertilize it; it may bear fruit in the future. If not you can cut it down.’”

Background: Since Herod the Great rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem, cir., 20 BCE, the governors there had practiced the same kind of religious tolerance that was shown to Jews in Rome. Jews were allowed to offer Temple sacrifices ordained in the Law of Moses. Outside the Temple square was a marketplace where pilgrims could buy sacrificial animals and convert foreign currency to Temple coins. The business of the marketplace was run by the Mafia. Caiaphas, the high priest, was a puppet of Rome and a pawn of his father-in-law Annas, the Mafia boss. The high priest served as the liaison between Roman authority and the Jewish population. Rome looked to the high priest to keep the Jewish populace in line. The Mafia ran the marketplace with impunity. In exchange, Caiaphas looked the other way as Pilate plundered the Temple treasury. Pilate’s tenure was brutal, corrupt and sacrilegious.

A Call to Repentance: In this passage, some people arrived relating several current events wishing to know what Jesus thought about them. Most Jews associated political calamity and natural disasters with sin. The slain Galileans were followers of Judas the Galilean, a leader of the Zealot movement, who sought to incite the people to rebel against Roman authority and expel the Romans by force from the Holy Lands. Pilate ordered them to be butchered in the midst of their animal sacrifices; so, that their blood mingled with the blood of their sacrifices. Jesus uses these current events to stress that sin is not always the immediate cause of this or that calamity or natural disaster, but such disasters as these are providential invitations to repentance. Jesus is the gardener in the story of the fig tree; possibly an allusion to the length of Christ’s ministry. The impenitence of Jerusalem would later bring God’s wrath.