

Luke 13:1-9, 22-30

Necessities:

- **Repentance**
- **Fruits**
- **Narrowness**

As we examine the various things Jesus did and the words He spoke, because we have only the printed Word and not a videotape, because we are perusing the Word piecemeal and not in real time, we can lose the urgency of the message and the necessity of our response.

Jesus, however, even though He spoke directly and powerfully, had the same experience while He was on earth. People failed to understand the urgency and the necessity. So, occasionally, Jesus had to address just that: the necessity of responding to His message, which is the subject of Luke 13.

I have often wondered how Jesus responded when people just couldn't seem to bring themselves to do anything about His message and His proof. As a teacher, I knew that different people understand things in different ways, so I was always prepared with three or four different ways of explaining new concepts, of relating them to things already known, of illustrating the principle with common experience. And, in math and science, I expected that process to work. Once a student finally grasped the concept of binomial expansion or stoichiometry, I fully expected that the student would apply those processes to their homework problems. They would cease to guess the answer, or copy the answer, but actually do it in the right way, because it *was* the right way.

Somehow, most people fail to make the same connections in religion as they make in math and science. Personally, I simply do not understand how people fail to make such connections, so I'm afraid I don't know how to help them. If people will not respond to clear evidence, I don't know what else to do.

However, not even math and science have had clear sailing. Knowledge has not always advanced. For example, the ancient Egyptians, before the time of Abraham, not only knew that the earth was round, but also had calculated its circumference with an accuracy of 6 significant digits. But, due to the collapse of the Roman Empire in 600 AD and the demise of education, the Flat Earth theory arose. It took the resurgence of education in the Renaissance to rebuild the truth.

Religion has never recovered from the Dark Ages. We could blame that on the fact that math and science deal with facts and figures while religion deals with emotions, but that just is not true. First, Jesus built His message and His proof on facts, not emotions. Second, math and science have had just as much of an emotional rollercoaster as religion. History records how people got just as upset over scientific change as they have over religious change. I believe that science and math have recovered because following the truth in math and science can make you rich, while following the truth in religion does not. In fact, it will cost you.

The truth of the Word of God implies the need for a response. Response is a necessity, not an option. The first necessary response Jesus addresses in Luke 13 is the necessity of repentance.

Luke 13:1-5

1 Now on the same occasion there were some present who reported to Him about the Galileans, whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

2 And He answered and said to them, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered this fate?"

3 "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

4 "Or do you suppose that those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, were worse culprits than all the men who live in Jerusalem?"

5 "I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

In Jesus' day, it was a commonly held belief that if some calamity befell you, you must have sinned. Conversely, if things went well for you, God must be happy with you. The proof offered by various rabbis came from the Scriptures. They could recount hundreds of examples where God caused terrible things to happen to those who were not following His Word. They could recount almost as many occasions when righteous people prospered at the hand of God. So they drew the absolutely ridiculous conclusion that your prosperity, or lack of it, reflected your salvation, or lack of it. Those rabbis conveniently omitted the record of righteous people who suffered and wicked people who prospered. They came up with the saying that endures to this day, "It's God's will," as if they knew, without a revelation from God, which events He caused and which events people caused.

Jesus knew that such thinking hindered people from acting on the message that both He and John the Baptist carried, "Repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand."

What do we picture when we hear the word "repent?" People then and people now usually picture those who have fallen victim to some of the more obvious and illegal activities we call sin (and they are sin), but such activities constitute only one small corner of sin.

I like this paragraph in Luke to the one in John 9 when the disciples encountered a man born blind. They asked Jesus, "Who sinned, this man or his parents?" Jesus answer was, "Neither." By the end of that chapter, Jesus was still fighting through that misconception that repentance is for other people - terribly sinful people.

But repentance is not just setting aside unethical, immoral, and illegal behavior. While those are a result of repentance, that kind of change in behavior actually is only morality. Morality may or may not be a result of godly repentance. A change in morality might just be an attack of good sense and have nothing to do with God. But, people who have never fallen into immorality in its various forms fail to understand that they have never really repented.

Repentance is a radical reorientation of the basis of decision making. In the case of godly repentance, it means to change from a worldly way of thinking (which may be wretched or may be entirely moral and honorable) and switch to a method which is characterized by an obsession for God's ways. Repentance is extreme. The contemporaries of the early Christians thought they were nuts, not because they switched from immorality to morality (although some did also need to make that change, but that did not strike the neighbors as extreme change, only sensible change), but because they took in abandoned children, shared so much that it affected their financial stability, and were so loyal to the assembly that nothing could keep them apart.

Unless you repent, you shall all likewise perish.

Each of us needs to examine ourselves to determine if that radical reorientation has actually occurred. Or, are we still the same good moral people with the possible difference that now we go to church?

In fact, the majority of people who call themselves Christian have been taught that repentance is not even necessary. They think that if you believe that Jesus is the Son of God, that God accepts you. Repentance is nice, but not necessary. Repentance is recommended, but you can go to heaven without it if you believe.

I have no idea what to say to such people. They might as well believe in a Flat Earth. Their position is defended by picking favorite verses and overlooking paragraphs like this one. If they have forsaken logic and investigation, I don't know what else to do. "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

While radical reorientation may be a disturbing thought, an obsession for finding ways to please God is required. Most people who call themselves Christian are fooling themselves and will pay with their eternal lives for this self-deception. But what about us? Do we fit the picture? Obviously, all of us will fall short of the example we have in Jesus. That's where grace comes in. But how much will grace cover? We can find examples in the New Testament of imperfect people called righteous, but we much also notice that they devoted the rest of their earthly lives to thanking God for that grace. Grace will not cover what you knew to do, could do, but did not.

The second necessity Jesus addresses in this scene is the necessity of bearing fruit.

Luke 13:6-9

6 And He began telling this parable: "A certain man had a fig tree which had been planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it, and did not find any.

7 "And he said to the vineyard-keeper, 'Behold, for three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree without finding any. Cut it down! Why does it even use up the ground?'

8 "And he answered and said to him, 'Let it alone, sir, for this year too, until I dig around it and put in fertilizer;

9 and if it bears fruit next year, fine; but if not, cut it down.'"

Bearing fruit is necessary. Once again, the majority of those who call themselves Christian have been taught that, if you believe, no action is required. Fruit is nice, but not necessary. A favorite example of such people to cite is the thief on the cross, that he was forgiven by Jesus and was told that he would see Jesus in Paradise, yet he was incapable of bearing any fruit since he would die shortly. Therefore, they reason illogically, bearing fruit is not required. I have no idea what to say to people, of whom there are millions, who would believe such a nonsensical conclusion. The forgiven thief did all he could under the circumstances, including defending Jesus in what would be for most people the ideal time to be focused on their own needs, not someone else's maligned integrity. That forgiven thief gave the only thing he had: his dying breath.

Jesus says, "If it doesn't bear fruit, cut it down."

We have lots of excuses for not bearing fruit. Those excuses have no logical foundation, but we use them anyway. We say, "But I don't know how. It's not my

talent." But the vineyardkeeper was requiring only figs of the fig tree, not grapes. The requirement was to use what you have. But figs were required, not optional. Many people decide that they are not capable of producing grapes, so they produce nothing. That excuse won't work.

Another favorite excuse is, "I don't have time." The fig tree would argue, "I'm busy developing leaves and stems and limbs and roots. Without those, there could be no fruit." But fruit is required. If our fruit is not produced for lack of time, we will be cut down.

How much fruit is required? A friend e-mailed a line from a missionary from Ghana (a missionary FROM Ghana working IN New York). He said he was going back home after a year (a very successful year by our standards) because, he said, he feared for his own condemnation because he felt the care and anxiety over material possessions overcoming him. His observation of the church in America was that, "They feed and feed on the Word day after day with sumptuous banquets of the Word, and grow fat because they do not exercise the Word."

What kind of fruit are we to produce? We could look to Galatians 5:22-23, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." And those would be good fruits to apply here. But those are all abstract fruits. We do not deal well with abstract concepts. We need physical, concrete goals or we theorize the abstract into oblivion. To make these fruits appear requires time, money, and effort.

How much time? The Bible does not give an absolute number. But that does not release us from the obligation to bear fruit (although many have tried that excuse and will be cut down on Judgment Day).

Here's a comparison. Under the Law of Moses, God expected 20% of the days to be spent in godly activities (not counting Sabbatical and Jubilee Years). That only includes the four major holidays and the Sabbaths during which no ordinary work was allowed. Those times were God's times.

We, in contrast, work a lot fewer hours than they did. The Jewish work week was 72 hours. Vacations, if they got any, came out of work time, not God's time. Yet, we do not even come close to their standard.

I consider the time I spend on church stuff to be embarrassingly short. I spend between 16 and 20 hours per week, every week, year in and year out. You can ask my wife or my son-in-law how much time I spend at work. I did it when we had lots of kids at home. Where do I find the time? You will spend your time on something. If God's not getting His share every week, without exception, you are a fig tree with no fruit.

How much money? The Bible does not give an absolute number. But that does not release us from the obligation to bear fruit. As an example, God, under the Law of Moses, required 10% of the gross income of the Israelites for the upkeep of the religious and the educational systems. While we pay for some of our educational expenses through taxes, religious education is still our responsibility. We had a low year in 1996 due to some unexpected income which did not prompt a corresponding increase in our budgeted giving. Still, we managed to hit 8%. Giving money will not get you into heaven. But, that charitable contribution line on Schedule A of your 1040 will certainly give an indication of the health of your fruit. Where you put your money indicates our priorities.

If every person who claimed to be a Christian were a fig tree in an orchard, how many would be left after those without fruit were cut down?

In verses 10-21, Jesus gives two examples illustrating a person who has not recognized repentance and an expansion on the idea of bearing fruit in the kingdom. I'll leave those for you to read. I will address them in detail in another lesson.

After those illustrations, Jesus goes on to the third necessary response: the necessity of being narrow.

Luke 13:22-30

22 And He was passing through from one city and village to another, teaching, and proceeding on His way to Jerusalem.

23 And someone said to Him, "Lord, are there just a few who are being saved?" And He said to them,

24 "Strive to enter by the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.

25 "Once the head of the house gets up and shuts the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock on the door, saying, 'Lord, open up to us!' then He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know where you are from.'

26 "Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank in Your presence, and You taught in our streets';

27 and He will say, 'I tell you, I do not know where you are from; depart from Me, all you evildoers.'

28 "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth there when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but yourselves being cast out.

29 "And they will come from east and west, and from north and south, and will recline at the table in the kingdom of God.

30 "And behold, some are last who will be first and some are first who will be last."

The second half of verse 24 is particularly frightening, "Many will seek to enter and will not be able." When Jesus spoke of this same subject in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, He included not only those who ate and drank at His table and listened to His teaching, but also those who prophesied, cast out demons, and performed other miracles. Association with Jesus is not enough. Good works for Jesus is not enough. Jesus demands that we be narrow.

What is it to be narrow, to enter by the narrow door? I think Jesus is being a little sarcastic here, using a derogatory term for effect. Even in His time, if you wanted to discredit your opponent but couldn't defeat his logic, you just labeled him narrow-minded. The Sadducees called the Pharisees narrow-minded because the Pharisees insisted on adhering to all the rules of the Law of Moses. The Sadducees were willing to make accommodations for modern day circumstances. For example, the Pharisees insisted on actually showing up in Jerusalem for Passover as the Law required. The Sadducees said that, if you lived far away, you could just send money. The Pharisees were right. The Sadducees, having no logic or Scripture to refute them, just called them narrow-minded.

But, the Pharisees were too narrow minded. They narrowed down so much that they left out such things as justice and the love of God, as Jesus pointed out in Luke 11:42.

How can we be narrow but not too narrow? We need checkpoints on both sides.

On the Sadducees side, if people outside the church think you are narrow-minded about the Scriptures, that's probably a good sign. If people think you are nice and accepting of other points of view, that's definitely a bad sign. If you give the impression that differing religious beliefs can both be right, you have missed the narrow door. This paragraph makes it painfully obvious that not everyone who goes to church, or is active in a church, is going to heaven. We have to play by the rules, God's rules.

But how do we know how narrow-minded to be? The Pharisees went too far. What is our benchmark on the other side?

First, we must know where our narrowness comes from, exactly. We cannot be content with, "It's in there somewhere." If we cannot find it ourselves in the Scriptures, our narrowness becomes Phariseism. But knowing where things are takes effort. To use an old illustration, a public school year consists of approximately 1000 hours of instruction. If your only contact with the Scriptures is two Bible classes and two services a week (in other words, you are here at every opportunity), it will take five years to get out of first grade, thirty years to get out of elementary school, and your entire adult life to graduate from high school (if you are fortunate enough to have 60 adult years). In my opinion, if you are not spending ten hours per week with the Word, you will never locate the narrow door. In just 25 years, you could have a high school education.

But the Pharisees knew the Scriptures. Where did they go wrong? They mixed logic with their Scripture. Not that logic is a bad thing. We must use logic every day just to live. We must use logic to apply the Scriptures. What I mean by mixing logic and Scripture is that they would base lines of logic on the absence of words or innuendo. The passage in question does not specifically require a conclusion, don't draw it. There are plenty of solid conclusions to be drawn that will earn you the distinction of being called narrow-minded, without having to string assorted verses together that God did not arrange in that way, or resort to the same logic that the lost use in order to avoid responsibility.

When you choose a place on which to stake your narrow door, be sure that the conclusion is inescapable, straight from the Scriptures, without further explanation. Let the unbeliever who claims to believe explain it away. Don't get in a duel with worldly logic. Those who have repented, who are obsessed with finding ways to please God, approach the Scriptures with that mindset. The others search the Scriptures to see that they can get away with. Those seeking an excuse can always construct one. Questions can be posed for which the Scriptures offer no direct answer. The worldly seize the opportunity to claim that that silence is their endorsement. But the silence is only imaginary. The Scriptures do not answer questions which begin, "Is it OK for me to ...". The Scriptures only answer questions which begin, "How can I please the God who has prepared a sacrifice for me and graciously offered eternal life?"

When an explanation begins, "It doesn't really mean what it says," no amount of logic will overcome it. When a defense begins, "Do you believe..." If you answer the question, you will lose the point. What I believe is not important, irrelevant. What is important is what the Scriptures say.

"Accepting Jesus into your heart" is perhaps the greatest deception perpetrated on Christianity in the last two centuries. As James commented on the same idea in his time, "You say you believe? You do well! The demons also believe, and shudder."

Acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God is a good thing, a necessary first step. But it is only the root from which many other necessary events spring, like repentance. Repentance is a radical reorientation to an obsession for God, not just morality. Lots of good and moral folks never repented. Repentance is a complete reorganization of how we make decisions.

We must bear fruit. If there is not fruit, the tree will be cut down. Producing fruit requires reallocation of resources: time, money, effort.

We must enter by the narrow door. Being narrow-minded is a necessity. If we will put up with things contrary to the Scriptures, we will be cast out on that day.