

Luke 13: 1-9 Sin and Punishment March 7, 2010

We want people to get what they deserve. Good people should live long, happy, healthy and prosperous lives. Bad people shouldn't. It's that simple. And for this system to work, we need a God who sees things the way we do, and gives people what they deserve.

This is how the people who are talking to Jesus think. There were some Galileans, people from Jesus' home state, who were killed while making sacrifices in the Temple. This is a horrible way to die, and they must have done something horrible to deserve such a death.

Jesus asks if those Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans. That is certainly the logical conclusion. But, they would have been drawing that conclusion without actually knowing the victims, as far as we can tell. Jesus refuses to assume that they are wicked because of how they died. He says there is not a direct correlation.

Then Jesus brings up another incident which must have started tongues a-wagging. Eighteen men were killed when a tower they were building fell over on them. Now, these men were building some sort of battlement for the Roman Army. They were working for the enemy, so maybe they deserved to die in that manner.

Jesus had evidently heard the gossip, so he refutes the popular assumption about those poor 18 workers. Were they the worst sinners in Jerusalem?

So, Jesus is discouraging us from assuming anyone deserves to die in a horrible way. Jesus is disappointed in the way Pat Robertson said that the reason Haiti was hit by the earthquake, and has had a history of bad luck, was because they had made a pact with the devil over 200 years ago. According to Jesus, you simply cannot work backwards from someone's horrible death to some conclusion about how sinful their life must have been. Jesus is pretty clear about how he feels about people judging other people.

I suppose this works the other way too, where we might assume that someone who has lived a long a prosperous life deserved to die quietly in their sleep. Again, we cannot work backwards from a pleasant death to assume that it was preceded by a beautiful life.

That sort of thinking would make sense if we didn't believe in an afterlife. If we had to get all our rewards and punishments in this life, then we COULD assume that the nature of the death spoke directly to the nature of the life.

People could make this work in a world without God, if we assumed the universe was fair.

But, we serve a God who is more than fair to us. We serve a God who loves us and is merciful to us, all of us. We serve a God who doesn't kill us for something we've done.

Now, it is possible to do things that contribute to our own early demise, behaviors that are unhealthy or just plain dangerous. There are all kinds of things we can do that will result in our death. To use an extreme example, we cannot blame God if we jump from a 10th story window to our death. The same goes for all risky behaviors.

Try this idea on. God doesn't send punishment, period. I am not entirely sure God sends suffering at all. But, if God does send suffering, it isn't in order to punish us.

So, why would God send suffering if it wasn't punishment? We need to suffer to learn empathy. If there were a person who never suffered, how would that person ever understand what someone who WAS suffering was going through? It would be a complete mystery, as the non-sufferer wondered what the big deal was. Why won't this person stop crying? Why don't they just pull themselves together and move on? What a big baby!

But, if we have suffered, we can share the pain. We can offer some level of understanding. We can have patience and sympathy. We won't assume that the people who suffer have brought it on themselves, simply by virtue of their suffering. We won't judge.

There are many, many ways to die; some instant or at least quick, others very gradual, taking years, or even decades. But, we all die. Every one of us: good and evil, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, old and young.

Death, and even suffering to one extent or another, can be the tie that binds us all together. We can offer comfort and solace to people who are suffering, including those who have lost a loved one. We can offer love and encouragement. We can be uplifting and generous of spirit.

And when we are this way, when we are drawing together in love and concern, God is working in whatever we say and do. We are ministering in His name. We are being the disciples Christ called us to be.

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