

Keep your lamp burning: judging yourself rightly

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When my father got cancer, he struggled understanding it all. He had questions like: Why me? Did I do something wrong? Is God punishing me? Am I not praying hard enough? Trials and times of testing are like tornadoes that whip through our lives and dismantle everything we thought and believed. We thought we had a handle on life; we thought we knew how God operates. But this car accident, getting fired, my wife leaving me, my mom dying proves I don't have a clue at all how this world works or how God relates to his children and now I'm back at square one.

Our passage today does give us an answer to at least one of these questions. I bet this won't be hard for some of you to imagine: you've been given some life-changing news. Your best friend has unexpectedly passed away. You're being accused of a crime at work and you're going to lose your job. You've become a widow much sooner than you ever thought you would. You're scared, you're hurting, you're confused. Could you imagine asking, "God, what do you want me to do now?" I could imagine asking that question. Trials like this stop us in our track; it's like we're dropped in the middle of an unknown world in the middle of the night. We don't even know what our next step should be. What in the world should I do now?

Let me throw in a wrinkle. You've got a neighbor down the street you really don't know that well. You've talked a few times, but not a lot. For the most part, he's a stranger to you. And to be honest, you're not too impressed with what you see. He doesn't take care of his house or yard very well. There are rumors about his bad and crude behavior. He never ties up his dog and it runs all over the neighborhood. And then one day, you come home from work and you see emergency services parked in front of his house. There's a lot of commotion. You get a little closer to see what's happening. You ask another neighbor what's going on and she tells you, "It's Dan. He's dead." Just like that, as if he got on God's last nerve, Dan is gone. Now what are you wondering? What's the question going on in your mind now? You might be tempted to ask, "Boy, what did he do?" or "How did he make God mad?" It's weird how often instead of asking, "God, what should I now do?" when suffering strikes we ask, "What did I do? What did he do?" Like the trouble and suffering is the result of making God mad at us.

Do you get the difference or the angle I'm shooting for? When suffering strikes we've got an option to look forward or look backward. But more often, I think, we're tempted to look in the the past wondering what we did that caused the trials rather than looking forward as to what we should do now. I think there are many reasons for this. First of all, we're terribly prideful people, which means, we think we have a lot more control over the circumstances than we do. And so we look back and wonder if we could have changed the outcome of our lives. If only I would have done this or said that, maybe I could have avoided this altogether. And part of the reason that's so enticing is that there's some truth to it. Sometimes, our foolishness does get us into trouble and if only we would have been wiser.... But other times trials and suffering find us. Not

because we did something wrong or because we acted foolishly. Just because. The second reason we're more likely to look back rather than look forward is because looking forward is scary. I've already alluded to this, but now that our lives are so ruined by all the tragedy, we're afraid and paralyzed from taking another step.

Our passage today helps us with that one question: what am I supposed to do now? So let's read the story and then make comments. And, if I could charge you, be open to correction this morning. Be humble before the word of God and be willing to adjust your think and your living (READ Luke 13:1-5).

Two tragedies are brought up in this passage. The first one is about people being unjustly murdered by the state. Some in the crowd bring up to Jesus a recent incident of the Roman Governor Pilate murdering a group of Galilean worshippers. Here they are bringing sacrifices to God and they are killed by an oppressive government trying to threaten them from observing their faith. So senseless. We've sadly seen the news stories of worshippers in churches and synagogues gunned down during Bible studies and worship services by domestic terrorists. You just shake your head in confusion when you see such things.

The second tragedy could probably fit more into the *act of God* clause that we find in our insurance policies. Siloam was a neighborhood, if you will, in ancient Jerusalem. And, apparently, it had a tower. Tragically, this tower fell and killed 18 people as we learn here in Luke 13. I'm reminded of the I35W bridge collapse in Minneapolis back in 2007. 13 people were killed and 145 were injured. It was so unexpected and devastating. I bet a lot of people were asking both, "God, what should I do?" and "Lord, what did they do?"

Notice how Jesus takes the conversation to that place. Speaking of those killed by Pilate he says in vs. 2, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?" And then he says in vs. 4 about those who died when the Tower of Siloam fell, "Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them; do you think they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?"

Do you see? Jesus is asking a rhetorical question. He's poking the crowds wanting them to use their minds. He says, "Do you think that these tragedies happened because they were worse sinners than you? Do you think these people had it coming to them because they had made God angry with them in some way?" He gives the answer, doesn't he? No, Jesus says! That's not how you should interpret this event.

As I suggested earlier, there is a right connection between our actions and the results of our lives. Driving under the influence is going to result in you getting pulled over or, worse, killing someone or yourself. Smoking is going to lead to lung cancer. Spending more than you make is going to lead you to crippling debt and a life of anxiety about money. There is a cause and effect in life. But we need to stop short of thinking or saying, "This is God's punishment in his life" or "God is making me pay for the bad decisions I made."

Jesus' own disciples struggled with this kind of stinkin' thinkin'. In John 9 we read about an incident where Jesus and his disciples pass a blind man. And they ask Jesus in vs. 2, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Instead of Jesus affirming this idea, that somehow our sin or even the sins of our parents or others produce this vengeful response from God in the circumstances of our life, Jesus repudiates it. Jesus says in vs. 3, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him." So, I would encourage you, FBC, settle this in your mind based on the word of God: don't see tragedies and trials and conclude, "God must have really been angry with them. God must really be angry at me." The Bible says God makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and he sends rain on the just and on the unjust. Yes, there are consequences to sin, but instead of being a voice of judgment to others where we presumptuously speculate on the acts of God on a person's life, let's be a voice of encouragement calling people towards life. Because that's what Jesus does in Luke 13.

Jesus gives us an answer to the question, "God, what should I do?" when tragedy finds us. Look at vs. 3, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." He says the exact same thing in vs. 5, "No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." So, what's the call? What does tragedy and trial, whether we're experiencing it or if we are observing it in the lives of those around us, invite from us? What's that step we should take when it's pitch black and we're afraid? Repentance. Turn to God. Turn away from the wrong thinking and the wrong behavior that's not helping us in the darkness and trial.

Jesus' motivates us with a warning, right? If you don't repent, you will perish, too. Those who died in that plane crash, in that earthquake, in the Twin Towers on 9/11, in that highway pile up, of cancer, they weren't worse sinners than you. We all stand before God the same way. You will perish the same way they did in your time and in whatever way God appoints for you. But there's still hope for you because you can still repent. You can still turn to God. There's still time to confess your sin, admit your need for God, and trust the mercy and grace of God given to you through Jesus Christ. What are you waiting for? The tower might just fall on you tomorrow? You might be the victim of some sense act of violence next week; why wait? So, in that message of warning is hope. You can find life; you can be spared.

What does this have to do with keeping your lamp burning; staying ready and prepared? I think a couple of things. Firstly, Jesus is keeping on this theme of repentance. He just got done telling us that parable about settling with your accuser on the way to the judge. Don't put off repentance and turning to God; do it right now. It's only going to get worse for you. That's probably something we all need to ponder. If you're like me, there are some things you need to turn away from so you can turn more to God. Some of you know those things; it's not that you're blind to what you need to turn from, but it's that you're unwillingly. What are you waiting for, my good brothers and sisters? Don't think you have more time than you do. I doubt the Galileans cut down by Pilot were thinking, "We're all going to die and meet our Maker today." Those killed

by the falling tower of Siloam or driving home from work in Minneapolis weren't imagining they were living their last day on earth. Don't wait, FBC. Today is the day of salvation.

The second way this fits the *Keep your lamp burning* theme, I think, relates to the discernment Jesus called for in the last passage. Last week Jesus wonders why the crowds were failing to judge the present time well. Why can't you see and judge our culture, society, right and wrong, well? But this focus is a little different. Now, Jesus is wondering, "Can you judge yourself well? Do you see that your sins are just as bad as those who perished in that accident? Do you realize you still have more turning to do? If you don't, you'll perish just like these people."

And that's kind of where I want to leave you today. I want to encourage you to keep looking yourself in the mirror and asking, "Am I right with God? Am I being a faithful servant? And am I seeing my sins as my biggest problems instead of being so focused on other people's sins?" And to encourage you that this is worth doing, remember, turning to God brings life. Also remind yourself that God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved by him. Remind yourself that God delights in giving you grace and mercy for your sins and also to give you strength to resist the temptations.

Key vs. Luke 13:5

Questions for the week

- Do you ever wonder why bad things happen? How come?
- What did you see in the scriptures today that helped you understand why bad things happen? Why was that helpful?
- What was the big takeaway as to what you should 1) know and 2) do?