

“A Tree in the Vineyard”

Once again we JIP the Scriptures – we “Join In Progress” the conversation that Jesus has been having with the crowds. To understand our text, we need to see it in the light of His teaching in the larger context – summarized well by His question in 12:56. “Why do you not know how to interpret the present/critical time?”

We are interpreting the times when we say things like – “life is good” – or, “the world is going to hell in a handbasket – we must be living in the last days – the end is near.” I remember my grandparents talking about living in the last days – and I think about this from time to time – and it always strikes me when I read Luther and he says the same thing about his days – that the end is drawing near.

It’s true – we are living in “the last days” – which, biblically speaking, began with the coming of the Christ. But the Last Day? Who knows? It seems like we can’t possibly go on much longer like this – but, that’s also what Luther thought.

What makes us think this way? Isn’t it the evil, heinous, “bad things” we see in the world around us? War in Ukraine, chaos at the southern border, crime in our cities, meth addiction everywhere, a pandemic, cancer ... the list goes on and on ... in every age.

The truth is that we tend to be like the Pharisees in our approach to sin and suffering. If something bad/evil happens, there must be sin – and God is cursing or judging the person. And if life is good/tranquil, then that person is righteous – and God is blessing them.

Our own thinking is often along these lines. If there is not an immediate consequence, or judgment for some sin I’ve committed – then I’m righteous, everything is okay with God. You commit a particular sin (and I’m sure you can think of something specific) – and nothing happens, so, “I’m good to go.”

NO! That doesn’t mean you are righteous – it means that God is merciful!

Jesus is teaching the crowds about interpreting the signs of the times and someone brings up “the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”

“So, Jesus, is this what you’re talking about?” Were these Galileans “worse sinners” because this happened to them – or – are you trying to tell us that Pilate is about to be judged by God for this atrocity?”

Jesus responds with an example of His own – “those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them.” Some say that these folks were most likely Judeans (since the tower was in Jerusalem) – and that Jesus uses Judeans to counteract their example involving Galileans. After all, the history of the Galileans and their apostasy might have led this Judean crowd to assume that those folks were “worse sinners” – and therefore, being punished by God.

One historian has this to say. “A tower at the Siloam-pool had fallen on eighteen persons and killed them, perhaps in connection with that construction of an aqueduct into Jerusalem by Pilate, which called forth, on the part of the Jews, the violent opposition, which the Roman[s] so terribly avenged. As good Jews, they would probably think that the fall of the tower, which had buried in its ruins these eighteen persons, who were perhaps engaged in the building of that cursed structure, was a just judgment of God! For Pilate had used for it the sacred money which had been devoted to Temple-purposes (the *Qorban*), and many there were who perished in the tumult caused by the Jewish resistance to this act of profanation.” (Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 222).

Now, with all this speculation – about both events – how are you supposed to know what is true. “Fake news” isn’t new. So, who are you to believe? How are you supposed to figure out who is to blame?

That’s the point! That’s OUR way of thinking – which Jesus highlights and addresses when He asks – “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners” and “Do you think that [the eighteen who died in the fall of the tower in Siloam] were worse debtors”?

The point is not that these folks were “worse sinners” and “worse debtors” – but that all Galileans and all those who lived in Jerusalem are equally sinners --- but that’s still not the main point! The main point is that – “unless YOU repent, YOU will all likewise perish.”

Jesus says this about Y’ALL – but lest you try to get lost in a crowd of equally-sinful-sinners – Jesus follows up with the Parable of the Fig Tree in the Vineyard.

The image of the vineyard is used throughout the Scriptures to depict Israel, God’s chosen people (or as we would say, the Church). But notice, the focus is on one, individual tree.

The Lord comes to YOU – seeking your fruit of repentance. He has been coming to you – and will continue to come to you for a period of time – digging around you and throwing manure – seeking the fruit of repentance.

If we are to properly interpret this present/critical time – we need to stop thinking like Pharisees. Rather than trying to attribute blame for massacres, natural disasters, wars, cancers, divorces, etc. – the point that Jesus is making is that all of these show forth the destruction that sin brings – and they should lead us to repent of OUR sin.

When we don’t get struck by a lightening bolt for our harsh words, lustful thoughts, deceptive practices – that doesn’t mean that we’re “good to go” with God. Just look around – our sin, car wrecks, the obituaries – they all say it’s time to repent!

Just prior to our text Jesus says that you are on the way to the Judge, and that you should make an effort to settle with your accuser on the way – or else you will be thrown into prison and “you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.”

Dearly beloved, the final judgement is coming – but Jesus is traveling with you – digging around you, and throwing on manure. He warns you of what is to come if you do not repent.

It’s time to repent. Stop looking at others – see your sin – and remember, that I was sacrificed “for you” – to mingle my blood with you – paying your debt, forgiving your trespasses, and delivering you from destruction.

It's time for you to come, with repentant hearts – and receive My blood poured out “for you.” This is not just a “sign of the time” – it is the very blood of your Savior – it is salvation from the sin and death that surrounds you – it is the refuge of God's mercy, for you, His beloved child. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.