

Luke 13:1-9

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 January 2010

Preacher: David MacPherson

[0 : 00] The tragedy in Haiti, unfolding before the eyes of the watching world, has, and rightly so, dominated the headlines and the news bulletins.

In the scale of the tragedy beggars belief, as we struggle to process the numbers involved, first of all we heard of perhaps a few thousand who may have died.

Then other figures have been quoted, 30,000, 50,000, 100,000, 500,000. And of course we don't know with any great degree of accuracy at this point what the figures are, or indeed what the final figures will be as other dangers now become very evident in terms of disease and other killers that could rear their ugly faces even in these days.

How are we to respond as Christians in the face of such a tragedy? Well, certainly with Jesus we are to be moved with compassion by the suffering of others.

We are to demonstrate solidarity with such, born of our shared humanity, but underpinned and amplified by the love of Christ that dwells in us.

[1 : 30] Now, of course, the genuineness of our compassion will be measured not by the amount of tears shed or horror experienced by the images that we see, but by digging into our pockets and giving generously to those in need.

And I make mention of the way in which that can be done in the intimation sheet, and I would encourage you to do so by whatever means you choose, but particularly by giving through a tear fund.

They work with church partners in the country, and so it would seem the best way of helping those in need.

Practical, compassionate support to the victims is then one manner in which we can and should respond to this tragedy and indeed to other tragedies.

But what else? This morning I want us to consider how Jesus deals with this matter of how we are to respond to tragedy, and as so often with Jesus, He shatters our paradigms and points us in surprising directions.

[2 : 53] I want us to read in Luke's Gospel and chapter 13. Luke chapter 13, and we'll read verses 1 to 9.

Luke chapter 13, verses 1 to 9, it's on page 1046 of our Bibles. Luke 13 from the beginning.

Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?

I tell you no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them.

Do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish.

[4 : 04] Then he told this parable. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it, but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any.

Cut it down. Why should it use up the soil? Sir, the man replied, Leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig round it and fertilize it.

If it bears fruit next year, fine. If not, then cut it down. The Word of God. Now, in considering this passage, I want to divide what we want to say under three headings.

First of all, to just notice the events themselves, and we'll do so very, very briefly. Then to notice the popular response that there was to these events.

And again, we will have to do that very briefly. Before moving on in the third place, and there we will spend the bulk of our time to consider a radical response.

[5 : 17] You have a popular response of the people, but then we have, presented by Jesus, a radical response to the events described. So the events themselves, a popular response, and then we will spend time, much more time, considering Jesus' radical response to these events.

First of all, then, the events themselves. Well, there are two tragedies referred to in the chapter that we've read. The first we might describe as a man-made tragedy, and the second we might call an accident, possibly caused by an earthquake.

We don't know. First of all, the man-made tragedy. This case of the Galileans who were told had their blood mixed with their sacrifices by Pilate.

Now, it would seem, we don't know the details of this, but it would seem that this were a group of men, Galilee, who had come to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the temple.

There was some dispute with Pilate for reasons. Again, that we're not made privy to, and Pilate took the opportunity to send his henchmen, send his soldiers to execute them effectively in the very act of offering their sacrifices.

[6 : 39] Hence, the picture of the blood of their sacrifices being mixed with their own blood as they are mowed down or cut down by Pilate's soldiers.

And it's a horrendous picture that is described. And the event is a repugnant one and very revealing as to the cruelty and indeed the profanity of Pilate that he would do such a thing in the very precincts of the temple.

Well, this is the first event that is the subject of conversation. People are talking about it. It's the talk of the town about what had happened at the temple, and people want to know, well, what does Jesus say? How does Jesus understand these things?

But then Jesus introduces another event that again, no doubt, was the subject of much debate and conversation. He speaks of this tower, the tower of Asylum, and how this tower had fallen down, and tragically, 18 people had died as a result of this accident, of this tower that had collapsed and had crushed and killed 18 of the citizens of Jerusalem.

No explanation is given as to the cause of this accident. Perhaps it was an earthquake. Perhaps there was some structural fault in the tower. We don't know.

[8 : 09] But as we do just mention the possibility that the tower had not been well built, we don't know if that's the case. But as we just mention the possibility, it does allow us, just as an aside, to note that the tragic impact of what we often call natural disasters, and so seemingly morally neutral, the impact of them is often cruelly magnified by human sin.

In the case of Haiti, it is already something that has been mentioned, that bad construction is in great measure the reason for the scale of the death toll.

Now, why are the houses badly built? Well, yes, in part because people are poor, but also in part because contractors who are given the task of building skimp on cement, skimp on materials, in order to increase their profit margin.

That doesn't happen in Haiti, but we can be sure that it has happened. That is human sin, human greed, magnifying in great measure the impact of what we describe as natural disasters, and no doubt examples of that kind could be multiplied.

Well, in any case, here in Jerusalem, the tower falls down. Whatever the reasons were, certainly we can describe it as a tragic accident, and 18 folk die as a result.

[9 : 36] Well, these are the events, and there is a popular response to these events. Now, what that popular response is is actually described to us by Jesus, but Jesus clearly is picking up on what others are thinking, and in a sense repeating to them what they think to then correct them in their error.

We have the popular response presented to us by Jesus in His words in verse 2, where Jesus answered, those who were inquiring as to His opinion, Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?

Now, it seems evident that Jesus knows that the answer to that, certainly on the lips of most, would have been, Yes, they must have been worse sinners, or else this wouldn't have happened to them. And equally, in verse 4, those 18 who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? And again, it would seem that Jesus knows that the mental response, maybe even the verbal response of some would have been, Yes, they

must have been more guilty for such a terrible tragedy to overtake them.

You see, this was the popular mindset, the dominant worldview, as it were, on these matters, of the man on the street and indeed of the priests in the temple.

[11 : 05] Such events, the killing of the Galileans, the collapsing of this tower and the death that it caused, such events were, it was thought, invariably acts of divine judgment that brought to light the sin of the victims, maybe the secret sin of the victims.

And people would wonder, well, what was their sin? They didn't seem to have any great sin in their lives, but there must be something, something we don't know about, but there must be something for them to have suffered in this way.

They were, it was felt, deserving of their tragic fate. Yes, it was a tragedy, but there was a sense in which the victims were deserving of their, of this fate.

Now, we find this on other occasions in the New Testament, particularly when a sickness is often identified with some moral cause in the life of the one who is ill.

And on those occasions also, we find that that is presented as a false conclusion on the part of those who think in that way. Now, this is the popular response, then, of the people that Jesus is dealing with at this time.

[12 : 23] Now, we might look on and consider that response, and we might say, without any help from Jesus, we, in our society, would be quick to reject as cruel and flawed such an attitude.

And we would be right to do so. That said, it is interesting how the basic concept of deserving and undeserving does surface in our discourse on this matter.

How did President Obama describe the tragedy? I think he spoke very well, and I applaud the efforts that he is making. But one of the phrases he used, and maybe we should be careful about analyzing too much the words that people use, but one of the phrases he used, he spoke of this tragedy as unspeakably cruel.

Now, I was left pondering on what that means. And I ask you the question, and I leave it as a question, can there be cruelty without a moral agent?

Can tectonic plates be cruel? Is fate cruel? Is God cruel? Who is guilty of this cruelty that is being spoken of?

[13 : 43] And I simply pose the question. But then Obama went on to speak of the population in Haiti not deserving this tragedy. And so this language of deserving surfaces.

Now, in a sense, the attitude expressed by the president, and I would imagine an attitude that reflects the feelings of many, perhaps including ourselves, in a sense, the attitude is the polar opposite of the Jews in Jesus' time.

The Jews in Jesus' time saw this tragedy, they considered the victims, and they concluded, well, they are deserving of death. They must have done something bad. There must have been some sin that explains why they suffered in this way.

And now we have, if you wish, the polar opposite. These people are not deserving of suffering in this way. It's not fair that this tragedy would overtake them.

So, in a sense, very different opinions, but nonetheless, the same basic concepts being employed of deserving or undeserving. suffering. Well, this was the popular response then in the time of Jesus.

[14 : 53] This was an act of judgment. And those who died, tragic though it was, and though we sympathize with them and with their families, nonetheless, they are, in a sense, deserving of the fate that suffered.

But then we move to the final thing we want to talk about, the third thing, but really to concentrate our attention on, and that is what we're describing as a radical response. And it is the response of Jesus.

Jesus does two things in the words that He speaks. First of all, He rejects the popular response. There, in verse 3, having asked the question, were these Galileans more sinners?

He very robustly answers His own question, I tell you no. And in verse 5, having presented the case of those crushed by the tower, were they more guilty?

Jesus responds, I tell you no. He says you're wrong. You're wrong to conclude that these people were worse than you, were more guilty than you, were more sinners than others.

[15 : 53] No, you are wrong to come to that conclusion. And He's very clear and very robust in rejecting this popular conclusion.

But not only does He reject the popular response, He proposes an alternative and maybe quite surprising response. And what is it? Well, we have it repeated by Jesus there on two occasions. In verse 3, But unless you repent, you too will all perish. And these words are repeated in verse 5, But unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Now, before discussing this alternative response of Jesus, let's be very clear on one thing. This response of Jesus is not to be understood as the only response to tragedy espoused by Jesus. A full-orbed appreciation of Jesus' life and teaching would rightly and necessarily give center stage to the imperative of compassionate solidarity with the victim, something we've already commented on.

[17:02] But in the context of the smug and complacent self-righteousness of those whom He is addressing on this occasion, Jesus sees fit to identify another crucial element in our response to tragedy, and it is personal repentance.

Jesus says, this is a fitting response to tragedy, that we personally repent of our own sins. Now, the matter of repentance and the very word repentance is one that isn't much used in popular conversation today, in any case used in a much diluted form.

But we certainly do use it often from the pulpit as it should be. But what does it mean? And what does this passage teach us about repentance? And this is what I want to concentrate our attention on in the time that remains.

This passage, I think, teaches us four things about repentance, or at least we can consider what it says under four headings. First of all, it identifies the universal need for repentance.

It also gives us great insight into the nature of repentance. It also implicitly, as it were, highlights the necessary complement of repentance.

[18:25] And in due course, I'll explain what I mean by that. And finally, it also highlights the urgency of repentance. Well, let's consider each of these in turn briefly. Remember that we're thinking about this alternative, radical response that Jesus gives for us as to how we should respond to tragedy.

Yes, we must identify in practical, compassionate solidarity with victims. Yes. but also, we are exhorted, we are commanded that we should also look inside and engage in personal repentance. First of all, then, of the points made, there is, in this passage, highlighted the universal need for repentance. Now, Jesus, as we have already noted, rejects the crude, cause-effect, moral philosophy of the Jews in their conclusion that there must be some moral cause to this tragedy. He rejects that. He says, that is false. And yet, in rejecting it, he highlights, in the passing, as it were, a basic truth. And it is this basic truth that we are all sinners.

Notice the language he uses. Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners? And then he says, do you think those upon whom the tower fell were more guilty? And the message, the implicit message, is clear.

[19:51] It's a given for Jesus and indeed for his audience that all are sinners, that all are guilty. The matter that is being debated here is the degree of guilt and the degree of sinfulness.

But it's accepted as a self-evident truth, as it were, certainly by Jesus and it would seem also by his audience. The audience don't protest and say, well, how can you call us sinners?

How can you call us guilty? No, they say, yes, yes, we recognize we are sinners, but they must be worse sinners. We're guilty, but they must be more guilty. Jesus and his audience accept as a basic truth that all are sinners.

And I think in that regard they probably leave our own society far behind in our understanding of the human condition. It is accepted as a given that all are sinners.

Indeed, in the warning of Jesus regarding the consequences of not repenting, this truth is also implicit, I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish. And why will all perish in the absence of repentance?

[20:56] Because all are sinners and all are guilty and all are worthy of that judgment upon them. The universal need for repentance.

Why? Because all are sinners. All transgress God's law. All fall short of his demands, and that includes you. Now, no doubt, in the measures that we can have in our mind, no doubt, some are more sinners than others.

There are monsters as we sometimes describe them, like Pilate and like Papadocca du Vallier. But, at the end of the day, it's just a question of degree, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of

God.

So, Jesus, in this passage, as he would commend to us the need to repent, first of all, he highlights for us the universal need for repentance, but also, crucially, there is instruction as to the nature of repentance.

What is repentance? What does that look like? What does it mean? Well, the word literally means a change of mind. That is the literal meaning of the original Greek word, a change of mind, implying a change of direction, a turning from sin.

[22 : 13] This movement, if you wish, of turning is implicit in this word repentance. We're going in one direction and we turn so as to move in the other direction.

And this turning involves different elements. It involves, first of all, a recognition that we need to turn a recognition that we are sinners, a recognition that we are going in the wrong direction.

That's fundamental. If we don't have that, we will do nothing. But having recognized the need, there is the need for action. We have to do something. I've been struck in these past few days by much that has been made of the satellite images of Haiti and how they can be of great help in aiding the relief effort, how it can give us a tremendous detail as to the extent of the problem, the nature of the problem.

We are able to, as it were, recognize the problem with great detail. But of what use would it be to have all the satellite images possible? Of what use would it be to have a great deal of understanding and knowledge as to what the problem is if you then don't do anything?

You see, it would be a foolish thing to know so much and do nothing. So it is with repentance. If we recognize that we are sinners, well, the next necessary element in repentance is action.

[23 : 36] We have to do something about it. It's interesting that there is, it would seem, in the language used by Jesus, a recognition that this matter of repentance is, at one level, a once-for-all recognition and action on our part as we would turn from our sin.

The verb that is used on the two occasions, and there is some textual debate in this regard, but some would suggest that it's a different form of the verb on the two occasions in verses 3 and 5. And on one occasion, the tense of the verb would point to a once-for-all act of repentance, what we would understand as being converted, of being born again, when as a sinner we recognize our condition, we recognize our need, and we turn to Jesus in repentance, seeking forgiveness for our sins, a once-for-all turning to God.

But of course, repentance doesn't end on the day that you are saved, on the day that you are born again, on the day that you become a Christian, or whatever language you want to use. Repentance is a daily demand on the Christian.

We are to daily repent of our sins, for we daily sin. There is something we need to do. We need to repent. And of course, this is tied in with another element, which is the change in our lives as a result of genuine repentance.

[25 : 04] The parable that Jesus presents illustrates that, that the fig tree must demonstrate that there is change by the fruit that it produces, and so too in the life of the one who purports to or claims to have repented.

That should be evident in the life that he lives, in the change of lifestyle that is demonstrated. We read what, in this same gospel, in Luke's gospel in chapter 3 and verse 8, listen to the words of John the Baptist, produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

And so, in terms of the nature of repentance, it is something that must be demonstrated in the lives we live, in the fruit that we produce. But there's a third element as we think about this matter of repentance.

Not only the universal need for it, not only the nature of it as very briefly described, but also what we might describe as the complement of repentance. Now, the complement of repentance is implicit, but not spelled out in the exhortation of Jesus.

You see, a Jewish audience who would hear this exhortation that they must repent would, or certainly should, have been clear as to the nature of this complement that so far I'm only cryptically mentioning.

[26 : 31] They would have understood that to repent is, yes, to turn from sin, but as part of one and the same movement to turn to God.

You see, this turning from sin is not turning and then say, well, what now? It's one movement where you turn from sin, but you turn to God. They are distinct, and yet they are part of the same.

They cannot be separated. We turn from sin, but we turn to God. This was the message of the prophets, and we've read one of the multiple examples we could have read from in the prophet Zechariah.

The people are called to turn from sin to God. Now, in the light of the New Testament, we can equate this turning to God with faith in Jesus Christ.

So, the complement of repentance for you and for me is faith in Jesus. It's trusting in Jesus. It's turning from sin to Jesus as the one who can forgive us, as the one who can save us from the consequences of our sin, as the one who can help us to leave sin behind.

[27 : 45] And as I say, you can distinguish between the two elements of repentance and faith in Christ, but you can't separate them. They are, as it were, two signs of the same coin.

Listen to what is said in Acts chapter 26 and verse 20 when Paul speaks of the message that he was preaching. And what is it that Paul says, So then, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the vision from heaven, first to those in Damascus, then to those in Jerusalem and in all Judea, and to the Gentiles also.

I preached that they should repent and turn to God and prove their repentance by their deeds.

There in a nutshell, we have much of what's being said. They should turn from sin.

They should repent, turn to God, and demonstrate the genuineness of it by the lives that they live.

So much of what purports to be repentance in the measure that the word is even used or the concept even considered, but so much of what purports to be repentance lacks this vital ingredient. All human efforts at personal reformation, all turning over a new leaf, all making a fresh start, are flawed from their inception if they lack this essential element of turning to God or of depositing our faith in Jesus Christ.

[29 : 17] If we think that repentance is simply saying, well, I wish I hadn't done that because I recognize it's a bad thing and I'm going to make a big effort not to do that anymore, that is not biblical repentance. That is a flawed movement.

You're turning from but you're not turning to anything. You have to turn from evil, turn from sin, and turn to God, turn to Jesus Christ who is ready to forgive you, who is ready to embrace you, who is ready to help you.

And so, it's only right that the question should be asked of you.

Is this something that you have done? Have you turned from your sin and have you turned to Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior? And Christian friend, this morning, do you do that every day?

Do you every day repent of your sin and turn once again to Jesus that He would forgive you and help you to live a life that is pleasing to Him?

[30 : 22] But finally, as we consider this matter of repentance, the passage also highlights one final element, and it is this, the urgency of repentance.

The words of Jesus in response to this tragedy, we are protected, as it were, in terms of the emotional impact of these events by distance.

So long ago and so far away and they don't cause the emotional impact on us. But the people who were listening to Jesus, they knew the folk who had died. Some of them were maybe their relatives or friends.

This had an immediate and an intense personal impact on their lives. Jerusalem, it was not a large city in terms of population. These, I am sure, would have been people known by at least some of the audience.

And when you consider that and you listen to what Jesus says, it seems so harsh. And certainly, in our 21st century years, the words of Jesus seem chilling.

[31 : 28] They perhaps great are self-righteous sensibilities. You will likewise perish. If you don't repent, if you don't turn from your sin to Jesus, you will likewise perish.

And we struggle and we say, well, that doesn't seem the way to respond to these tragedies. What does Jesus mean when He speaks of them also perishing?

You too will all perish. What does He mean? Does He mean that Pilate would murder them? Does He mean that a tower would fall on them? Well, no, He doesn't mean that. The picture is of being caught by eternity unawares.

You see, these incidents that are being described were sudden and unexpected and unpredictable. The victims were caught unawares. And the point that Jesus is making, be careful not to be caught by eternity unawares.

Be careful that you don't meet death unprepared. Unless you repent, you too will perish in this way. You too will be caught unawares, unprepared.

[32 : 39] Be careful that that doesn't happen to you. Pilate's victims began the day of their death oblivious of what the day would bring. Those crushed by the tower of Siloam woke up that day just like any other day, little knowing that they wouldn't reach the end of that day.

And so Jesus warns you. He says to you this morning, Be careful. You know not the day nor the hour.

An earthquake, an icy pavement, a faulty heart valve, a drooping eyelid behind a wheel, and death strikes. And so I ask you, Are you ready?

Are you ready? For this is an urgent matter that you be ready for that day whenever it comes. The Lord is patient. That is the import of the parable that Jesus tells that we don't have time to consider. But that patience that the parable speaks of is not endless. The fig tree was given every opportunity to bear fruit, but finally, it had to be cut down in the absence of fruit.

[33 : 54] And what about you? How many opportunities? In the words of another passage of Scripture, The axe is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

And so as we close what we want to say this morning, how should you respond to the tragedy in Haiti? By all means, and I encourage you to listen to the cry of the widow and the orphan and give generously, but also listen to the urgent and loving cry of Jesus.

Unless you repent, you too will perish. Let us pray. Let us pray.