

Luke 13 Jesus the impartial but patient judge

Over the past few months, we've been preaching through a series thinking about who Jesus is, the Jesus that people encountered in the gospels, to challenge our impressions and assumptions about his character and mission. Jesus is the one who shows power to forgive by showing he has the power to heal, he's the one who calls for uncompromising discipleship, and the one who shows he has all power over the natural and spiritual realms. We've asked what it means to live the blessed life, the faithful life, the healed life, but as I prepared to preach our passage for today, the question that really jumped out at me was: what does the judged life look like? How can we know if we're under God's blessing, or judgement? Today we meet Jesus the impartial but patient judge, as we think about this difficult question of suffering and faithfulness.

One thing I love to do when I'm reading a passage is take note of the opening few words. It's particularly helpful because it serves as a little signpost for you, outlining where you're coming from and where you're headed. Luke opens this section by saying "Now there were some present at that time..." and my first thought is what time? And what people?

Let's back up and get our bearings.

All the way back in Luke chapter 9, Luke tells us in verse 51: "As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem."

This is it; Jesus is on the move to do what he came to do, the son of man must suffer and die for the sins of the world. On the way, he makes stops in towns and villages and preaches the kingdom of God.

In chapter 12, as Jesus gets closer to Jerusalem, his entourage had grown to "many thousands" and people are crushing one another to be able to hear Jesus speak. So, with such a crowd Jesus begins a new sermon. In very coarse brush strokes, as Jesus' audience becomes more diverse, more self-interested, and more keen on the spectacle, Jesus warns them against reliance on wealth, warns against godlessness, self-interest, and most importantly, warns against being unprepared, unfaithful, and falling under the judgement of God.

Phew. That's our context. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. He is preaching to thousands about judgement. And there were some present at that time... who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

This is a horribly jarring and grotesque report that seemingly comes out of nowhere. We don't know any more about this event from outside the Bible, but the situation is in keeping with the character of Pilate. These Galilean Jews were executed while they were offering sacrifices, cut down right there on top of the

animals that ought to have taken their place. And as their blood spread across the altar of sacrifice, we and all those listening are left wondering “was it the animal who took God’s wrath, or was it the people?”

That’s what seems to be going on here. There are some in Jesus’ gathering who heard him speak about God’s judgement, and they are now asking, do people suffer because they are less godly than the rest? Is this what the judged life looks like?

On the surface, you could say it’s a reasonable question. So, how are we to wrestle through our passage today? I want to explore 2 headings with you, not nearly as in depth as I would like, but I hope it will be of some encouragement to you in what is quite a challenging passage.

1. Suffering and repentance.
2. Forbearance and Fruit

Suffering and repentance

Suffering really does feel like the topic for the year doesn’t it. How that’s possible on top of 2020, 2021 and 2022, it really boggles the mind. The whole world is looking on with grief at what is happening in Gaza, substituting ongoing suffering in Ukraine in our daily news cycle, death and destruction at the hands and neglect of ideological powers feels like a very particular form of suffering and evil. Meanwhile, Pakistan is kicking out a multitude of Afghan refugees and Bangladesh is erupting in political violence. Closer to home there has already been a multitude of bushfires in Queensland and now into NSW meaning fire crews are in survival mode until rain comes. It’s shaping up to be another awful season like 2019. We’re no stranger to natural disasters here in Australia, but a once in 500-year flooding event piggybacked by a devastating bushfire season because of all the new growth really wasn’t on anyone’s bingo card.

There’s the ongoing economic struggle of rising cost of living, mortgage stress and housing availability. There’s the difficult reality for our indigenous population asking ‘now what’ after the defeated referendum. And communities are hurting after a number of Sydney school deaths.

Many, many people are crying out “Where is God in all this? What is God doing about this?” and it is good and right and ok for us to honestly ask that question. I’ve personally been wrestling with it this week, and in fact passages like Luke 13 have always been uncomfortable passages for me. Can I encourage you, it’s ok to name up these questions and doubts in your Bible studies and prayer gatherings, because suffering is a really big deal, and we’re all at various points of making sense of it. I can’t take us through the philosophy today, but I do want to affirm that we can come to God in prayer and petition to ask his intervention into war and disaster. We can’t presume to know the mind of God, and his wisdom is far beyond our wisdom, but one thing the Bible makes clear both in its instruction and in its

example, it is good and godly to be praying along these lines for peace and safety. He does hear our prayers.

But we head onto shaky ground when we start to wonder whether the suffering we see is deserved, and our hearts grow cold toward our neighbours.

Of course, we know from experience that our own sinfulness often brings about a form of suffering. Greed so often results in long term loss, especially when it progresses to fearfulness or stealing. Gluttony can bring about poor health outcomes. Sexual sins will destroy stability within marriages, or significantly ruin teenage friendships as porn changes how kids relate to each other. We know full well there's a connection between suffering and sin, and it's been like that ever since humans first questioned God's goodness and went our own way. But there's always that hypocritical Pharisaism lurking around the corner, that we might thank God we're not that tax collector... consider ourselves more holy than others.

When I was a relatively young Christian, a few years into being a disciple of Jesus, the Victorian bushfires of summer 2009 hit, swallowing thousands of homes, killing 180 people. Facebook was also a relatively new phenomenon and of course it became a platform of discussion and support for those affected. I had read an article from a Christian ministry that claimed a prophetic dream linked the 2008 abortion laws in Victoria, and God's judgement by fire, and in my naivety and to my shame I shared it on my Facebook wall along with my own comment. Needless to say, I hurt quite a number of people, and lost quite a number of friends, some who I had been sharing the gospel with. Although I didn't mean to hurt, my actions were very hurtful and betrayed an awful arrogance about my own spiritual condition.

And this is what we see in Luke 13. As these reporters come to Jesus what lies behind it is this very air of superiority Jesus warned against in chapter 12: "Hey Jesus, so about all this judgement stuff, you know we're totally on board with you. People should be wayyyy more faithful, of course. Tell us about those Galileans, what did *they* do to deserve such a shameful death?"

Extreme tragedy, they think, must betray extraordinary guilt.

Well Jesus turns it around on them immediately: "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?"

He rejects the premise. They're on thin ice if this is how they're thinking. Answering his own question, Jesus says: "I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

Well maybe they didn't really understand him. Or maybe they still felt their self-justification was merited, it was Galileans after all, not Judeans.

"It wasn't 'us' who suffered, Jesus. You say they weren't worse than the rest of Galilee, but everyone knows about Galilee..."

Jesus gives them an example closer to home. Siloam was a suburb of Jerusalem; remarkable tragedy had befallen their own neighbours too. He goes on:

“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.”

Jesus is careful here. He’s not denying that there are consequences for sin, and that in the history of Israel there hasn’t been times of explicit suffering for profound sinfulness, we know this. But the logic only works one way. While much of the world’s pain and suffering is as a result of original sin, those who experience profound loss and pain haven’t necessarily been marked by God as those deserving judgement more than anyone else.

We can look back at the book of Job as a whole book dedicated to this question. But even within the book of Luke, those who hunger and are poor, who weep and are insulted for the sake of Jesus – they’re not under judgement. They’re blessed in the kingdom.

God can and will use suffering to call us back to him, to draw us close to him, teach us dependence on him, but let me be clear: suffering is no sure indication of particular sinfulness.

There is however one little word, which Jesus repeats 4 times, that blows this right open. All Galileans? All perish. All Jerusalem? All perish.

The Galileans weren’t worse sinners. The Judeans weren’t more guilty. We are all sinners. We are all guilty. Doesn’t matter which tradition we come from, or our religion, what our ethnicity is, how wealthy we are or how educated we are: no matter who you are, whether you’re suffering or loving life with not a care in the world – unless you repent, ultimately, you’re going to perish and face the eternal consequences.

Jesus takes this ‘whataboutism’ and insists that there are no exceptions. All have sinned. All deserve judgement. The only way up is to trust Jesus for your salvation.

And this is the answer to my question at the beginning – what does the judged life look like? It looks like the call for all to repent and follow Jesus.

You all know full well that I’m a sinner – there’s nothing about this collar, or my training, nothing about my conversion story or my theological commitment that makes me a better person in God’s eyes. As far as my goodness goes, I’m right there in the list with murderers, drug dealers, and the unfaithful at the bottom of the heap. Pastors face the same struggles, temptations and vices as anyone else, and we all have lists of sins we’re ashamed of. Like everyone else, I deserve God’s judgement. But, in God’s kindness, I responded to Jesus’ call to repent of the wrong that I’ve committed, I trust in Jesus for the forgiveness of my sins, and that bears itself out in my life with fruit of repentance.

So whenever suffering comes my way I am confident that God has forgiven me through Jesus’ blood, and there’s nothing else that needs to be done, no penance required, no repayment necessary. God’s grace is a gift. And we look forward to the day when the curse of humanity and all creation is reversed, when there will be

no more war or illness or natural disasters, and the effects of sin will be gone for good.

Heavy stuff. But wonderful news.

Forbearance and Fruit

You may be sitting there thinking “Great, that’s good for you, but I’m not sure where I stand on all this stuff. I’m not confident I’ve been forgiven.” Maybe you’re hoping that nobody notices that you don’t have it all together, and that right now there’s not much to show for your faith apart from being here on a Sunday. Maybe you say ‘Alan, you’ve got no idea what the judged life is like’. I’m feeling crushed right now. Well, this next bit of the passage is for you.

Jesus isn’t done with his teaching yet, and he goes on to tell a parable:

“A man had a fig tree growing 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?’”

This fig tree is in a prime spot in this vineyard – it’s in excellent soil, got all the nutrients needed to fruit, has a person tending to it. It basically couldn’t live a more comfortable life as far as trees go, and yet, the tree doesn’t fruit. There is nothing about this tree to suggest it’s going to ever produce a crop. It’s been 3 years, it’s well established, but ultimately, it’s useless. The owner comes back every fig season, and there’s nothing to see. It’s only good for firewood.

But the man who tends his plants replied “Sir, leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilise it. If it bears fruit next year, fine. If not, then cut it down.”

Fruitfulness is quite important in Luke’s gospel and it’s often confronting. John the Baptist’s ministry in chapter 3 speaks very plainly about it:

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 9 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.”

As Jesus begins his teaching ministry, Fruit becomes an important theme for him too. In chapter 6 Jesus speaks about recognising believers by their actions:

“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.”

Jesus’ parable of the sower in Luke chapter 8 doesn’t mention fruit specifically, but it does talk about the believer as a seed, growing up to stable mature faith, and producing a crop of their own.

But when we arrive here in Luke 13, the parable is a little different. It's still a parable about fruit, yes, but in this parable there's not just the farmer or owner and the plant. We have the vine tender too. And the vine tender counsels patience on the part of the owner.

This parable is speaking about God's forbearance. His restraint. You see God loves everything that he has made, and he especially loves human beings that he has made in his own image. He loves us enough to send Jesus into the world to die for us, that if we turn and repent, we can be forgiven.

This is the Jesus we meet, who takes sin and justice seriously, but in his love, shows us patience and gives us time to turn and repent. He encourages us to trust him for another season. We don't know when Jesus will return, and we ought to hear the warnings of Chapter 12 that tell us to be watching and ready, or the warnings from chapter 13 that the time for repenting is now. The vineyard owner is bringing judgement and will one day cut down a fruitless tree, but this parable opens the door to those who haven't yet committed to following Jesus, or just don't recognise the fruit of faith. You can tend to your faith like the vine tender sees to the needs of the fig tree, there is hope for you yet.

What does it look like to tend to the fig tree?

I have 4 practical steps for you to tend to your faith

1. Dig around the tree, sever the things that inhibit growth – stop buying into the worries of the world, status, wealth, comfort. As difficult as it is to let these things go, you are more than your job, your parenting, your sport skills. Don't build your identity on these things, you're a truly spiritual, wonderfully made human being, loved by God.
2. Dig out moths that eat the roots – Repent and seek God's forgiveness for those sins that keep eating away at you. Doubt your doubts. What doubts do you have that you should be interrogating? Are the things that you hold up to keep Jesus out really true?
3. Loosen the soil so nutrients can get in. Embrace honesty, spend time with God's people, church – be it on a Sunday, or in a life group, or at Youth on a Friday night – Church ought to be a place where you can be a sinner and know that you're in good company. It's why I try to be so candid about my own life. Be willing to open up so you can actually see the work of the gospel.
4. Fertilize your faith. How do you do that? Read the Bible deeply. Read it expectantly. God speaks to us by his word. And pray deeply. Pray expectantly. God loves to hear us come to him, lay our burdens down at his feet, express our dependence on him, and to receive his blessings. Praise deeply. Cultivate joy. Sing and worship. There is no better news than Jesus' love for you will never fail. You are more loved by God than you will ever know, so let your joy out.

Jesus the impartial but patient judge