

Return to the King

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we live in a world of cause and effect, don't we? Where we think actions have consequences and some of them inevitable.

And we learn that from a very young age, don't we? So I wonder whether you recall that when you were young, or perhaps when your children were young, I'm going to come across here to do this, you might have done this with your mum and dad.

Taken out some blocks. I know I don't have enough, but just go with me. And very carefully stack them one at a time. One after the other.

Ooh, different one. Hope it stays. And then when it gets tall enough, which for a little child, that's probably it.

Ooh, I'm getting wobbly. And then knock it over. And then have a big laugh. And then start all over again. Don't you do that over and over?

[1 : 0 3] Well, that's what parents do because that keeps them going for hours. But children get it, don't they? Even from a very young age, that there is cause, knocking the blocks.

And then there is effect. The blocks tumbling down. And before you know it, you learn to apply it everywhere. Us boys realize that if we drink too much water, I guess it happens for girls as well, we'll be busting to go, right?

Except for some of you geniuses, of which I'm sure there are one or two here, if you don't study for your exams, you will fail. So ingrained is this that we often get upset, don't we, when it doesn't apply.

So for instance, if actions don't result in what we feel are logical consequences. So we say things like, I can't believe he got away with that. He lied and they believed him.

Or we say, she took credit for something she didn't do and got rewarded. Action does not result in what we think should be the consequence.

[2 : 1 5] And here we've extended the law of cause and effect to the realm of morality. And we expect it to apply. We want good things to happen to good people and bad things to happen to bad people.

It's a universal principle, right? Even the Buddhists have what we call karma. And today in our passage, in Luke 13, that's the same view that the people had in Jesus' day.

In verse 1, this is what we discovered. Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifice. Without needing to go through the exact practice of what they were doing, we can see how it was a sacrilege, wasn't it?

But these people thought that if the Galileans had suffered such a fate, then they must be guilty of something bad. Hence, Jesus says what's on their mind.

Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? A few verses later, Jesus gives another example.

[3 : 20] He says, All 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? So whether it's an example which is caused by human evil or one that is a natural disaster, which is the second one, Jesus' answer is exactly the same.

I tell you, no. But unless you repent, you too will all perish. Nowadays, of course, we tend to respond not by judging people, but with sympathy.

But I think if we dig down a bit more, we probably realize that actually it's the same principle at play. We sympathize because we don't think they deserve the suffering.

We think bad things shouldn't happen to what we feel are decent people. So much so that some go so far as to question God.

How can God allow this to happen? And then if they push it further, then to question the very existence of God as well. And yet, while it's natural to think like that, Jesus in our passage today invites us, no, actually he challenges us to respond differently.

[4 : 35] He teaches us that instead of looking at others and thinking, oh, they don't deserve it or they must have done something bad, what we're to do instead is to look at our own lives and to ask, why aren't we like them?

Why haven't we suffered like them? Recently, I had a friend respond to birthday wishes on Facebook, as you do nowadays.

He posted, thank you all for the lovely birthday wishes. I feel super blessed. So far, so good. Nothing unusual in all that. We often see these sort of posts.

Just the other day, there was another one with a picture of their wife and he was saying, super blessed to be married to this wonderful woman. Or another one was, over the moon that I get paid to do what I love. So we get messages like that.

But then my friend continued with something rather unusual. And this is what he said. God continues to give me far, far more than I deserve. With family, friends, safety, prosperity, joy.

[5 : 40] Not to mention eternal life. Now you don't read that often, do you? Especially that bit about far, far more than I deserve.

Because we tend to think, you know, we deserve our good life. We've worked hard. We're good people. We deserve it. But not this humble and godly friend.

For him, good things have happened to someone undeserving. Him. And you know, if you've met this guy, you would never think him undeserving. I mean, he's just a lovely guy.

And yet, that's how he thinks. You know, I look at my own life too and I have much to thank God for. A beautiful family. Being able to serve God in a great church like this.

My good looks. Which my wife says I have. So, it must be true. I really don't deserve all of this, do I?

[6 : 39] I've been spared much suffering in life. But that's not because I've earned it. But because God is gracious to me. Jesus says here that those who haven't suffered aren't better because aren't better than those who have.

It's only because of God's grace. But then he goes on to warn don't presume on this goodness. Because God's judgment will fall on all.

Instead, repent. That's the only way to avoid his judgment. Or to put it positively, that's the only way to enter and remain in God's kingdom under his blessing.

Turn away from living your way independent of God and rejecting his rule over your lives. Return to return to him your rightful king because he's your creator.

You see, brothers and sisters, when God looks down on humanity, he doesn't see good people versus bad people, does he? After all, didn't Jesus just ask whether those who suffer are worse sinners or more guilty?

[7 : 46] He's implying that all are guilty, isn't he? All are sinners. And so, if all sin, then the only response is repentance. Which doesn't mean trying to do better or be better.

Our main issue is not so much that we've done specific things wrong, more that we've rejected God as king. And that's what we need to repent of to turn back to God and submit to his kingship.

Friends, we've witnessed many tragedies of late, haven't we? And I'm talking about close to home with the bushfires.

But also, you know, if you look around the world, 176 people just died because the plane has been shot out of the sky in Iran. Last Sunday, just south of Manila, there was a volcano, Taal, that erupted and some 30,000 people have fled their homes.

I've seen some photos of the towns and the roads and they're just buried in a thick grey sludge. I see kids just caked all over with the ash. And there's also been a series of devastating earthquakes in Puerto Rico.

[8 : 58] But we've been so focused on our part of the world that we probably haven't even noticed, have we? And perhaps you closer to home, you may be suffering yourself or have people you love suffering or going through hard times.

And during such times, it's right for our hearts to go out to them, it's right for us to lament the suffering, it's right for us to reach out and help in whatever way we can. But Jesus also reminds us that it's an opportunity to take stock of our own lives and if needs be, to repent.

Because the question isn't if we will face judgment, but when. if we've been spared thus far, it's only because God is merciful.

And when we see suffering in others or in our own lives, it's actually a prompt to check our lives. So instead of worrying about other people and, you know, whether they are being judged or not, what we need to do actually is look at ourselves in the mirror.

Because something worse awaits those who do not repent, worse than what the Galileans suffered, worse than what was happening to those under the Tower of Siloam. And so, I don't know some of you, although I do know some of you and I know that some of you are living rightly with God, but if you're not living the way God wants you to, if you're just pursuing your own agenda, then, having read this passage, I have to say, you can't say you haven't been warned.

[10 : 38] Now is the time to repent. And please don't fall into the other trap, which Jesus now talks about, which is to think that you actually have time on your side.

Because in the next parable, Jesus goes on to say, a man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, he went to look for fruit on it, but he 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 use up the soil? Now the fig tree generally is understood to be a reference to Israel, not just the people, but particularly the leaders. And judgment is about to fall on them because they have refused thus far to bear the fruit of repentance, that is to turn back to God through Jesus.

And so it's slated to be cut down, as you would expect from any tree that does not bear fruit. And yet the carer says to the owner in verse 8, Sir, leave it alone for one more year.

And I'll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine. If not, then cut it down. Now we don't really need to work out who the two men are, but Jesus' point is simply this, judgment is coming.

[11 : 49] The cutting down of the tree is about to happen. It should already have happened, he said. But God is holding off to allow Israel one more chance to turn back to him through Jesus.

But there is a warning, and the warning is don't think there's ample time to repent at leisure. No, the time to repent is now. And so that applies to us as well.

If we are living in opposition to God, then the time to repent is now. Don't say you haven't been warned. Don't think you have ample time. It's like that reading that we had in Isaiah today in verse 6 and 7, which I've got on the slide, Isaiah says, seek the Lord while he may be found.

Call on him while he is near. And what he means is that the time is now. Now is when he is near. Now is when he may be found. And here's the great assurance that if we do, then God promises that he will forgive.

Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on them. And to our God and he will freely pardon. And friends, I guess this is not just for us, but it applies to our friends and loved ones as well, doesn't it?

[13 : 07] If they're in a similar situation, then we ought to warn them, shouldn't we? Now I know, I feel myself how difficult this is. I don't like to confront people to tell them to repent.

And I've seen how when we've done that in the past, in the media, for example, with the Boxing Day tsunamis, that people just pile in and criticize us for being insensitive. So much so that even now some well-meaning Christians would say, this is not the time to tell people to repent when there are tragedies and disasters around.

But you know what? For those of us who like to ask WWJD, what would Jesus do? I mean, look at this passage. What is the answer?

It's pretty clear, isn't it? we see exactly what Jesus did. A disaster has just happened. Jesus was told about it, but he didn't shy away from it, did he?

He didn't think it was now insensitive and inappropriate to say anything. He didn't think the timing wasn't right. No, he seized the opportunity to remind people of the severity of God's judgment and the urgency of time.

[14 : 22] But I want you to know this though, that Jesus wasn't accusing those who have died. He's not connecting the death of the Galileans to their sin. No, that's not what he's doing. We've already seen that they were not more sinful than the others.

So we mustn't make that mistake. Instead, he was challenging the people that were with him, those who think that they were safe, those who think that they must be right with God just because they've escaped death.

You see, Jesus knew their human nature and knows our human nature, doesn't he? He knows that when life is good, we tend to be complacent, don't we? We're allowed into a false sense of security, but it takes a crisis in order to force us to sit up and take notice of God.

I mean, that's certainly been my experience as a pastor. It's harder to interest people with the gospel when things are going well. That's why I think gospel work in Australia is hard because life is good.

we haven't had a recession in more than 25 years. We live in an abundant and beautiful country. We eat what we want, whatever we need we buy. We've not lacked for anything, have we?

[15 : 35] And so, even though it's a tragedy and we don't like it, I wonder whether a crisis like the bushfires may actually be something that we need as a nation to make us sit up and take notice of God, to actually realize that God is being merciful to us and that he's calling us to repentance.

Now, some people say, oh, look, we can't do that, it's too complicated, but really, as humans, we are capable of having more than one response at the same time, aren't we?

We are able to grieve for those who suffer, we're able to reach out to help others, and yet, at the same time, we're able to look at our own selves and be challenged to repent.

We can do all those things at the same time. It's not that we can only do one and not the other. Now, of course, our tone shouldn't be one of condemnation, we're all in the same boat, but we can bring up the topic, I think, in a winsome way, can't we?

So, for example, we could say, I don't know about you, but a crisis like this really highlights how fragile life is. It makes me think whether I'm ready to face death myself.

[16 : 46] Or if you're suffering a crisis yourself, you might say, things may look bad for me now, but I take great comfort to know that even if I die, I wouldn't be faced with something worse, and that is God's judgment.

I'm pretty sure you guys can come up with your own words probably better than me, but I hope you can see how we can actually raise the topic of repentance and turning back to God without being judgmental or condemnatory.

And that's not to say that even if we say it the most gentle and nice way, that people wouldn't still be upset with us. That will still happen. But God's not asking us to worry about pleasing them, are we?

But rather to think of those who will respond positively to what we say. Maybe not even initially, they might get upset, but then afterwards change their heart. These are the ones God wants us to reach out to with our witness.

We will always have naysayers, that's just the way it is. But God has also prepared the hearts of those who will be open. And so we should say it, even though it's uncomfortable, because who knows, God may use our words to bring someone to faith.

[17 : 57] Well, as if to show us exactly what that means, Luke now goes into our final section with an encounter where we do see two people, one who responds rightly to Jesus' ministry and one who doesn't.

So in verse 10, we read, on a Sabbath, Jesus was teaching in one of the synagogues and a woman was there who had been crippled by her spirit for 18 years. She was bent over and could not straighten up at all. When Jesus saw her, he called her forward and said to her, woman, you are set free from your infirmity.

Then he put his hands on her and immediately she straightened up and praised God. So here's the first response, a crippled woman who delights in Jesus, she represents all those who do. Her attitude is one of total dependence.

She's powerless, she knows it. In fact, Jesus doesn't say that he's healing her. Look at what he says. He says that I'm setting you free from your infirmity. She's captive, isn't she, to an evil spirit.

But once free, her response is one of praise and joy. By contrast, we now have the self-righteous synagogue leader. He's proud and ironically, even though he's religious, he's not right before God.

[19 : 08] He thinks he's the judge of what's lawful according to God. That's why he's indignant, because Jesus has healed on the Sabbath. He's broken the law. And so he says to the people, there are six days for work, so come and be healed on those days.

Don't come on Sunday. And we see in verse 17 that he represents all who oppose Jesus. But it's his pride and his self-righteousness that bars him from God's kingdom.

It stops him from recognizing Jesus as the true king. And what's more, in his pride, he lacks compassion for the woman. And the thing is, pride always blinds, doesn't it?

The last thing a proud person can see is his or her own pride, even though everyone else can see it. And so that leads to hypocrisy, which Jesus exposes.

And so he says, the Lord answered him, you hypocrites, doesn't each of you on the Sabbath untie your ox or donkey from the store and lead it out to water? Then should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?

[20 : 18] You see, the man's very own actions betray him. He cares more for his ox, so much so that he would break the Sabbath for it, than for this woman, a daughter of Abraham, a co-heir with him of the promises of God.

And when Jesus calls him out, he's humiliated. Now friends, we can be humiliated and still be proud. We can be humiliated and still be proud.

But only a humble person will repent willingly. And so I guess the question is, which are we? Repentance is never easy because it means admitting our pride to ourselves, to others, and ultimately to God.

It means realizing actually that we often think better of ourselves than we truly are. And some of us go as far as to say, look, you know what?

I'm willing to be humbled by God, but God forbid that someone else would tell me that I'm wrong. But without humility, there is no repentance, and without repentance, there is only judgment.

[21 : 33] And so I guess I ask, which would you rather suffer? The temporary discomfort of being humbled, or the eternal suffering of God's judgment? It's better to be humbled now, isn't it?

And to enter God's kingdom and be blessed by him. And sadly, I have to say, it's often the most religious people, the ones who think they're morally upright, who think they know right from wrong, like the synagogue leader, who are most prone to being blinded by pride.

And guess what? Many of them come to church. Now, I'm not saying then don't come to church. We need to come to church, but we need to come to church realizing that actually it's because we need God.

We are like the crippled woman, dependent on him and his son. And so it's good to keep reminding ourselves, even as we come to church each week, how easy it is to slip into that religiosity and to think that, oh, you know what?

We're now better than others because we're Christians. It's easy to be blinded by our own pride. So let's keep praying that God will keep humbling us and revealing to us when we do have pride in our lives.

[22 : 47] which actually we should just take it for granted that we do. Friends, I am a bit sorry that this is the first sermon of the year. Actually, I'm not really that sorry, but it's God's word.

I know that many people expect the first sermon to be more upbeat, you know, first sermon of the year, first sermon of the decade even. You know, you probably want something to help you with your New Year resolution or something.

But this is where we are. We stopped here last year and so we begin and God's given us this word for today. But guess what? We weren't also expecting for the start of our decade to start with the country on fire, were we, covered with smoke.

And so perhaps it's not a bad thing that we're here. Perhaps it's good that God is prompting us to start our year, to start our decade, being humble, being dependent on him, repenting.

because ultimately that opens the doorway to joy and praise and blessing in his kingdom. And I, you know what? I think it will stand us in good stead in the coming months and years.

[23 : 56] So that no matter what trials and sufferings we face, and even if we face death, we're ready to come face to face with God. Not in judgment, but in his welcome.

So let me just pause now. I'll give you a chance to just reflect, to pray perhaps, to give thanks to God for all the good things you don't deserve, to repent perhaps of pride and self-righteousness that hinders our relationship with God.

Let's do that. Father, thank you for all the good things in our lives. You have given us much, much more than we deserve. And you have withheld your judgment for now, which we do deserve.

forgive us of our pride and of our sense of self-righteousness. Forgive us when we look down on others because they aren't as good or generous or compassionate as us.

Forgive us when we shake our heads at others because they're not as mature or godly or theologically sound as us. We repent of our hypocrisy.

[25 : 01] Thank you for exposing our pride. set us free from it by helping us to focus on your amazing and abundant grace, which is found in your Son, through whose name we pray.

Amen.