

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Luke

SB_LK13_Parables & the Necessity of Repenting

Repent or Perish (13:1-5)

This passage in Luke has no parallel in the other Gospel narratives. We do not know the event to which reference is made in verse 1. Rome's occupation of Israel made the situation ripe for revolutionary activity. Josephus indicated that Galileans were especially susceptible to revolt.¹ Evidently, Pilate had ordered the murder of Galileans who had brought sacrifices to the temple. The result of their murder was that their blood was mingled with the blood of the sacrifices that they had offered. The event could have occurred during the Feast of the Passover or Tabernacles when Galileans would have most likely been at the Temple.

Jesus' question in verse 2 reflects the opinions of His audience. The idea that judgment and death are the results of sin led to the belief that a tragic death was the result of extreme sin.² Notice that Jesus doesn't indicate that those people who were killed were guiltless. Rather, Jesus is just refuting the idea that His audience was more righteous just because they had not suffered a similar fate. You can almost see the self-righteousness of the Jewish audience that is implied by Jesus' statements. They considered themselves to be righteous before God, therefore such a death as was suffered by the Galileans and the eighteen on whom the tower fell could only occur when such righteousness did not exist. Jesus destroys their self-righteous argument and indicates that they were in fact worse sinners than those who were destroyed.

The Parable of the Barren Fig Tree (13:6-9)

This passage is a parable that uses a fig tree; therefore, it is quite different from the cursing incident in Matthew 21:18-22.³ In the parable (Luke 13:6-9), the fig tree is given an extra year of grace by the owner of the vineyard at the request of the keeper of the vineyard. The owner of the vineyard is symbolic of God the Father and the keeper of the vineyard is symbolic of Jesus. The vineyard is symbolic of Israel which is given an extra season of grace before judgment at the request of the keeper of the vineyard (i.e. Jesus).

¹ Frank E. Gaebelain, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1976 – 1992).

² Earl D. Radmacher, General Editor, *The Nelson Study Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1997), 1724.

³ The cursing of the fig tree in this passage has two lessons for the disciples: 1) a lesson of **faith** and 2) a lesson regarding the **religious leaders** of Israel. If the disciples had genuine faith in Jesus, they would be able to perform such miracles as moving a mountain. By contrast, the religious leaders of Israel had failed to exercise faith in Jesus. They had all of the outward signs of fruit bearing (the temple, feast days, the Law, priesthood, etc.); however, they bore no fruit. The fig tree had all of the outward signs of fruit bearing; however, it bore no fruit. Mark notes that "it was not the season for figs" in his narrative (Mark 11:13). Why should Jesus curse a fig tree for not bearing fruit when it was not the season for fruit? The tree stood out because of its leaves, i.e. signs of fruitbearing. It promised a show of fruitbearing, but actually produced no fruit. I don't believe that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree represented a cursing of all of Israel. I believe that Jesus' cursing of the fig tree represented a cursing of the religious leaders who were hypocrites within Israel. This is more consistent with the narrative and connects very well with the rejection of Jesus by the religious leaders in the previous verses.

Healing a Woman on the Sabbath (13:10-17)

This isn't the first time that the Sabbath has been the focus of controversy in Luke's Gospel (see 6:1ff – the disciples pick grain and Jesus heals on the Sabbath). In this passage, we see Jesus teaching for the last time in a synagogue. As He was teaching, He apparently became aware of a woman that He had not noticed until that point. Luke mentions the seriousness and duration of the woman's infirmity to emphasize the miraculous nature of the healing. Most commentators indicate that Luke uses the word "spirit" in reference to a demon. However, there is no indication in this verse that Jesus cast out a demon. I believe that the use of the word spirit in this verse is a reference to a condition that prevailed in this woman's body rather than a demon. There are many examples in Scripture where the word "spirit" is used in reference to something other than an unseen creature of the angelic realm or even the human spirit.

The response of the religious leaders is typical – a self-righteous indignation based upon a distorted emphasis upon the letter verses the spirit of the law. The synagogue leader doesn't address Jesus. Instead, He addresses the crowd and uses logic derived from Exodus 20:9-10 – "six days you shall do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your male servant, nor your female servant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates." However, there was ample rabbinic precedent for helping animals in emergencies on the Sabbath.⁴ Jesus uses a lesser to greater argument for assisting animals on the Sabbath, i.e. if an animal is worth saving, how much more should a human be worth saving? Also, Jesus points out that the woman was a Jew and as such, she should have special importance in the plan of God for Israel, even in the eyes of the religious leader.

The Parable of the Mustard Seed (13:18-19)

As in Matthew 13, the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven are parallel parables and Jesus uses them to teach a parallel truth. The parable of the mustard seed likens the kingdom of God (the Messianic kingdom on earth) to a grain of mustard seed. This parable has four elements:

- A grain of mustard seed
- A sower
- Birds
- Abnormal growth of the mustard seed into a tree

This parable is concerned with that period of time known as the Messianic kingdom or Millennium. The Messianic kingdom begins relatively small in size and number of redeemed. The redeemed who inaugurate the Messianic kingdom will be those who have endured until the end of the Tribulation (Matt 24:13). During that period of human history, the gospel of the kingdom will be preached again in anticipation of the 2nd Advent of Christ and the Millennial Messianic kingdom on earth. This understanding requires the following interpretation:

- Grain of mustard seed = either the gospel of the kingdom OR more likely the redeemed who inaugurate the Messianic kingdom and who remain after the judgment associated with the 2nd Advent of the Messiah
- Sower = Jesus Christ (same as the parable of the wheat and the tares)
- Birds = does not represent evil as in the parable of the sower or soils. In the Hebrew Scriptures, a tree large enough to support nesting birds was considered prosperous and healthy (see Ps 104:12; Ezek 17:23; 31:6; Dan 4:12, 21).
- Abnormal growth of the mustard seed into a tree = either the gospel of the kingdom planted by Jesus during His public ministry to Israel and which is once again preached during the Tribulation and which grows into a great tree (the Millennial kingdom) at His 2nd

⁴ Gaebelain, .

Advent OR more likely the rapid expansion of the population of the redeemed during the Millennium.⁵

The Parable of the Leaven (13:20-21)

Although leaven sometimes symbolizes evil, the principle of leaven is that a little leaven has an effect upon the whole of the dough with which it interacts. When yeast is kneaded into dough, it expands by itself. Here the kingdom of heaven (the Millennium) is seen to grow based upon the internal dynamic of the Holy Spirit verses being powered by outward armies or organizations. The kingdom was offered without any display of pomp or extravaganza.

The point of the parable – The kingdom produces ultimate consequences out of all proportion to its insignificant beginnings. The dough [not mentioned] is Israel, whereas the yeast or leaven is the gospel of the kingdom. This is a parallel truth to the parable of the mustard seed.

Point of comparison – The parable of the mustard seed addresses the extent of the kingdom's growth whereas this parable (the parable of the leaven) concerns the power and process of its growth.

Point of contrast – Leaven is used to represent evil in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 and Galatians 5:9 as well as many Old Testament passages such as Exodus 12:15 and Leviticus 2:11. However, this is not always the case, e.g. Leviticus 7:13 and 23:15-18.⁶

The Narrow Way (13:22-33)

The focus in this passage is upon the judgment that will be meted out before entry into the Kingdom of Heaven (i.e. the Millennium). In these verses, Jesus is teaching His disciples that the way of discipleship is narrow or restricting because it is the way of persecution and opposition. In Matthew's Gospel, this is a major theme (e.g. 5:10-12, 44; 10:16-39; 11:11-12; 24:4-13). Also, in

⁵ One's preference for one of the two alternative interpretations of the grain of mustard seed and the abnormal growth of the mustard seed will hinge upon whether one associates the truth of the parable in the Tribulation (Israel's last days) or in the Messianic kingdom. If Jesus was teaching principles primarily related to Israel's last days, then the mustard seed must be analogous to the gospel of the kingdom. However, if Jesus was teaching principles primarily related to the Messianic kingdom, then the mustard seed represents the number of redeemed in the kingdom. I lean toward the later view (i.e. that the mustard seed represents the number of redeemed in the Messianic kingdom); however, I also recognize the inter-relationship between the number of the redeemed who inaugurate the Messianic kingdom and their acceptance of the gospel of the kingdom preached during the Tribulation.

⁶ Historically, dispensationalists have tried to interpret the leaven in this passage and Matthew 13:13 to represent evil. Most of those who do so interpret the leaven as representing the professing (but not believing) Church that grows throughout the Church Age under the general title of Christendom. They interpret the parables of Matthew 13 to be focused upon principles of life related to the period between the advents of Christ (i.e. the Church Age and the Tribulation). This understanding in turn is derived from their understanding of the phrase, the "mysteries of the kingdom" (Matt 13:11). Other dispensationalists have interpreted the leaven to represent religious (unbelieving) Judaism during the Age of Israel (pre-Pentecost and Tribulation). However, this too is an interpretation that sees leaven as only representing evil. These alternative interpretations by various dispensationalists overlook the fact that the leaven represents a principle related to a growth dynamic and not evil in context. The spiritual quality [good or evil] of the growth must be evaluated based upon the context. The Jews did not consider leaven to always be evil, otherwise they would never have used it. Instead, it was forbidden on certain occasions, e.g. the feast of unleavened bread. The context of this parable is Jesus' clarification of the nature of the kingdom of heaven (the Millennial/Messianic reign on earth) through parables.

Matthew, Jesus' teaching on the narrow way is set amidst teaching regarding false prophets (i.e. Matt 7:13-14 cf. 7:15-20) and the presence of false prophets is implied in Luke 13:26-29. The narrow road leads to life in the kingdom (Matt 7:21-23) whereas the broad road leads to destruction (Matt 25:24, 46). The false prophets of the kingdom are similar to those who have taught a "good" to advance their own selfish interest, but they have denied and not proclaimed Jesus as the Messiah. They are similar to those today who acknowledge that Jesus was a prophet and a teacher of good, but who fail to acknowledge Him as the only hope of salvation.

Similar principles are taught to the Church Age believer in relation to life after death as well as suffering in this life in Philippians 3:19, 1 Timothy 6:9-10, and Hebrews 10:39. The difference is that the immediate potential of the Kingdom is not present to the Church Age believer as it was when Jesus taught His disciples.

In verses 31-33, Luke includes some narrative not mentioned by the other Gospel writers. It is possible that the warning of the Pharisees was genuine since there were some religious types who were sympathetic to Jesus' ministry (e.g. Matt 8:18-22; Luke 7:36; 8:40-56). The words "today" and "tomorrow" in this passage are figurative. "Today" and "tomorrow" signify a period of present opportunity; whereas the phrase the "third day" would have reminded Luke's readers of the resurrection and the consummation of Jesus' goal in His 1st Advent.⁷ Jesus followed a long line of prophets who were executed in the nation's capital (1 Ki 18:4, 13; 19:10, 14; 2 Chr 24:21; Jer 2:30; 26:20-23; 38:4-6; Amos 7:10-17). This indicates that Jesus was very aware of the purpose and reason for which He journeyed to Jerusalem.

Jesus Laments Over Jerusalem (13:34-35)

All along the religious leaders have been Jesus' primary target. Matthew notes a change of reference to "this generation" (Matt 23:36). No doubt, Jesus was recognizing that the leaders represented the people and the people do not abandon their leaders for Jesus as the Messiah in spite of Jesus' warnings. This sets the stage for the concluding lament over Jerusalem. When Jesus stated that their house would be left desolate, He referred to any one or a combination of several things:

- The city of Jerusalem
- The Jewish temple in the city
- The Davidic dynasty which ended with Him and to which the Jews looked for a successor to David to be the Messiah Who delivered
- The nation as a whole.

Any one or a combination of these points are possibilities since they all relate to the 5th Cycle of Discipline that Jesus knew would come upon Israel if they rejected Him as their Messiah. Jesus knew that the 5th Cycle of Discipline (Lev 26:27ff) was Israel's lot; however, He did not know at that point that it would occur in 70 A.D.

⁷ Gaebelien, .