

**A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**  
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**“There Will Always be Expectation”**  
*The Third in a Lenten Series on Spiritual Principles*  
**Luke 13: 1-9**  
**March 11, 2007**

Jesus has a way of making things incarnational, about us. We'd rather them be about other things... other people, ideas, propositions, morals and values. We prefer that it be about something other than our lives and Jesus always seems to want it to be about you and me.

In the Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus seems to happen upon a conversation that was about other things. I imagine this is one of those 9-11 kind of events. Pilot had done something despicable. It was an act meant to terrorize. He killed some Galilean worshippers... while they were at the altar.

And you know how a world is that gets rocked by such a thing. Folks just have a need to talk. And they have a need to gain some perspective on it. And for sure, to regain a sense of control about their lives. So... people are kicking this around, at the synagogue, down at the well, at the barbershop, in the market.

And you know how the conversations went. You had the Zealots weighing in... some of them loudly. The issue for them was justice and it was never going to happen until they had the courage to stand up to Rome... no matter what the cost.

Some others talked about justice but felt like nonviolence was the only righteous course. It was time for Israel to appeal to Rome...or have a nationwide boycott.

Then there were the conversations that were more philosophical and theological. Was this just random or was this God's doing? **“I mean God used Babylon to punish Israel long ago... why not Pilot to punish some Galileans.... You know how Galileans can be, not to paint with too broad a brush, but they're a little too lax on their Sabbath keeping and a little too comfortable with Gentiles.”** You know those kinds of things were said... or worse. **“Pilot didn't do this, God did this because of some sin.”**

Others, more moderate types, members of the CBF... (Cooperative Bar Mitzvahed Fellowship)... they always took the other side, reacting as they did to fundamentalists. **“Bad things just happen... that's all. We just need to focus on how we can minister to their families in Galilee.”**

Of course, there were all sorts of splinter conversations about God and history and suffering and providence... there was a lot of providence talk. **“God's in control.”** **“Well, clearly not in control of that maniacal Pilot.”** Back and forth it would go.

And one morning, Jesus happens along when one of these debates is in full swing. Everyone is talking, arguing in, trying to find some perspective and make some sense out of this horrible thing.

Someone sees Jesus, **“Hey, let's get the new Rabbi to weigh in on this one.”**  
**“Jesus... you've been reading the papers, haven't you... care to comment?”**

And he's so perceptive... **"Lots of you think they had it coming to them, huh? You think they were worse sinners than you are, don't you? I tell you it isn't so!"**

All the CBFers are thinking... *"okay, this is good, he's one of us."*

But then Jesus comes out with something that confuses the whole bunch. **"Unless you repent, you too will all perish."**

Then just to stir everyone up even more, he reminds them of that accident that happened in Jerusalem, when the tower collapsed on those Judeans.

Horrible accident... 18 people died. No evil—just an accident. And the CBFers are hoping he's going to say something like, **"You know, it's a finite world and towers just fall and hurricanes just happen..."** Which is true. But he doesn't... he wants it to be about them.

**"Unless you repent... you too will all perish."**

Everyone at the market doesn't know what to do with that and neither do we. Do you? Aren't you thinking... **"Gosh, I wish he hadn't said that..."** And I'm thinking, **"Gosh, I wish this weren't in the Lectionary."** No one's saying Amen. No one likes it.

I mean, the conservative is thinking... **"Is he saying... 'I'm bad? I'm bad too and my own 9-11 could be just around the corner?'"**

And the moderate is thinking, **"Is Jesus trying to say God uses tornadoes to punish people? Surely not... I mean, let's just check the Greek here... or maybe it's one of those moments where Jesus is just trying to be ridiculous to shock me... Like when he says to hate my mother."**

And the liberal is thinking, **"Well, there's another page of scripture I need to remove."**

No one's satisfied with what Jesus says... But, maybe on our best days, in our best moments, we know at the very least that he's now made the conversation about us... about me... about you. Now it's incarnational. It's not about a proposition. It's about a life.

It's easier to talk about why bad things happen to good people than it is to look at myself... Jesus is more of a spiritual director than he is a philosopher. **"What about you? What about your life? You're perishing too... maybe little by little... but you're perishing and better repent."**

Repent...or you too will all perish.

So... this sort of clears up things... the Gospel (at least according to Jesus) is not I'm Okay, You're Okay. It's really not okay with God for us to be less than we are. And you don't have to go *brush arbor* on everyone with this and picture God having some tantrum because you're an evil sinner... It's just that it's not okay with God for us to be less than we are.

How could it be? God created you... gifted you with some talent and you've been lazy and haven't bothered to develop it... how could that be okay with God?

God created you... gave you the capacity to think and choose, and you've lived like some machine on auto pilot going through the motions of your life... How is it that a loving God would be okay with that?

God created you and set you in a garden of joy with other people and you're ignoring them... how is it that your isolation and loneliness could ever be okay with God?

God... called you to be compassionate, as He is... How in the world would we expect God to just be okay with selfishness?

I know lots of us have spent lifetimes reacting to judgmentalism and loud, angry, narrow preaching... but in our flight from that, how in the world did we come to imagine that Love, ultimate and eternal love, would just be okay with our being less than we are... perishing away.

You wouldn't abandon your loved ones that way. They're too relevant... Too significant... Too much is at stake... And your love just won't let you go there. So... the Gospel story is not so easy to nail down and bind up... is it?

Jesus has everyone back on his or her heels, which is typically a good time to tell a parable and he does. **“All this talk of repentance puts me in mind of a story.”**

And as is typical the parable wants you inside it... wondering about it. Who's this character and that one? Is the vineyard owner God?... is the vineyard Israel?

The only thing we know for sure is that the Landowner is converting to the Baptist faith. He's trading in his grapes for figs. No more winemaking for him.

Not really... he's just a successful vineyard owner who wants some fig jam on his bagel every morning... that's all. He just loves figs... that's all.

And he had a fig tree planted... And he gave it three years... And there were no figs...

And he wanted figs and should expect figs... that's what a fig tree is for... bearing figs. The owner wants figs... expects figs. There is always expectation from anyone who plants anything.

There is expectation that things be a certain way. It matters.

In the Jewish mystical tradition they teach that the spiritual world is held up by two pillars... and each of the pillars has a name. One of the pillars is named severity. It also gets named wrath but they don't mean by that, God throwing tantrums... it's really more like intensity.

It is expectation... It is calling... It's the idea that God is not indifferent. It's a boundary. A line in the sand.

And this is one side of God's being... one side of God's love. It really comes straight out of the Psalm that says, **“God said one thing... I heard two... that God is powerful and God is merciful.”**

Which is the name for the other pillar... “mercy.” So, it's mercy and severity. It's challenge and forgiveness. Both are from God. All of it is grace. It's all love.

And this is really hard for us to get, which is exactly what we heard from Isaiah earlier. **“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor my ways your ways.”** God is love and God defines love but it's a definition we can't comprehend.

But we try... we argue about this point of it or that one. And try to limit God to being this way or that... Capable of this but not that... We try to name what God has done or would never do, because we know what is loving and we know what God is like... and scripture again and again says, **“Don't be so sure of that.”**

And that's what Jesus seems to be driving at with the parable. There are no figs and the owner isn't willing to pretend. He's a realist. Cut it down. It's just taking up space and in a land where good soil is rare... you just don't waste space or water.

Of course, he's going to cut it down. Maybe he'll try olives next time... He likes olives too.

But then, here comes the other side of God's reality, "**Aphes...**" is what the gardener says... "**Let it be...**" It's the same word Jesus uses on the cross. "**Aphes... they don't know what they are doing. Forgive it.**" That's mercy...

There's severity... There's mercy... and both are God at work in our lives. Both are active. Severity is the gardener pruning... painful pruning. Mercy is the gardener letting it be... just spreading some manure around so that something from the inside might transform the tree. Both are God being God.

"**Are you saying, God might prune us... correct us?**" I'm afraid so... if that is what love calls for. But do me and everyone else a favor. Be humble and quiet about it all. About God's pruning and about God's fertilizing. Often I think this is going on under the radar, for one thing.

And secondly, typically when I hear people using this kind of talk... according to them, God seems very random with it all. A rule of thumb for us all. **If some innocent person is hurt in the process of our being taught a lesson, then it's likely not God at work, so be quiet about it.** I'm not saying innocent people aren't hurt by our sin... they've certainly been hurt by mine. I'm just saying, "God doesn't manufacture judgment that way."

And even if you feel certain some difficulty in your life is God's correction... just be quiet about it. It might just be bad luck, Earl.

And as long as we're on the subject... be careful what you claim as a "blessing" from God, too... Thank God quietly for a new opportunity... a new job... but just remember that the other person who applied is still unemployed.

And if your stock went up... it may be that someone's benefits at the assembly line went down. Or the woman working in the third world country is still making only 75 cents a day.

Careful there... about assuming God's favor... or God's reproof. God's ways are not our ways. Be careful... but do be aware and do trust.

God is not indifferent to who you are. You matter. And if you're perishing, you can be certain of this... it is breaking God's heart and that is why God is going to Jerusalem. The cross is a "severe love." You matter and God is at work.

One last thought... Maybe you're thinking... "**I really know what it's like to be the fig tree. I've tried and I've tried... and I've tried. I'd love to make fruit for the owner. But... I look at my limbs... my life... and I'm afraid what's there is pretty pitiful.**"

One last thought for those of us who've been there... are there. We try hard to grow what can only be given. Perhaps the greatest grace we can know... is the honest word that we're dead. That's all judgment really is... it's a word about what is real. It's not harsh or mean... just true.

Maybe that's where the parable wants to take us all. We're dead... It's Lent and we're dead. But... Lent doesn't last forever, does it?