

Luke 13:1-9 "The Villain in the News"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me this morning to Luke 13. It's been about three months since I said turn to Luke. You may have forgotten where that was, you know, even though we're 12 chapters in.

Basically halfway through Luke's gospel, which is kind of exciting. It's been a while, so I want to do a review here at the beginning of the new year as we jump back into Luke for a little bit.

If you remember way back to when we started, it was a long time ago, I brought a football, which I'll admit is a little painful for me this week.

But nonetheless, we brought a football and started where football coach Vince Lombardi did every year. He said, ladies and gentlemen, this is a football.

[1 : 06] And he started and said, we're going to start back at the beginning, at the basics, and say, this has to be the center of attention. This must be the thing that you focus on.

This is what you have to follow and keep your attention glued to. And Luke has been doing that in his gospel. He told us at the very beginning, he was writing to say to Theophilus, this is Jesus. He's the one you've got to keep your focus on. He's the one you've got to know about. He's the one I want to make sure you're clear on. The real Jesus, I want to tell you who he is and what he was like.

He's the center of attention. We said Luke's gospel is the historical, paradoxical, upside down, life-changing, true story of Jesus.

That's why he's writing. So we've seen as we've gone through these first chapters, Jesus announced by angels to shepherds as good news of great joy for all people, right?

[2 : 11] That's the theme of the series. Good news of great joy for all people. Jesus himself is good news. He brings a message of good news for all sorts of people.

Many you may not expect. That's part of the upside down nature of Jesus, right? The king himself. The one at the center of attention. Not merely engaging shepherds, but many other social and religious outcasts.

Valuing women, including Gentiles. Loving enemies. We see Jesus healing the sick, the possessed, even the dead, raising them to life.

Quite a king. A powerful king and at the same time merciful. An authoritative king and at the same time humble.

This is the Jesus that Luke wants people to know about. He's unlike anyone they've ever known. So just a couple chapters ago, we saw this Jesus who's done all these things get laser focused on one thing.

[3 : 26] On the primary calling, the primary mission that he had. Saying, I must suffer and be rejected and be killed and rise again.

He sets a course for Jerusalem, doesn't he? Right? Before we even get to the midpoint of Luke's gospel, Jesus says, that's where I'm headed and the rest of the gospel is headed that way. He fixes his gaze on a sacrificial death in our place.

And he won't be deterred from it. Nothing can get him off that course. Jesus and those following him are headed to Jerusalem. Every story we read now is in that context.

The rest of the way through until he gets there. It's in the shadow of the cross and that great task that's before him that Jesus has fixed his eyes on. But we've entered a section just recently where for several chapters on his way to the cross, Jesus is teaching about his kingdom.

He's the king and he wants to tell us how his kingdom works. And we've already heard him turn our value systems upside down. We've heard him challenge us on the extent of our love.

[4 : 36] We've heard him instruct us on how to pray. There's a lot more teaching coming up. There are parables of mustard seed, a wedding feast. The prodigal son is coming in a couple chapters.

That's exciting. There's also some challenging, hard sayings about what it looks like to follow him and what living in his kingdom must look like.

So we've added that little button to the sermon slide to remind us where our focus is in this part of Luke's gospel. This is kingdom teaching from Jesus on his way to the cross.

It's the king teaching us with the cross always in view. He's headed there. It colors every event and every conversation on the way. As we turn to chapter 13 this morning, Jesus has just been teaching those who would be a part of his kingdom to be all in.

Challenging us to value him above all else. Particularly in light of eternity. He says that's vitally important. Let's read about this next interaction with some that have been listening to him teach.

[5 : 49] This is Luke 13 at verse 1. God's holy word given so that we might know with certainty about Jesus and the hope that he gives.

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?

No, I tell you. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those 18 on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them.

Do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. And he told this parable.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. And he said to the vine dresser, Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and I find none.

[6 : 57] Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also until I dig around it and put on manure. Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good.

But if not, you can cut it down. Let's pray and ask God for his help as we study his word. Father, we've already said this morning how much we need your help.

And it's especially true as we seek to understand and apply your word to our hearts. Because our hearts would rather avoid it.

Holy Spirit, would you come and work in our hearts. And we might submit ourselves to your word and that it might shape who we are. Not just today, but every day.

Teach us and change us, we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. When some sort of major disaster or calamity hits, I tend to brace myself and prepare to wince as some self-appointed spokesman for Christianity steps to the microphone.

[8 : 14] And in recent years, perhaps Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell or someone else blames the victims or the country for bringing the disaster upon themselves.

It's happened after 9-11 with the immorality of various groups being blamed for that disaster. It happened after Hurricane Katrina when more than a couple of people lined up to pronounce the city of New Orleans to be full of big sinners.

And thus, this was God's judgment. That's the dot that's connected. The conclusion drawn is that the disaster is a direct judgment upon those particular sins of particular people.

Partially, I wince because I think that is such an inaccurate portrayal of Jesus and the Bible's view of things as we see this morning.

But partially, I wince because I do the same thing on a smaller scale. This functional karma, perhaps you could call it, that we live with in our culture.

[9 : 27] I was talking with a pastor friend about this a while back and he calls it the villain in the news dynamic. Have you noticed that? Every news cycle, there's always a villain in the news.

Just watch in the coming days. What media folks have learned is that we love hearing about villains. Someone who is ostensibly evil, who's really tangibly bad, is always featured in every cycle. And one of the reasons we consume this so readily is that we have this strong propensity in us to blame others and self-soothe.

To feel better about ourselves because we see someone else who is clearly worse than we are in some way. And while that psychology makes sense, the results of that can be spiritually devastating.

It can build self-justification, self-righteousness. The sense that I'm okay begins to grow in my heart and it keeps me from things I really need.

[10 : 42] Self-examination. Genuine repentance are avoided. And those dynamics can be eternally deadly.

So to guard against this reality that I've seen happen in my own heart, I've been for a couple years now practicing what my friend suggested to me.

When I see a villain in the news, I try to ask myself where some of those same realities are true in my heart. It's really a very convicting and humbling thing to do.

Just think of some of the villains in the news recently. A number of politicians, Trump, Franken, Moore, just the list goes on.

Accused of using other people, even young people, to serve their own pleasure. Now either I read reports like that and feel above them and better than them, or I think of how my heart has used someone else.

[11 : 52] My kids or my wife as if they existed to serve my pleasure. Think of Matt Lauer, who has recently of course been exposed as being one way in public for the television audience and everyone else to see, and another way entirely in private.

Now it's true that the outworking of that heart level idolatry in that case for him is different from what it is for me. But that same idol lurks in my heart in significant ways.

So don't hear what I'm not saying. I'm not seeking to flatten all sin and say everything's the same, or to say that the impact of these things on people that they hurt is not real.

It is. It is distinct from the impact that sin in your heart can have on someone else. But those things are real. What I'm talking about is how I respond.

What does it drive me to do when I see something bad in someone else? Does it lead to self-soothing? Or to self-examination?

[13 : 12] Two different options. Do I think of Kim Jong-un? He's I think a perpetual villain in the news these days in case they don't have a fresh one to put in. He's reliable I think at this point for being able to be used in that way.

So do I think of him as a deranged egomaniac that couldn't be any more different for me if he tried, that I'm entirely unlike?

Is that the way I think of him? Or do I read a story and do I think of him as someone who's obsessed with controlling and manipulating everything and everyone around him so that it serves his purpose and his kingdom?

Hmm. Because when you say it that way, I start to see myself. My kingdom may be smaller, but my heart knows that sickness very well.

And that's what Jesus is telling us here, that we must see our hearts. We have to see the reality of what goes on in our hearts.

[14 : 19] It's absolutely essential for our spiritual health that we see that while we're conditioned to go through life safely protected from that reality by many forms of self-soothing.

Telling myself, I'm okay. I can prove it. Look at all the people who aren't. See, it doesn't take a nationally known figure in the news for my heart to insulate itself from its sin and idolatry.

It can be someone on my own news feed, my own friend group, in my own church. They are clearly more materialistic, less spiritual, worse parents, better gossips.

Whatever the case may be, you fill in the blank. And because they are, I'm okay. I must be alright. There's no need to consider my own heart on these issues.

Several years ago, I sat across the lunch table from a guy I knew from church. And at that point in time, he'd have told you and I'd have told you, he was pretty much the biggest mess around.

[15 : 34] I didn't know anybody who was really struggling as badly as he was. We'd been talking regularly because his wife was leaving him. He'd been involved in immorality in a number of different levels and different ways.

His work was absolutely falling apart, partially because he was personally struggling with depression that left him hardly functional sometimes. And add to that, he had anger issues that were starting to manifest themselves with his kids in particular.

He'd been verbally abusive and rough with his kids. And in this day, that's what he was sharing with me about. He told me through tears about this encounter with his kids, his outburst and the completely just painful things that had happened in this situation.

And then he started talking me through his emotions that night that led up to his outbursts. And I started hearing him use words that I had thought the exact same words just the night before. I had lost my cool with my little kids when they had interrupted my controlled environment and peaceful evening.

[16:58] I had wounded their little hearts. I had seen it in their eyes when I reacted harshly. And it was as though God reached across the table in that moment and said, look, I'm using the guy who's the biggest mess you know to hold him up as a mirror to you.

And say, do you see? Do you see your heart? It's just like his. You may have acted differently in some ways, but you're no better than he is.

You're not above any of the things that he's done because the same battle going on in his heart is going on in yours. Your heart battles those same idols. You've got some repenting to do.

And God had to use that to show me. Y'all, that's what Jesus is saying to his followers and to us in this passage. The clear call of the king is repent.

It's not complicated to figure that out in this passage. It's to have your eyes turned to your own heart to grieve the sin that you see there, the relational distance between you and God because all of our sin is first and foremost against him, a breaking of that relationship.

[18:17] It's the call for us today to repent because Jesus is saying this is the way of life in his kingdom. Repentance is a daily, moment by moment, part of living in his kingdom.

It's a lifestyle, as Martin Luther would remind us years later. Jesus came saying to everyone, repent, for the kingdom of God is near.

And so even when you're living in the kingdom, what that means is repent. He continues to call us to turn from sin and turn back to God and find forgiveness and fruit in him.

I know it's taken me a little bit longer than usual to get back to it, but let me show you how Jesus draws us to examine our own hearts and repent in this passage.

He does it primarily by warning us. That's what most of the passage is. Why should we repent? The bad news is worse than you realize.

[19:28] As Jesus has been challenging those following him, apparently some of them, understandably, needed the pressure released a little bit. They needed the focus turned off them and these things Jesus is calling them to.

It's they say, hey Jesus, you know about those Galileans that got killed? Bad bunch, huh? How about them? Terrible event.

Event that fits with what historians tell us of Pilate and his harsh treatment of the Jews. This would have been a horrific event.

Most likely a massacre by the ruling invaders in the temple on the Passover. It would be like Christians being killed in church on Easter morning.

An awful event. And boy, those people who died must have really had it coming, the crowd says. But Jesus says something different, doesn't he?

[20:29] He says, you're examining the wrong hearts. Verse two. He answered them, do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered in this way?

No, I tell you, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Don't worry about their hearts and how bad they are. What about yours?

And he adds to that his own example. 18 killed when a tower falls on them and Jesus repeats the same challenge. Repent or you too will perish.

Y'all may not have thought you were perfect, but did you realize the sin in your heart deserves death like this too? It's not that theirs was worse than yours so they got what was coming.

Look what yours deserves. Jesus makes clear in multiple places in many different encounters that specific suffering should not be assumed to be linked to specific sin.

[21:35] Rather, Jesus is saying all sin deserves God's judgment. That's what really comes out here in the conversation if you look back at it carefully that all of us on our own face God's judgment.

Notice four times in four verses all the other Galileans you'll all perish. Do you think they're worse than all the others in Jerusalem? No, you'll all perish.

All of you are facing this same thing Jesus said. Stop distinguishing yourselves from them and see yourselves in the same category. That's what we mean by saying that the ground is level at the foot

of the cross.

You may have heard that before in a church context and wondered what we meant by that. It's not that we're all really close to God but that we're all utterly undeserving of heaven and utterly close to hell.

That's what it means. You don't get off the hook for that by hanging around Jesus and listening to his teachings. You don't get off the hook by being born a Jew. So you don't get off the hook by being born in the Bible belt.

[22 : 48] You don't get off the hook by showing up at church to hear a sermon now and then. Jesus says, no, no, you too repent or you will perish. The bad news is that doing those kinds of things doesn't make you any better than the villain in the news.

It doesn't. The bad news is that there is badness in this world and it's not just badness out there. There's badness in here. Right? And further, the bad news is that even the sin that you see in your heart that doesn't seem so bad deserves death.

That's highlighted by Jesus' parable with the fig tree, right? He's making that same point at the beginning of the parable. The man had a fig tree in his vineyard and he came seeking fruit on it and found none.

The tree was dead and he said, look, for three years I've come seeking fruit on this tree and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? Right?

Makes sense. It's a dead tree. Get rid of it. See, what Jesus is saying is repentance by its nature bears fruit. Doesn't it?

[24 : 00] It's a turning back to God to trust him that then looks like something in my life. So when the fruit is not there, the root, repentance, is not there either and you all likewise will perish.

You will be cut down in terms of the parable. So here's another way the bad news is worse than we realize. True repentance is not merely avoiding evil, really big sins, you know, just being a decent guy.

That's not what repentance means. Rather, it involves actively bearing fruit. Jesus challenges his followers and us.

Don't look at others and see their big sins. Look at yourselves and see if you truly love me. Does your life demonstrate a passionate zeal for Christ that actively shares him with your neighbors? Or, do you soothe yourself with thoughts of being pretty good while checking out on Netflix every spare moment and serving yourself? Do you sit back and soothe yourself with thoughts of, I'm pretty good because while your friend has had an affair that led to a divorce, you're still technically faithful to your wife even though you're emotionally cold and verbally harsh regularly and rarely demonstrate love toward her at all.

[25 : 36] I mean, at least you're not doing the big things, right? Friends, repent or you likewise will perish.

Bear the fruit of a heart turned back toward God or you will be cut down. It's what the gospel tells us. There's good news coming, but it's not going to be good news until we look the bad news squarely in the face.

Grace is not going to be amazing to us until our sin is amazing to us that we see ourselves as broken and bent as every villain we see in the news. And Jesus says, you've got to see it.

You've got to look at your heart. You've got to learn to stop making yourself feel better by comparing to others but instead examine yourself and then you can truly appreciate the good news because there is good news.

It's the second reason why we repent actually. The passage is primarily a warning but it's a warning that is laced with hope. See, repentance is not merely wallowing in how bad we are.

[26 : 41] That's what sometimes we think. Repentance is not just being awful and feeling awful. It's also about celebrating how good God is and the beauty that He brings in broken people and places.

the good news is better than you imagine. Jesus' parable of the fig tree does certainly affirm the seriousness of the warning but it does something else that's easy to gloss over.

If you don't know about fig trees the people in Jesus' day certainly did. They knew what to do with a fig tree that it had no fruit for three straight seasons.

cut it down. The real question that would have puzzled Jesus here is why'd this guy come the last two years and not cut it down then?

It was a no-brainer. Get that thing out of the way so you can put something else in. This is serious. This is an agrarian society. The vines need to work properly and if they don't you need to get the tree out of the way.

[27 : 45] The owner says as much in verse seven doesn't he? He knows. It's obvious to him what he should do and yet something different happens. He decides to wait yet another year and not just to leave it alone but to have the tree cared for and nurtured in the hopes of renewal possibly coming.

The point clearly in this context is to encourage repentance not merely by warning repent or you will perish but especially by hope.

the hope of God's patient mercy or if you prefer his merciful patience. We know that God's like that don't we?

All the way back when he introduced himself to Moses in Exodus 34 he said I'm the Lord the Lord a God merciful and gracious slow to anger abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness that's who I am and Peter tells it to us in a really helpful way in the context of judgment and why has Jesus not returned yet?

Peter says the Lord's not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness what's happening? Why hasn't Jesus come back already? Peter says the Lord is patient towards you not wishing that any should perish but that all should reach repentance the one thing that will prevent the perishing right?

[29 : 20] That we would turn back to God a mercifully patient God see Jesus warns of the reality of sin and judgment and we need to hear it as a merciful call to repentance to find in him the hope that he offers if we will yet acknowledge our utter helplessness and need for rescue there is a king who is headed to a cross remember?

Remember that's where he's going? To be a savior a helper a rescuer there's not just two groups in this passage who died in Jerusalem right?

Everyone hearing this hears it in the context of there's someone else who's already told us he's going to die in Jerusalem to be the only one who can do helpless sinners good who can offer them hope and he desires us not to miss out on relationship with him because we feel better than the next guy or okay without him rather he wants us to experience him the beauty of a life giving relationship with him that's really more good news better than we imagine that he would desire that it's it's why repentance is greater than resolutions how many of you have already broken a new year's resolution don't don't feel ashamed yeah I know several me too I don't want to discourage you but it's only one weekend and sometimes that happens some of you didn't start the new year's resolutions

I understand that too this isn't always the case but but how do resolutions typically work a resolution in and of itself it's just a resolution means this I am struggling in some area and this year I am going to be better I commit to being better in whatever area it is diet exercise spirituality something you're gonna see a change you'll see fruit in me but but isolated like that resolutions are lacking two really important things the relationship and the results usually usually you don't see the fruit see it's because a resolution leaves me alone with me it's an attempt to move from bad me over here to good me by myself and I've already shown myself to be a dead fig tree as it were now simply resolved to bear fruit next year from the same dead tree there's a difference in repentance repentance turns from sin bad me first to God to a relationship to a

God who forgives who shows patient mercy who sacrifices himself for me because he loves me and it is that relationship that resolution skips over it's that relationship that is actually the power for the results it's that relationship that allows fruit to be born because God gives his spirit it's not just me left alone with me it's God giving to me his spirit that bears fruit in my life because God is because he's so good because he is patiently merciful and abundantly gracious he does all these wonderful things we've been celebrating this morning he gives us children we don't deserve he gives us hearts that actually want to be generous and see his kingdom advance in place of the hearts that just want to see our kingdom promoted he gives us eyes that see like we watched in the video a desire to see other people experience the relationship that we've experienced the thing we've needed so badly to have to have the opportunity to share that with others that's the God we enter into relationship with and he begins to produce that fruit in us fruit that we can't make on our own no matter how hard we resolve we turn back to that God and he produces fruit don't don't just resolve you miss both those things you miss first of all you miss

[34 : 17] Jesus if all you do is resolve you stay on your own you miss him that's why he says repent repent you'll get me and then there will be fruit that must also come Southwood may we not be a group of people and believe me it's easy to do this it's even easier in groups than it is individually may we not be a group of people that finds our significance and our value in being better than another group of people you know how easy that is to do you know how off-putting that is what's welcoming and honest by the way is being a group that that owns our shortcomings that knows our weaknesses and that runs quickly and repeatedly to one great savior isn't that the truth y'all tell people all the time

Southwood's not a place where a bunch of people who figured life out come to be part of a group together and as a result we're not a church that has life figured out or church figured out and that's just honest right that's just the truth it's who we are and yet there's something we have to say along with that amazingly for people like us that don't have things figured out amazingly Jesus call to repentance is to us again a call to relationship with him that he loves us and wants to be in relationship with us it's a call for us personally and together to realize that we desperately need a king who will go to a cross for us a king who loves us enough to call us back to himself and be in relationship with us again let's pray Jesus thank you for loving us enough to challenge our hearts our hearts that are really slow to repent really quick to defend would you change our hearts personally would you continue to work in this body make us people in a community really gracious and humble and really hopeful because at our lowest point we see a savior savior who still loves us in the face of our biggest failure and sin we see a savior who's going to a cross so that he can take care of it who's got blood that will wash away all our sin might we come and see you clearly rejoice in you and be renewed people because we walk in relationship with you we ask in your name amen for more information visit us online at southwood.org