

Worse Sinners

(Sermon by Rev. John Dieterly, March 7, 2010)

I Corinthians 10:1-13 ¹I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that our ancestors were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, ²and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, ³and all ate the same spiritual food, ⁴and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ. ⁵Nevertheless, God was not pleased with most of them, and they were struck down in the wilderness.

⁶Now these things occurred as examples for us, so that we might not desire evil as they did. ⁷Do not become idolaters as some of them did; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and they rose up to play.” ⁸We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. ⁹We must not put Christ[€] to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents. ¹⁰And do not complain as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

Luke 13:1-9 ¹At that very time there were some present who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. ²He asked them, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? ³No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish as they did. ⁴Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”

⁶Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came looking for fruit on it and found none. ⁷So he said to the gardener, ‘See here! For three years I have come looking for fruit on this fig tree, and still I find none. Cut it down! Why should it be wasting the soil?’ ⁸He replied, ‘Sir, let it alone for one more year, until I dig around it and put manure on it. ⁹If it bears fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

There are always hard questions for us to deal with in our faith. Why are there some people, who seem to be good people, who struggle with serious illness, or seem to have no end to their problems? And why are there people, who seem to be absolute scoundrels, who seem to have everything work their way?

Some people listening to Jesus teach thought they would come and raise that very question with him. They put it into the context of the thinking of their day and news events of their day. First of all, we must remember that in their thinking, when bad things happened to people, it was punishment for sins that they must have committed. They also thought that good things, like children, wealth, good health, and long life were blessings for righteousness living.

Job struggled with this way of thinking. When he lost all his possessions and even his family, his friends were sure he had committed some grave sins, but Job questioned God’s wisdom for sending such troubles to a righteous person. He did not think he had done anything wrong, but God was wrong for permitting his suffering. The Jewish people at the time of Christ were having this same struggle, but for the most part they thought that bad fortunes were God’s way of punishing sinners. So when they came to ask Jesus about some of the current events of the day, they put it into the context of their thinking that the tragedies that had occurred were God’s way of punishing sinners.

The first tragedy was just some of the all-too-common cruelty of that day. Some Galileans were offering animal sacrifices, we can presume they may even have been offering the sacrifices to God, as customary in the Old Testament, when Pilate pulled a cruel joke and ordered their own blood mixed with the blood of their animals, action that not only was intended as an affront to their worship, but may well have resulted in the death of the worshippers. The second tragedy may well have been a simple construction accident, something we may even hear about today. Their thinking was that the people who suffered from these tragedies suffered because of their sins.

Haven’t you heard people with the same attitude today? Ah, you see, the Soviet Union was the evil empire, and God surely punished them, which is why that empire has crumbled. Or how about all those sinners in Haiti. One of our so-called TV evangelists even said that the earthquake struck Port-au-prince because the mayor had made a pact with the devil. I just love Jesus’ answer to these folks. Basically he told them that they better mind

their own business. **“Unless you repent, you will all perish just as they did.”** I know enough about Haiti to know that there are people who practice voodoo and all sorts of pagan rituals, but I know there are many devout Christians in the Port-au-Prince area, so that I can not accept that they are “worse sinners” than people in this country who worship the almighty dollar, or who worship fame and fortune and sacrifice everything to obtain them. And I know enough about the Russian Orthodox Church, and the many Christians in the Soviet Union who endured terrible persecution for two generations that I can not accept that they are worse sinners” than people in this country who join satanic cults, or those who expend great energy to increase their own wealth and following, while claiming to be preaching the Gospel. You see, every one of us is like that fig tree that Jesus describes, the one that was not bearing fruit when the master of the vineyard came to harvest. Every one of us has gone through a season where we should have been bearing fruit for God’s realm, but gave nothing.

Paul is addressing this same kind of problem, but typical of Paul, he writes very explicitly about some of the temptations that were destroying lives in his day. First, do not become idolaters. This was a challenge in Paul’s day, and it still is in our time. What obsessions have you permitted to take over your life? Money? Movies? Sports? Work? Have any of these obsessions begun to border on idolatry for you?

Do not indulge in sexual immorality. We live in a culture that has become numb to sexual immorality. And it is not just in Hollywood or in the big cities. This one is almost too hard to even talk about any more. It has almost become the fabric of our culture. So many lives have been broken, so much happiness destroyed, it seems so pervasive, even in the church, but Paul is very clear, **“Do not indulge in sexual immorality.”**

Do not put Christ to the test. It is not just the attitude that some have, that they want God to prove himself, but it is also manifest in our drifting away from God. Maybe it is lethargy or maybe we are putting Christ to the test, when we say, “I don’t have to bother going to church today, God will forgive me.” “I don’t need to study the Bible, God will be there when I need him.” “I don’t need to pray, God knows I am grateful. God knows what I need.” What words have you used that have put God to the test.

Do not complain. Oh, my. This is certainly relevant. So many of us think we have so much to complain about, we who live in a land of affluence, in a community of peace and security, with more variety and abundance in our diet, more clothes in our closets, more leisure opportunities, more of almost everything than any other nation and far more than our ancestors enjoyed. So why do we complain, about anything? Oh, and the church doesn’t seem to be exempt, either. If you stop and think about it, it seems a bit odd. Here in this place, where we are in the presence of God, where we receive the gift of forgiveness and the promise of life everlasting, we gripe and complain about the small stuff, and it really is all small stuff, compared to the grace and mercy of God. As Paul said, **If you think you are standing, watch out that you do not fall.** If you think you are more righteous, or if you think other people are worse sinners, watch out for yourself, that you do not fall.

Jesus concluded his teaching for the day by telling the little parable of the fig tree that would not bear fruit. It is not too hard for us to picture ourselves as the fig tree in the parable. We have not always yielded the fruit the master has sought. But change position and think of yourself as the landowner. Have you ever looked at another person and found their faults? Have you ever asked the same question as the landowner did? He asked why that tree should be taking up space in his vineyard. Have you ever asked why some person is taking up valuable space on this earth? Isn’t Jesus telling this story as a parable about not being too quick to judge others? Or perhaps you should think of yourself as the gardener, the one who came to the defense of the tree that was not bearing fruit. Have you ever defended one who was not bearing the fruit of righteousness, and even more, have you ever nurtured that one with the hope that he or she might bear fruit? Put yourself in this parable in all three characters. As the landowner, don’t judge the one that is not bearing fruit – give them a chance. As the gardener, accept some responsibility for the one that is not bearing fruit, Nurture and help that one so that he or she might become a productive Christian. And always come back to considering yourself as the fig tree that is not bearing fruit.

None of us have perfectly obeyed God’s commandments; we can’t even measure up adequately to Paul’s little list. But God is not ready to give up on you. God will continue to tend to your needs, as carefully as the gardener promised to tend to the fig tree. God will feed you and nurture you, so that you will endure the hard times and bear fruit fitting of his grace and mercy. Do not trouble yourself about the sinfulness of others, but come to God in repentance for your own sins and shortcomings, and God will provide you with the strength and endurance you need to face your life’s challenges, and to bear fruit in abundance, to the glory of God. Amen.