PARABLES

Pilate, the Tower and the Fig Tree

Luke 13:1-9

A parable about suffering and evil in this world

Introduction

The verses we will look at come in two sections:

- Pilate and the Tower (1-5)
- The Barren Fig Tree (6-9)

Each section discusses politics and repentance. The second is a parable and in the first the Lord Jesus makes His point by comparing two real events. It is typical of parabolic speech. In these two events we have people suddenly killed - the first by Pilate and the second by a falling tower. The message is, **"repent or perish"** and it is given to the general public. The parable of the Barren Fig Tree, as we will discover, is directed to the leadership of the nation of Israel and the message is, **"produce or perish"**.

Pilate and the Tower

"There were some present at that very time who told Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices." (v.1)

It is interesting that the Old Syriac translation and the Arabic translation have translated the Greek word *'pareimi'* as 'come' rather than 'present'. So it reads, ***"And some came at that very time ...."***. Commentators suggest that both are possible.

So the atrocity storytellers suddenly appear and report to the Lord Jesus the incident of ***"the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices"***. We are not told the intent of the storytellers, but the intent is clear to anyone who lives or has lived in a world of violent political conflicts.

Around AD 26 Palestine was an increasingly violent place. There was growing resentment of pagan Roman domination. This resentment continued to grow until the final climax in AD 66. Something approaching a war-mentality characterised large sections of the Jewish people. It is much the same in Palestinian camps today in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. We know that such a mentality can affect the judgement of a whole nation. It was probably clear to some who kept a watch on the Lord Jesus that He did seem to really care for this national cause. So they sought to test His reactions.

Josephus records a number of massacres during this period, but not this particular one. Most commentators think we are speaking about an actual historical event. At any rate, civil national violence spawns incredible rumours. One real massacre is enough to create stories about ten others.

In Lebanon there was civil war from 1975 for about 16 years and even today there are several armed militia. The civil war in Lebanon was sparked by the massacre of 28 people on a bus on the outskirts of Beirut. From that time on there have been endless stories of massacres (some fact and some fiction) going about all over Lebanon and beyond. Such stories serve a function in a community. The teller and the listeners together are emotionally stirred up to a point of blind rage and this motivates them to the point of retaliation. But you are in very big trouble if you dare to ask, "Have you checked your sources" or if you say, "Don't forget that **our** hands are not clean either"! Such talk is considered disloyal and the one who dares to express such cautions can expect at least verbal abuse, if not a physical attack.

This brief report in v.1 has the characteristics of such violence-inducing rumour. Pilate's soldiers **could** have been so insensitive as to attack the worshippers in the Inner Court of the Temple during the very act of a sacrifice. Josephus doesn't mention it. It is possible that Roman soldiers attacked a group of Zealots in Jerusalem and then the report was blown up. So the crowd may have cried out bitterly, *"Destroy the evil Romans, O Lord, hear the cries of your chosen people."*

In the case of the Lord Jesus. If His commitment to nationalistic goals is suspect, then this may be a test case intended to measure His loyalty to the national cause. Remember the advice in Amos 5:13, ***"Therefore he who is prudent will keep silent in such a time for it is an evil time."*** It was probably a trap:

- If He answered, *"This killing is a clear case of injustice and oppression"*, they could have reported Him to Pilate claiming that what He taught was highly critical of Roman rule.
- If He showed indifference or there was any hint of approval of the Roman government, then the crowd would view Him with great antagonism and the rumour would spread everywhere that the Lord Jesus favoured collaboration with the enemy!

The answer of the Lord Jesus demonstrates great courage. [Read what happened to Jeremiah in Jer. 26.] It also illustrates how much more ready people are to talk of the deaths of others rather than their own. When it comes to personal religious beliefs, we are always ready to talk in generalities, but almost never about our eternal destiny and our spiritual state.

The Answer of the Lord Jesus

The Structure [a translation of the words as they were originally written word for word]

Verse 1 ***"Do you think that those Galileans***
worse sinners they were
than all the other Galileans because they suffered thus?
I tell you, No!
But unless you repent,
you will all likewise perish."

Verse 2 ***"Or those eighteen upon whom the tower fell*** (in Siloam and killed them)
Do you think worse debtors they were
Than all the others who dwelt in Jerusalem?
I tell you, No!
But unless you repent,
You will all likewise perish."

So these two verses have a common refrain. Each verse refers to violent death - the first at the hands of the hated Romans and the second is assumed to be an 'act of God'!

The complete surprise in the answer given by the Lord Jesus

1. The crowd expects Jesus to respond with a denunciation of the Roman government. He does not! Rather He **opens** the connection between sin and suffering **and** concludes with a call for **them** to repent! Political zealots struggling to enforce their concepts of justice and nationalism don't take kindly to such a call!
2. On the topic of sin and suffering, there is a double denial of a one-to-one relationship between them. It seems that the people jumped to the conclusion that, as there is no smoke without fire, so there is no suffering without sin. This was the view of Job's friends. They tell Job, *"Since you suffer, you must be a sinner; for if you were right with God, all would go well with you."*

   Ever since the flood, mankind in general is not treated in this world according to its deserts. The reward for wickedness is yet to come. This is similar to the account of the man born blind in John 9:1-3. The popular attitude was stated. The disciples assumed that someone had sinned - either the man or his parents. The Lord Jesus denied both. Again in Luke 5:19 the Lord Jesus speaks to a paralysed man on a bed and announces the forgiveness of his sins. Jesus seems to be speaking to the same mentality. We can assume that the paralysed man had been told he was paralysed because he was a sinner. So his healing can't be accomplished until he is assured his sins are forgiven.

   In his book 'The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah', Edersheim says that the eighteen were killed by a falling tower while working on Pilate's aqueduct. Pilate had taken money from the Temple treasury for the building of the aqueduct - much to the horror of the people! If one of the towers supporting the aqueduct collapsed on the workmen everyone would have assumed this was a judgement from God for collaboration in such a project.

This is an interesting speculation because it links **both** stories to Pilate. But in both cases the suffering of the people can't be linked to their sins.

3. The informants ask in effect, *"What about the suffering of these great national heroes struck down by our hated enemies?"* The answer of the Lord Jesus is, *"What about the suffering of those who were killed by an 'act of God'?"*

   [Note: there is no category of chance or even fate in Biblical literature. The Biblical understanding of the sovereignty of God excludes the concepts of chance or fate.]

   So the Lord Jesus refuses to discuss the suffering of the politically oppressed without broadening the discussion to include other types of sufferers. It is really easy for those suffering political oppression (such as the Palestinians) to quickly assume **their** suffering is the only kind that matters. So it is with us. We so easily develop a crass indifference to the suffering of others around us provided their suffering has a different nature to ours. So the incisive statement by Jesus doesn't allow us to narrow the discussion just to a sense of outrage over a particular form of suffering - in this case political oppression.

4. In the first verse we read of **'sinners'** and in the second of **'debtors'**. The same is found in the Lord's Prayer. In Matthew it is, ***"Forgive us our debts as we forgive ....*** **"** (Mt. 6:12) and in Luke it is, ***"Forgive us our sins as we forgive ...."*** (Lk. 11:4) Debts are a believer's unfulfilled duties in discipleship and obedience. Sins are overt evil acts a believer commits. The Aramaic word *'hoba'* carries both meanings. The evil the political enthusiasts are urged to repent of is described both as sins (v.2) and as debts (v.4).

5. The stunning climax is a call to the listeners to **repent lest they also perish**! This shows the amazing courage of the Lord Jesus. It helps us understand part of the reason why His own community rejected Him. It also gives us a profound insight into part of His response to all oppressed people struggling for justice. When Jeremiah attacked the political injustice of his day, influential friends protected him. (Jer. 26:24) Apparently Jesus had no powerful friend to protect him. Nicodemus made a very feeble attempt once. (Jn. 7:50)

   Arabs in the Near East marvel that the Lord Jesus was not physically attacked on the spot for this call to repentance is in the context of these extreme nationalists. (Romans would probably call them terrorists.) Those who fight for a **just** cause often assume that if an action is taken **in the struggle for the cause**, that makes it righteous. Current Middle East politics is filled with this assumption. It does not make it righteous! The more intense the struggle (the Arabic word is *'Jihad'*) the greater the assumption of its own righteousness. And this assumption of righteousness tends to express itself as arrogance that refuses any criticism. So we assume, "Our cause is right, thus we are righteous. After all we have suffered, how **dare** you inflict any more wounds on us by your criticism." The whole of the Islamic world tends to think like this. It is a powerful part of a Semitic culture and the whole issue of conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis since the 1930s has repeatedly demonstrated this attitude.

   Only the strong and very brave can dare to endure the wrath of the oppressed and seek to turn the focus away from the hated enemy to the pain of self-criticism - especially with a warning, ***"Unless you repent, you will <u>all</u> perish"***. In the synagogue in Nazareth there is a similar refusal to identify with the nationalism of His day. (Lk. 4:25-29) Jesus chooses two foreigners - today we would call one a Syrian and the other a Lebanese - to illustrate the kinds of people who, through faith, will receive the benefits of the now present Kingdom of God and to make it worse, one of them was a woman! The listening audience was so upset that they tried to kill Him! In this case in Lk. 13 we are not told the listeners' reaction.

6. But I think what the Lord Jesus said is more profound than this. It is more than a simple rejection of a nationalistic struggle. It isn't just a rejection of political action in preference to 'spiritual action'. The Lord Jesus seems to be saying, "*You want me to condemn evil in Pilate, but I'm not talking to Pilate! He isn't here! I am talking to you! Evil forces of wickedness are at work in your movement and they will destroy you Pilate or no Pilate*. (See Eph.6:12) *We must repent or all of us will be destroyed by these forces of evil.*"

It is so easy to develop an attitude of 'we are the angels and they are the devils'. We need to listen to the Lord Jesus as He speaks so courageously insisting, *"There are devils among us and angels among them. We must repent!"* The Lord Jesus doesn't tell them to submit to Pilate. He is not agreeing with Roman oppression. But He is bravely demonstrating a deep concern for the people in front of Him who will destroy themselves and all around them if they don't repent. So the questioners' response should have been, *"We ask him to look at evil in Pilate. He wants us to see evil in our own hearts. We must repent. If we do not, that evil will destroy us."*

In summary

1. Sin is defined both by evil acts and by duties left unperformed.
2. There is no one-to-one relationship between sin and suffering. Easy theological judgements about the reasons for natural and political disasters must be rejected.
3. Any intense political movement must look deep within its own soul to repent of its own evil, lest it destroy itself and the very people it seeks to serve.
4. The compassion of Jesus reaches out to all who suffer, not only to those who are politically oppressed.

The Barren Fig Tree (v. 6-9)

The text assumes a continuity between verses 1-5 and 6-9.

The Literary Structure [Again a word by word translation]

It has five verses

1.	***"A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard***	PLANT
	and he came seeking fruit on it	SEEK FRUIT
	and he found none.	NO FRUIT
2.	***He said to the vinedresser,***	MASTER SPEAKS
	'Behold! These three years	THREE YEARS
	I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree	SEEK FRUIT
	and I find none.	NO FRUIT
3.	***Dig it out!***	DIG OUT
	Why should it exhaust the ground?'	SAVE THE GROUND
4.	***But he answering said to him,***	VINE DRESSER SPEAKS
	'Master forgive it this year also	ONE YEAR
	until I dig around it }	HELP FRUIT BEARING
	and spread on manure. }	
5.	***And if it bears fruit in the future***	FIND FRUIT?
	and if not,	NO FRUIT
	dig it out.' "	DIG OUT

The first and last verses have similar patterns, 'plant - seek fruit - no fruit" in the first verse and then "find fruit - no fruit – dig it out". The parable begins with planting the fig tree and ends with the threat of digging up the planted fig tree.

The second verse states the problem and verse four gives the hoped-for solution. The climax is in verse three, ***"Dig it out!"***. The critical verse is just past the climax as the voice of mercy pleads for additional grace. Note the absolute right of the owner over his own property. It was his soil, his vineyard and his fig tree. It all belonged to him. Growing out of this absolute right was the moral right of an expectation of fruit. Why did the owner make a place in the vineyard for the fig tree? Because he expected figs! The owner also has another right – a punitive right of ownership to destroy all that fails. It is a most dangerous thing to be unfruitful when enjoying great spiritual privileges.

Verse One

In Joel 1:7 the prophet see an invasion of locusts (in fact a nation) and he says, ***"It has laid waste my vine and splintered my fig tree; it has stripped off their bark and thrown it down. Their branches are made white"***. And in 1:12, ***"The vine dries up and languishes …. All the trees of the field are dried up and gladness dries up from the children of men"***.

In Isaiah 5:1-7 we are given the parable of the vineyard and the owner of the vineyard is the Lord of Hosts. The vineyard is the People of Israel. The hearers of the parable would have immediately recognised this symbolism.

But the Lord Jesus changes the meaning of the symbolism. In this parable it is the story of **one** plant and not the whole vineyard. And it is a fig tree not a grapevine. Why? Perhaps because in Palestine a fig tree bears fruit about 10 months in the year. So at almost any time an owner can find fruit. Also in the prophetic literature of the Old Testament, fig trees and vines are symbols of peace.

Micah 4:4, ***"But they shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree and no one shall make them afraid, for the mouth of the Lord of Hosts has spoken."***

Zech. 3:10, ***"In that day, declares the Lord of Hosts, every one of you will invite his neighbour to come under his vine and under his fig tree."***

Hosea 9:10 sees the first fruit of a fig tree as a symbol of a pure, innocent and responsive people, ***"Like grapes in the desert, I found Israel. Like the first fruit on a fig tree in its first season, I saw your fathers."***

A failure to bear fruit in Hosea 9:16 is a symbol of the idolatrous days in which Hosea lived.

So there could have been a variety of reasons why the Lord Jesus chose a fig tree rather than a vine in this parable. The Lord is re-working material well known to the hearers. Clearly the owner is God. The vineyard (but not the tree) is Israel (the people not the land).

Note that the master of the vineyard is concerned about the fruitfulness of the whole vineyard and asks some serious questions about a particular fig tree. It is unfruitful, so it is bleeding strength from vineyard itself. The master acts **to preserve the vineyard** and not to destroy it. So who is represented by the fig tree? It is probably the **leadership** of the People of God. For this is a frequent topic in the parables of the Lord Jesus.

Luke 20:9, ***"The scribes and chief priests … perceived that he told this parable against them."***

So the problem isn't the whole people, but the fruitless leadership within the nation.

Note too an aspect of culture faithfully preserved: landowners, both then and now, don't get their hands too dirty. The vineyard owner doesn't plant a fig tree himself. Rather, he has it planted!

Verse Two

The owner and the vinedresser co-operated in planting the fig tree and now they co-operate in evaluating the problem. According to Lev. 19:23-24:

"When you come into the land and plant any kind of tree for food, then you shall regard its fruit as forbidden. Three years it shall be forbidden to you; it must not be eaten. And in the fourth year all its fruit shall be holy, an offering of praise to the Lord. And in the fifth year you may eat. …."

Usually newly planted fig trees don't produce any fruit for the first three years. This fig tree had been planted for seven years, so this was its eighth year or maybe the seventh year if he was going to "offer praise to the Lord". So seven or eight years had passed and still no fruit! The situation appeared hopeless!

So what the Lord Jesus is saying is that quite enough time has passed for the current leadership of the nation to produce "fruits of repentance". (Lk. 3:8) The master has waited patiently, long beyond what is expected.

Verse Three

"Dig it out! Why should it exhaust the ground?"

So the fruitless tree is not only disappointing, but it also takes up space that could be used by other trees. It also draws minerals out of the soil and so exhausts it.

Note that in Europe we cut down trees, but in the Near East a tree is "dug out". The whole tree with its stump and root cluster is removed. John the Baptist said, ***"Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees"***. (Lk. 3:9) In the Near East you "dig out". You don't "cut down". So the unfruitful leadership of the nation is to be rooted out.

Verse Four

Here is a dramatic turn of events! The vinedresser speaks to his master and suggests a possible alternative solution. In Isaiah's parable there is no offer of grace. (Is. 5) The owner says there that he will, ***"Break down the hedge ... break down the wall ... make it a waste ... and command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it."*** That is harsh!

So the hearers probably expected that the Lord Jesus would end His parable with something equally harsh. But the fig tree is offered a period of grace and extra special attention is to be paid to it. The vinedresser will dig around it and add manure. So the symbolism of mercy is here in this parable of Jesus as well as the symbolism of hope.

The word 'manure' occurs only once in the New Testament – here. If the fig tree represents the scribes and the priests, then they needed a little 'manure' spread around them! Probably the poor, disadvantaged people listening to the Lord Jesus chuckled at this mild irreverence!

So here is a debate between 'mercy' and 'judgement' that so often occurs in connection with the law of a country. So if God dealt with the leaders of Israel by strict justice, they would perish. But He does not. He gives them another chance. It is indeed madness to fly in the face of His justice and it is desperately evil to flout His mercy.

This tension between justice and mercy is reflected in the Old Testament. In Hosea this 'debate' is clearly seen. In Hos. 11:5-7 you see the judgement of God promised. But in v. 8:

"How can I give you up, O Ephraim?
How can I hand you over, O Israel?
How can I make you like Admah? }
How can I treat you like Zeboiim? } (These two cities were destroyed along with Sodom and Gormorrah.)

My heart with recoils within me.
My compassion grows warm and tender.
I will not execute my burning anger ...
For I am God ... the Holy One in your midst
And I will not come in wrath."

In the original Aramaic there is wordplay:

"dig it out" = *'fsuqih'*

"let it alone" = *'shbuqih'*
(forgive it)

So this tension between justice and mercy is deep within the heart of God. He resolved it on the Cross! The Cross is a revelation of the very heart of God.

Verse Five

"And if it bears fruit in the future - and if not, dig it out."

The voice of grace and mercy is talking. The vinedresser is pleading for grace (give it more time) and mercy (forgive it). The time of 'execution' is not mentioned. So the time for the future judgement of the leaders is left unspecified. The Arabic word for tomorrow is *'bukra'*, but it also means 'sometime in the future'. But the implication is clear after the "acts of redemption" (digging round and spreading on manure) are completed and enough time for renewal is given, the fig tree must respond. If it does not, judgement will be the only option left. The health of the vineyard is too important to leave an unproductive tree indefinitely occupying good ground and sapping its strength.

But notice that the salvation offered to the tree has the following qualities:

- It comes exclusively from the outside.
- The voice of mercy pleads for forgiveness.
- Redemptive acts that may lead to renewal (production of fruit) are proposed.
- ***"Let it alone"*** is the New Testament word for "forgiveness".
- Forgiveness is nothing unless help for the tree comes from the outside. Renewal cannot come from the resources of the tree itself.
- The vinedresser must act to save the tree and the tree must respond to those acts or they are of no avail.

We are not told what happens! The story is open ended. Does the tree respond? The hearer must respond! What response were the original hearers pressed to take?

The present leadership of the nation is fruitless. Judgement threatens. God in His mercy will act to redeem. If there is no response, judgement is the only alternative. His love for the community of faith is too deep for it to be otherwise.

The Theological Themes in the Parable

1. The spiritual leaders of the household of faith are planted in 'God's vineyard' and are expected to produce fruit for Him again. Notice God's rights. We have no rights apart from the rights of God. Our only right is to be damned.
2. When that leadership is fruitless, it not only fails in its own obedience, but it also sterilises the community around it! God cares for the community and will not tolerate this situation indefinitely.
3. Mercy is extended to unfruitful leadership in the form of forgiveness and renewing grace. We have no right to expect anything except for the mercy and grace of God.
4. Only in the grace of God, freely offered to the fruitless leaders, is renewal possible. God acts to forgive and renew. These acts come from beyond the leaders who cannot renew themselves.
5. God's offer of mercy must evoke a response from within or renewal will not take place and judgement will be inevitable.
6. The judgements of God are rooted in righteousness - the rights of the owner - and the judgements of God are always exercised in infinite patience. But in the end, the judgements of God are irrevocable.

So these two sections are closely related. The first deals with the suffering of the community that results from the political leadership - the Romans. The people are called on to repent. The second deals with the barrenness of the spiritual life in the community that results from the failures of the religious leaders who need forgiveness and grace. So in the first section the people must repent. In the second section the leaders need forgiveness. In each section politics and repentance are related in ways that instruct us as believers in every age.

The owner was looking for figs from the fig tree. What is God looking for? He is looking for men (in a generic sense). What sort of men? Men like the Lord Jesus – men in His likeness. And He has the moral right of expectation. So the issue is: are we being fruitful or are we a 'waste of space'? Are we taking God's resources and wasting them in unprofitable use?

What then is the test of life? **Fruitfulness according to God's intention**. He is expecting fruit. The Lord Jesus is both the owner and the vinedresser. If we are being unfruitful, He is willing and able to make us blossom with beauty and bear fruit!