

"Getting What's Coming To You"  
Luke 13:1-9

March 24, 2019

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Lent

When I was in college and seminary, we used to amuse ourselves by changing the words to popular hymns in order to make a joke. (It just shows how little we had to do for fun before the Internet.) One was dedicated to our Greek prof, Dr. John Schwane who was an excellent teacher, but was also very difficult and demanding. We would jokingly sing, My Hope is built on nothing less than passing one of Schwane's tests. I was reminded of another one when reading our Gospel lesson for today. It went like this: Chief of sinners though I be, I thank God you're worse than me. While the first of those may be a bit exaggerated, the second one (like all good humor) is funny because it has an element of truth to it, at least in our perception of ourselves and others. We DO think that others are worse sinners than us and we may thank God for that.

After all, we are competitive people. We are always comparing ourselves with other people when it comes to our performance in school, our performance at work, our performance in sports, and so on. Therefore, it is only natural that we would compare ourselves with others when it comes to our standing before God. When we do that, we will always try to find a way to come out on top.

Few people (Christian or non-Christian) will claim to be perfect and without sin. If we were perfect, that would end the argument right there. We would definitely be better than everyone else. However, both our experience and the Holy Scriptures make it clear to everyone, even ourselves, that we are not perfect.

Still, we attempt to justify ourselves in order to escape condemnation. We evidently feel that God judges "on the curve." In other words, we think that we don't have to be perfect, just better than other people. It's like the story of a guide who took a client out to hunt for bear. The guide warned the man that the bears were fast and were man-eaters. The man said, "I sure hope I can run faster than the bear." The guide answered, "I hope I can run faster than you."

The nonbeliever will have to acknowledge that he has done things wrong. So, he will use phrases such as, "Well, no one's perfect," "I'm no worse than anyone else," and, "I'm only human." You and I, as Christians, know that we are sinners and not perfect, not only by our behavior, but because the word of God says such things as, "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God," and "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us."

But this does not satisfy our competitive nature. Although we have all sinned, we still want to show somehow that other sinners are worse than us. First, we will try to make our case that we are better by comparing offenses. People will feel superior because, although they have sinned, their sins aren't as bad as others. You will hear people say things like, "At least I didn't murder anyone," or "Well, it's not like I robbed the bank." This line of reasoning doesn't work very well. It doesn't prove that we are superior to others, but just that we are less bad in some of the ways in which we violate God's 10 Commandments.

Second, we try to make our case by showing that others are actually worse than us and that God knows this by how He treats them. When bad things happen to people, many will assume that they have done something bad and God is punishing them for this. On the other

hand, if no problems or suffering enter your life, then you must be doing good and God is blessing you.

This forms the basis for our text today. Some people come to Jesus to tell Him “about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.” We’re not exactly sure what this incident is all about. It’s not mentioned in any other historical documents. However, it appears that some Galilean pilgrims came from the north to offer the Passover lamb sacrifice and Pontius Pilate sent troops into the temple area to kill them for some offense they had committed while they were doing this sacrifice so that their blood literally mingled with the blood of the animal sacrifice. This must’ve been some terrible offense for Pilate to take such extreme action.

Since the Jews looked down their noses at the Galileans and considered them rubes and “hicks from the sticks”, they were rather smug and expected Jesus to issue some condemnation of the Galileans for what they had done. After all, it’s obvious that God was punishing them for that by allowing Pilate to take their lives. By doing this, the Jews would consider themselves to be better than the Galileans.

Jesus crosses them up by not condemning the Galileans and pointing the finger back at the Jews who had reported the story. He said, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way?” Jesus answers his own question and throws the ball back into the court of the Jews by saying, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.” Not only were the Galileans not condemned as worse sinners, but the Jews were condemned for their sin as well.

Lest the crowd think that perhaps Pilate was at fault here and the Galileans died as innocent martyrs, Jesus takes another example to prove his point. This would be a so-called natural disaster, one that would be referred to as “an act of God” if you’re trying to turn it into your insurance company. A tower at Siloam became old and weak and eventually fell over, killing 18 people. Since this occurrence was under the direct control of God and not under the control of a human like Pontius Pilate in the first example, could these deaths be seen as evidence that these people were greater sinners than everyone else who lived in Jerusalem? Was God punishing them with death for their worse sin? Again, Jesus answers in the negative, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

We might do something similar. We assume that, if things are going well in our lives and we have many good things, obviously God is blessing us for being faithful. On the other hand, if things are going badly – we lose our job, we become ill with cancer, a family member or loved one dies, and so on – we may think that God no longer loves us and is punishing us for some awful sin. We may cry out, “Why me, Lord?” What have I done to deserve this.

Jesus’ response to us, if we smugly assume that we must be better than other sinners because our lives are going along better or that other people are worse sinners because of the presence of suffering in their lives, would be, “No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

Jesus is telling us two very important things in this. First, there are no other sinners worse than you in God’s eyes. God is very clear about that in His Holy Word. All have sinned the same. All stand under the judgment of God the same.

Now, the effect of some sins is greater others in our lives. For example, murdering someone is worse than simply punching them. Taking money out of your mother’s purse is not as bad as robbing a bank. However, in the long run, our human differentiations regarding sins (“worse sin vs better sin”) matter little. It’s like staging a contest to see who can leap across the Atlantic Ocean from New York City to Europe. While some may get a few inches or

even a couple of feet closer to Europe from New York City in their leap, the differences are so small as to be insignificant.

Second, Jesus is telling us not to worry about other people's sins. We have become very good at confessing other people's sins. We go into much detail when we talk about somebody else's sin. Like with the people in our text for today, we judge people on their sin and condemn them for it. Jesus calls upon us, as he did to the people in our text, to repent of our sins and not concern ourselves with other people's sins.

Why? All sin, from that which we consider the tiniest and least important sin all the way up to what we consider the biggest and most serious sin, causes God to be angry with us and earns His punishment, both in this life and the life to come. All suffering, pain, and trouble are, in essence, punishments from God for sin. Pain in childbirth and difficulty in farming are two specific examples God gives to Adam and Eve after they had sinned. But every suffering up to and including death and hell are the results of our sins, the consequences of our sins, and the punishment for our sins.

God does not grade on the curve. You and I do not escape punishment because somebody (we think) is a worse sinner and gets punished more. Jesus says that all of us who failed to repent will be destroyed. Our problem is that we believe that our default position with God is one of blessing and goodness. We think that when good things come into our lives, we are just getting what's coming to us, what we deserve.

However, what we really have coming to us, because of our sin, is the punishment for our sin which we have earned and deserved. We think that this is not fair. The people of Israel thought this was unfair as we read in our Old Testament reading for today. They believed that blessing should be theirs simply because they were the people of God. We may think the same is true because we are Christians.

However, God is not fair and praise be to Him that He is not. God does not act according to fairness (or we would be doomed). God shows mercy and acts according to grace, His undeserved and unmerited love for us. Instead of punishing us as we deserved, God put our sin upon His Son and punished Him in our place which He most certainly did not deserve.

Instead of trying to justify ourselves by being good or, at least attempting to be better than other sinners, God justifies us. He declares us to be not guilty for the sake of Christ through the forgiveness of our sin. Instead of trying to elbow past those sinners which we consider worse than us and try to get to the front of the salvation line on the basis of our own merit, God shows mercy and, by His grace, admits us into His family. Instead of striving to avoid death and somehow live just a little bit longer, God raises us from the death of sin to new life through our attachment to Jesus in Holy Baptism and raises us from physical death to eternal life through Jesus' resurrection from the dead so that we might live forever.

Is this fair? No, but we don't want fair. As the Lord said through Ezekiel, "Your people say, 'The way of the Lord is not just,' when it is their own way that is not just. When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it. And when the wicked turns from his wickedness and does what is just and right, he shall live by them." It is not just, as Israel did and we often do, to expect or even demand that a holy and just God ignore sin or allow it. Instead, God calls us to turn from our sin. That is called repentance.

Repentance is more than something we think about during Lent. It is more than simply being sorry for sin. It is more than simply participating in a church rite at the beginning of Divine Service. It is more than something you do when you feel you need it. In the very First Thesis of the 95 which he wrote, Martin Luther explained what the call to repentance means.

He wrote, "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, ``Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

A life of repentance is to daily acknowledge and confess your sin before God without worrying about or comparing with anyone else's sin. Repentance means that you feel sorrow and regret over your sin and desire, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to turn away from sin. Repentance is to trust in God's mercy for the forgiveness of sin without trying to earn it or think that you don't need it.

Live in the full and complete forgiveness for all of your sin because of Jesus Christ's death on the cross in your place. Live in the hope, joy, and anticipation of eternal and perfect life on the basis of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Do not be angry because you feel that some sinners are worse than you. Do not worry because you feel that some sinners are better than you. In Adam, we are all sinful, guilty, and deserving of punishment in this life and in the next. In Christ, we are holy, not guilty, and recipients of God's blessing in this life and in the next.

Still, take the words about repentance seriously. There will be a time when God's mercy will end. As Jesus' short parable at the end of our Gospel indicates, like an unfruitful fig tree is eventually cut down and thrown into the fire, unrepentant Christians will eventually cut down and thrown into the fire of hell. Ezekiel warned the people of that. Paul used the example of the people of Israel to warn the people at Corinth. God's Word warns us of that today. Repent of sin today and live forever in heaven.

Salvation is not a competitive event. We never have to worry about who is worse than us who we are better than. We are all sinners. Simply confess that sin to the Lord, receive forgiveness, turn from that sin, and live. Do not try and figure out why certain things happen to certain people. Not only is that part of God's unrevealed will to us, it is not necessary that we know it. Rejoice and be glad in God's mercy, His forgiveness, and His assurance of everlasting life. Then you will "get what's coming to you" by grace, through faith, as a free gift from God. And that's all that really matters. Amen.