

## SOMETHING TO THINK ABOUT

From Chapter Twelve, verse one of the Gospel of Luke through Chapter Thirteen, verse nine we see Jesus engaged in a long discourse. Jesus and his disciples are in a location where a large crowd is gathering around. The bible says the crowd is so large that people are stepping on one another. The discourse can be difficult to follow because Jesus talks first to his disciples, then the crowd, then his disciples again, and so forth. He is talking generally about being ready for the coming kingdom.

Beginning at about verse 54 he criticizes the crowd for being able to predict the weather but not being able to predict the signs of the time. Then the writer seems to drop in an incident that doesn't quite fit. He says that there were some present that reported to Him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.

Now, in order to understand what they're talking about here, you need to understand the function of the Temple and the function of the sacrificial system. In Christian theology, we preach that God is everywhere and that anyone can approach God in prayer. We also teach that we receive atonement with God for the sins we've committed through the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

The early Jews had a very different view on those beliefs. God wasn't so much everywhere, rather God existed in very specific places: God could be found at a holy mountain, the Tabernacle, or the Temple. Not just anyone could approach God. God could only be approached by a High Priest or a prophet of the stature of Moses or Elijah. Finally, a person atoned for their sins through the sacrifices.

That fact that Jesus refers to the mingling of the blood, suggests that he is referring to the burnt offering specifically. Burnt offerings were rendered in the following manner. The animal to be offered was presented to the priest for examination. The priest would look for any blemish or any sign of deformity. If the animal was accepted, it would then be brought to the altar. It would be slaughtered, and the blood would be gathered carefully, ideally so that not a single drop touched the ground. The blood would then be sprinkled around the sides of the altar.

The altar itself was essentially a huge brazier, kept going night and day. The remains of the animal would be flayed and then cut and burned on the altar. The remains would be burned all night until nothing was left. There were literally hundreds of Sacrifices every day to service the multitudes who sought atonement for their sins.

When the Scripture says that Pilate mingled the blood of some Galileans with their sacrifices, it means that they were killed while attempting to make their sacrifices at the altar. The sacrifice was fouled, which means it didn't take. It was also a sacrilege to do this. Per the

theology of the day, the prevailing opinion was that these Galileans must have been particularly heinous sinners.

Now, this wasn't exactly earth-shattering news to the crowd. Political correctness- as we understand it today- didn't exist in the ancient world. So, calling Galileans sinful was not a particularly bad thing for the biblical writers to do. Judeans, as a rule, believed Galileans were stereotypically sinful. Remember, also, that Jesus was a Galilean himself. So, what is the teller of this tale after?

Perhaps, they were just trying to deflect Jesus from the criticism they were receiving. One sure-fire way to deflect criticism is to change the subject and scapegoat someone else. Alternatively, they could have been trying to ridicule Jesus. Perhaps, they were just throwing him what we would call a curve ball.

But Jesus answers, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all other Galileans because they suffered this fate? I tell you, no, but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

Then he gives them another example. He mentions the Tower of Siloam. The tower of Siloam was a tower in the city wall of Jerusalem that fell and crushed people who were walking through it. Eighteen people were killed when it fell. Jesus asks the same question. "Do you think that they were worse sinners than all those in Jerusalem? I tell you, no, but, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish."

What do these two stories have to do with us? I once heard one of my professors in seminary say that what we really want is grace for ourselves and works for others. We assume when bad things happen to others, they brought it on themselves. It's the result of some sin that they have committed. When we suffer, on the other hand, it's not our fault. It's someone else's fault, and we should receive grace for it. Worse even than that, sometimes we do blame ourselves. We place ourselves lower than others, but here's the thing- both of those points of view are wrong. We are all equally guilty and equally forgiven before the throne of Jesus Christ.

Jesus then launches into the parable of the fig tree. Now remember, parables don't make any sense on the surface. What they are designed to do is make you think. A man planted a fig tree in his vineyard. For three years he came looking for fruit and didn't find any. Here's the thing. Here's what doesn't make sense about that. Fig trees don't produce fruit for the first three years after you plant them. So, there's no reason for anybody to come looking for fruit. Any average person could have told him, "There's not going to be any fruit on that tree. You don't need to go look." Because, for the first three years, there's no fruit on those trees. Then for the next three years the fig tree will produce fruit but it isn't edible. You can't eat it, or at least you wouldn't enjoy the experience of eating it. It just isn't palatable for that next three years. You only expect to harvest fruit from a fig tree between years six and nine. Then the tree dies. So, it doesn't make any sense to cut the tree down if you don't see fruit for three years. It

shouldn't be producing any fruit during that time.

But think about it for a moment. If we take the fig tree as a metaphor for the nation of Israel, we understand that Jesus is sending a message. When he says, "You are not bearing fruit", he is saying, "You're not doing what I asked you to do". When he says, "cut it down". He is saying, "I will choose someone else to do it if you don't."

Several years ago, Barbara came home and was upset with me because I had not done some chore that she had asked me to do. I confess to you right now I don't remember what the chore was, but I remember that I didn't do it. I kind of bristled when she argued with me because of that. Partly because I had done all of the laundry that day. Her response was, "I appreciate you doing the laundry, but that isn't what I asked you to do. I asked you to do this other chore." That was true. She had not asked me to do the laundry.

This sort of thing happens all the time in our relationship with Jesus Christ. How many of the things that we do in the name of Jesus Christ, are actually things that he asked us to do? How many of the things that he asks us to do, do we actually do?

It's an issue that has haunted me as long as I have been a Christian. I see so many people in so many churches doing so many things that have no biblical basis to them, while ignoring so many things that the scripture says we are supposed to do.

At the same time, I have to be careful about throwing stones because I am bad about that myself. How many of the things that I do throughout the day are actually things that I was asked by Jesus to do, and I'm supposed to be the preacher. I'm supposed to set the example. How many times have I ignored things the scripture said I was supposed to be doing?

The funny thing is the things that we were doing in the name of Christ that we weren't asked to do, so many people who think that we can't get along without them. We just can't get by without them. It's absolutely amazing.

Years ago, we had a discussion in the Presbytery about whether or not we could be a Presbytery without a summer camp. Now, I'm not opposed to summer camp. Not at all, but you know the church got along for a long time without a summer camp. I've looked through this book. I don't remember there being anything in here about a summer camp. I'm not opposed to summer camp; I think summer camp is a great thing, but it's not something that we were asked to do.

I think it's important that we take note of this passage, because we need to understand that we aren't entitled to anything. Except the salvation that we were already promised and have already received. The church was founded to serve Jesus Christ. If we place our own needs first, then God might decide to hand the ministry off to some other group that will actually do the things that he has asked us to do. It occurs to me that might be a factor behind the demise of the church, one that we often don't want to touch. In any case, it's something to think about.

