

“Very difficult words.” Luke 13:1-9

“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 eighteen 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 vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. 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.’”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Today we will focus on the first few verses of what Luke has recorded. These are very difficult words of Jesus. These are very difficult topics to engage in. This is something that is very difficult to hear and accept. Our whole being, or we should say the Old Adam in us puts up quite a resistance. Let's see how we go!

What was going on with Jesus and those people? Luke writes: **“There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices.”** That was a very unfortunate incident.

The Roman governor Pontius Pilate had ordered a politically motivated massacre of Galileans, while they were offering their sacrifices at the Temple. That was shocking news. It was like someone came and told us that in the neighbouring city the local secular governor had sent his troops to massacre a group of Christians while they were celebrating the Lord's Supper and their blood was mingled with the elements of the Lord's Supper. How would we react? Doesn't that cry out for vengeance?!

Or think about a situation where you personally may have suffered a painful injustice. Where you have been treated so unfairly, so hurtfully, where you may have been wrongfully attacked, humiliated, abused. Or think about news which every day brings us horror stories of human evil. How do you feel? What is your reaction?

What do you think about those who did it? There is not much good that we want to say about them, right? They are evil, evil perpetrators. We feel that we are justified to be furious and cry out for vengeance. For we are not like them! We would never act like

them, we certainly are better, and we want others to support us in our righteous anger. Everyone should sympathise with us and condemn those evildoers. Sounds right?

But what did Jesus do? What the heck! These are not the words one expects in a situation like that. **“I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”** There is no “O, sorry to hear this, guys! O, man that’s just wicked!” None of that! And then Jesus gives this rather shocking, almost offensive example.

“Or those eighteen 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?” We may have some historical information about this event. It is likely that Pontious Pilate had taken money from the Temple, by force, and used it for his building project.

No honourable Jewish person would agree to work for such a project which was funded by robbing God’s holy house. And that the tower of Siloam had collapsed and killed eighteen of those workers can be easily understood as God’s righteous wrath and judgement on those shameless evildoers. They deserved it, didn’t they?!

But what did Jesus say? **“No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”** How does that sound? How do you like it? How could those people hear it? Was Jesus completely heartless, incapable of empathy?! What is wrong with Him?!

These are difficult words. Why does He say them? Jesus speaks about the disturbing reality of our sinfulness, about our need for repentance and the need for God’s transforming forgiveness. He also teaches us about something very profound and even more disturbing. About true and false Church. Our Book of Concord speaks about it so often. The true Church and the false church. What about them?

The true Church rejoices when God speaks to us and reveals us *our sins*. When the Word of God shows us what we have done wrong, and how we have failed to do the good we were supposed to do. For then we can repent, with God’s help, we can turn away from our sins and our idols, we can be forgiven, we can battle our sins, we can try to overcome them, to be healed and restored. What a blessing! What a joy!

The false church is happy when we talk about the *sins of others*, what they have done wrong or failed to do. Then she can express her righteous anger and feel good about how moral she is. The false church hates when *our sins* are revealed. It is like touching an exposed nerve, then she jumps up to protect herself, and angrily turns against those who have dared to touch that nerve. It is very sad.

The false church will look good from the outside, she will be passionate about many righteous causes, and quite self-righteous because of her obvious goodness, and furious if she is called to repentance. Remember, that’s what Pharisees were like.

They were the best, the most moral people of that day. The pillars of society. Leading exemplary lives, standing for all the worthy causes, quick to condemn all who were not as good and moral as there were. They were so good, nothing to repent of... So good that they had to murder the One who called them to repent.

The true Church, sure, also will be passionate about righteous causes, but at the same time humble and grateful when she is called to repentance. The true Church doesn't care to be self-righteous; she joyfully recognizes that she lives by grace alone. That she too has failed, and not less than everyone else, both by sinning and by failing to do what she was supposed to do.

Do you know, do you realise how far reaching the consequences of our sins are? We have no idea! What damaging impact do our sinful actions have on the lives of others, and on those they interact with? What is the extent of the negative impact of those good works we should have done, but have failed to do? How much do our sins corrupt and destroy society? Do we know? We have no idea...

But recognizing the depths of our sinfulness, and rejoicing in the fact that we live by God's grace alone, fills the true Church with gratitude, with humility and appreciation of God's undeserved mercy. The true Church is humble and grateful.

"Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." This is what Jesus says. It may sound judgemental and arrogant. Sure, but only if we do not know Him. But we do know Him. True God and true man. We know what He has said and what He has done.

And that is truly shocking. Jesus speaks to us: "I know that you won't repent, that you are incapable of true repentance, therefore I will take your place and I will perish because of what you have done." That is what He did.

We all have failed. We all have sinned. We all continue to sin. We don't want to repent. We want to be self-righteous. We want to be good on our own. We deserve to perish. We deserve to receive what we justly deserve.

But then, this Jesus comes in: "No, I will perish in your place and in the place of every evildoer. I will suffer God's righteous wrath for your sins and for the sins of every perpetrator. I will endure God's rejection because of your selfishness and for the selfishness of every abuser. I will receive the wages for your sins, that is, death.

I will do all of this for you and for them as well! And when I rise again, and rise again I certainly will, I will come to you, and I will say to you: "I forgive you. Everything. Go and sin no more!" That is His message to us. To you. To everyone.

These are difficult words. It is difficult to recognize how sinful we are. It is difficult to admit that we all need to repent. All the time. Every day. It is so difficult to ask for forgiveness when we have sinned. It is so difficult. We struggle.

But that is nothing, literally nothing, compared to what Jesus endured for us. Just remember all the false accusations and unjust attacks that He experienced, remember His betrayal, beating, mocking, His sufferings and His death on the cross. For you!

Now He opens His heart and His arms widely to you and invites you: "I have already suffered for your sins and for the sins of every human being. I have already perished in your place and in their place. I have already forgiven you and them. You are free to admit that you have sinned, you are free to turn to me.

You are free to ask for forgiveness... for I already have forgiven you. Yes! You don't need to toil to feel self-righteous. Because you are good in my eyes. You are very good for me!" How comforting! How freeing! But then Jesus does one better.

"I want to bless you. I want to assure you of my forgiveness. Yes, you! I will give you this gift – we call it a private confession – I want you to experience the joy of my grace. Receive it! Use it! Come to me, kneel with me, be honest with me, for I already know everything, and let me bless you! Rejoice and be blessed!"

It is sad that we do not use this gift more often. Somehow, we have lost it. Forgotten. It is us who miss out on the experience of God's grace that we all need so much. May the Spirit of the Lord stir us up to use His gifts so that we all may benefit from it!

Concluding, one lesson that we should take with us. When we experience challenging seasons in our lives, when we are treated unfairly, suffer injustice, when our regular and orderly lives are shattered and turned upside down, when we want to cry out for God's vengeance upon our enemies, remember Jesus' words:

"I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." It is not easy, but let us first, acknowledge God's verdict about our sinfulness. Let us first, repent. Let us rejoice that we all [!] live by God's grace alone and not by our righteousness.

As John the apostle wrote: **"If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."** (1 John 1:8-10)

Don't be self-righteous. Be humble. Repent. Don't make our Lord Jesus a liar. Rejoice in His grace and allow Him to create a new heart in you. Let Him make you gracious. For we all need it. So that we don't perish but live forever together with the same Jesus Christ, our Savior. Amen.