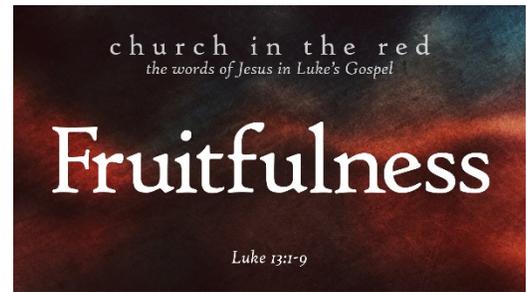


Fruitfulness

We are beginning chapter 13 in our series from the Gospel of Luke, focused on the words of Jesus (with letters printed in red in many Bibles).



Let's set the scene. Jesus and His followers are on a journey... a journey from the Galilean region, along the banks of the Sea of Galilee, to Jerusalem. It could have been walked in days, but Jesus (preaching, teaching, serving, healing, and such along the way) turned this into a journey of months.

As He has been teaching along the way, the emphasis has been on the urgency of the times... that these were days to believe, for all to find their place in the Kingdom of God, to not wait or put it off until tomorrow because who knows about tomorrow. Today is the day to believe. That same theme carries through today's text... and that same theme is true for us today. Today is a day to believe. So, let's *take in* what Jesus says to us today through this text.

Here is how it is presented by the Lumo Project:



Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

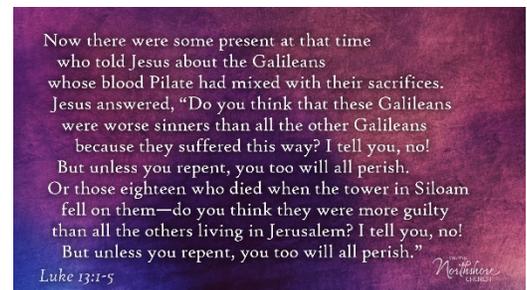
² Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?"

³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. ⁴ Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish."

⁶ Then he told this parable: "A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. ⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?'"

⁸ " 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' " ¹

The passage begins with this disturbing report, shrouded in some mystery since we don't have a lot of details. What was the story with these Galileans, and what about this business of Pilate mixing their blood with the blood of their sacrifices? Sounds barbaric, doesn't it?



¹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 13:1–9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Not only are there few details here, but there is also no specific account anywhere in the Bible, or in any other historical documents (for that matter). It could be that there are no specifics to be found about this event because it was *just another Tuesday* in this Roman-occupied territory. It wasn't an event that was all that unusual.

While we don't know much about the specifics of this occasion, we do know something about what was going on those days in Judea. The likely scenario was that these Galileans were insurrectionists (insurrectionists, from the point of view of the Romans; I suppose others might have thought of them as patriots... these kinds of things are often defined in the eye of the beholder). There were zealots in Galilee, and ongoing unrest throughout the region, chaffing against the Roman occupiers.

We do know Pilate, due to his role in the unjust execution of Jesus. This is that same Pilate, the governor of Judea with the authority, power, resources, and mandate to keep Judea Roman. If Pilate perceived a threat from some band of Galileans, even a minor threat, even an embarrassment, he would have unleashed his military power to quell the rebellion with little hesitation. His job was to keep the screws tight on Judea, securing ongoing Roman rule.

But what about this business of mixing their blood with their sacrifices? Did he literally mingle the blood of these Galileans with the blood of their sacrificial animals? Was this a government attack on worship? It is hard to know for sure.

I wasn't likely an attack on worship, since we do know that Pilate, and the Romans, allowed the Jews to worship. We know, again from the account of the way Jesus was treated in Jerusalem, that there were agreements, even collusion between the Romans and the religious leaders of the Jews. This wasn't likely merely a matter of Galileans innocently going about their business of worship; it was more than that (likely much more than that).

It could be that this is merely a figure of speech, a way of painting the actions of the Galileans as a righteous religious cause, leading to martyrdom, and that Pilate's action wasn't merely anti-insurrection, it was anti-Jew, even anti-God. This could be spin... spinning a matter of law enforcement into something a lot bigger. Why say "Pilate stopped some criminals" when you could spin it into "Pilate mixed their blood with their sacrifices"? Words have power. I suppose that happens today.

But it could also have literally happened, that the Galileans, on their march to protest, disrupt, or even overthrow Roman rule, carried with them the symbols and tools of worship. With whatever arms they might have had, they also carried with them offerings (even live animals) for sacrifice. It could very well have been that when Pilate's soldiers cut down the Galileans in the streets, so too they slaughtered their sacrifices, literally mixing their blood.

People make their wars "*holy*" wars yet today. Not all wars are religious wars, but a lot of them are. Even the scene at our Nation's capital on January 6 was a religious war to some. Apart from the images of people being harmed, even killed, on that day... for me, some of the most heartbreaking images were of those storming the capital under Christian symbols, crosses, verses of Scripture, and other Christian images.

Some who were there that day (for the *riot* if you watch Fox News, or the *insurrection* if you watch CNN, or *Trump's Insurrection* if you watch MSNBC) were motivated by false prophets who had fomented a religious war. To them, misguided and wrong as they were, they were fighting for God. Of course they were not fighting for God; the false prophets were wrong. Believe me, if God wants anyone to be the President, God can make it happen without a riot or insurrection or whatever that was hoped to be.

Getting back to the text... we could wonder why did they tell Jesus about these Galileans. It could be that they were trying to determine which side Jesus would take. Would Jesus be on the side of the Romans, or on the side of the rebels (or patriots, depending on your perspective)? If Jesus was the Messiah many hoped He was, setting up a kingdom of His own, it seemed clear that He would have to overthrow the Roman government to install His own. Perhaps Jesus was the leader these Galileans needed. Would Jesus take their side, or stand on the side of the Romans. Was Jesus red or blue, right or left?

I'm guessing we have all learned to be careful when people try to draw us into political debate.

It could be that they were telling this to Jesus as a warning. A group of people from Galilee were heading to Jerusalem to turn the government upside down. Does that sound familiar? It could have been that they were warning Jesus that He, and His followers, could meet the same fate.

But Jesus perceived what was really going on; we can hear it in His response:

Jesus answered, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?²

He pressed the point farther when He said:

Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem?³

We know even fewer details about this tragedy in Siloam. We know that Siloam was a neighborhood in the Jerusalem metroplex. But we don’t know anything more about the fatal accident than what is described here. We don’t know, but those hearing Jesus that day knew.

The point Jesus made is that suffering, even suffering to death, is not predictable. Nor is it a reliable indicator of what is ultimately going on.

We might think that we have time. We don’t need to worry, because we are good... not doing something that **deserves** suffering and punishment, even capital punishment like that suffered by those Galileans. But Jesus explained that whatever sin (or even perceived crime) that brought them death was not because they were any worse than anyone else.

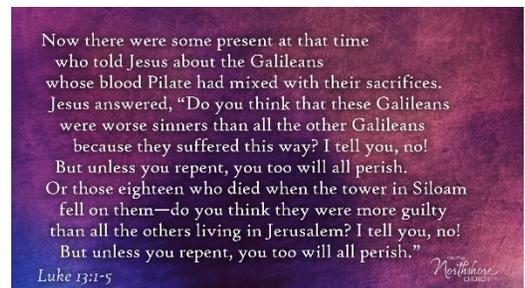
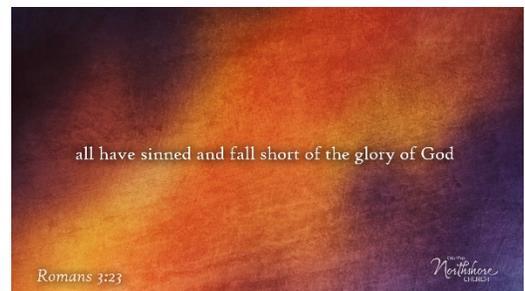
Perhaps you have heard the way it reads in Romans:

all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God⁴

“Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way?³ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.⁵

Their demise is a warning to all... not that their demise was deserved, but that demise, one way or the other, waits for all.

We might think we have time. We don’t need to worry, because we are safe. But what of those apparent innocents, those 18, who were apparently at the wrong place at the wrong time when that building collapsed.



² [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 13:2). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

³ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 13:4). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁴ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Ro 3:23). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁵ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 13:2–3). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

Whether it was by earthquake, or some accident, or just poor or careless construction, they didn't deserve their fate.

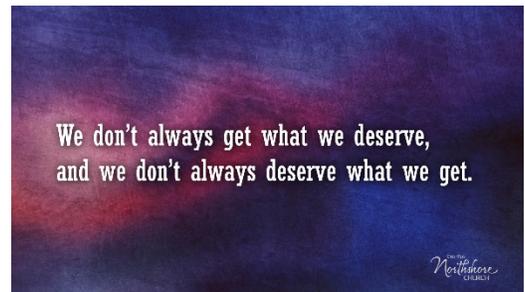
do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? ⁵ I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” ⁶

Like I mentioned before, the time for faith is always now. The time for believing and taking action is now.

Perhaps a way to summarize what Jesus illustrated here is this:

We don't always get what we deserve, and we don't always deserve what we get.

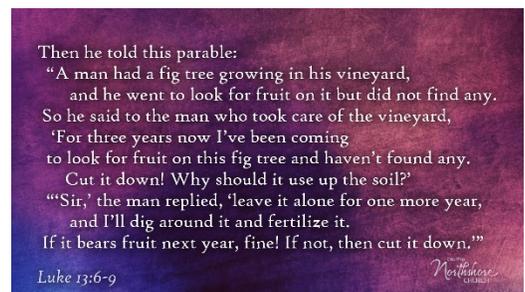
Sometimes we deserve better and sometimes we deserve worse. We often don't deserve the suffering that comes our way; neither do we deserve God's mercy and grace.



It is often a waste of time to try to determine who deserves what. In the grand scheme of things, we all deserve punishment for sin... and, thanks be to God, we all have opportunity to enjoy God's mercy and forgiveness. This is not a time to worry about who deserves what. Now is a time to turn to God, to repent of failings, sin and disobedience, and believe.

⁶ Then he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard⁷...

A parable... Jesus told stories like these to illustrate a point. Parables were not just stories for entertainment, like a joke... but parables were like a joke in that they have a *punchline*, or perhaps more accurately a *punch in the gut*. Jesus told parables to draw out a response. They were stories with a purpose... and the purpose was often a decision to pursue righteousness, to believe and worship and live lives that are up to God's calling, mercy, and grace.



⁶ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 13:4–5). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

⁷ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 13:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

So, this landowner went out to his fruit tree and was disappointed; he expected fruitfulness and found, instead, fruitlessness.

Parables, generally, have one big point; I think this one has two, or perhaps a big point and a subpoint. Here is the biggest point: be fruitful.



I still have it on a poster out in the lobby; Jesus said:

This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit⁸

Jesus calls us to be productive. It isn't just a matter of saying a prayer and then somehow being preserved for eternity; we are called to believe today, to serve today, to be fruitful today.



Let's think about fruit for a moment. What is the chief purpose of fruit? Fruit is for reproduction.

Let me ask you this... what is the fanciest "kind" of fruit? What kinds of mutant fruit do we like the best? Seedless!

We like to eat some seeds, but we throw away the seeds of most fruit.

I really like apple pie. Making apple pie takes some work, and it usually starts with removing the skin and the seeds. We would have an easier time preparing apple pie if we used seedless apples (apparently there is such a thing, it is just not common; the technical term is *parthenocarpic*). While seedless apples are uncommon, seedless grapes and watermelons are very common.

While we prize the mutant, parthenocarpic plant that produces seedless fruit... I wonder what God thinks of seedless Christians and seedless ministries. I wonder if we sometimes make our "fruit" so tasty and appealing, focusing on the sweet flesh of it all, that we produce seedless fruit.

⁸ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Jn 15:8). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

I'd have to say that I've observed, and even perpetrated, seedless Christianity. There are times when we are so wrapped up in the sweet, juicy indulgence of the flesh of the thing that we produce mutant, sterile, seedless fruit. Such fruit is certainly tasty, but it has no power to reproduce. If Christianity were allowed to go "all seedless", then, like any organism, it would become extinct within a generation.

We need to be sure that our fruit has seed in it; our fruit (at least some, or hopefully most, of it) needs to contain the power of reproduction.

The purpose of fruit is to reproduce... a whole tree. Fruit doesn't merely produce more fruit, but it reproduces a whole plant. We don't plant an apple seed in the dirt and then one day find an apple that has popped up out of the ground. Rather, the seed produces the whole plant. Roots, trunk, limbs, leaves... all of it.

As God's firstfruits, our good work is not limited to only that which produces merely fruit. The seed our Creator has placed in us results in creation in all manner of ways. There are many meaningful ways to be productive in God's economy.

Maybe your frustrated because your labor isn't producing the fruit that you hoped for... but think about how an apple seed doesn't merely produce another apple. The seed God has placed in you, among his firstfruits, may be producing other parts of the plant, other parts of the creation, other parts of the economy and the grand scheme that is all part of God's plan and purpose.

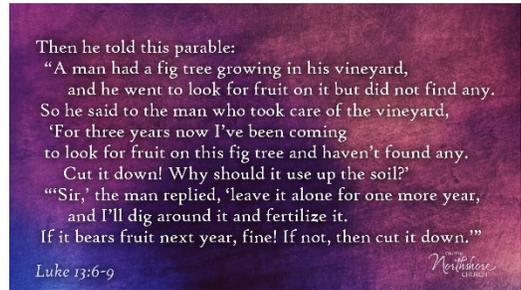
Finally, think of how unlikely seeds work in unlikely places. Different seeds endure in different ways for different times. Some are extraordinarily hearty and reproduce years after they were created. Even bruised and battered fruit, even old and dried up fruit has the ability to reproduce. Even seeds in unlikely places, sometimes in the harshest environments, still manage to be productive. Why, when trying to grow grass in my lawn, does it seem that the easiest place to grow grass is the tiny seams and cracks in my concrete driveway?

It could be that you have doubts about any seed that might be in you. Maybe you think you're too bruised, too spoiled, too old, too whatever. Let me encourage you to not underestimate the power of the seed that God has placed in His firstfruits.

God calls us to be productive, to be fruitful.

But alas, that farmer did not find fruitfulness.

⁷ So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, 'For three years now I've been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven't found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?' ⁹



What was supposed to be a revenue center was merely a cost center. The tree should have been producing fruit, but it was found to be worse than worthless; it was actually costing the landowner as that fruitless tree sapped the soil of its nutrients.

Again, the main point is to be fruitful, productive, even reproductive. But there is a second point, perhaps a subpoint, found here at the end.

⁸ " 'Sir,' the man replied, 'leave it alone for one more year, and I'll dig around it and fertilize it. ⁹ If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.' " ¹⁰

What is the other point of this parable, beyond fruitfulness? There are second chances. Our God is the God of second chances.

Notice that the man did not merely snap his fingers and, magically, fruit appeared. There were sacrifices of time, resources, and effort.

It was going to take another day or two... wait, no, that is not what it says... it would take another **year**. It would take time and patience.

And there would be digging and fertilizing. I suppose I appreciate the way the NIV sanitized the language here; perhaps you're reading from a version that translates these words a bit more literally. The word here for fertilizer is not something like a bag of *Scott's Turfbuilder* purchased at Home Depot; the word is *dung* or *manure*.

Sometimes there are aspects of rebuilding our way to fruitfulness that stink, that are hard, that are unpleasant. Sometimes there is pruning, getting rid of the unproductive stuff to make way for the productive stuff.

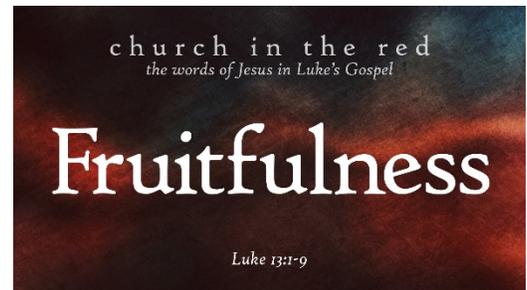
⁹ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 13:7). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

¹⁰ [The New International Version](#). (2011). (Lk 13:8-9). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

In this case, as there often is, there was even *risk*. This second chance meant putting effort into this tree that could have been spent on something more productive. Putting the fertilizer on that tree meant there was less for other trees. But rebuilding is worth it; taking a risk, sharing, even sacrificing, is often worth it.

Let's determine to be fruitful today, to hear the call of Jesus, believe, and bear fruit.

Today could be a start, a first start. We start by receiving God's best. The best thing God can give us is Himself. We turn to Him in faith; we believe. That is the place we start, and the place we restart. It can be a simple, three-word prayer: Jesus, I believe.



Do you need a second chance today? Here the word of the Lord, and know that there is another chance for you today, for me today, for us today.

Let's commit ourselves to the work of second chances, the work of digging, pruning, fertilizing and such. Look to God today for how He is accomplishing that in us (which, by the way, often looks and feels like suffering... but God does not waste pain).

Let's join Him in this work of clearing out the unproductive stuff in our lives so that the productive stuff can grow.

Father, we want to be fruitful. We start, and restart, by receiving You, by believing You. Forgive our fruitlessness, and forgive our appetites for the fleshy, juicy stuff of life, neglecting the most productive stuff... that which leads to reproducing Your mercy, grace, and work in this world. We acknowledge the unproductive stuff in our life and ask for your forgiveness... and we ask for gifts of courage, faith, and conviction to respond to Your call and Your work. Thank You for Jesus, and His work on our behalf. Jesus, we believe. And we pray in that powerful name of Jesus. Amen.