The Clock is Ticking

On April 3, 1974, my brother and I spent the evening in our bathtub and our mom was crammed between the sink and the toilet. One of the largest outbreaks of tornadoes to hit the US was passing through. One tornado missed us by a couple of miles. It made a mess across the army base where we lived and in neighboring Huntsville, AL. In 1989, an even larger tornado hit Huntsville while one of my coworkers nearly drove his truck right into it. (He was close enough that all of the junk that was his dashboard got sucked out the window.) Several weeks ago, two other tornado outbreaks wrecked parts of the US and killed dozens of people. In our part of the world, we just had Typhoon Rai wallop the Philippines like it was a giant tornado. A few days ago, a rapidly moving fire destroyed over a thousand homes in Colorado. Many of us on Guam remember what that was like back in 2002 with two significant typhoons that year. We even had a 7.1R earthquake that year. Of course, an even bigger disaster has been the relentless waves of COVID all over the world. We have been seeing in the news reports of disasters around the globe. It can be depressing and scary to watch accounts of wars or rumors of wars, typhoons, tornadoes, fires, and disease.

What are we to think about all of this? It can be tempting to think that God is not in control. In *Disciples Indeed,* Oswald Chambers states that “The greatest challenge to a Christian is to believe Matt. 28:18 – “All power is given unto Me in heaven and in earth.” How many of us get into a panic when we are faced by physical desolation, by death, or war, injustice, poverty, disease? All these in all their force will never turn to panic the one who believes in absolute sovereignty of his Lord.” What about those who don’t believe in Jesus or the one true sovereign God? They have a good reason to panic. Actually, more reasons than they know. Is time running out for them? Maybe, some parables from Jesus recorded in the Book of Luke will give us some food for thought about what the Lord is doing.

Luke 12:54-13:9

**54** He also said to the crowds, When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, A shower is coming. And so it happens. **55** And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, There will be scorching heat, and it happens. **56** You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

**57** And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? **58** As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. **59** I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.

**13** There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. **2** And he answered them, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? **3** No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. **4** 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? **5** No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.

**6** 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. **7** 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? **8** And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. **9** Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.

This section of parables relates to various disasters. I think Luke lined these all up to stress the point that we never know when our time is up. Eccl. 9:12 makes the point that people do not know when their time on this planet will come to an end. The clock is ticking for us all.

In verses 54 and 55 of Luke 12, Jesus shares what is considered common sense in discerning the weather forecast based on the wind patterns. (OK, maybe this is not so much common sense. I am a bit biased because from the time I was in 2nd grade until the 10th grade, I studied meteorology because I thought I was going to be a weather forecaster. I still study it now as a hobby.) Apparently, Jesus is implying in verse 56 that the Jewish religious leaders should be able to use the same sort of discernment to see God moving in their midst. Just like I studied meteorology, these leaders studied God via the law and the writings of the prophets. However, they were clueless or too hung up with maintaining their positions and status in the community. Jesus often uses the term “hypocrites” when describing Jewish religious leaders, most of whom are Pharisees. In His day, this term was only used to describe actors or people pretending to be someone else. It did not have the automatic derogatory meaning that it has now. Using that term here makes it seem that the teachers and scribes were just holding positions and going through the motions instead of doing their real jobs of guiding the people in living for God. It would seem that Jesus was implying that these leaders should get out of the way and let those who actually care about living for God lead the people.

How much effort do we put in to studying theology or at least learning as much as we can about God? Now, people study all kinds of sciences with great fervor. In the past, the study of theology was held in very high esteem. Back then, it seems the people had a better idea of how important living for God now and in eternity is. Even in ancient times, theological study could go off the rails. This appears to be what happened with the Pharisees. They had studied the law so intently, but lost sight of the God who gave it to them. While this happened to the Pharisees and many others all the way up to present times, this does not have to be the case for us. It is important that we not lose sight of the kingdom of God, so that we can see what the Lord is doing.

Verses 57-59 are called the parable of the lawsuit. This same parable is in Matt 5 where Jesus is talking about anger and the importance of reconciliation in this portion of the Sermon on the Mount. Here in Luke 12, the author uses that same parable for a different purpose. Some of you may not have realized that parables can have multiple meanings or purposes. The story of the prodigal son/older brother is a prime example. While some consider the synoptic gospels repetitive, one can see that this is not the case. They are all worth reading in their entirety. In this context, it would seem that Luke (inspired by the HS) is considering us standing before the Judge of the world. Are we willing to take our chances and plead our cases in which we are guaranteed to lose? Verse 57 let’s us know that we should be able to figure out for ourselves that we do not stand a chance. The law is our accuser in verse 58. We cannot meet its requirements. Our only way to settle is to trust Jesus to save us from the wages of sin. Otherwise, by the time we get to verse 59, we are stuck in hell with no way to pay our way out. The wages of sin is death. To be in jail eternally is not the way you want to end up. It is far better to rest on God’s mercy instead of arrogantly thinking you can handle your sin problem on your own. You know what they say about those who represent themselves in a court of law. He who represents himself has a fool for a lawyer.

Verse 1 of chapter 13 is a very compact story. These poor Galilean pilgrims were killed in the middle of their worship of God at the temple. One would think that killing people in a religious sanctuary is a big no-no. That kind of blows up the whole idea of a sanctuary. The victims could not have stood guard to avoid this attack while focusing on worshiping God. Pilate did not win friends by doing this. So Jesus was asked if this was evidence that these people were particularly terrible sinners. Job’s “friends” had this sort of mindset when they asked him what he had done to bring on such destruction. John 9:2 recorded that even Jesus’ disciples were thinking this way when they asked about whose sin caused a man to be blind. Apparently, the idea of karma, or at least bad karma has been engrained into people throughout the ages. In the John account, Jesus goes on to say that this blindness happened so that God’s work could be revealed in him. He could have answered the same way in Luke 13:3, but that was not His emphasis. Instead of being concerned with the wickedness of Pilate’s actions, Jesus was concerned that people would not realize the urgency of repentance. Yes, what Pilate did was terrible, and it should be upsetting. However, we should be even more upset if our sin debt has not been dealt with by the time that we face the ultimate Judge. Jesus’ listeners would be no better off than the executed Galileans if they did not repent. Given the suddenness of Pilate’s attack, it can be said that we really do not know how much time we have left to get our affairs in order with God.

When Jesus was asked about the murdered Galileans, it could have been that those who asked were from the area around Jerusalem. Since they were closer to the temple, they probably felt superior in their relationship with God. They may have been depending on the leadership of higher-ranking priests. This might be why Jesus used verses 4 and 5 to reinforce his teaching on the urgency of repentance. Here, he brings up the example of 18 people who were killed when the tower in Siloam collapsed. At least one commentator theorized that this could have been a construction accident involving Jerusalem’s water supply. This event is not recorded elsewhere, so there is a lot of conjecture tied to that disaster. Jesus’ bringing up a disaster in Jerusalem deflates the idea that bad things happen to others and could not happen to ourselves. This is a problem common to just about all of us today. These days, you are considered paranoid if you don’t have this tendency. Even people close to the center of power need to repent before one of those tragedies that they have avoided come to land on their own doorstep.

Some have said that Luke’s recording of the parable of the fig tree in verses 6-9 is a softened down version of the cursed fig story in Matthew and Mark. However, those accounts relate to God’s looming judgement. Luke’s account is more related to repentance. Also, the tree in Matthew and Mark was along the road. Luke’s tree was in a vineyard, likely out of range of passersby.

It is interesting that verse 6 states that the tree was planted in a vineyard. Usually, figs grew somewhat wild in uncultivated soil. This must have been a special tree to have been planted in good soil. The owner chose this tree over others like the Lord chose Israel over other nations. Having it there would be a sacrifice since its shade and water consumption would not be helpful to the grape vines or their highly valued crop. Verse 7 indicates that maybe the sacrifice was not paying off. It reminds me that to whom much is given, much is expected. Since the tree was not bearing fruit, the owner wanted it removed to save resources for plants that did produce.

Verses 8 and 9 show the gardener proposing to give the tree a second chance. Instead of immediate destruction, the tree would actually get more fertilizer and care. How many of you gardeners have faced similar situations? This sort of thing has happened to me several times as I have moved to places with poor soil. Sometimes, it is a struggle to get the right combination of nutrients to the roots to achieve the desired results. This seems a lot like unbelievers being exposed to multiple witnesses over the years. Some plant the seeds, others water the soil. I am not sure how to take the idea that I may be the one hauling fertilizer to those who have not yet trusted in Christ for their salvation. It’s more fun to be the one who sees the fruit of faith ripening. As verse 9 indicates, even the hopeful farmer has a limit. If no fruit shows up after all of that additional work, the tree is going to be firewood. Good is longsuffering, but there is a limited time for which He will wait for us to produce fruit. Repentance must occur before our time in court before the holy God or we will be lost forever.

I did see that a commentator mentioned that the parable of the fig tree was directed at the nation of Israel. I suppose that these parables do not all need to be taken at a 100% personal level. 40 years after Christ told this parable, the nation was destroyed by the Romans. The Lord gave Israel many chances to repent over thousands of years. (That’s a lot of water and fertilizer.) They still failed to follow Him. The good news for us is that even in Israel’s destruction, the gentiles benefitted from the diaspora of believers spreading the good news to the whole world.

So, what are we to do with this? The first parable shows us that God is working in this world. He wants us to see that He is not a far off, aloof watchmaker who doesn’t care about us. We should be able to see the results of His work. If we do, this would affect how we view time’s relentless march.

In the second parable, He reminds us that judgment is coming. We are going to lose our case before God, the Judge unless the sin debt is paid. It will go a whole lot better for you if Jesus is sitting at your table instead of at the prosecutor’s table.

The third parable reminds us that tragic things can happen to anyone at any time. It does not matter how good or bad we are. God has the power to determine when and where something would happen to us (Ps 139). Our lives on this planet could end while we sit here in church just the same as they could while attempting to cross Route 8 near the airport at night. (That’s the place to be if you have a death wish.) That knowledge could drive us to curl up into a fetal position in a mental health institution. A more positive outcome is that we could be freed from that kind of worry by knowing God’s power, love, and mercy will see us through whatever comes.

The fourth parable was actually my favorite. (You might have thought it was the first one due to the weather reference.) The optimistic gardener in me empathizes with the caretaker of the vineyard. This story shows that God does give us many opportunities to repent from our sins and live for Him and bear good fruit. This is not the kind of fruit you get from our work such as the muscles you build up by being a gym rat. This fruit comes from where our roots are. If our roots are in the dry or sterile soil of living for ourselves, we will eventually shrivel and be good for nothing. If our roots are in the soil of life in Christ, you can expect a far different outcome. For some, it takes longer than others to get roots in the right place. However, God is far more patient with us than I am with tomato plants that don’t work well on Guam.

God loves us so much that He is trying to get our attention. He does not want us to get caught by surprise when our time is up, and we have not come to trust in Jesus. I have heard of people thinking that they can put off accepting Christ as their Savior until they have lived a “full” life on their terms. None of us knows how long we can put off that decision.

This reminds me of the news report I saw that included a patient who was seriously suffering from COVID asking the doctor if he could get vaccinated. The doctor told him it was too late for that. This patient thought that they had a good handle on when it was the right time to get vaccinated. That didn’t turn out so well. He had no protection when he actually needed it. As bad as the consequences of waiting too long in this case were, they don’t compare to the magnitude of regret one would have if they waited to long to come to Christ.

The idea of a fruit tree in the loving care of the world’s best Gardener makes me think that there is nothing to be gained by waiting. We do not come out ahead by living life apart from God and then just squeaking into the Book of Life at the last minute. As the Apostle Paul said in 2 Cor. 6:2B, “Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation.” If you are not living for Christ, what are you waiting for? You do not know how much time you have to make that life-altering change that will affect you beyond the end of time.