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FLASHING SWORDS AND FALLING TOWERS
Luke 13:1-9

In 2007 a man named Humberto Hernandez was walking along a street in Oakland. Nearby a car ran out of control and rammed into a fire hydrant. The pressure of the water shot the fire hydrant in the direction of Humberto. It struck him in the face, killing him. He was killed by a flying fire hydrant! What a bizarre way to die. Was this man singled out for death for some unknown reason? Why do tragedies like that happen in this world?

The title I picked for this sermon sounds like something straight out of the *Lord of the Rings* movie, but it has nothing to do with that. In fact, there is no movie and no battle. The title refers to some tragedies that sparked the conversation that we'll study today. This passage makes an enormously important point that no one likes. It reveals a view of the world, of life and of ourselves that is radically different from how nearly every human being thinks. It is not a very palatable concept. It sounds negative and it goes down hard. I have a history of problems with canker sores, but the problem has been greatly alleviated by taking lysine. However, that means I take a 1000 milligram lysine pill, which is the size of an egg. It is tough to swallow, but it is worth it. I think of the message of the passage we're looking at today as sort of like that. If you swallow it you will discover that it can and should have a revolutionary impact on your outlook and your spirit. Let's look at another of the Jesus tales, this one from Luke 13:1-9.

JESUS TALKED ABOUT TRAGEDIES

This passage begins with a news flash. Someone breathlessly reports the news to Jesus that Roman soldiers had slaughtered some innocent people. Film at eleven. Apparently there were some people from Galilee, Jesus' home area, who came to Jerusalem to offer sacrifices at the Temple, but as they attempted to do so a number of them were killed by Roman soldiers who were under the command of Pontius Pilate, the Roman procurator of Judea. We don't know for sure what triggered this incident. We also don't know why those reporting it brought it to Jesus' attention at this time. They may have hoped to get Jesus to incite a demonstration or an uprising against the hated Romans. More likely this is a manifestation of the very human impulse to be the first to pass on the latest incendiary story. There was a theological component to the report, and it is the theology of the incident that Jesus zeroes in on.

As I said we don't know why the Romans committed this atrocity. We have no record of it in history. This is the only mention of it. However, it was the kind of thing that was not uncommon in that historical context. The Romans were an occupying army. Among the populace of Israel there was a continuing undercurrent of insurgency against the occupation. It was underground most of the time, but the Romans were always aware of it and were quick to deal with it. Occasionally it broke into the open as riots, demonstrations or even armed violence. The Romans responded to the insurgency the way occupiers often do, with an iron fist. Shoot first and ask questions later.

Not long after this incident, in 35 A. D., some Samaritans were trying to worship at their holy site, Mt. Gerizim. They were just going to climb that mountain as part of their worship but they were brutally murdered by some Roman soldiers. Again it is not clear why it happened. The leader of this particular group of Samaritans was something of a kook, so maybe the Romans thought he was fomenting rebellion. Vitellius, the Roman legate in Syria, was so horrified by this atrocity he reported Pilate to Caesar. Pilate was summoned to appear in Rome to explain the atrocity. That incident clearly indicates that the kind of thing reported in this episode happened all too often. A possible contributing factor in the incident reported in Luke 13 was that Galileans had a reputation for being prone to resistance and insurgency against the Romans.

Apparently the news report raised questions typical for such an incident. Why would God allow seemingly innocent Galileans who were only trying to worship him to be ruthlessly struck down? Did they do something that warranted such a cruel fate? That's understandable. Who has not asked that question? Innocent children are brutally, mercilessly gunned down at their school. Hurricane Katrina almost wipes out a city and costs over 1800 people their lives. Hundreds of thousands of people die when a tsunami overwhelms Indonesia. 3000 people die in a terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, and in all those situations we ask why? Why must such awful things happen? Why did those people have to die?

Jesus' response to this report goes directly to that question. But it does so in a uniquely divine way. Have you ever noticed that in the Bible God often displays a somewhat annoying approach to answering questions? Especially "why" questions. Consider the book of Job. Poor Job is described by God himself as blameless and upright. Then his life became a nightmare. One horror after another befalls him until his own wife suggests the appropriate response is to curse God and die. People tell him these things must have happened because he deserved it. Job vehemently defends himself against their accusations and in the process ends up

directing his anguish and his questions to God. He rails against God's unfairness to him, crying out for some explanation. Finally God shows up. He answers, but his answer is curious. He gives no explanation, no rationale. He simply says, "Are you God, Job?" He never answers Job's questions, instead he turns the tables on Job and points to his need to humble himself and trust God.

We saw a similar thing a couple of weeks ago in Luke 12:13-21 when a man came to Jesus demanding that he get involved in a dispute he was having with his own brother. Instead of discussing their dispute Jesus zeroed in on the man and his problem and said, "be on your guard against all kinds of greed." It wasn't what the man wanted to hear at all. Once again Jesus went right for the jugular.

Here you see some of that same kind of thing. Jesus' response to the report of the atrocity and the question of why God would permit such a thing to happen is, "unless you repent you too will all perish." What sort of answer is that to the question of what those people did to deserve what happened to them? No one wanted to hear that.

Jesus asks, "were these Galileans worse sinners than all the other Galileans?" In other words, did this awful thing happen to them because they deserved it? The answer is no, they were no worse than anyone else. They were just ordinary people, no better and no worse than the average Galilean. Jesus follows that up with a question about 18 people who were killed when a building fell on them. This happened in an area of Jerusalem called Siloam, which was in the southern part of the city. Apparently it was a freak accident, maybe due to faulty construction. A tower collapsed and 18 people were killed. This is a familiar story in history. On May 23, 2004, the brand new Terminal 2E at Charles De Gaulle International Airport in France collapsed and killed 4 people. In 2011 the stage at the Indiana State Fair collapsed and killed 7 people. Why did these things happen? Jesus asks the same question. Did it happen because those 18 people somehow deserved it? Surely not.

There is a view of the world that is practically a default setting for human beings. That view underlies this story. It is the karma plan. You do good, and good things happen to you. Do evil and evil things happen to you. You get what you deserve. This seems right and fair to us. It is how things ought to be. In fact it is a fundamental principle that we used as parents.

We taught our children that if you make good choices you get good results, and if you make bad choices you get bad consequences. We even see this in the Bible.

Galatians 6:7 says “a man reaps what he sows.” In the Old Testament it is all over the place. Deuteronomy 28 says if you obey God “you will be blessed in the city and blessed in the country (verse 3).” It gives a long list of blessings that happen if you make good choices and obey God. Then it says if you do not obey God, “all these curses will come upon you and overtake you” (verse 15) followed by a long list of terrible consequences.

The obvious implication of this idea is the one that Job’s friends arrived at. If some awful thing happens to me, if my life seems to be one disappointment, one loss after another, it must be because I’ve done something wrong. In the vernacular of our secular world it’s the universe paying me back. In a biblical framework it’s God meting out his justice to me for the wrong that I must have done.

This perspective is clearly on display in John 9:1-2. “As he (Jesus) went along he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’” If this terrible thing happened to him he must have done something to deserve it, right?

I was talking to a Christian friend quite some time ago. Multiple aspects of this person’s life had turned into train wrecks. It had been going on for a long time and there didn’t seem to be any hope that it was going to change. In despair he said, “I don’t know what I’ve done that has brought all of this down on me.” This default perspective of ours will always produce a “why me?” response at some point, probably at any number of points. Something bad happens and your response is, “what did I do to deserve this?” Or maybe, “I don’t deserve this!” You look at your life and you don’t see any horrible choices or actions. In fact, you’re a pretty good person, so why have such awful things happened to you? That, in fact, was eventually the place that Job came to. In Job 31:4-6 Job cries out, “Does he (God) not see my ways and count my every step? If I have walked in falsehood or my foot has hurried after deceit let God weigh me in honest scales and he will know that I am blameless.” Then in verse 35 he says, “Oh that I had someone to hear me! I sign now my defense. Let the Almighty answer me; let my accuser put his indictment in writing.” He was innocent and didn’t deserve what happened to him so he pled his case before God, seemingly to no avail. So we get books with the title *Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People?* that become best sellers. Why do these things happen?

Perhaps the biggest problem for all of us is the problem of suffering. Why do so many suffer and why are there so many tragedies? This life is absolutely full of suffering and death. There are so many instances of seemingly inexplicable

disasters. On July 9, 1993, Garry Hoy, a 38-year-old lawyer was showing clients an office on the 24th floor of the Dominion Centre in Toronto. He decided to assure them that the glass in the floor to ceiling window was unbreakable so was perfectly safe. He threw himself against the glass. Indeed, it didn't break, but the whole pane popped out of the frame and he went with it, falling to his death.

On August 25, 2010 a small Czech made L-410 turbojet belonging to tiny airline Filair was on final approach to Bandundu in the Congo in Africa with 18 passengers and 2 pilots on board. One of the passengers had secretly smuggled a crocodile onto the plane in a sports bag. The crocodile got out, causing the passengers to panic and rush to the front of the plane trying to escape the reptile. They threw the small plane completely out of balance causing it to crash. Only one passenger and the crocodile survived. What did these people do to deserve such bizarre endings to their lives?

This is where Jesus' words create a profound paradigm shift. Were the Galileans who died worse sinners than the Galileans who were not killed? Were the unfortunate victims of the Siloam accident awful people who deserved what they got? Did Garry Hoy, the people on the Filair flight and Humberto Hernandez get what they deserved? The answer in all those cases is no.

Jesus answered in verse 3 and again in verse 5, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish." In other words, you, all of you, deserve the same kind of fate that befell the unfortunate victims. He is claiming that *all of us* deserve to die! The slaughtered Galileans, the Siloam tower disaster victims, Humberto Hernandez, Garry Hoy and all those on that Filair flight deserved exactly what they got! They got what we all deserve.

At that point in history who would you say was closest to knowing God and doing his will? I submit to you it was the Jewish people. They were not perfect, but they were light years ahead of everyone else. They at least believed there was one God and made some effort, in many cases herculean effort, to worship him and live by his Law. At that point they were the best the human race had to offer. Yet Jesus said they all deserved to die just like the victims of the twin tragedies! What do you think that said for the rest of the human race, including us?

Well that's an awfully negative perspective of the human race. But we must go back to where our problems all started. Why do people die? The book of Genesis says life didn't start out with everybody dying. God gave the first two humans a command. Don't eat this particular fruit. The day you disobey, the day you sin, you

will die. They decided they knew better than God what was good for them, and they directly disobeyed God's command. They ate that fruit despite the threat of death. And the day they did it...they didn't die. Now in a sense they died. They died spiritually. Something terrible happened to their nature, their innocence was destroyed, their relationship fouled up and they were separated from God. But they continued to live physically. Eventually they did experience the full consequence of that disobedience. They did die. It was many years later. The time between the day they ate that fruit and the day they finally physically died was what we call a grace period. The day they died they got what they deserved.

Our mortgage is owned by our bank, Wells Fargo. We must make a payment on that mortgage every month and it is due on the first of the month. I never have that payment in to them on the first of the month. You're late with your mortgage payment every month? Dude, what's your credit score? 12? No, my credit score is just fine. That's because I'm never late with our payment. But you said it is due the first and you never get it in by then. Yes, but Wells Fargo says as long as they have my payment by the 16th of the month they'll call it good. They give me two extra weeks to pay them. They don't have to do that. They do it out of the goodness of their hearts. They extend grace to me for two weeks every month. Adam and Eve lived the rest of their lives on earth in a grace period that they did not deserve. In other words, they were allowed to live longer than they deserved due simply to the grace of God.

Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death. That's exactly what God told Adam and Eve in Eden. The day you sin you die. That might seem a little harsh to some people but remember what you are doing when you disobey God. You are introducing evil into the world. Someone will be hurt every time you sin. Should God ignore that? Should he just let a little evil and the damage it does go? How much evil do you want in the world? That's like asking how much ebola virus you would like in your system. I don't want any. Neither does God, so he must deal with evil, every bit of it. So the day we introduce it by sinning, we should die.

Every day since the day you did something God didn't want you to do you've been living in a grace period. I tried to think back to my earliest memory of doing something wrong. It was hard because I never did anything wrong as a kid. Just kidding. I was a good kid. But I remember the story of the time my mother needed to go shopping and I wanted no part of it. So I threw a tantrum. My mom held the bedroom door shut while I yelled and kicked it. Would you say that was a thoughtful, loving action on my part? No it was nothing but selfish obstinacy. It was a clear violation of respecting a parent. Then there was the time my parents

had to meet with the teacher at school because I was such a disruption in class. Was that being loving to my teacher? No, clearly it was not. In those cases, and countless others, I sinned. Every day since those days I've been living in a grace period, because what I earned on those occasions is death.

It really goes deeper than that. From the time I was a baby I've been obsessed with self, and that self-orientation taints everything, even the good moments in my life. So even before I can remember I have been disobeying God and earning death. So have you. The point is, what you deserve is to die! The fact is, that you are alive today is simply due to the grace of God. You and I deserve to die like the Galileans and the victims of the Siloam disaster. That's what Jesus was saying.

When something good happens we almost never say, "what did I do to deserve this?" The fact is, we don't deserve the good. When we wake up in the morning we should say, "What did I do to deserve to be alive today? Nothing. I don't deserve this. It is simply a gift given to me by a God of mercy and grace." That sort of changes the picture, doesn't it?

JESUS CALLED FOR A CHANGEUP

In my high school days and my first two years of college I tried to play baseball. I was a poor excuse for a baseball player. In fact, I was just pathetic. For instance, when it came to batting I couldn't hit a curve ball to save my life. That wasn't the only pitch that gave me problems, just the most obvious. It's been so long since those days that I can't even remember the names of a lot of my teammates. But oddly for some reason I recall the name of one of our opponents when I was in college. We were playing Cal Poly Pomona. They had this pitcher who had a reputation for being really good. His name was Crabtree and he was going to start the game against us. I heard about him from teammates before we played them. When the game started I remember thinking he was overrated. From the start it looked to me like he didn't have very good stuff at all. I was not impressed. I was happy because that day a number of my friends had come to see the game and I was sure I was going to impress them because I was going to hit this guy. I'd told them earlier he was reputedly a tough pitcher so I knew they'd be impressed when I got the better of him. I got up to bat my first time. He threw me a couple of weak sauce fastballs, one for a ball, the second in the strike zone. I jumped all over that one and just crushed it, but pulled it foul. That was unusual for me because I almost always hit up the middle or to right center. That I was that much ahead of him told me he just didn't throw very hard. Then came his next pitch. As soon as I saw it my eyes lit up. I was expecting him to throw me a breaking ball next but this obviously was another fastball. I was going to hammer it. Only I didn't. I lunged

and flailed at the thing. I hit nothing but air, and I was so off balance I almost fell down doing it. One of my friends told me after the game that I looked so bad it was embarrassing. What I didn't know was that what made Crabtree a good pitcher was he had a great changeup. It looked like a fastball, but arrived at the plate much later than a fastball thus throwing the batter's timing off. He changed what he was doing. That's what Jesus called for in this passage. He said we are all deserving of death, so it's time for a changeup. Do something different.

I told my baseball story because Jesus used the word "repent" which unfortunately is kind of a loaded word today. It has lots of religious connotations added to it. So to avoid those connotations and the resulting confusion I want you to think of a changeup. The word literally meant to change your thinking. And that's exactly what the people in Jesus' audience needed to do and what we need to do. They needed a change in their thinking. They needed a changeup.

Then Jesus told his story, another one of his Jesus Tales to illustrate his command. In this case it was a story about a fig tree. A man planted it and expected it to grow figs. He waited 3 years, but no figs. I can relate. We planted an avocado tree in our back yard. I'm waiting for it to grow avocados. No luck. In fact despite the fact that we've tried a number of different things to encourage the tree to grow, we're getting close to just have an avocado stick in the ground. It's dying. Not only does it not have any avocados on it, it is now nearly devoid of leaves.

In Jesus' story the man tells his employee to just dig the tree out and trash it. My prediction is that a year from now, probably much less than that, we will have done that with our avocado stick. His employee says, "Let's give it a little more time. I'll work on the soil, dig around and put some manure in there and see if that helps." If it doesn't start producing next year then let's trash it. I could tell him right now it won't work. We've tried it with the avocado stick and it hasn't helped at all. Nevertheless, in the story the idea was that they would give the tree more time to produce fruit.

What people tend to do with that story is identify the fig tree as Israel, the owner of the vineyard as God the Father and Jesus becomes the vinedresser who asks for more time. That's going too far. Remember this is a simple story designed to illustrate one idea. You must not get hung up on the details. Remember my story, my parable, of having trouble with a changeup while playing baseball in college. Imagine what would happen if you do with that story what some interpreters do with Jesus' parables. They would try to see every part of the story as symbolic. The catcher calls for a changeup, so he must represent Jesus. The pitcher is the one who

receives the call so he must represent God's people hearing the message. The change up works foiling me, the batter. Who do I represent? Well, I guess I'd be the enemy of the pitcher and the catcher. So that would make me Satan. Hey, wait a minute! That's not what I meant at all.

The simple point of the story is that God is patient with us and will do all he can to nurture our souls, but if we do not produce fruit eventually he will deal with us like the owner would deal with an unproductive tree. What he wants is that we would produce the fruit called repentance. We would throw a changeup, meaning we would change our minds, change how we think about things. What was it that needed changing?

Jesus' audience they thought they were fruitful trees by virtue of being of the right ethnic heritage as descendants of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and they were of the right spiritual heritage because they believed there was one God and made some efforts to keep his rules. By doing that they did enough to earn his acceptance. If that were true they didn't need Jesus. That's why the majority of them rejected him. They thought they already had the truth.

Jesus said in this passage what that accomplished was to qualify them for immediate death. They needed to throw a changeup. They needed to change their minds. They needed to accept that their current thinking was deadly and to see that they needed something else to save them. The answer was to believe that Jesus was, in fact, God's Messiah who had come to rescue them from that death.

This message would be preached boldly and clearly to them later by Peter. In Acts 2 you see the account of the day of Pentecost, when powered by the Spirit of Jesus the disciples told people they had rejected their own Messiah and had him executed. In verse 37 realizing their horrible, inexcusable sin the crowd cried out, "What shall we do?" How can we fix this? In verse 38 Peter answered, "repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins." Change your mind. Quit rejecting Jesus and believe him, and put your trust in his work, believing it was enough to take care of your guilt and bring your forgiveness and acceptance. The fruit of the repentance that God looks for is believing in Jesus!

IMPLICATIONS

ACCEPT THE TRUTH ABOUT US ALL

There is one principle that will completely revolutionize how we think about the things that happen in this world. It is this simple truth that what we deserve is death. That is what we have earned. This helps us re-frame the question when

tragedy strikes. Instead of asking why this terrible thing happened, we should admit that it is only due to God's grace that it doesn't happen continually to all of us. The question isn't why it happens, but why it doesn't happen more. And the answer is that it is solely due to God's kindness and grace.

It is important that you major primarily in using this reality to help you understand life rather than setting everybody else straight. When a friend suffers a terrible loss, perhaps losing a loved one, and they say, "Why did God do this?" if you say, "Well it's because you deserve it," you are probably going to be about as welcome as a big zit on a bride's chin the morning of her wedding.

This may seem a negative perspective, but it's not. First, it can help us struggle a little less with the pain and disappointment of this world. When we experience it we can remember that this is what we have earned and it is only due to God's grace that we don't experience more of it. On the more positive perspective this idea can make us much more grateful, positive and joyful people. Last fall this church gave Laurie and me some gift cards to thank us for serving here. It was a kind and gracious act. I was talking to a friend and commented how humbled and grateful we were. The friend said, "Well you guys deserve it." I said thank you, but what I thought was, "What I deserve is to die and be judged for eternity." That is theologically true. So anything that is an improvement on that is nothing but pure, 100%, unadulterated grace.

Imagine how this is going to affect you when you accept this truth. I was thinking about Carissa, who got a cold just before she and Michael left on their honeymoon. My first thought was, "Really, Lord? I believe I spoke to you about this. That poor couple got to spend 26 of their first 28 days as a married couple apart because the Marines insisted Michael go to Twentynine Palms to repeating train he has been doing since September. So now they get to have a honeymoon and she gets sick after I had specifically requested that you keep that from happening." I felt bad for Carissa. But as I thought about it I realized if I were in her shoes what I should be thinking is, "Well, this may not be my ideal, but what I deserve is way worse. So I'm alive, I'm on my honeymoon, and all of that is nothing but pure grace. So thank you, Lord."

You're going to end up being a person who is grateful for every good thing that happens in your life. I got up this morning and I didn't deserve that. Thank you Lord. I have a headache. Don't much like the headache, but thank you Lord that I'm alive to feel it. Imagine how different you will be if you begin reflecting on

how much good God gives you in life that you don't deserve, and how much bad you do deserve that you don't have to experience.

THROW THAT CHANGEUP

We humans are an odd mixture of conflicting thoughts. On the one hand we go through life thinking we deserve something. We deserve to be healthy, to live a long time, to avoid terrible disasters, to be loved, to be noticed and have approval, to have some good things happen to us. On the other hand, we also have this nagging sense that we don't measure up somehow. That sense can be vague or it can be acute, but all of us know deep down something is not quite as it should be with us. So we go through life trying to prove otherwise. We try to convince ourselves, other people, and ultimately God that we meet the standard, whatever that standard may be. We're good enough, holy enough, smart enough, charming enough, talented enough, religious enough, kind enough, honest enough, generous enough, that we should be approved. Yet somehow that nagging sense that we don't quite measure up never completely goes away. So in a sense we kind of are dogged by the thought that maybe we don't deserve good.

There was a classic scene from a television show many years ago. It's from the Bob Newhart show back in the 70's. You can watch it on You Tube still today. Bob is a psychologist in this show. A patient, a woman named Kathryn comes to see him. She says she has a terrible fear of being buried in a box. Thinking about it she begins to panic. Bob asks if she has ever been buried in a box. She says no, but just thinking about it makes her life horrible. She says "I can't be in a tunnel, an elevator, a house, anything boxy." Bob says, "Kathryn, I'm going to give you two words. I want you to listen carefully, then I want you to take them out of the office with you and incorporate them in your daily life." She takes out a pad of paper and pen and asks, "Should I write them down?" Bob says, "It's only two words. I find most people can remember them." She says, "All right." Then Bob says, "All right, here they are." He leans forward and says, "Stop it!"

That's the message today. Stop it. Stop thinking you somehow deserve something because God owes it to you. And conversely stop thinking that somehow you've got to work harder to prove you measure up, to get God to like you and do good to you. Throw that changeup, admit you don't measure up, but that you believe in Jesus, and that's sufficient.

Quit trying to prove that you are good enough that God ought to accept you and love you. Accept that your only hope is God's grace which is exactly what Jesus came to bring you. Trust in him and the work of his life, death and resurrection.

You might be thinking, “Uh, Rick, this isn’t exactly a deep message. Believe in Jesus. That’s all you’ve got?” Yep, that’s all I’ve got. Believe he is my only hope. Believe that no amount of religion, money, power, success, pleasure, approval, fame, intelligence, position, can give me eternal life. Only Jesus can. As we make this the fundamental truth, the very foundation of our identity, our relationship with God, a place and purpose in the world, it will have an effect. This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and it will change us. It will produce fruit. It will produce humility, peace, gratitude, joy, love for God and for other people, patience with them and kindness. That’s what it always does when someone does an extraordinarily kind thing for us. And that extraordinarily kind thing is what God has done for us in Jesus, which impacts us in everything we are and do.