

Title: Mercy Assumed
Text: Luke 13.6-9
Theme: There is a limit to God's mercy.
Series: Luke
Prop Stmtnt: There is a limit to God's mercy to rebels.

Over time you begin to experience more and more discomfort and pain in your left knee so you see a surgeon who points out that in an effort to avoid pain, you have been favoring your left knee so much that it is wearing out your right knee. In fact, the reason why you have pain in your left knee is because you have been compensating for the fact that your hips worn out and the reason why your hips are worn out is because you've been walking funny. Why do you walk so funny? Further testing reveals that your spine is out of alignment. This has caused you to have an uneven gait which over time has caused an orthopedic tsunami in your body. So, yes, the surgeon can replace your left knee, then right knee, left hip, then right hip, but if you don't get your spine issues addressed, you are going to be playing whack-a-mole with your skeletal structure for the rest of your life. Your spine holds all the parts together.

We are tempted to look at the areas in our lives that hurt and cause us pain and try to do something about them. In so many cases, the individual issues are related to the fact that our life before God is misaligned. If you do not get the most important relationship aligned correctly, there is no way that anything else is going to work well. We are studying the life of Christ as recorded by Luke. Christ has come, in part to make God known to us so that we can know what to think about God and how to relate to him. However, what we are witnessing is that the majority of people would rather live out alignment with God. Jesus is up front about this. Living out of alignment with God comes at a serious long-term cost, while living in alignment with God often comes at a short-term cost. Therefore, Luke chapter 12 is marked by warning and hope. Jesus warns those who are smug, complacent, and indifferent to the ultimate issues of life and who are not ready to meet God and give an account for their lives. To them he keeps saying that the end is coming and you must be prepared because you will give an account.

v.3 "...whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops."

v.4b "...fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell."

v.9 "but the one who denies me before men will be denied before the angels of God."

v.10 "but the one who blasphemes against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven."

v.20 "Fool! This night your soul is required of you..."

v.40 "You must also be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an hour you do not expect."

v.49 *"I came to cast fire on the earth..."*

v.56 *"...why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"*

v.59 *"...you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny."*

It is also marked by hope.

v.4a *"...do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have nothing more that they can do."*

v.7b *"...Fear not; you are of more value than many sparrows."*

v.8 *"...everyone who acknowledges me before men, the Son of Man also will acknowledge before the angels of God..."*

v.11b-12 *"...do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say."*

v.22-30 *"do not be anxious about your life...of how much more value are you than the birds! ... if God so clothes the grass...how much more will he clothe you...your Father knows that you need them."*

v.32 *"Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."*

v.43 *"Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes."*

The end of your life is coming and you may need to be warned to get serious about your life before God, or you may need to be encouraged that your faithfulness is worth it, so hang on.

You are in one of two groups. You are not ready to meet God because you have never entrusted your life to Christ or you are ready to meet God because you have and you love him and can't wait to see him. Which one is it? The group that you are in determines how you will hear this parable that Jesus gave in 13.6-9.

Read Text:

This parable follows the warning that Jesus gave about the uncertainty of life (13.1-5). At the end of chapter 12 he urges us to settle our accounts with God before the end comes. I needed a new furnace and purchased one with a plan that allowed me to put 0 down, and a monthly payment for 2 years with 0% interest. However, at the end of the 24 months, if there was an unpaid balance, the balance would now have a 24% interest rate, plus everything that I had paid up until that point would be subject retroactively to a 24% interest rate. 0 down and 0% interest for 2 years was a good deal only if I was ready for the end. Otherwise, I would have been hit with a hefty payment. In those 2 years I looked at that paperwork 100 times because I wanted

to make sure that I did not miss that and in fact, paid it off around month 22 just to be sure. Why would a bank offer such a deal? Only because they know they will make money from it and while there will be people who are careful, there are plenty who are not.

Jesus knows that too. Over and over and over he keeps emphasizing the same theme so that you do not miss this. Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God on earth. Jesus is the ultimate truth. Therefore, to reject the ultimate revelation of God and the ultimate truth is to invite the ultimate consequence. The ministry of Jesus was incredible, but it raised the stakes beyond high. If you follow the wrong directions to the freeway, it is going to take you longer to get to the freeway. If you forget to put salt in your recipe, it may make your food not so good. But if you do not listen to Jesus, you are turning your back on God. Sadly, we know the story. Most did not take him seriously. It is still that way. I pray that those of you who have not been honest before God and made things right with him, will let the Spirit of God press this into your heart.

Verses 6-9 are one short parable. Parables have been described as earthly stories with heavenly meanings. Typically, when Jesus gives a parable, he is making one main point. In order to understand the point of the parable we have to start with his audience. In this case, Jesus is talking to the crowd who are made up his disciples, but mostly people who are curious or antagonistic. Jesus has already faced the antagonism and it is about to heat up. Jesus tells this story about the fig tree because it is their story. The fig tree is a lesson that represents Israel. Do not ignore this because Israel is a nation that represents the world. God raised up Israel to be a people that he would use as an object lesson to all the nations. What happened to Israel is both warning and hope for the world.

It is around 30 A.D. Israel had been Israel for about 1,500 years. Even though the Assyrian destruction of the Northern Kingdom and the Babylonian Captivity of the Southern Kingdom just about wiped it out, Israel survived, by the mercy of God. It was easy to assume that she would survive the Roman Empire too which fueled an arrogance and hostility to her foreign occupiers. 40 years is not a long time. In 70 A.D. Jerusalem fell to Rome. The capital city, seat of power, home of the Sanhedrin and of course the Temple were destroyed. Israel as a nation was being wiped off the earth. The unthinkable actually happened. The fig tree was cut down, just like Jesus said. Mercy assumed is mercy rejected. The parable is not difficult to interpret.

1. **God put you here for a purpose.** (6)

Israel is parallel with southern Georgia and has a climate conducive to growing many kinds of citrus fruit, avocados, olives of course grapes and figs. The Prophets used some of these to symbolize Israel and Jesus is doing the same. A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard. His vineyard was akin to his garden, where he had trees that he planted in order to get fruit from them. The man is the owner. The man has the fig tree planted. He does it in order to get fruit. The purpose of the fig tree is to produce figs. What kind of a fig tree doesn't produce figs? A diseased one, dying one or a dead one, unless it is young. It generally takes 3-5 years for a fig tree to start producing a decent amount of figs. The owner has both a right and a responsibility to expect figs. If the tree is taking up space and nutrients without producing fruit, then he needs

to do something so that it is not stealing resources from the others around it. God raised up Israel for a purpose.

“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.” Deut. 14.2 He repeats this idea in Deut. 26.19, 28.9 and in several other passages in the OT. Why Israel? Were they special? No. In Deut. 7.7, God said, *“It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples,, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers....”*

God chose small, weak Israel to show his glory and power to the world. God makes much of himself through people that the world tends to overlook. God chose them, like the owner chose this fig tree and planted it so that it would produce fruit for him. Israel was proud of being Israel instead of being humble before God. The irony is that they would never have been Israel if it had not been for God.

Turn to 1 Peter 2. This is the text from which we named our church. V.6 points out that Jesus is the cornerstone, chosen and precious and that whoever believes in him will not be put to shame. (embarrassed, let down, disappointed) But not all believe in Christ. Verse 7 says that the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone. The builders are Israel and Jesus is the Cornerstone for a new people and a new nation, which is us, the church. Look at v.9. *“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* This is the same idea of the fig tree. God has chosen us, the church (purpose clause) to make known (proclaim) the excellencies of God who has called us out of darkness and into his marvelous light. He has called us to bear fruit that displays the gospel. That is our purpose. God saved us on purpose and for a purpose. Do you get that? Does that wake you up for the day and get you going? Because it is supposed to.

2. God gives you time to grow and fulfill your purpose. (7)

Three years have passed and there are no figs. At the three-year mark you should expect at least some figs. It may take up to 5 years for the full annual benefit to be realized but while some fig trees start to produce a lot of figs by the 3rd year, all fig trees should at least have something. In Israel's case, God gave them centuries to get it right. The OT is the sad and sordid story of God's unfaithful bride, Israel. He gave them time, he gave them prophets, he gave them warnings, he gave them plagues, military invasions and very public examples. And now, God has given them Jesus. Other than the short amount of time in his early days on the earth, Jesus never left the small borders of Israel. God sent his Son to Israel. The light of the world shone in Israel.

There is no fruit, so the owner says, “Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?” Then we hear from the vinedresser.

3. God is merciful and provides resources for you to be faithful. (8)

The vinedresser asks the owner for one more opportunity. He wants to give the fig tree another chance and promises to tend to it and provide fertilizer so that the tree has every possible chance to survive. Why does the owner do it this way? This is consistent with how God engages us so that we get firsthand experience with his mercy.

God revealed to Abraham his plan to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham then asked God if he was willing to spare the cities if there were 50 righteous people found and God was willing to spare it for 50. Then Abraham asked for 45, then 40, then 30, then 20 and finally for 10. Abraham knew firsthand how merciful and patient God was. Many years later, God told Moses that he was going to wipe out Israel and start over with a people from Moses. Moses interceded for the people and God responded with mercy. God told the prophet Ezekiel that he has no delight in the death of the wicked. This was clearly displayed through Jonah who warned the Assyrians of their impending judgment and when they repented, God stayed his hand, much to the chagrin of Jonah.

In Isaiah 65.1-2 God says, *"I was ready to be sought by those who did not ask for me; I was ready to be found by those who did not seek me. I said 'Here am I, here am I,' to a nation that was not called by my name. I spread out my hands all the day to a rebellious people, who walk in a way that is not good, following their own devices."*

2 Peter 3.9 tells us that *"The LORD is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing (desiring) that any should perish but that all should reach repentance."*

The picture we get is that God loves to be talked into being merciful and in fact God is way more merciful than we are. Even if God gives extra time for people to repent and they don't repent, God has not wasted his mercy. Every expression of God's mercy is another reason for us to trust him, love him, be amazed by him and worship him.

Can you think of the ways that God has been patient with you and has provided resources for you so you can be faithful? Were there, are there times when God could have just said, "That's it! Enoughs enough, we're done here. Time to move on." Some people try to say that the God in the OT is angry and that God in the NT is compassionate. I don't know how they say that. Just read the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy and imagine that you are God driving the bus on a road trip with the children of Israel. Nobody would have lived it that had been me. God is amazingly merciful. However, mercy extended should never be mercy assumed because mercy assumed is actually mercy rejected.

4. The limit of mercy. (9)

The vinedresser makes his plea. The tree is spared for one short year. Israel has a short time to humble herself before God. John the Baptist said earlier that the axe was at the root of the tree. We are at the 11th hour. Time is very short, but God has given this brief time to respond. Oh how I wish the story went differently than it did. Israel did not repent. The axe that was laid to the root chopped it down. The tree that was cultivated and fertilized did not produce fruit and it was cut down.

Conclusion:

In the prologue to his massive tome on Jerusalem, Simon Montefiore described the scene outside of Jerusalem on the 8th day of the Jewish month Ab, July, 70 A.D., the night before the final assault by the 60,000 Roman soldiers on the Temple and the rest of the city and its starving 500,000 inhabitants. *“Around the walls, there were gruesome scenes that must have resembled hell on earth. Thousands of bodies putrefied in the sun. The stench was unbearable. Packs of dogs and jackals feasted on human flesh. In the preceding months, Titus had ordered all prisoners or defectors to be crucified. Five hundred Jews were crucified each day. The Mount of Olives and the craggy hills around the city were so crowded with crucifixes that there was scarcely room any more, nor trees to make them. Titus’ soldiers amused themselves by nailing their victims splayed and spread-eagled in absurd positions. So desperate were many Jerusalemites to escape the city that, as they left, they swallowed their coins, to conceal their treasure, which they hoped to retrieve when they were safely clear of the Romans. They emerged ‘puffed up with famine and swelled like men with dropsy,’ but if they ate they ‘burst asunder.’ As their bellies exploded, the soldiers discovered their reeking intestinal treasure troves, so they started to gut all prisoners, eviscerating them and search their intestines while they were still alive. ... The cruelties inflicted by the Romans and the rebels within the walls compare with some of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century.”*

40 years before, Jesus had said, “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” Matthew 11.28-30

Mercy assumed is mercy rejected. When you reject God’s mercy, then you get his justice.