

So what's been happening with you lately? How's life? And so begins the idle small talk we all engage in to pass the time. And more often than not, what does that talk turn to? Complaints. Grievances. How bad the weather is, what latest health issue you're afflicted with, the trouble your relative got into or the latest thing that's wrong with our country. Whatever it is, this seems to be our default way of communicating, to identify these bad things in our lives and talk about them.

So let me ask you this: What bad stuff has happened to you lately?

Now forgive me for being a little confrontational here, especially with such a leading question, but if your answer is anything other than "nothing at all", you are wrong.

Wrong? How would you know? You don't know everything in my life, Pastor. You can't know what I've been going through. How can you stand there and tell me that nothing bad has happened to me?

But I can. I absolutely can stand here and say that nothing bad has happened to you lately. Nothing bad has ever happened to you, and nothing bad ever will. Yeah, I know, I'm going to have to back that up a bit. In order to do so, let's look again at the first part of our reading for today from Luke 13: <Read text: Luke 13:1-5>.

At the start, we see a little idle gossiping going on, and hey what do you know, they're focusing on the latest troubles and tragedies that have happened. Sounds familiar. This time it was about some people from Galilee that the Roman governor Pilate had killed. And worse, he did so in such a way that their own blood was mixed in with the sacrifices they were offering at the time. Now, it's not recorded for us directly, but we can guess pretty easily what the Jews present were thinking about this event that happened, because of what Jesus says in reaction to them.

Their basic line of thought was probably something like "Wow, what a horrible, humiliating and disgraceful way to go. They must've done something *really* bad to end up like that. They must've gotten on God's really bad side." But Jesus' response sets them, and us, straight. Jesus makes it plain; these people were not worse sinners than anyone else. He even brings up another example that must've been making the rounds at the time. A tower fell and crushed eighteen people. Clearly, that was an act of God! He must've been angry with them too! And yet Jesus makes it plain, this did not happen because they were worse sinners than all the rest.

Looking at what Jesus has to say about these "bad" events starts to shed some light on our own troubles. Jesus doesn't say these people were worse sinners than the rest to come to such an end. But he also doesn't say they didn't deserve these things. After all, he still calls them sinners. We use that word so regularly it probably has lost its impact for us. So consider what happened. The crimes they committed against God meant they deserved to be slaughtered with their sacrifices. They deserved to be crushed under a falling tower. Every ache and pain and heartbreak and grief in our own lives is not undeserved. You have broken the law of a Holy God. God is a God of love, but you were born and bred in selfishness. You are the opposite of what God requires. You and I deserve punishment. Far worse in fact than what we do put up with in this life, far worse than a humiliating death. We deserve eternal death.

So certainly, whatever comes our way in this life, we have no right to complain about. Whatever little pain we suffer now is a pittance compared to what should come on us the moment we step into this world. The moment we first grab at something and shout, "Mine!" For every day that we have served our own selfish interest to the detriment of those we claim to care about, we ought to be dead already. The things we endure now? We earned them, fair and square. Thinking that we haven't? Thinking that we don't deserve this kind of shabby treatment from the world? That kind of arrogant pride is just another reason we ought to be punished.

Except... that may all be true but it doesn't really mesh with what I said when we started. I told you that nothing bad happens in your lives. I didn't say nothing happens to you that you don't deserve. That's different. That's still bad stuff happening to you, even if you did bring it on yourself. I said nothing bad. And I still stand by that. It is good to remember that we don't deserve better treatment than we're getting, but that's not the whole story. There's more to it than that, as Jesus illuminates in the rest of our reading: <read text Luke 13:6-9>.

A man, a caretaker and a fig tree with no fruit. It doesn't take too much imagination for us to understand who the players in this parable really are. The fig tree is you. The man who owns the fig tree is God's justice. The man who cares for the vineyard is God's love. You could also identify them by the persons of the trinity that showcase these characteristics the most; God the Father and God the Son. Now, again the issue is that the fig tree was not bearing fruit. In other words, it was not doing what God expected of it. Again, that's us. We are the ones who don't do what is right. We don't bear fruit for God on our own and we deserve to be cut down. But the caretaker suggests giving the fig tree a bit more time,

and in that time, he'll cultivate it. He will order everything around it to give it the best possible opportunity to live and grow and flourish. It will have every advantage, and in the end, the tree will either be cut down, or it will be allowed to live based on whether it bears fruit in time.

This is what our God does for you. He does everything possible, orchestrates everything in your life to one end, to one purpose; that you might bear fruit in time. He may have to dig around your roots, he may have to fertilize or prune your branches. In short, he may need to disrupt your *status quo* so that you have the advantages you need to grow the fruit that will mean the difference between living or being cut down. These things may be unpleasant, uncomfortable, even painful or terrifying. But they are only what is necessary, because the penalty for failure here is too terrible to imagine. And we should also imagine that if the caretaker is successful in getting the tree to produce fruit, he won't just give up and leave it alone, but rather will continue to work the soil around and care for the tree so it can keep on producing and not end up back on the list for destruction.

Now, let me explain this a little further before you start thinking that I'm telling you it's up to you to be saved. Do you see so far how this carries over into what we're talking about? God demands fruit from you. The fruit he demands that you live according to his will, that you be holy, that you be selfless. You haven't and you can't. None of us can. By nature your roots are dead and your branches are rotted. No amount of effort will ever cause the smallest blossom to bloom. The only way we have what we need is if God comes and causes it to grow in us. To speak plainly and not leave anyone confused, you are a sinner. God demands that you be without sin and that you have a life lived in perfect obedience to him and his will. You do not have this and you cannot do it. The only solution is if your sin were taken away and a perfect life were somehow credited to you by someone else. This is what the caretaker Jesus does for us. He has taken our sins to the cross, and he has given his life to us. By his death, he has made it possible for us to be alive again in him.

And the key to us personally receiving what Jesus has done is our faith. This too, is a gift from God, but it is something he needs to create in us and he needs to keep alive and healthy. This is the point that you and I are now at as believers. We have received faith, Jesus has brought our roots to life and our branches to bear fruit. In God's eyes we do produce fruit because of this faith. Frankly, we still are bad trees. But Jesus' life is counted as ours and that means that God will not hold us accountable. We are forgiven. And nothing better has ever happened to anyone, since because of that forgiveness you and I will not be cut down. We will live. We will live forever with our Father because of what Christ did for us and through our faith in him.

All great news. Wonderful news. But I still haven't actually explained what I meant when I said nothing bad happens to you. The key is in the work of the caretaker of our parable. His ongoing work is to give you every advantage to stay alive in the faith, to continue to bear fruit for the Lord so that you will live and not be cut. We have a firm promise from our God that there is nothing in your life, nothing, that does not work towards this goal. The famous passage from Romans 8:28 assures us in no uncertain terms, **"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."** God does not exaggerate. He does not make false claims. He says here plainly, everything that happens to you is there to work for your eternal good. God and his angels surround you every day, and you've no idea of the evils he stops every day. The ones that happen do not "slip through". Trouble does not come because God was asleep. What he chooses to allow through he does as your caretaker, the one who carefully fertilizes and prunes and cares for you that you can continue to produce good fruit.

Do you get it? Do you see it? With your Savior Christ, nothing bad happens to you. Yes, some things hurt. There are frustrations and annoyances. But every one of them was carefully chosen and allowed in your life to cultivate you for eternal life. And that is not just "not bad", it is a very, very good thing indeed.

Carry this proper perspective with you through your life and see the peace that firmly trusting this truth can bring. Understand and accept that you are sinner, deserving of nothing good. See that your Heavenly Father cares about you so much that he sacrificed his Son to save you. See that even now he cares for in with what is most important: seeing to it that you do not die eternally. And that he will do whatever it takes to keep that from happening to you. Understand that the events in your life happen because God wants you to stay in your faith, God wants draw you always closer to himself, no matter what tools he needs to do to make that happen. Let this understanding keep you at peace when the difficult times come. Whatever comes, it's nothing bad. He has forgiven you through the blood of Christ and he is doing everything he can to keep you with him until you go home to him in heaven forever. We couldn't possibly ask for any better! Amen.