



## **CROSS TRAINING:**

**What price would you pay to get a (real) life?**

### **Week Three:**

*Wasting Space and Borrowed Time*

Luke 13:1-9

## **Preparing for the Text**

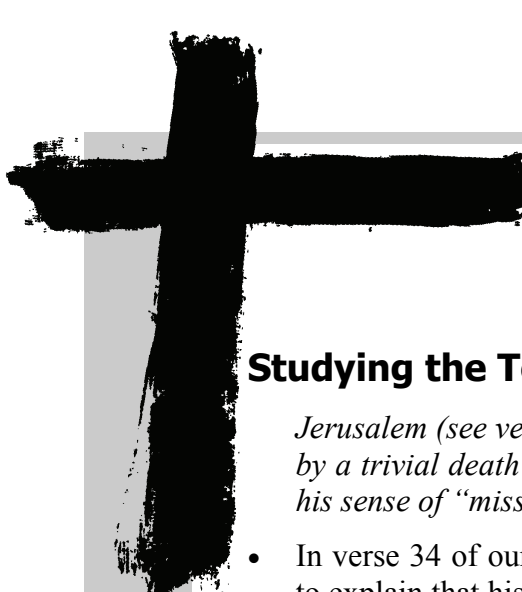
As your small group or class settles in for this session of our Lenten study, it will probably be helpful to provide some initial moments of sharing as participants “check in” with one another after a week apart. Consider using these or other light, “icebreaker” questions to kick off the discussion:

- Judging from the way you *actually* spend your leisure time (rather than how you might wish to describe your *ideal* practice in using discretionary hours), what is your favorite means of “killing time” to relax and unwind?
- As you reflect on your childhood and adolescence, what was the *first* or *worst* example of procrastination in which you remember neglecting to do what clearly needed to be done until it was perhaps too late to “salvage” the assigned task? Why do you think this happened, and what did you learn as a result?
- What is the first image, phrase or memory that pops into your mind when you hear the word “repent?”

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## **Studying the Text:**

Knowing that one of the essential themes of the Lenten season has always been an open call for repentance, for centuries Christians have acknowledged that the example and experience of Jesus provides a sharp reminder that *we are not yet fully the kind of persons we should be*. That recognition serves as a backdrop for our text in Luke 13:1-9, for once again we find ourselves listening to the urgent voice of Jesus cautioning listeners that they will suffer loss and even death if they do not take serious steps to fundamentally alter their lives (see verses 3 and 5). Rather than simply affirming that we are really good folks when you get right down to it, Jesus insists on speaking clearly and forcefully about the critical deficiency that he detects in us. We are endangered by a false sense of pride and complacency, forever assuming that the suffering experienced at times by others says something about *them* that we assume to be irrelevant or untrue of *us*. Instead, Jesus tells a simple parable about a barren, unproductive fig tree that has been taking up space in a working vineyard, apparently in a last ditch attempt to encourage all of us to get serious about using wisely what precious time has been graciously afforded to us by God. He is, in effect, asking us to consider the very real possibility that we have been wasting space on borrowed time when his own mission to save and transform us can be thwarted by our refusal to respond to the second chances we have been granted. So after reading the text with the other participants in this study session, discuss the following questions:



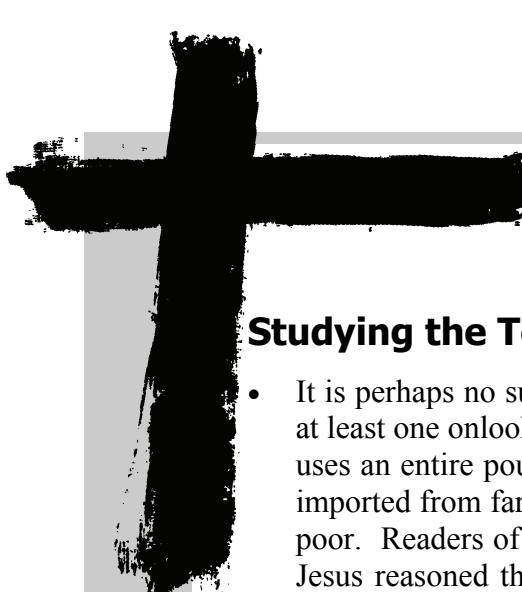
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## Studying the Text (continued):

In verses 1-5, Jesus responds to an initial report that Pilate (the brutal and reviled governor of Judea during the Roman occupation of Palestine) had ordered some sort of summary execution of Galilean religious pilgrims who were offering their sacrifices of worship in the Jerusalem Temple (verse 1). In other words, Jesus is perhaps being asked to respond to the kind of urgent news that might provoke him as a popular religious leader from Galilee to incite some sort of response against the military forces of occupation. It is also likely that Jesus is expected to affirm a common assumption of his day that the circumstances of these horrible deaths reflect some sort of judgment by God (see the story of a very similar view that assumes that bad things are not supposed to happen to *good* people in John 9:1-3, and the way Jesus refutes this oversimplified approach to moral reasoning). But in responding to this news as well as his own “test case” example of the 18 people who died when crushed by a collapsing tower of Siloam (the tower was probably located in the Jerusalem city wall very near the Temple), Jesus ignores pressure to inflame the situation and blame the victims by instead calling his listeners to take seriously their need to repent. *What is your reaction as you hear Jesus warn you that all of us face grave danger if we do not immediately “change our course?” Remember that the word that is translated as “repent” (verses 3 and 5) in our text quite literally pictures the complete reversal of direction by someone who has come to realize that they were journeying through life in the wrong way. In what way is this kind of repentance required of you at the present time – i.e., where is Jesus perhaps telling you that you have been moving in the wrong direction?*

- The parable of the barren fig tree in the vineyard told by Jesus (verses 6-9) plays against two well-known Old Testament passages depicting God’s people as faithless and unfruitful, failing utterly to produce the expected harvest of righteousness and justice in their land (see Isaiah 5:1-7 and Micah 7:1-7). Clearly the story Jesus told is one of longstanding duration, for God has been waiting on us to live fruitful lives of obedience and integrity across centuries of sad history. But Jesus gives a decisive, new twist to this old story, placing emphasis on the mercy and patience of a gardener who is not yet willing to cut down and remove the unproductive fig tree that has been wasting space in the owner’s vineyard. *Who is this gardener, and how does what he says to the vineyard owner about his plan to use “one more year” in seeking fruit from this barren fig tree help you better understand the ministry and purpose of Jesus who tells us this story?*
- Remembering that we have entitled this Lenten Bible study, *Cross Training*, we should probably pay more attention than we usually do to the way the gardener in this parable of Jesus speaks about the work he intends to do in coaxing the barren fig tree to finally produce the fruit expected by the vineyard owner (see verse 8). Perhaps Jesus is trying to tell us something significant about the way he works in our lives. In the parable, the gardener tells the owner that he needs one more year to cultivate the tree, for he intends to “put manure on it” so it might bear fruit in due season rather than being cut down and replaced by more productive plantings. No less gifted interpreter than St. Augustine reminds us of the symbolism of this “Gospel manure” when he pointed out that it might well be “a sign of humility” that we require something so ordinary (and obviously *unpleasant* at times) to do



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## **Studying the Text (continued):**

what we are created and meant to do as children of God. Although the bumper stickers popular in our coarse, contemporary culture focus on a negative form of this realization, Jesus seems to be suggesting that some very good things (like our spiritual health and maturity) can emerge from repentance if some true Gospel “Manure Happens.” *In what ways does this aspect of the parable Jesus tells help you interpret and appreciate what is happening in your life at present? Is there a sense in which your present circumstances can be explained as the work of a very patient, Divine Gardener who may be carefully using some “manure” to help you become fruitful and productive for the Kingdom in new and necessary ways?*

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## **Applying the Text:**

Many and gracious are the forms of God’s mercy, but in light of our text we may wish to reconsider the extraordinary mercy shown to us in the gift of time. The response of Jesus to the urgent news of suffering and death is to issue a call for repentance, and he follows this up with the teaching of a parable that features the insistence of a gardener who desires one more year before giving up on a tree that offers no apparent hope to its owner. What is Jesus talking about? Maybe this: one of the deepest mysteries of God’s unfathomable mercy is that we are often given the gift of time to learn from our mistakes and journey forward along a new path. For no matter what you have done in your past, you are here right now in a moment of true opportunity because the Gardener of Heaven has pleaded for another chance in your case. You have been given the gift of time to try again, to repent and move in a new direction. Quit comparing yourself to others. What matters right now is how you will respond when Jesus says, “Unless you repent, you will perish.” How many times will you have a chance to begin again? *Make this one count!*

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## **Praying the Text:**

By now we hope your class or small group has grown completely comfortable in closing each study session by allowing participants to seek and receive the ministry of intercession as others gather around to “lay on hands” and pray for God’s mercy and care in response to specific needs. Drawing from our text in this session, you may wish to briefly identify the significant circumstances in which it has become evident that you need the grace of a Divine Gardener who wishes to dig around in your life to produce the good fruit of true repentance. Perhaps you have come to see that you desperately require God’s healing gifts or the grace that will make it possible for you to live faithfully and obediently in response to a clear calling of Jesus. Ask God to baptize and fill you with God’s own Holy Spirit so you might choose to travel in a brand new direction once it has become evident that you were heading down the wrong path in some dimension of your life. Your group members can be trusted to pray for you not only in this moment, but as often as the Spirit prompts them to intercede for you in the coming week. And of course, beneath all of your group prayers, Jesus himself will be praying for you “in groans deeper than words” until God’s Spirit accomplishes the work that is needed in your life (see Romans 8:26-27). Remember that every one of us needs this sort of thing, just as Jesus clearly told us in our text for this session: “Unless you repent, you will *all* perish.” We’re in it together, so use this moment and don’t try to “go it alone” any longer!

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