

“Our Merciful, Longsuffering Mediator”

Luke 13:1-9

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

What does it mean to be merciful and longsuffering? No, longsuffering does not mean having the fortitude to endure the child incessantly kicking the back of your seat on your cross-country flight, neither does being merciful mean slipping a little melatonin in the child's juice so no one has to deal with their wild antics anymore. After all, you were only doing it for the public good, right? If we want to understand what it means to be these things that describe our Lord and Savior, then we must look outside of ourselves and the world around us to understand what they truly mean. Because as the Lord describes Himself as such in the parable of the fig tree in our Gospel lesson, We have to note that it is in contrast to the owner of the vineyard, our Heavenly Father, who has no patience for unrighteousness.

In our world, being merciful is often equated with simply being nice, or even more often, permissive. Longsuffering though is something that we don't see much of in our society today. Patience and forgiveness are a major part of what it means to be longsuffering, and in this sinful world those things are rare, if not entirely absent most often. These are what our loving Father has promised to be, and Jesus gives us a wonderful example of this in the parable of the fig tree in our Gospel lesson. If not taken in context, this parable can seem permissive, and is often used by the liberal church to support such permissiveness. When Jesus says in verse 8, “Sir, let it alone this year also,” He is not indicating that the barrenness of the tree is to be overlooked or even wiped away. This is not meant to be a “clean slate” for which the tree can choose either to bear fruit or no fruit as if the previous three years never happened.

This parable is one that is meant to point people to repentance, to the truth that standing alone in the vineyard they have no ability to bear the fruit required of the owner. The tree needs the work of the vinedresser applying the manure in order to be the fruitful tree that is required. The Son applies forgiveness and life to each and everyone of us, and because of that application we may now go forth and bear good fruit in our lives. That is the definition of good works that Paul gives us in Ephesians 2:10, “For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” We have the ability to do these because we have been joined to Christ in His death, having been given the righteousness of the Son as if it were our own. But that righteousness is only imputed to us for His sake, and is not of our own doing or of our own personal merit.

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Third Sunday in Lent (3/23/2025); Luke 13:1-9

The starting point is not one of righteousness. The tree does not begin with fruit and then loses it if it fails to do what is necessary to keep it. This false doctrine has long pervaded the church, trying to convince people that they have inherent righteousness that is simply buried and needs to be brought out and discovered by good works and “decisions for Jesus.” The folly of this ideal is in the reality that we have no inherent righteousness, but only original sin because of the sin of our first parents. Jesus Christ is the only human, Godman though He is, to live a life fully imbued with inherent righteousness. The rest of us are totally depraved, having lost the righteousness with which Adam was created, and then lost in his surrendering to the temptation of the serpent through Eve.

Any belief that we have buried within us the necessary righteousness to achieve the fruit bearing God wills for us is contrary to Holy Scripture. Ezekiel 33:13 says, “Though I say to the righteous that he shall surely live, yet if he trusts in his righteousness and does injustice, none of his righteous deeds shall be remembered, but in his injustice that he has done he shall die.” We are righteous for the sake of Christ, by virtue of the faith which we have been granted by the Holy Spirit. If our works are allowed to speak for themselves, our just God will seek vengeance for our unrighteousness. None of the righteous deeds will be remembered, because if we are choosing our own works over the work of Christ which has covered our sin, we have abandoned our faith and have lost all righteousness that is imputed to us for His sake.

This is the point that Jesus is trying to make to those in our Gospel lesson who wish to know what the people who suffered the calamities mentioned did that was so evil to warrant such a punishment from God. Though He is longsuffering, our God is not forever suffering. The falling of the tower in Siloam, or the massacre of the Galileans by Pilate, was not a punishment by God because these were worse sinners than the ones to whom Jesus is speaking. The reality of sin in the world, and the effects of it on fallen creation cause calamities to befall even the heartiest people of faith. The call from our Lord in Luke 13 is one of repentance, lest they fall victim to the sin of pride and lose the faith which saves them. His warning is one that should shake them to the core and lead them to repent of their sin and surrender themselves to rely on His gift of grace and mercy.

They must repent and turn to God, lest they die like those who perished in those catastrophes. The Lord is telling them, that like those who suffered these tragedies, they know not the day or the hour of their death, and if they die outside of faith in Christ, they die a second eternal death. Repentance is not what will save them, but it is what faith engenders. It razes the conscience to the ground and calls upon it to cry out in remorse

for the wrongs done to our righteous God. That is the true meaning of repentance, and it leads the terrified sinner to the free gift of forgiveness that is found only in the loving arms of our Lord and Savior.

It is important to note, though, that this repentance is not the reason they receive that gift. Forgiveness is not theirs because they repent and turn from their sin. Forgiveness is theirs because, even though He has yet to go to the cross, the benefit of His death is appropriated to them outside of time by faith in the Messiah, should they receive that faith from the Spirit. There are certainly those to whom Jesus is preaching that are not in the faith, and will remain outside of it, just as there are those to whom we preach the Gospel and it falls on deaf ears. These hardened hearts will be subject to the judgment of our just God, and the danger of their unbelief goes so far beyond any worldly calamity that may befall them. For those outside of Christ, there awaits only eternal death separated from God in the outer darkness of weeping and gnashing of teeth, as Jesus teaches in Matthew 8:12.

But for those who are in Christ, for us here who have faith by the gracious gift of our merciful and longsuffering Lord Jesus, there waits for us a bounteous feast at the Table of our Lord. The fruits we bear in this life are a testimony of the faith which we have by grace alone for the sake of Jesus Christ alone. And we share those fruits with one another in our sacrifice of Thanksgiving as we come to His table in a few short moments to receive the very body and blood which He has given for the benefit of our everlasting souls. As we gather here to eat His body, and drink His blood, we “proclaim the Lord’s death until He comes,” Paul says in 1 Corinthians 11:26. And that is what our repentance, faith, and the forgiveness it brings has done for us. We have been given the blessed gift of strength to make that proclamation until the day when we are called home, or the Lord returns again in glory to raise the dead, “those who have done good to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil to the resurrection of judgment,” as Jesus says in John 5:29.

We are at the halfway point through this Lenten season, and as we continue to look to the reality of our inherent sinfulness that clings to us because of our Old Adam, repent and receive the free gift of forgiveness that the Lord brings to His people. When we do this, we are not performing a righteous work that earns the gift that Jesus so freely gives, but we are offering our response of thanksgiving and praise for the mercy that has been poured out on us for the sake of Jesus Christ. Luther teaches in the Small Catechism that we are to “by daily contrition and repentance” drown the Old Adam in us that it might “die with all sins and evil desires.” By remembering our baptisms which have washed us

clean in the blood of the Lamb, the new man emerges to live before God in righteous purity.

And that is the way of escape that Paul speaks of in our Epistle lesson. The way in which we endure as we walk this world of sin and calamity is by the truth that we are baptized, redeemed and washed clean of the stain of sin for the sake of Jesus Christ alone. Because of the vinedresser, our Lord and Savior, cultivating faith in us and allowing the Spirit to work in our hearts, we have the blessed gift of eternal life in Him, and as such we bear good fruit, “performing deeds in keeping with repentance,” as Paul proclaims to King Agrippa in Acts 26:20. The Lord is merciful and longsuffering, mediating on our behalf that the Father would show us His loving kindness, not for the sake of our works, which alone would condemn us, but for the sake of His Son, who has done all that is necessary for us to be declared righteous in the sight of the Father. He has redeemed us from the power of sin, death, and hell, and now has prepared for us an eternal home in the vineyard of our loving God, to dwell in Christ for all eternity. Amen.