

# The hard sayings of Jesus

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Preacher: Tedd Tripp

[ 0 : 00 ] I would invite you to turn to Luke chapter 13.

We'll be looking at the first five verses of that chapter. As I have occasion to preach this year, I thought I would look at some of the hard sayings of Jesus.

There are many things that Jesus says that are hard for us to understand. They're shocking to their hearers and they're shocking to our sensibilities, things that break the categories in which we normally think and provide us ways of looking at life and understanding life that we would never get to apart from the revelation that God has given us in his word.

So Luke chapter 13, verses 1 through 5. Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices.

Jesus answered, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than other Galileans because they suffered in this way? I tell you no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish.

[ 1 : 15 ] Or those 18 who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them, do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? I tell you no, but unless you repent, you too will all perish.

Let's pray and ask God to illuminate his word for us this morning. Father, I add my prayer to the prayers of our pastor a moment ago that your spirit would do that work in us that we cannot do for ourselves, that you would, who caused these words to be written.

We know holy men were carried along by the Spirit when they wrote down the words that we have for us in the Bible. And we pray that that same Spirit would work in our hearts and our minds today, that you would work within us, giving us illumination and understanding and insight.

And we pray, Father, that you would bless both the speaker and the hearer in these minutes we have together, that we would be built up in the faith and strengthened in your grace.

We pray for your help. We ask it, acknowledging our need of you, and praying that you would do for us what we cannot do for ourselves. For Christ's glory. Amen.

[ 2 : 30 ] Amen. The events that are spoken of in this chapter are events that the people who were hearing Jesus would have been familiar with.

They were contemporary events. In fact, the people he was speaking to had heard about these things and even asked Jesus about them. And the first event was a massacre.

Pilate, the Roman governor, who possessed nearly absolute power, had taken out some political enemies. There were these people that had come down from Galilee, a sect of Galileans.

They had come down to offer sacrifices. While they were offering their sacrifices at the temple and were in a situation where they were vulnerable, the henchmen of Pilate fell on them and slaughtered them all on the spot.

And in the course of things, the blood of the Galileans was mixed with the blood of their sacrifices. And that's the reference in this passage. That was the way political enemies were dealt with in Bible times.

[ 3 : 34 ] So we think we have problems with political civility and managing disagreements. But this was one of the events. The second event was not a man-made disaster.

It would be more in the category of natural disaster. In Jerusalem, there's the Pool of Siloam. It's on the south corner of the city. And there was a tower there at that corner.

And the tower was part of the fortification, part of the defenses of the city. And one day the tower fell over, and 18 people died and were killed.

So we have two tragic events. One is a man-made event, Pilate's henchmen slaughtering the Galileans. The other would be in the category of natural disaster, one of those unfortunate things that happens.

And there are two things I want for us to see in this passage today. The first is just how not to respond to disasters. And the second is how should we respond to disasters, because that's where the passage takes us.

[ 4 : 39 ] Now, these disasters raise questions that every one of us asks at some point. Why do these sorts of things happen? How can we make sense out of the strange ways in which disasters come upon mankind?

Because some people never seem to face disasters, and other people seem to face affliction all the time. Why? Or it seems that pain and suffering, or it's opposite.

Joy and blessing seem so random. Why is that? Why do some people seem to live a charmed life, and other people seem to always struggle?

Why? How do we make sense of living in a world in which these tragic things happen to people unexpectedly? How can we make sense of that?

And there are two basic ways that people respond to those kinds of disasters, and we see them here in this passage. Often people blame the disaster on the person who's the victim of the disaster.

[ 5 : 48 ] That's really the moralist's response. They reason like this. If you're living a good life, and if you're doing the right things, then things are going to go well for you, and you won't have these kinds of difficulties.

God's going to bless you. God's going to answer your prayers. Your life will go well. So if you live right, things will go well for you.

And if things are not going well for you, then you must not be living right. You must be doing something wrong, or else these disasters would not continually be coming into your life.

Because if you were doing the right things, things would be going better. And we might think to ourselves, wow, that's really me. That's really pretty judgmental.

But if you think about it, there's something very intuitive about that response. When our lives turn out well, we tend to take the credit for it. We tend to preen ourselves and be proud of ourselves.

[ 6 : 55 ] And we think, well, I must be doing something right. That's why things are going so well. Do you remember that scene from the movie Sound of Music, you know, when Maria and Captain Van Trapp have fallen in love, and the Baroness has accepted the inevitable, and she has left the scene.

And the captain finds Maria in the gazebo, and they both admit their love for one another, and, of course, they're delighting each other, and they break into song because that's what you do in musicals.

And so they sing to each other. Do you remember that song? Here you are standing there loving me, whether or not you should, because somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good.

You know the end of that song, don't you? And, you know, what are they saying? They're saying, if things are going well for me right now, I must have been doing something good.

That's why things go well. And remember the next lines. Nothing comes from nothing. Nothing ever could. So somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good.

[ 8 : 15 ] And it's that view of tragedy that Jesus addresses here in Luke chapter 13. He says, Do you think those Galileans were worse sinners than the rest of the people in Galilee?

I tell you the truth. And unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. And apparently someone in the crowd has suggested that it was sin on the part of these people that had brought about the disaster that they were suffering.

And you see the same response again in verse 4. Jesus says, Of those 18 who died when the Tower of Siloam fell on them, do you think that they were more guilty than all the rest living in Jerusalem?

See, we tend to think that when things are going well for us, it's because I must have done something right. And when things don't go well for us, we respond, I don't get it.

Why is this happening? And of course, we don't have any songs from Rodgers and Hammerstein on the disasters that come to me because of the wrong things I do. But that mindset is there with us.

[ 9 : 31 ] In Hinduism, this is the whole idea behind karma. If I do good things, I create good karma. And if I create good karma, it'll come back to me sometime in the future.

And if I do bad, I create bad karma. And bad things will come upon me. And that kind of thinking is intuitive for us. It's built into us. There's something in the human heart and the way the human heart works and processes things that if things are going well, I want to take credit for it.

If things are going well, it's because I work hard and I'm clever. If my marriage is going well, it's because I'm a sensitive and caring husband. And if my children are doing well, it's because I'm a good parent.

If my investment strategies have panned out, then it's because I'm a clever and shrewd manager of my money. There's something in the human heart that wants to take credit for everything that goes well.

And nothing comes from nothing, nothing ever could. It's a way of saying if good has come into my life, then it's because I've done something good. It couldn't be grace.

[10:47] It couldn't be the kindness of God. It couldn't be God's goodness coming to me undeserved. When good things come to me, I want to take the credit.

And when bad things come to me, it's intuitive to think I must have done something wrong. What have I done wrong? Why am I being punished like this? And so the first response is that intuitive response to the human heart to take credit for good, to blame ourselves when there's bad.

So if the tower falls on me and there's disaster, somebody did something wrong. The other way that human beings respond to those kinds of disasters is to rail against God.

It's to rail against the inevitable, against the universe, if we're not Christians. It's to rail against the things that we cannot understand and cannot make sense out of so that people will ask the question, how could things happen like this?

I mean, where's God? Why would a good God allow bad things like this to happen to people? It's not fair. There's no justice in the universe.

[12:01] These people don't deserve for bad things to come to them. Or people that don't believe in God at all will say, well, it's just a crazy world.

The world's random. It's malevolent. You can't make any sense out of it. Life doesn't make sense. Go figure. And the idea underneath that notion is that life doesn't make sense.

And you cannot make sense out of bad things that happen because the universe is screwed up.

And things just don't work out the way they should work. And most people are, so we have this idea, most people are sincere.

They want to do the right thing. But because the world is so screwed up, bad things happen to good people. In fact, there was a rabbi and a New York rabbi in the 1980s wrote a book.

Rabbi Kushner, he wrote a book about this response. And the title was, Why Do Bad Things Happen to Good People? It was the number one best seller on the New York Times list back then.

[13:05] There was no Amazon list then. But the New York Times was the list. And it was the number one seller for over a year. And if you think about it, these two responses, the response of the moralist or the response of the fatalist, are the most common responses people have to disaster.

Either the victim has done something that's brought this disaster on himself, or the world is just crazy and doesn't make any sense and that's just the way it is.

And Jesus' response is really that both of these approaches to disaster are wrong. Because both of them are flawed. Neither of them will stand up.

One will make you a person who's proud and arrogant. And the other will make you a person who's despondent and fatalistic. But neither works as a satisfying way to think about disaster.

So what is Jesus' answer to this question? It has two parts. The first part, he says, no, things do not come to people because they were so bad and God is bringing retribution to them.

[14:21] Disasters that come into people's lives are not retribution. So that's Jesus' first answer.

Remember in John chapter 9 when Jesus healed the man who was born blind and the disciples come to him later and they say, who sinned?

Did he sin or did his parents sin? And Jesus' answer is no, God didn't bring this disaster on him as retribution against the family. He goes on to say it was brought so that you might see the power of God.

But Jesus says it's not valid to look at someone's tragedy and say they must really be terrible sinners. That tragic things are not retribution. God's mercy and his grace is so great that he doesn't bring instant retribution upon our sins.

In theological terms, that's the doctrine of forbearance, that God is patient with us. He's long-suffering with us. He bears with us in our sin, in our failure. And of course, if God did not do that, none of us would survive. None of us would live long enough to be saved if God instantly brought to us what our sins deserve.

[ 15 : 44 ] And his second response, so his first response is, no, it's not retribution. That's not the way God works. The second response is, repent or you will also perish.

That's an amazing response because if he had just said, it's not retribution for sins, don't you dare look at someone who is suffering and saying they're suffering because they were bad. It's not the way things work. If that's all Jesus said, we would be left with a world in which towers fall and it doesn't make any sense. But his next statement is so important for us to get a hold of. He says, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. He's saying, don't think that people who have experienced disaster are worse sinners and that's why disasters come upon them. We all deserve to have towers falling on us. That's what he's saying. Unless you repent, you will all perish. Now, this is shocking to us because Jesus' answer to, were they worse sinners, is we all deserve to have towers fall on us.

[ 17 : 02 ] If God, Jesus is saying, in fact, if God gave you what you deserve, he's not doing that, but if he were to give you what you deserve, the tower would fall on you.

And what Jesus is showing us here is something that we have trouble getting our minds around. That on the one hand, God is so kind and so gracious that he doesn't give us what we deserve instantly.

God in love sends his reign on the just and on the unjust. And if God would instantly give us what we deserve, then the towers would fall on all of us.

And we like that idea that God is merciful and gracious, but we have trouble embracing the truth that we all deserve to have the towers fall on us.

We all deserve God's wrath and indignation. And we want to tend to say that if we are loved, then we couldn't really be that bad. Or if we were as bad as the Bible said, then we couldn't be loved.

[ 18 : 07 ] And what Jesus is saying is both things are true of God. God is a God of love and mercy so that we can't look at disasters and say, see there, God is giving them what they deserve.

They were greater sinners than the rest of the Galileans. Nor can we say, we're clearly not as bad a sinner because no disasters come to us. Jesus says, no, we all deserve to have towers fall on us.

And unless you repent, the towers will fall on you. unless you repent, we will all likewise perish. Now you might be thinking, this is really harsh teaching.

Do you really mean, Ted, to say that we all deserve to have towers fall on us? Think of the mercy and kindness and forbearance of God in your life.

have you even gotten a small portion of the bad things that you deserve? Has every lie you ever told come back on you?

[ 19 : 20 ] Has every stupid choice you ever made resulted in problems and disaster? Has every friend you ever betrayed ceased to be a friend and not wanted anything to do with you and refused to forgive you?

Have you gotten a ticket every time you were driving too fast? Have you been busted every time you smoked pot or used some illegal drugs?

Have you been exposed every time you looked at something on the computer that you shouldn't be looking for? You get the point. You see, none of us have even gotten a small portion of what our sins deserve.

If we got what we deserve, we wouldn't be here. It's all mercy. It's all kindness from God who's a God who's calling us to repentance because God in His grace hasn't given us what our sins deserve.

And what God is saying to us in this passage is if you really saw your heart, if you really saw your pride, if you really saw your compulsive self-love, if you really saw your selfishness, if you really saw your anger, if you really saw your deception and the denial in your heart, if you really saw it as God saw it, you would know that you deserve to have the tower fall on you.

[ 21 : 02 ] If you could see things with accuracy, you could not bear to look at your heart and ever conclude that God owed you anything. It would be impossible.

God has already showered incredible mercy and kindness on all of us. the fact that we're here in our right minds, in the church, hearing the word of God, that one of the greatest privileges a human

being can experience is incredible evidence of mercy and kindness.

See, God has already shown us mercy. The gospel tells us, as Jack Miller was fond of saying, cheer up. We are more sinful and flawed than we ever wanted to think, and we are more loved and cherished and cared for than we ever dared to imagine.

And there's a recent biography of Jack Miller that's been written entitled, *Cheer Up*, because that was the phrase he was so well known for. And these two statements have to be believed and embraced if you're to understand either one of them.

Because if you're to understand, you can really only understand the love of God, begin to understand the love of God in light of having some sense of how corrupt your own heart is.

[ 22 : 23 ] And you can never bear to look at the corruption of your heart without understanding that God is a God who has incredible mercy. Instead, you will insist on denial, on blame shifting, unless you understand that in Jesus Christ there is such love, such grace, such mercy, such forgiveness, that you can come to him in spite of the fact that you are such a great sinner, you deserve the tower to fall on you.

You'll never fully understand the depths of his mercy, or understand his grace for sinners, or understand his patience, or his kindness, or his forbearance, unless you have some perception of how wicked and miserable you truly are.

sin. It's only when we see our sins as bitter that his grace will really be sweet. So Jesus is telling us here that we shouldn't blame people who have towers fall on them, or we shouldn't blame the God who runs the world.

We should recognize that we all deserve to have towers fall on us. And if you see that and understand it, then you understand what Jesus is telling us in this passage is that we are all called to repentance, that humility and repentance should be daily spiritual activity for all of us.

And there are so many places where God's word speaks of comfort. Obviously, there are many passages that talk about comfort, ways we can encourage people who have had towers fall on them, maybe physical towers, or work towers, or family towers, or financial towers have fallen you.

[ 24 : 15 ] And God is, the Bible is full of encouragements for those situations. But here, God is speaking to people who have not experienced those disasters, and he's talking to people who have seen the towers falling on others, and not on them.

And the passage is directed to people who are not at this moment experiencing disaster. Now, the clear implication of the passage is that if you are in a period in your life in which towers are not falling on you, you're in a time of spiritual danger.

Let me repeat that. If you're at a time in your life when towers are not falling on you, you're in a place of spiritual danger. Because we're sensitive to the dangers of being people who the towers are falling on.

We know the spiritual dangers of discouragement, of self-pity, of self-condemnation, of questioning the goodness of God during times of trials.

But this passage is addressing people who are not in the middle of disasters, who are only observing disasters in the lives of others. And implicit in Jesus speaking to them is the fact that there were no falling towers, that everything is going along well.

[ 25 : 34 ] Your family life is working well. Your job is going well. Your relationships are satisfying and meaningful. Those times are also a trial.

And beware of those times because there's spiritual dangers that attend those times when everything seems to be going swimmingly. And they can be times of spiritual blindness.

So what should you do in those times when no towers are falling on you? The passage tells us, doesn't it? We should repent.

There's no more important time to repent than a time when there is no disaster in my life. Times when you feel blessed.

Times when life seems to be going well. When family life is going well. When the job is going well. When things are turning out well for me. That's a time to repent.

[ 26 : 36 ] Because repentance is not primarily for the bad things that we do. It's not primarily just for breaking the rules. And you might think, well then what should I repent of?

The core of sin is not just breaking the rules. The core of sin is putting anything in the place of God. Now if you have been attending the growth groups, you know this is an issue we discussed in one of the questions in the past week.

The whole question of idolatry. It's the great exchange of Romans 1.25. We exchange the truth for a lie. And we worship and serve created things rather than the creator.

And the core of sin is making of God of something other than God. And this passage, the people Jesus is rebuking are people who are not suffering.

But who are self-righteous or smugly feeling superior to those who are suffering. And it's in those times when things are going well that we tend to subtly shift our hope from the grace and goodness of God to the things that are going well.

[ 27 : 53 ] And we can, those times when towers are not falling on us, we tend to think that it's because I'm doing well.

And we turn our hope away from the blesser to the blessings themselves. That's why it's so dangerous to be in a time when towers are not falling on you.

Because in those good times, we can shift our hope. We take joy in the blessings that we're enjoying. We're more enamored with the gifts than we are with the giver. And during good times, your heart's self-justification, your heart's self-righteousness grows.

Hey, my work is going pretty well. My family is going pretty well. My relationships are going well. And those times we shift our joy and our hope to those things rather than to God.

I was speaking with a pastor some time ago who had resigned from his church in the midst of controversy and in the midst of criticism. And he was hurting and confused.

[ 29 : 09 ] And I was seeking to counsel him and encourage him and his wife on the phone. And I have to confess that I thought at the time, I'm not having these problems because I'm really a better pastor than he is.

Do you see the pride in that? The incredible self-righteousness of that? I know why I'm not having these problems. I've learned how to navigate those challenges in church life.

How quick I was to think the explanation for his trials were his poor performance. Jesus is speaking to us. He's speaking to me when he says, unless you repent, you all perish.

When you're in times of blessing, it's time to repent. It's a time to say, God, I want my joy to be joy in you. I want your smile to be my delight.

I want your nearness to be my comfort. I want you. I want to repent of the ways I make things going well my delight.

[ 30 : 20 ] And I want to confess that I put my hope in other things. I want to repent of that. I want to cast myself afresh on you and on you alone.

And see, if you don't do that now during times of blessing and past, then when a season of adversity comes and towers are falling on every side, you'll be devastated because you were trusting those things that were the apparent mercies of God in your life and not trusting in God and the one who is the giver of every good gift.

So the time for repentance is when things are going well. And as I said a moment ago, repentance is not just for the bad things that we do. It's for trusting in the good things.

It's not just breaking the rules, but the disease of sin is such that breaking the rules is simply a way that I find something else to trust in, something to delight in, something to give me joy other than God.

I mean, why does a person drink or do drugs or chase down sketchy internet sites or commit adultery or lie or steal or cheat or gossip or do anything that is against God's rules for mankind?

[ 31 : 47 ] Why do we do that? We're trying to fill the emptiness of ourselves with something else. I'm trusting in something else to be my savior, something else to be my lord, something else to be my justification.

That default mode of the human heart is self-justification. And there's no time when the dangers of self-justification are greater than in those times of relative peace and security.

So when Jesus speaks to these people who don't have towers falling on them, he says, repent. We tend to think of repentance as something that we do when we come to faith in Christ at the beginning of the Christian walk.

But gospel repentance is for all the time. Because gospel repentance is not just repenting of the bad things. It's repenting of trusting in the good things. Gospel repentance is sweet and not bitter because it's not about being bummed out with myself and grudgingly acknowledge that some of the failures in my life is my own dumb fault.

That's not what gospel repentance is. See, gospel repentance is repenting of the tendency of my heart to trust in something other than God, to look for joy in something other than God.

[ 33 : 13 ] To feel a sense of satisfaction when things are going well that doesn't focus on God as the giver of every good and perfect gift. That doesn't focus on Christ alone as my hope.

And Jesus, who is speaking here, is absolute proof of the fact that a religious kind of understanding of the falling towers is wrong.

Because he was the best man who ever lived. And yet he got more pain and more suffering than anyone who ever lived.

And the reason you can know that if you repent, you'll be safe, that you can repent and you can entrust yourself to him is because the ultimate towers fell on him.

The ultimate tower of eternal judgment fell on him. The person who most deserved to hear, to have God hear him when he faced the ultimate tower of judgment falling on him, was turned away from by God at that moment.

[ 34 : 30 ] So that he bore the ultimate tower of divine justice so that it would never fall on anyone who repents and believes in Jesus Christ and trusts in God's atoning work, Christ's atoning work.

So when the little towers fall on us, we can take comfort because the ultimate tower will never fall on me because it fell on him. And so when towers are falling on me, I know I'll be okay because the ultimate tower of eternal judgment fell on Christ.

And when things are going well with me and everything's going fine and no towers are falling on me, the reason I can know that God will be good to me and not give me what I deserve is because God gave Jesus what he did not deserve so he could give me what I do not deserve.

He got something far worse than he deserved. And I got something far better than I deserved. One final truth I must draw your attention to is that if you don't repent, you will perish.

Everything can be dealt with through repentance and faith in Jesus Christ because the ultimate tower fell on him. But without repentance, nothing can be repaired.

[ 35 : 59 ] If you don't repent, you'll perish. And there's no sin so small that it doesn't require repentance. And no sin so large that repentance and faith in Jesus Christ cannot handle it.

And Jesus is calling you to him today. He's calling each one of us who are not having towers falling on us to repent and to embrace him.

To recognize that you deserve to have the ultimate towers of God's judgment fall on you and crush you to power, to powder. But if you come to him, he is full of grace and mercy.

He's calling us to repent. I was thinking of the words of that old hymn. Just as I am poor, wretched, blind, sight, riches, healing of the mind, yea, all I need in you to find, O Lamb of God, I come.

I come. We need to come to him. Let me pray with you. Father, we come in prayer recognizing that this passage speaks to us.

[ 37 : 20 ] It speaks of us and of our needs. And it speaks of us and our brokenness and our need for repentance.

So we pray, Father, that you would work the humility in us, that we would not have the response of the moralist and faith in us, that we would not have the response of the fatalist, but rather that we would have the response of a true supplicant to repent and to cast ourselves on God's mercy.

We ask this for Christ's great glory. Amen. Amen. Amen. Let's close by singing hymn 493.

493, stand as we sing, we have not known thee as we ought. 493. 493. We have not known thee as we ought, nor learn thy wisdom, grace, and power.

The things of earth have filled our blood, and triumphed our blood, and triumphed our blood, and triumphed our blood, and triumphed our blood.

[ 39 : 03 ] Lord, give us light thy truth to see, and make us wise in knowing thee.

We have not given thee as we ought, nor thou believe thee as we ought, nor thou believe thee as I also might, nor God in deed and word and thought, remembering that God was nigh.

Lord, give us faith to know thee near, and grant the grace of holy fear.

We have not loved thee as we ought, nor care that we are loved by thee.

Thy presence we have wholly sought, and we we long thy grace to see.

[ 40 : 25 ] Lord, give a pure and loving heart to feel and own the love thou art.

We have not served thee as we ought, alas the duties left undone.

The work with little fervor wrought, the battles lost or seriously won.

Forgive the zeal and give the might for thee to toil, for thee to fight.

When shall we know thee as we ought, and hear and love and serve the might?

[ 41 : 34 ] When shall we out of trial brought, be perfect in the land of night?

Lord, may we lay thy name prepared to see thy face and serve thee there.

Receive this benediction. Now to him who is able to do more abundantly than all we could ask or think, according to his power that is at work in us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever.

Amen.