

Cloudy with a Chance of Judgment

Luke: Certainty of the Truth

Luke 12:49-13:17

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Have you been following the news about Hurricane Harvey? It's scary and devastating. All of the news about Harvey made me think back to the way I responded to news of tornados when I was a kid.

I grew up in Garden City. One of the great things about western Kansas is you can see for miles without anything to block your view. No trees! No tall buildings. Just farmland for as far as the eye can see; which is great for being able to see twisters in the distance. As a kid, whenever there was a tornado warning, my brother and I would get on the roof to try to see if we could spot a tornado coming. It was sure a lot of fun! But it was pretty stupid as well.

My father-in-law Steve is very different than me in many ways. And he has a very different approach to storms. I'll never forget when Maggie and I went to Chicago to meet Matt and Deborah Stanghelle for the first time. We left our kids with Steve and Susan. And while we were gone there was a tornado warning in Wichita and a horrible storm. But we weren't nervous for our kids because they were with Safety Steve! We knew he'd take every measure to prepare for the storm and protect our kids. There would be no getting on the roof to watch the tornado. No, he bought a battery-powered weather radio, flashlights, and the whole nine yards. He shut the family into the basement bathroom, put our children in the bathtub, and shielded them with his life.

How do you react when the warning signs of a storm are heard on the news? Are you more like me or more like Steve? In Texas some have boarded up their homes and businesses and left town. Others have said they'll try their luck and ride it out.

In our passage this morning, we see that there's a spiritual storm alert that is loud and clear. Jesus gives the weather report: it is cloudy with a chance of judgment. The storm of judgment is coming. The sirens are on. What should we do to get ready? Should we get on the roof and try our luck? Or should we get in the bathtub in the basement? There are two responses and there are two results.

Jesus says there is protection from the storm available now, if we'll take it. Otherwise, we won't survive the storm of judgment.

Luke 12:49-13:9¹

⁴⁹"I came to cast fire on the earth, and would that it were already kindled! ⁵⁰I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished! ⁵¹Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. ⁵²For from now on in one house there will be five divided, three against two and two against three. ⁵³They will be divided, father against son and son against father, mother against daughter and daughter against mother, mother-in-law against her daughter-in-law and daughter-in-law against mother-in-law."

⁵⁴He also said to the crowds, "When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, 'A shower is coming.' And so it happens. ⁵⁵And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, 'There will be scorching heat,' and it happens. ⁵⁶You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?"

¹ Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® unless otherwise noted.

57“And why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? 58As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison. 59I tell you, you will never get out until you have paid the very last penny.”

13:1There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. 2And he answered them, “Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? 3No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. 4Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? 5No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish.”

6And he told this parable: “A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard, and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. 7And he said to the vinedresser, ‘Look, for three years now I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?’ 8And he answered him, ‘Sir, let it alone this year also, until I dig around it and put on manure. 9Then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good; but if not, you can cut it down.’”

This is the Word of the Lord.

This is my sermon in a sentence: The storm of judgment is coming; we should be prepared.

To divide my sermon this morning I'll begin by explaining the first part of this sentence. Then I'll give three ways we should be prepared for the coming judgment.

THE STORM OF JUDGMENT IS COMING (12:49-56)

Let's start with verses 49-56 and the fact that the storm of judgment is coming. In verse 56, Jesus says, “You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present times?” What he's saying is that people are pretty good at knowing when bad weather is coming, but they're not as clear on the fact that judgment is coming.

Even before there was Doppler radar, ancient Jews knew how to predict the weather. If there was a cloud in the west, over the Mediterranean, they knew that rain was coming and that flooding may follow (12:54). If there was a hard wind blowing out of the south, from the desert, they knew that it was going to heat up quick (12:55). In fact, the temperature can rise as much as thirty degrees in an hour when there's a strong south wind.² The presence of clouds or wind meant bad weather may be coming. But the Jews failed to see that the coming of Jesus meant that bad judgment was coming. They didn't realize how cloudy their future looked!³

Jesus says that there's something way hotter than desert heat that's coming. He came to cast fire on the earth (12:49). And there was something far worse than floodwaters coming. He came to bring the waters of judgment (12:50).⁴

Earlier in Luke, John the Baptist announced that Jesus would come to baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire (Lk. 3:16). He said, “His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire” (Lk. 3:17). What this means is that when Jesus came, he came to separate those who belong to him and those who don't. He came to provide forgiveness and eternal life to those who believe in him. He came to

² Green, Joel B. *The Gospel of Luke*. The new international commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1997.

³ Garland, David E. *Luke*. Zondervan exegetical commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 2011.

⁴ Bock, Darrell L. *Luke Volume 2: 9:51-24:53*. Baker exegetical commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Books, 1994.

baptize them with the Holy Spirit. But he came to bring judgment to those who reject him. He came to baptize them with fire, the eternal and unquenchable fire of judgment.

There would be a great division. This is drawn out in verses 51-53. “Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth? No, I tell you, but rather division.” Now Jesus is using a little bit of hyperbole here. There’s certainly a sense in which Jesus did come to bring peace on earth. Zechariah predicted that Jesus would guide God’s people into the way of peace (Zech. 1:79). At Jesus’ birth, the angels announced that there would be peace on earth among those with whom God is pleased (Lk 2:14). These verses are referring to peace with God. Those who place their trust in Jesus can have peace with God. And that peace is made possible through the baptism that Jesus underwent at the cross. That’s why Jesus says, “I have a baptism to be baptized with, and how great is my distress until it is accomplished” (12:50).

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem (Lk. 9:51), where he will die for the sins of his people. There’s a judgment that is coming for all people. But before it comes, Jesus took God’s judgment on himself on the cross.⁵ And those who believe in Jesus and trust his work on the cross for them can have peace with God. They can be forgiven and have eternal life. And they won’t face God’s judgment of wrath, because it has fallen on Jesus.

But not everyone will receive him. John tells us, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God”; those who were born of the Holy Spirit (John 1:11-12).

Everybody gets the same weather report. But not everybody responds in the same way. Some people try to weather the storm on their own, while others look for protection in Jesus. Those who trust in Jesus will have peace with God. But not everyone will—those who reject him won’t.

And as a result, there will be a great division. There will be a division between those who belong to Jesus and those who don’t. And that line of division will cut through even the most intimate of relationships: father and son, mother and daughter, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law (12:53).

This is the spiritual weather report. Jesus is saying that we need to have our spiritual weather radar up. We need to be spiritually sensitive to the fact that judgment is coming so that we can prepare.

And how do we prepare for the storm of judgment that is coming. Jesus gives us three ways to prepare in the verses that follow.

SETTLE YOUR ACCOUNTS WITH GOD NOW, NOT LATER. (12:57-59)

First, we should settle our accounts with God now, not later. This is seen in verses 57-59.

In these verses, Jesus gives us a picture of a man who’s being dragged into court by his accuser. It appears as though this man owes his accuser a great financial debt. There doesn’t seem to be any question that he actually owes his accuser the money. So what will happen? His accuser will take him before the judge. The judge will find him guilty. Then he’ll be handed over to the bailiff. And the bailiff will throw him in prison. And he’ll never get out until he’s paid the last penny.⁶

⁵ Bock

⁶ Bock

In the ancient world, you couldn't file for bankruptcy. If you couldn't pay your debts, you got thrown into prison. And in prison they would likely beat you. This punishment was meant to elicit the sympathy of a family member who might pay the debt. But in reality, hardly anybody ever got out of prison, because most people were poor in those days and there was no way to earn money when you were in prison.⁷ They weren't able to pay their debts.

So Jesus says the man would be better off if he would settle his debts out of court. Pay a smaller amount before you get to court. If this one goes to court, it won't end well. Make a good judgment now so you won't face the bad judgment later (13:1).⁸

Some people want to try their luck with a hurricane or a tornado. Some people want to try their luck in court. Some people want to try their luck with God. But Jesus wants us to know this. The storm that is coming is not one we'll survive without protection. The court trial that is coming is not one where we'll be let off the hook.

Our sins are great. We owe God a great debt. We're guilty. We won't make it through his judgment. Our only hope is to settle our account with God now, not later. And the only way for us to settle our account is to trust in Jesus now. He's the only one who can pay our debt. We're not able on our own.

Jesus is fully God and fully man. He had to be fully human to be *qualified* to pay for the sins of man. He had to be fully God to be *able* to pay for the sins of the world.⁹ His work on the cross is the only way our debt can be paid. And we need to settle our account with God now. We won't make it in the final judgment.

There are many people today who want to wait to respond to Jesus. They're having fun now. They like having control of their life now. They'll wait till they're older to settle their account with God. But tomorrow may never come.

It's better to lose your life now in order to find it, than to continue trying to hold on to your life now. If you don't bow the knee to Jesus now, you will lose your life in the judgment.

Settle your account with God now, not later. Trust in Jesus today, not tomorrow. That's the first way to prepare for the coming judgment.

REPENT OR PERISH. (13:1-5)

The second is this: we should repent, or we will perish. This is found in chapter 13, verses 1-5.

Right after Jesus tells the crowds that they need to settle their accounts with God now, before they face the judge, a couple of guys bring up a couple of "what if" stories. They start by telling him about some Galileans that Pilate killed as they were offering sacrifices (13:1). Presumably they also told him about a tower in Siloam that fell on a group of people and killed them (13:4). They want Jesus to explain why these bad things happened.

⁷ Bock

⁸ Cf. Green

⁹ Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1994.

The problem of evil has always been a roadblock for people's faith. When bad things happen to people, some people question God. Others say that God is using these bad things as judgment against bad people. We see this when disaster comes at the hands of people. Think of 9/11. Some said, "Doesn't 9/11 show us that God is not good or not powerful?" Others said, "9/11 shows us that God was judging our nation for our horrible sinfulness." We see something similar when natural disasters hit. Some say "God is not good," and others say, "God is judging us."

I wonder if the people listening to Jesus were doing something like this. Jesus spoke of the judgment of God that would come on them. And they responded by taking the focus off of themselves. They were judging others, talking about how sinful they were. Or maybe they were even judging God.

It's interesting. Jesus doesn't even address their question. He turns things back on them, twice. He says, "Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (13:3, 5). He turns things back to the judgment that is facing them and what they must do to prepare. They must repent or they will face God's judgment without hope.

Once, C.S. Lewis was asked to write about the biggest obstacle to evangelism in the modern world. This is what he said.

The greatest barrier I have met is the almost total absence from the minds of my audience of any sense of sin.... The early Christian preachers could assume in their hearers...a sense of guilt. Thus the Christian message was in those days unmistakably the [Gospel], Good News. It promised healing to those who knew they were sick. We have to convince our hearers of the unwelcome diagnosis before we can expect them to welcome the news of the remedy.

The ancient man approached God (or even the gods) as the accused person approaches his judge. For the modern man, the roles are quite reversed. He is the judge: God is in the dock. [Man] is quite a kindly judge; if God should have a reasonable defense for being the god who permits war, poverty, and disease, he is ready to listen to it. The trial may even end in God's acquittal. But the important thing is that man is on the bench and God is in the dock.¹⁰

Whether it's terrorist attacks or hurricanes. Whether it's the massacre of the Jews or the tower of Siloam. We live in a time when people want to stand in judgment of God or in judgment of others. Jesus wants us to focus on ourselves. He wants us to know that we're the ones who are sinners before God. And we're the ones who will be judged by God. We're in the dock. God's on the bench.

If we want to make it through his judgment, we need to repent of our sin or else we will be punished for our sins. Now is not the time for theological debates. Now is the time for an altar call. Jesus is calling us to respond to his weather report. Jesus is calling us to respond to him. Repent or perish. That's the second way to prepare for the storm of judgment.

BEAR FRUIT IN KEEPING WITH REPENTANCE. (13:6-9)

The third is this. We should bear fruit in keeping with our repentance. This is found in the parable of the barren fig tree in verses 6-9.

¹⁰ Lewis, C. S., and Walter Hooper. "12. God in the Dock." in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014.

The parable is simple. A man had a fig tree that wasn't bearing fruit. It was taking up space in his vineyard and not producing any figs. It only seemed natural that he would cut it down and plant something in its place. But the vinedresser asked for another year. He planned on trying fertilizer. If the fertilizer worked, there wouldn't be a problem. If it didn't work, then it could be cut down and thrown into the fire.

The fig tree clearly represents Israel. They weren't bearing fruit. They didn't bear much fruit at any point in history. And now, even after Jesus came, they were still not bearing fruit. They weren't responding to Jesus in faith and repentance. The conclusion is clear as well. If they won't respond to Jesus, they need to be cut down.

Now the Jews thought that they were people of faith. They believed in God. And they thought they lived lives of repentance. They were good Jews. But there was no fruit. Their lives didn't match up with their faith. Their lack of fruit proved that they didn't have true faith and true repentance.

While this parable was mainly aimed at the Jews in the first century who were rejecting Jesus, it still applies to us today. There are many people in the church who say they believe in Jesus. They say they have repented of their sins and trusted Christ for salvation. But there's no evidence. Their lives don't line up with their faith and repentance.

During first service, we had the joy of witnessing the baptism of Andrew Coltrain. In his baptism testimony he shared a story that he heard from Paul Washer. It illustrates this point perfectly.

Washer asked his audience to imagine that he had showed up late to speak that night. And when he was asked why he was late, he would explain that he got a flat tire on his way there. And, as he was standing on the side of the road changing the tire, a logging truck came by and ran him completely over. He went on and asked his audience to imagine that there were no visible signs of him being hit by the truck: no broken bones, no scrapes or bruises, not even any dirt on his clothes. He said that if that happened, nobody would believe that he was telling the truth. You can't be run over by a logging truck and show no signs of the incident.

Washer then drove the point home. How much more of a liar do we make ourselves out to be when we claim to have been brought out of sin and given salvation by God and our lives show little evidence that this ever actually happened.

Our Statement of Faith says, "We believe that God's justifying grace must not be separated from His sanctifying power and purpose." The book, *Evangelical Convictions*, which is a commentary on our Statement of Faith, tells us what this means. It says this, "Without some evidence of God's sanctifying work in a person's life, we have no reason to believe that person who makes a Christian profession has, in fact, been truly justified by God's grace. We are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone, but that saving faith never stands alone. It is always accompanied by the fruit of the Spirit."

As God's grace works in us it will produce fruit. Does your life show evidence that God's grace is at work in you? Earlier in Luke, John the Baptist calls us to "bear fruit in keeping with our repentance." "Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire" (3:8-9). Does your life bear fruit in keeping with repentance? Jesus is asking us: to inspect the fruit. That will tell us if we have, in fact, repented. Paul admonishes us: "Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith" (2 Cor. 13:5).

That's the third way we prepare for the coming storm of judgment.

God Is Patient

This passage brings us a very severe weather warning. The storm of judgment is coming. But here's the good news. While this storm *is* coming, there's still time to prepare. The fig tree was given a year to respond before it was cut down. And we're given time now to prepare. We're given time to settle our account with God now. We're given time now to repent before we perish. And we're given time to bear fruit in keeping with our repentance.

There's a reason that God's judgment is delayed.

In 2 Peter 3:8-12 we learn the reason: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed. Since all things are thus to be dissolved, what sort of people ought you to be in lives of holiness and godliness, waiting for and hastening the coming of the day of God..."

The storm is coming. It will come like a thief. But today is the day of salvation from the storm. Don't delay. Respond to Jesus today. Don't try to weather the storm alone. Fall on Jesus now. And then live lives of fruitfulness knowing that the day of the Lord is coming.