

As I am quickly learning, there are certain principles you need to learn for disciplining children. And among them is the idea that punishments need to happen quickly. You can't let a small child disobey for 30 minutes and then finally tell them to stop. You can't tell a small child to stop and then wait 30 minutes to put them into time out. It just doesn't work.

Small children need to have an immediate consequence to their actions. If they don't, they'll never understand what they've done wrong. They'll never understand the reason for their punishment. The whole process of discipline just falls apart.

This is all fairly intuitive to us, I think. Sure, there are books and websites and classes that will teach it to you. But most parents figure it out eventually on their own.

It's so intuitive, that we sometimes try to apply the same principle to God. Because God is our heavenly Father. He is our creator and divine judge over the living and the dead. He demands justice and righteousness. And he punishes the wicked. We know this. We believe it with all our hearts.

And so we look around the world at our friends and neighbors. At our state and our country. And we see people doing things that are incredibly sinful. That are unjust and unrighteous. And are just plain wicked.

And we say, “God, you need to punish them. Right now! Quickly! Because if you don't do it quickly, then they'll never learn. They're acting like children. They need to be treated like children. And children need to be disciplined quickly.”

But he doesn't. The unjust and the unrighteous and the wicked continue to be unjust and unrighteous and wicked. They even sometimes prosper in their sinfulness. And that drives us crazy.

But we keep doing it. We keep looking at the world in those terms. And, in fact, we'll even do the inverse as well.

We'll see someone dealing with calamity and suffering. Disease or disaster or heartache. And we'll say, “Aha! God is punishing them. They did something wrong. They have cancer... maybe they smoked. They had a house fire... well, if they had managed their money better, they'd have insurance for that. Their spouse is divorcing them... I wonder if they had an affair.”

It's human nature to do it. Even if we don't believe that the hand of God actually came down from heaven and struck them with divine wrath. We're still inclined to believe that only bad things happen to bad people.

Jesus deals with this exact question in our Gospel lesson today. A group of people come to him and start talking about the bad things that have happened to several of their neighbors recently. Both incidents are really quite tragic.

The first involves Pontius Pilate. Yes, that Pontius Pilate. The same one that signs off on Jesus' crucifixion. Pilate was known for being a really, really sick man. Cruel in ways we can't imagine.

And he decides one day to punish the Jews by taking the blood of some Galilean men who were executed and throwing it in with the animals being sacrificed at the Temple in Jerusalem. Essentially, in the eyes of the Jews, he turns them into human sacrifices. One of the most perverse, unlawful things for any Jew to be involved in.

Second, they ask him about a tower in the town of Siloam. A building with 18 people inside it that suddenly collapsed without warning. Maybe it was constructed poorly. Maybe there was an earthquake. We don't know. All we know is that when it falls, it kills everyone inside.

So we have these two groups of senseless deaths. People who died, at first glance, for no reason at all. At least, no reason that was their own fault.

But the people who hear about this still try to fit this into a sense of divine punishment and discipline. What did they do wrong to deserve being made into human sacrifices? What sin did they commit that God brought that tower down on their heads?

But Jesus doesn't say what we expect. He doesn't say, "Oh, no they didn't do anything wrong." Nor does he say, "Oh, they did plenty wrong. You just didn't know about it."

No, instead, he turns the question back on those who are asking it. And he says, "They didn't sin anymore than you have sinned. So repent."

And if that sounds a little dark and ominous, then you're hearing it correctly. It is dark and ominous. That's the point.

Jesus is basically saying, "Bad things do happen to bad people. And the world is full of bad people. Including you. So just be glad nothing bad has happened to you... yet."

Well that's cheerful. So what you're saying, Jesus, is that we're all sinners. God will punish all of us. And there is nothing we can do about it?

Yeah, that's it in a nutshell. And, really, that's the exact same message in our Old Testament lesson. *"When the righteous turns from his righteousness and does injustice, he shall die for it... I will judge each of you according to his ways."*

And in the Epistle. *"We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble, as some of them did and were destroyed by the Destroyer."*

You see, the lesson here is not that God doesn't punish us. He does. The lesson here is not that we don't suffer in this life because of our sin. We do.

The lesson here is that God works in his own time and his own way. We are not 5 year olds that he punishes the moment we do something wrong. Every one of our sins carries with it the lifetime penalty of death. And for those sins, every one of us will die and be judged... eventually. When God chooses for us to die and be judged.

I know, it's not the happiest news you've ever heard. But it's the truth. And, fortunately, it isn't the whole story. The whole story is in that last parable that Jesus tells. The parable of the fig tree.

It's kind of an odd story. Here's the owner of a vineyard who has planted a fig tree, who expects to harvest figs from it. Nothing unusual there. The problem is that he expects to harvest figs from it quickly. Only three years after it's planted.

And from what I've read, three years is the bare minimum that a fig tree needs to grow in order to bear fruit. But many of them need four or five or six years before they start producing fruit. The vineyard owner has an impossibly high standard for his fig tree. He expects perfection from it. And it isn't perfect.

So the vinedresser stops him. And convinces him to give the tree more time. Let me work with it. Let me fertilize it. Let me do everything I can for it. If it still hasn't produced fruit after I do all of that, then, yeah, it's probably hopeless. You can go ahead and cut it down. But don't give up on it yet.

We are the fig tree and Jesus is our vinedresser. He has held back his Father's wrath. He has done everything for us. And we who are baptized with his blood have born fruit.

The fruit of faith. The fruit of repentance. The fruit of new life. We will not simply be chopped down and thrown into the fire. When the end comes for each of us, it will be a new beginning in God's glory.

But that's not true of everyone. Because God's judgement does eventually come. Maybe not in five minutes, or five hours, or five days, or five years, or five decades. But it will come.

Every day that an unbeliever we know is alive is a day that Jesus is holding back his Father's wrath. It's a day that he's preparing their hearts for the message we can give them. It's a day that they can begin to bear the fruit of repentance and faith as well.

We look around at the world and we say, "God, they're evil. Why don't you punish them?" Or, sometimes, "You punished them, therefore they must have been evil."

But Jesus doesn't look at the world like that. He doesn't want us to look at the world like that. He wants us to look around and say, "God, I'm evil. And you saved me. You let me bear good fruit for you."

"So please... hold back your punishment for another day. Show me someone like me who can still be saved. Give me another opportunity to show them your love. Give me another opportunity to bring the vinedresser, Your Son, to them. And by His grace and mercy, give them another opportunity to bear fruit for you." Amen.