

# Luke 13

by John Nelson Darby

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*John Nelson Darby's sermon on Luke 13 emphasizes the call to repentance and the distinction between God's grace and His governmental judgment on Israel and the world.*

**Scripture:** Exodus 34:5-7, Psalm 118:1, Psalm 132:13-14, Ezekiel 15:6, Matthew 7:19, Luke 13:3, Luke 13:24, John 16:2, Romans 11:5, Galatians 6:7

**Topics:** "Repentance", "Judgment and Grace"

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## Description

John Nelson Darby discusses the distinction between the church of God and His governmental dealings with the world, emphasizing that while grace is evident in the church, God's justice and mercy are displayed in His governance. He uses Luke 13 to illustrate that judgment is imminent for those who do not repent, highlighting the need for personal accountability and the consequences of sin, as seen in the examples of Israel and David. Darby points out that the fig tree symbolizes Israel, which has failed to bear fruit, and he warns that without repentance, judgment will come. He also addresses the hypocrisy of the religious leaders who prioritize the law over compassion, and he concludes with the hope of grace for Israel's future repentance and restoration. Ultimately, he emphasizes the importance of recognizing Christ's authority and the necessity of faith in Him for salvation.

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## Transcript

There are two great principles or subjects in connection with man on the earth - the church of God as such, and the government of God in the world; and these are very distinct. In the church the riches of His grace are manifested. In His governmental dealings we see the display of His justice, mercy, and goodness. An example of God's governmental power as to Israel we have in Exodus 34:5-7. This is not sovereign grace, bringing a soul to eternal life, but government of the same character as we may see every day around us. If a man wastes his fortune or ruins his health by intemperance of any kind, his children suffer for it. "What a man soweth, that shall he also reap." See God's dealings with David, because of the matter of Uriah. "The sword shall never depart from thine house . . . Thou didst it secretly, but I will do this thing before all Israel . . . Because by this deed thou hast given great occasion to the enemies of Jehovah to blaspheme, the child that is born unto thee shall surely die." And we know that this judgment for his sin was accomplished in David's after-history. This is not grace, but government. God deals in the same way with a saint now - that is, both in grace and righteousness.

126 In Luke 13 we see the Jews had this thought of government in their minds, nor was it wrong in itself. They thought that God could not let such a guilty fellow live as this Pilate, who had been mingling the blood of the Galileans with their sacrifices. But Christ brings them to a new principle by which to judge, and tells them judgment was coming upon themselves if impenitent. "Suppose ye that these Galileans were sinners," etc.? "I tell ye nay, but except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish." It refers to judgment in the government of this world, which would overtake all who repented not. They had God's Son there, and they were practically rejecting Him; and how many of the Jews had their blood mingled by Titus? Christ had said to the Jews at the close of chapter 12, "When thou goest with thine adversary to the magistrate . . . give diligence that thou mayest be delivered from him, lest he hale thee to the judge," etc.; but of the state of the Jews, who were under God's dealings and would not escape till the chastenings of the Lord upon them are complete. Thus it is very evident that this passage refers simply to God's government of His people. Natural conscience ought to have told these Jews not to reject the Messiah, for God was going all the way along with them to the magistrate, dealing with them in patient grace, and He would say to them, If you do not repent and be reconciled, judgment must come upon you, when it will be the same with you as with those whom ye think to be such sinners.

Verse 6. The Lord is dealing here with the same state of things. The fig-tree is Israel, and God comes seeking fruit in them and finding none. In the gospel there is this difference, that grace, instead of seeking, sows in order to produce fruit. He found none, and the sentence therefore upon it is, "Cut it down." He not only found it useless, but His vineyard was encumbered by it. "The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles through you." Then comes in Christ's mission. Last of all "He sent his Son." God had planted a vineyard and pruned it, but there was no fruit. Then a new gardener comes in, and He says, "Spare it this year also, till I shall dig about it," etc. It must bring forth fruit then, or be dugged up. He has done as He said, but still there is no fruit.

127 Verse 11. The woman with an infirmity, whom Jesus heals on the sabbath day, brings out another thing that was working in their hearts, in the place of the law which left room for hypocrisy. They would lead an ox or an ass from the stall on the sabbath, but they would not bear that a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan had bound these eighteen years, should be loosed on that day. One of the infirmities of man's mind is to use possessed truth to resist revealed truth. Paul was an example of this - "as touching the righteousness of the law, blameless"; still he "thought he ought to do many things contrary to Jesus of Nazareth." So also Christ says of the Jews in John 16, "These things will they do unto you," etc. They were using the name of the one true God, which had been given them ("Jehovah thy God is one God") to reject the Son; for when Christ came in humiliation, they would not receive Him. Orthodoxy is used to stop the reception of truth. When truth is the ground of a man's standing, it gains him credit; but when a new truth comes in, it puts faith to the test. Truth that requires faith to walk by is resisted by the natural heart; and the root of this is hypocrisy. The ruler of the synagogue said, "There are six days in which men ought to work; in them come and be healed, and not on the sabbath day." But he ought to have known that the Lord of the sabbath was there; for that single word "daughter of Abraham" ought to have told him who He was that stood there. The Lord answered him, "Thou hypocrite!" A solemn word this!

Verse 18. He goes on to shew what the kingdom will be like when the king is rejected and gone away. A kingdom without a king! who is sitting on His Father's throne, until He comes to take His own throne. The kingdom is like a little seed thrown into the ground, which springs up and becomes a great tree - just what we call Christendom. This fills up the gap between His rejection and His coming again. There is no power exercised while the King is away; as in Mark's Gospel it sprang up, men knew not how. When the harvest

is ripe, He will come again. He sowed the first time, but He will put in the sickle the second time. He is looking for heavenly fruit now; but when He comes, He will find Christendom a great tree with the fowls of the air lodging in its branches. Pharaoh was a great tree; Nebuchadnezzar a greater still: they were the high and mighty ones of the earth, representatives of worldly power. Even Israel, which had been planted a noble vine, wholly a right seed, was bearing no fruit. Therefore, as it is said in Ezekiel 15, "what is the vine-tree more than any tree," if it bears no fruit? It is only fit to be burned. Otherwise useless if it does not bear fruit, it only makes the best firewood.

128 Verse 21. Here the kingdom is likened unto leaven, and leaven is that which spreads throughout the whole mass, and also gives a character to that in which it works. It is nominal profession of Christianity which is spread into a vast system. There is not a word here about the Holy Ghost, but about the effect in the world. In Matthew 13, in the first parable, there is individual result, and not the kingdom spoken of. In the first three of the six similitudes, it is the public appearance; in the last three, the inward character is described.

Verse 23. "Are there few that be saved?" The word used here is the same word that through the LXX signifies a remnant, or "such as shall be saved." The question really was as to whether this remnant would be few or many, who were to be spared when the judgment came; but, this being a mere idle question, the Lord does not answer it, but says to them: -

Verse 24. "Strive to enter in at the strait gate." The strait gate was receiving Christ at that time - the real but narrow entrance of faith in Him and conversion to God. There will be some to come and knock when the door is closed, to whom He will say, "I know you not whence ye are": you are not changed, Strive to enter in at the strait gate, through which Christ goes before you - that is, rejection. "Many shall seek to enter into [not at the strait gate] and shall not be able."

It is most simple when we see the rejection of Christ. Those who reject Him in the day of His humiliation will themselves be rejected in the day of His glory; and, instead of being His companions in the kingdom, they will be thrust out. The unbelieving Jews will see the Gentiles come into the glory of the kingdom, while they, remaining in unbelief, will be cast out.

129 Verse 31. The Pharisees say to Him, "Get thee out and depart, for Herod will kill thee." Now Herod was an Idumaeon, and what right had such a stranger to be their king? What had he to do with the promises to Israel? Nothing. In Herod we have a figure of the wilful king. He tried to kill Christ, and therefore the character of opposition-king belongs to him. He had no faith in God's purposes or in Christ's glory; and the Lord says, "Go and tell that fox." I shall do My Father's will till the moment come for Me to be glorified. I am here as long as My Father wills, and then I shall be perfected. The power of God must be fully known. What divine contempt for the apostate king, but what perfect human obedience combined! "Nevertheless I must walk to-day, and to-morrow, and the day following; for it cannot be that a prophet perish out of Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets," etc. After all, Jerusalem is the guilty place. Let the Edomite king do and say what he will, it is "the holy city" that is guilty, for it was nearest to Himself. The nearer I am to God, if I reject Him, the worse is the sin and the more dreadful the judgment. See Psalm 132. "The Lord hath chosen Zion," etc., and Psalm 88:65-68, the same election of Zion. Christ does not put the sin upon them till they have rejected both Him and His Father. He brings out a purpose of grace in these closing verses. The old man is condemned and profitless - Israel and all of us. "Can the Ethiopian change his skin or the leopard his spots?" The gospel begins with seeking and saving that which was lost. Here we see that, though they have rejected Him in responsibility, He has not rejected

them in the day of His grace. Grace shines out in His yet choosing Judah.

Notice how the divine person of the Lord comes out here. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered," etc. A prophet could not say this, and He was a prophet too, and more than a prophet: He was Jehovah, for none but Jehovah could gather Israel; as "He that scattereth Israel will gather him." Israel under responsibility had rejected Jehovah; but Jehovah will own them when He comes in sovereign grace. How blessed is the way! The circumstances through which He passed in His path down here did bring out in a far brighter way who He was than any text to prove it, important as that is in its place. For suppose you believed there was a God, yet if He were to come down by your very side and say I am, would not this be a very different thing? Christ was the humbled man all through His path down here, for He was ever the servant of all; yet when the service was done, and rejected as of no use, His glory shines out. "Before Abraham was, I am." See in this chapter of Luke the connection between verses 33, 34, and 35 as illustrative of this. "How often would I have gathered thy children . . . your house is left unto you desolate . . . until ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord."

130 The complaint in the Psalms is, that there is none to say "How long" - none to count on the faithfulness of God to His people. See Psalm 74:9. This expression is often used in the Psalms and in Isaiah 6 and refers to chastening, not retribution. How long is Israel to stumble and fall? (Rom. 11). In Isaiah 6 the prophet, having uttered these words, "Make the heart of this people fat," etc., taken up by the Lord in John 12, then says, "how long?" He waits in faith, and reckons upon God, and having God's mind, he cannot believe that God will give them up, and therefore asks, "how long" is the chastening to continue? To which the Lord answers, "There shall be a great forsaking in the midst of the land, but in it there shall be a tenth, and the holy seed shall be the substance therefore." The sap is still there, though there are no leaves. So in Psalm 118, "He hath chastised me sore, but he hath not given me over unto death." In the same way the Lord does not say, "Your house is left unto you desolate, and therefore you shall not see me again." No; but He says, "Ye shall not see me until ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord." He can give, as Jehovah, the answer in grace, and when He gives repentance to Israel, then He will send Jesus, whom until that day the heavens have received. Meanwhile our connection with Him comes in. The prophet spake only of earthly things, though divine; but to the church it is, "Holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling," and "hath made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus": that gives security. How did I get there? By virtue of Christ. He is my tide. My desire is to be acquainted with this, that I am one with Christ in heaven-an everlasting portion. This the Holy Ghost seals upon my soul, and would have me enjoy more and more.

131 When Israel is brought to repentance, "the stone which the builders rejected" will be "the head of the corner," and owned of them. They will say, "O give thanks unto the Lord, for his mercy endureth for ever." Alas! they will receive another first; but when their hearts are turned, and grace works, they will use the language of Psalm 119 and find the expression of the law within their hearts; and when faith is thus exercised, and their hearts are broken, and open to receive Him, then He Himself will come to them. If there is not a prophet to say "How long?" Jehovah will give the answer. He never changes; and though He executes judgment and righteousness, grace is found in Him still. "When the Son of man cometh, shall he find faith on the earth?" Well, if there be not faith to be found, or a prophet to say "How long?" there is One who will lay up, in His treasures, something for faith to lay hold on, in the sovereignty of His own grace.

Thus we see Jehovah in that humbled One, and how He is able to rise above all iniquity. How precious does all this make Jesus to us! and we are one with Him. May we learn of Him, and so follow Him, remembering that all that is left outside the narrow way is the flesh and evil.

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