

I appreciate people like Ken Bailey who have spent years of their lives researching and trying to discover how other cultures hear and understand the stories of Jesus, especially the parables. Ken has spent years living in the Middle East and going to remote villages, telling the parables and listening to what the people heard and how they interpret the story. We in the Western world need to learn that our way is not the only way to hear the stories and occasionally the way others hear it may be more correct than ours.

We all hear things differently. Look at us in the United States. Easterners think differently than Westerners and then there is the South? Listening to how others hear the story may help us to understand the story better.

In today's New Testament reading we have an encounter and a parable. Two incidents and two images with maybe the same response from Jesus. The first asks two questions: Whose sin is worse? Did they suffer because of their sins? It was a legitimate question in a time when sin, prosperity and health were often thought to be connected. It is still an idea brought up today. Let there be a natural disaster, etc. and you do not have to wait long for someone to say that it was God's judgment on... Jesus was asked, "Who sinned the most? And, "Who was the most guilty?"

Ken Bailey points out in his book, Through Peasant Eyes, that most of those in the Middle East who hear this story sense a trap — this is a political, not a religious question. How Jesus answers will be held against him by the other party or other side. It is a no-win situation. There is no answer that will satisfy both sides. How does Jesus get out of this one?

He simply tells the questioners, "YOU need to repent." Not the others, but you. Why are you even asking the question? Are you trying to justify your position? Are you trying to move your guilt over to someone else? Are you trying to make God take a certain political position? Each of you should first examine yourself and make sure you know why you believe and act the way you do. You, too, need grace and forgiveness as much as those you are asking about.

Jesus then tells a story, a parable. Now, as in most parables there are things that the audience would understand that we may not. For example, How old is the tree in question? Probably around nine or ten years. The tree would have been given three years to grow after it was first planted, to establish itself in the soil. Then its fruit would have been forbidden for three (3) years (Lev. 19:23). The next year the fruit would have been dedicated to the Lord (Lev. 19:24). It would be only after that that the fruit would be available to be eaten. And, Luke says that the Master had waited three years for the fruit! He had been disappointed for three years now - enough is enough. So, to dig it out and replace it would start the cycle all over again.

The vinedresser, though, asks for more time. Let me work on it a little longer. He wants to put some manure around it (would cause the audience to chuckle). Jesus is referring to the religious leaders of the day. They need something spread around them - only place in NT this word is used! Not what they were expecting to hear. There was no praising of the leadership nor was there judgment. The vinedresser asks for forgiveness rather than judgment. Give me more time.

Most translations say "another year". However, the identical phrase is found in I Timothy 6:19 and is translated, "for the coming age". Or, for the future. The phrase does not carry a specified time frame. The emphasis is again on forgiveness and grace rather than judgment.

Here we have two calls for mercy, forgiveness and grace. The first is that we first look at ourselves. Do you recall Paul's words in I Cor. 11:28? He writes that as we come to Table, as we come to worship, our first priority is "self-examination". Paul calls for self-examination as worshippers come to Communion. We are not to look around the room and see what other sinners are there and how bad they are. We are to look deeply into ourselves - where is our heart? What is the condition of our heart? It is easy to see the misdeeds of others while justifying our own.

Paul calls for us to look deeply inside and then give thanks to God for the grace we have received. Remember that we used to be outside the circle. There were barriers keeping us out. The barriers that were used to keep us out have now been broken down. We are to remember and give thanks for what God has done for us in Christ. God came to us with redemption, forgiveness, mercy, grace, hope and love.

God's grace came even when we were not producing any fruit. God's grace is to be extended to all who are willing to receive it. Thus, if anything, we are to err on the side of grace. Who knows, another day, another moment and maybe grace will be accepted. We cannot expect others to return love if all we give out is hate. Proverbs 15:1 reminds us, "A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger."

There is a commercial where a husband comes home. As he comes home the wife says, "The flame is out." He tears into a tirade. He does not stop to find out what she means. Finally, when he has calmed down she replies, "The flame on the stove is out."

Jesus simply states that God is waiting for us to end our tirade and to hear what God is really saying. God is waiting for us to understand the full measure of God's grace. God's grace is extended to all, offered to all. We begin by looking at ourselves and once we have understood the depth of God's love - to let the love be extended to others. It can make all the difference in world.

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NIV, New International Bible Society, Zondervan, 1973, 1978, 1985

NRSV, Division of Christian Education, NCC, 1989

Bailey, Kenneth, Through Peasant Eyes, Wm. B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI 1980