

# Jesus Smashes the Gospel of Self-Esteem

One of the cruelest things we can do during a time of great human suffering is to suggest that those who are the most severely afflicted must be worse than everyone else. "Those wicked sinners got what they deserve in that hurricane," we say glibly, little knowing that we condemn ourselves in the process.

It is Jesus Himself who exposes the bankruptcy of this self-righteous mindset, yet He does it in the most unexpected way.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that, at one particular time, "There were present at that time some who told [Jesus] of the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices" (Luke 13:1).

In other words, these were Jewish men doing what the Law of Moses required, offering sacrifices at the Temple in Jerusalem. Yet Pilate murdered them and mixed their blood with the animal sacrifices.

How could something so bad happen to such good people? Doesn't God protect His own? Perhaps they were guilty of secret sin?

Jesus anticipated these questions and replied, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered such things? ... I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:2-4). What a piercing statement!

"No," Jesus was saying. "These men did nothing out of the ordinary to deserve such a dreadful fate. All of you deserve to die a horrible death unless you repent."

How this undermines the gospel of self-esteem. How this

smashes all self-righteousness. How this reduces all of us to sinners needing repentance and mercy. Without God's grace, we are all lost and doomed to destruction.

Jesus reinforced this with another example, asking, "Or those eighteen, upon whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all men living in Jerusalem? I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish" (Luke 13:4-5).

Surely they must have done something to deserve such an end. Towers and buildings don't just collapse at random. God must have done this because they were "worse offenders" than the rest.

Jesus flatly rejects this way of thinking, but not in our typical, flesh-exalting way, which says, "I'm sure these were good people, because human beings are fundamentally good. We don't know why bad things happen to good people like this."

Instead, Jesus says, "All of you listening to me also deserve a similar fate. And you can be assured it's coming to you one way or another, in this world or the world to come, unless you turn from your sins and ask for mercy."

Yes, it was Jesus, not some angry, right-wing preacher, who uttered these words.

Elsewhere He referred to His own disciples as "evil," even though they had left everything to follow Him (see Matt 7:11; Luke 11:13). But as fallen human beings with mixed motives and sinful passions, He recognized their true spiritual and moral estate. This underscores just how different the message of Jesus was from our contemporary gospel message.

The Lord preached that we were guilty sinners in need of a Savior. In response, people flocked to Him to be saved, forgiven and transformed.

In stark contrast, many of our contemporary preachers proclaim that we are very special, very wonderful, very good people who have somehow lost our way. Jesus has come to unlock our destiny!

So, He's no longer a desperately needed Savior, He's a partner waiting to strike up a good deal, and it makes good business sense to follow Him. "Let's do this," we say in response to this offer. "I always knew I was special."

Is it any wonder that so many of our churches are so anemic today? Is it any wonder that, rather than us changing the world, the world has changed us? Is it any wonder that we are producing consumers rather than disciples? And is it any wonder that we have forgotten who Jesus really is?

Because we have downplayed the ugliness of sin, we have lost sight of the beauty of the Savior. Because we have not realized the depth of our guilt, we have not understood the immensity of His sacrifice. And because we have emphasized our own destiny and calling, we have forgotten God's far-greater destiny for us.

This, then, is the gospel message.

We sinned, He died. We were guilty; He took the punishment. We deserved damnation; He cancelled our debt. What extraordinary, matchless love! Then the heavenly Father takes us into His own family as dearly loved children. What a wonder!

So, the same Jesus who so accurately diagnosed our terminal condition (saying that, without repentance, we all deserved a dreadful death), turned around and said, "Father, put their punishment on Me." Is there a greater expression of love than this?

But when we diminish human evil, we denigrate the cross. When we exalt human nature, we minimize the Savior. We don't want to play games with something as sacred as this.

Next week, when *Saving a Sick America* is released, I plan to return to this subject, asking my fellow leaders an important question: Are we shepherds or are we hirelings?

For now, I urge you to consider this: Outside of God's mercy, all of us deserve a terrible, dreadful fate, but all our guilt and shame and pain was put on Jesus as He hung on the cross.

This means that you don't have to perish. You can start a brand-new life in the Lord.

But it starts by acknowledging your guilt, without blaming others or making an excuse. If you get low, God will meet you there.

(I wrote this during the first night of the traditional Jewish New Year, called Rosh HaShanah, which begins a major season of repentance on our calendar. May my fellow Jews around the world recognize their Messiah and find mercy and grace through His blood.)