



## DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

7643 Huron River Drive

Dexter, MI 48130

734-426-8480

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### “When Bad Things Happen to Good People”

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Dr. Matthew J. Hook

Luke 13

It's a little freaky that this week, while I'm looking at Luke "Chapter 13," and with the sermon title "When Bad Things Happen to Good People" that...

- Mindy's lost her best friend who leaves behind young children and a husband.
- Jenny goes to the hospital due to remnants of an illness and exhaustion.
- Karl calls me while heading to Wisconsin to be with his cousins who lost their 17 year old son.
- Dave emails that Tracy's 18 month old nephew was found in the family's swimming pool and needed to be revived and taken to the hospital.

And I find myself wondering how to respond. It seems like God isn't there. Like there is no such thing as "good health" insurance," because our good health just won't last. ☺ Last time I checked, the mortality rate in America was 100%. Why do bad things happen? And if you're like me, you ask "Why?" And you live in fear that someone is going to ask *you* "Why?"

**Even when we make a big deal of God, like on Palm Sunday, it doesn't seem to last.** Look at Jesus on Palm Sunday: The right man. Right message. Right place. Right time. And by Friday He's dead. Only 5 days later! (What a shame it's called "Holy Week," not "Holy Month." We couldn't even make it a whole week!)

And when tragedy strikes, you know a lot of people who'd say "*That's because God really isn't there. And if God is there, how could He allow this to happen? He must be a terrible God.*" Whatever philosophy or view or anchor they had just got washed away. And so we come up with ideas: People say:

- "It was God's will." And sometimes people sugarcoat it and say
- "God needed another flower in His garden." Listen: If God needed another flower in His garden, He could create one. He doesn't need to take a 7 year old to do it

Or they say:

- "God only takes the good ones."

Or the opposite:

- "I wonder what they did to deserve *that*? There must be something wrong with them." THIS is more our response, *though we never speak it out loud*. When we see a family with a special needs kid, or someone who has had a string of tragedies or difficulties, we think "They must have done something to deserve that." And we judge them, whatever the problems.

We rationalize it. We theologize it. We think we're more worthy than bad things happening. We assign blame to the victims. We have to do *something*. Look at how Pat Robertson pointed out the Haitian "Pact with the devil" as probable cause for the earthquake. It's like we have to come up with something. So, Church, what will you come up with?

Look at Luke 13:1 *Now there were some present at that time who told Jesus about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mixed with their sacrifices. 2 Jesus answered, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans because they suffered this way? 3 I tell you, no! But unless you repent, you too will all perish. 4 Or those eighteen who died when the tower in Siloam fell on them—do you think they were more guilty than all the others living in Jerusalem? 5 I tell you, no! But unless you repent,*

*you too will all perish."*

We're getting a glimpse into some of the current events of Jesus' day. It seems Pilate the governor had some guards kill a rowdy crowd of Jews who had come to offer sacrifices. And the people were wondering if those Galileans were worse sinners. Jesus also mentions the disaster of a tower falling. (Sounds familiar). Were the people killed worse than others? Jesus says "No!" They weren't worse sinners than anyone else. But we tend to think that way, don't we?

Being killed or not being killed is no measure of a person's unrighteousness or righteousness. Anyone can be killed. Only God's grace causes *any* of us to live. And what does Jesus say to all this? "*Unless you repent, you too will all perish.*"

*22 Then Jesus went through the towns and villages, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem... 32 'I will drive out demons and heal people today and tomorrow, and on the third day I will reach my goal.' 33 In any case, I must keep going today and tomorrow and the next day-- for surely no prophet can die outside Jerusalem!*

He knew the place He had to go. He knew his mission. He knew it was time for the confrontation. We, on the other hand, will go to great lengths to avoid the confrontation. We'll miss a dozen divine appointments if it means difficulty.

**Isn't it time you turned your face toward Jerusalem?** No matter where you've come from, God has a mission for your life. Isn't it time you "made your way to Jerusalem?" Isn't it time you put away your own plans and faced the mission God has given you?

Jesus did. Even though He knew He's going down. Could that really be the will of God for Jesus too? There it is: God's will again. What's going on here?

Leslie Weatherhead's book "The Will of God" can help us. There are millions of people who live apart from Christ, who resent and hate God because of their misunderstanding about God's way of working in our world. And there are millions more of us who are Christ-followers who are confused about God's will. I think part of the reason is because we use "the will of God" to include several layers of meaning.

- **What God Really Wants.** God's Original Design for every situation. The intentional, perfect will of God
- **God's Will in a Fallen Universe.** Risk for Relationship: The circumstantial, permissive will of God.
- **God's Victory Over All:** The ultimate will and purpose of God.

### **First, what God Really Wants. This is God's intentional will.**

God's Best, His Intentional Will basically What God Really Wants

"God's best" for people can be defeated. After all, how you and I choose to spend our time may not be God's will for our lives: watching TV, getting addicted to the internet. Having a big house and spending lots of money on myself when there are widows and orphans that need help. God's will can be defeated. If this were not true, you and I would have no freedom at all. All the evil that is temporarily successful, temporarily defeats the will of God. There are 1,000 tragedies which are the furthest thing from God's will.

- Starving children in the Sudan.
- Millions of street people in India.
- Millions of women and children in the sex trade.
- Horrors of concentration camps and modern terrorism.

It's about time we get rid of all our belief that everything which happens in this world today is the will of God! So much of what occurs is evil. There are people who seem to get a lot of comfort thinking that their tragedies are the intentional will of God, but ultimately there is never any real comfort or support in something that is false. If you base your support on an idea of God which is untrue, you'll be left without meaning, in your time of need. You may end up resenting God, and doing yourself emotional and spiritual damage.

### **Second, God's Will in a Fallen Universe. This is God's circumstantial will.**

Paul said, "*We know that the whole creation has been groaning in pains of childbirth, right up to the present time*" Romans 8:22. (June 25<sup>th</sup>). Not only do we humans have imperfections and infirmities, but the radical defect goes through all of nature with its disasters. Sin is so serious that it has caused a radical imbalance and imperfection in the very fabric of the creation. Before we fell from God, there was no category like this in God's will; but *because* of the reality and consequences of sin on the world, the radical imbalance has

impacted the whole of the universe.

With accidents, God's laws and God's causes are always working; like gravity. The very law that enables the child to stay on the face of the earth is the force which can kill. And *the law is not suspended if we're the innocent party in an accident.*

Stuff happens within God's circumstantial will, but *not* because God intends or wills them. The amazing promise of the Scripture is that God will not allow anything to happen to us which by itself can defeat His ultimate purposes, or his children. Romans 8:38 *For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, 39 neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.*"

And thus we have His promise that nothing can happen to you that God cannot use for good. And that puts us in a new place, because it is never the event itself, but rather the fact that God is at work that makes a circumstance turn out for good. Even in New Orleans. Even in Haiti. And Chile. There are no circumstances which are so deadly in and of themselves that they can down the Christian or defeat God—not even death itself. God is never beaten by any possible combination of circumstances.

### **Third, the Ultimate Will of God.**

In the end, the ultimate will of God can never be defeated. Like kids playing in a little mountain stream. They build little dams of rocks and sticks and mud and divert the stream. But the stream continues to surge down to the river and the valley. Even engineers building dams can't stop the streams from flowing to the sea.

In our lives, so many things—our sins and mistakes, the accidents of life, the sins of others against us—may divert and temporarily defeat God's plans and purposes. But even in new circumstances created by these evils and accidents, God will provide other channels to carry out His ultimate will.

Jesus made His way to Jerusalem. And with evil intent, the leaders and the crowds took the innocent Son of God and crucified Him on a cross. From a purely human standpoint, it was the most heinous crime in history. But God's ultimate will can never be defeated, as we will celebrate next week. And 6 weeks after that, Jesus followers were preaching about that very same death on a cross. And now this torture instrument is a symbol of mercy, love, forgiveness, hope, a new beginning, life, and self sacrifice. God had made our crime His instrument to save the whole world. When Jesus saw those tragedies, those bad things happening to good people, his answer was this: Repent. Imagine if we did. And imagine if they saw the results of God transforming us to His likeness.

And imagine what our communities would look like if you and I shared a mature understanding with people as they experienced the inevitable tragedies of life? May you and I witness to our faith as we walk with one another through everything life will throw at us, on our way to Jerusalem, in order to claim the victory we have in Christ.

## **Study Guide for Luke 17—21 The Coming Kingdom**

**Monday: Read Luke 17. Forgiveness No Option** (1-10). Can you believe it? The disciples beg for more faith, but Jesus tells them forgiveness isn't faith, it's duty, a command. What quality of a disciple do you have the most difficulty with? Ten Healed (11-19). When 10 lepers are healed, only 1 turns back to thank Jesus. Have you thanked God lately? Coming Kingdom (20-37). Jesus says His return will be sudden, and unexpected. In the meantime, how should you live? (see v.32-33).

**Tuesday: Read Luke 18. Persistent Widow** (1-8). How persistent are you in prayer? Pharisee & Tax Collector (9-14). When it comes to acceptance, who are you most like? Little Children & the Rich Young Ruler (15-30). How's your approach to God, really? Can you really let go of your riches? Jesus Predicts His Death & Blind Beggar (31-43). If Jesus asks you "What do you want me to do for you?", what do you say?

**Wednesday: Read Luke 19.** Zacchaeus (1-10). Where did Jesus first find you? How did He get you to join Him (coaxing, big scare, invitation)? Parable of Service (11-27). Notice it's not how much we have, but what we do with what we have that counts. Ask a trusted friend to help you see your talents. How can you "invest" them for the Kingdom? Palm Sunday (28-48). Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem. How would He be treated if He rode into your town today?

**Maundy Thursday: Read Luke 20.** Jesus' Authority Questioned (1-19). The tensions have mounted. Jesus' parable tells He is the Son of the Owner of all. How could a friend encourage you this week? (REMEMBER PASSOVER DINNER AT CHURCH TONIGHT). Traps Avoided (20-40). Between the Roman government and the theologians. Who do you yearn to see come to God?

**Good Friday: Read Luke 21.** The Widow and Signs of the End of the Age (1-38). The beautiful widow: Do you give to God off the top, or from the leftovers? Share with someone. Have you ever felt persecuted? (12-19) Have you ever felt protected by God? What can you do to be better in watching and praying? With Easter here, could you start a journal?