

8. Man in the dock: Why can't you tell the time?

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[0 : 0 0] Well, it's just as well we believe in the infallibility of Scripture when the fallibility of the preacher is so obvious in public, isn't it? Well, let's turn, shall we, to the Scriptures, to Luke chapter 12 and to these verses that we read a moment ago.

And our question for today is right there in verse 56 of Luke chapter 12. Can you see it there? Why do you not know how to interpret the present time, says Jesus?

Why can't you tell the time? Now, last week we were just a few verses back, actually, in Luke's Gospel, chapter 11, verse 40, with the question, Why are you such hypocrites?

In other words, do you think God is blind? Do you think God can't see behind the masks that you hide behind as human beings? Whether it's the mask of sentimental spirituality or the mask of self-justifying morality.

And so many people today hide behind one of those masks. They hide behind them from the real Jesus. But here again, Jesus is still firing salvos at the hypocrites.

[1 : 1 2] Do you see verse 56? Do you see how it begins? You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but you don't know how to interpret the times, says Jesus.

Why can't you tell what time it really is? Now, that's Jesus' question to those people then. But actually, it's a question that the Bible is always asking, and is still asking to people today.

And it's an important question. Very important indeed for all of us. So we're going to look this morning at these few paragraphs that we read, beginning at verse 54.

We're going to look at these verses to see exactly what it is that Jesus is saying, and why it is it's so important. So look at verses 54 to 56, first of all.

It's all about telling today's time. It's about the need to learn how to tell the time properly. Let's read them again. When you see a cloud rising in the west, you say at once, a shower is coming, and so it happens.

[2 : 2 0] And when you see the south wind blowing, you say, there'll be scorching heat, and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

See, Jesus is saying, you people, you're all very good at knowing and learning the meaning of all kinds of trivial things. But you seem totally blind to interpreting the really important things in life.

So he says, you're brilliant at weather forecasts. Well, obviously, Michael Fish wasn't in the audience. Remember poor old Michael Fish? Don't panic, there's no storm coming. And then the greatest storm we've ever seen devastated the country.

I don't know about you, but I find those BBC forecasts utterly hopeless. I look at those five-day forecasts on the internet, and it has five great big suns, and then the next morning I get up and it's pouring rain, and it's suddenly changed to five great big rainy horrible phases.

Or sometimes it's the other way around. Not very often right enough here, but they don't seem to be terribly accurate. I've learned, therefore, that when in Glasgow, never go out without a brolly. But that's island life, isn't it?

[3 : 27] We have the weather coming in from the Atlantic, and that's the way it is. And if you're new to Glasgow, let me give you this piece of advice. Invest in a brolly and a good raincoat, and never be without it. Unless probably you come from Northern Ireland, in which case you think you've come to a dry climate here, I'm not sure.

But that here, of course, Israel was very, very different, wasn't it? And it still is. A very, very predictable type of weather system there. To the west, the Mediterranean Sea.

And so if you saw clouds coming in from the west, well, you know that you're going to get showers and rain. Absolutely obvious. To the south, well, the Negev Desert. And so if the wind is coming from the south, well, you know it's going to be blistering hot.

So everybody knows, says Jesus, how to predict earth and sky. But, he says, you've got no idea how to read the signs of the times that really matter.

The vital matters of life and death. The meaning of life. Heaven and hell. In fact, says Jesus, actually, you don't seem very interested in even thinking about these things.

[4 : 38] Well, I think that's pretty much the same today, don't you? Just think of the effort that is put into predicting all kinds of things to do with earth and sky, to do with matters of daily life in our society.

Will interest rates be going up or down next time the Bank of England meets? Will the oil prices go up and down and what effect will that have on our heating bills this winter? What effect are these things going to have on the dollar?

Or on the FTSE? Or on the housing market? Or all of these things. That's what your newspaper was full of yesterday, wasn't it? Mine was. And there are vast industries, aren't there? They're built on these kinds of predictions.

And vast salaries paid to the analysts and the managers and all these kinds of people. Those people who claim to be able to read the signs of the times in all of these things.

And I suppose they can to some degree, otherwise these hedge fund managers wouldn't be making all the millions that apparently they are. Well, think of politics. Endless combing over every little detail in the statements that politicians make and party leaders make.

[5 : 47] Assessments and opinions. Is there going to be an early election or not? What are the polls saying? It all depends, doesn't it, on the forecast, the predictions of the pollsters, the political analysts and all the rest of them.

Those who can read the times, who can sense the public mood, who can predict the economic climate in the next few months. But in the midst of all of that, does anyone have any clue what God's timing is for this world?

How does anybody even care what God is doing? Jesus, you see, is saying, you don't even see it coming, do you? Why can't you tell the time? Well, what is it that Jesus' heroes seem to be so blind to, so ignorant of?

What is it that's creeping up on them and they don't seem to see it at all? Well, it's there if you look back to verse 49, isn't it? The fire of God.

The judgment of God. Let loose on the whole of the earth. And that's what Jesus says his whole ministry is about. You see that verse, I came to cast fire on the earth and would that it were already kindled.

[6 : 59] It's a bit of a shock that, isn't it? So it's verse 51. You think I've come to bring peace on earth? No. But division. Jesus says that he came with a message to divide the world now and also to divide it ultimately forever.

And Jesus Christ, gentle Jesus, meek and mild, he came to call time on the world. It's wake-up time, he says, but you're not listening.

And what Jesus was saying plainly to the Jews of his own day was this. It's time. Time to welcome me as your Messiah, as your King. That's what the whole story of Luke's Gospel is about.

If you read it right from the beginning, it's about the coming of the promised Messiah, the long-awaited Messiah, the one who at last has come and presented himself to his people. Do you remember the stories at the very beginning of Luke's Gospel?

We read them at Christmas, don't we? That all the words of the prophets have at last been fulfilled, that the oath to Abraham at last is coming to its climax, that the sunrise from on high has visited us, says Zechariah in his song, to give light to those who are in darkness.

[8 : 1 6] That's why the old saints like Simeon and Anna were overjoyed. They'd been waiting all their life, we're told, for the redemption of Jerusalem, for the consolation of Israel, for the great day of the Lord.

And now it's come. But of course there was another side, wasn't there, to that great day of the Lord? Because according to the prophets, when that great day came, it wasn't just a day of great joy and rejoicing, although it was a day of salvation, but it was the beginning of the great day of judgment.

When God himself stands upon the earth to bring all wrongs to right, to judge in righteousness and in truth. It's the beginning of God's judgment on the world.

I came, says Jesus, to cast fire upon the earth, the fire of judgment. And that's what Jesus means by telling the time properly. It's understanding the significance of his coming to earth.

But what does that mean for the people that he's speaking to? How do you act when you've grasped what time it actually is? Well, look at verses 57 to 59.

[9 : 3 1] It's all about acting in good time, isn't it? The whole point in learning to tell the time is so that you can act at the right time. The whole point of the weather forecast, or the financial forecast, is so that you can assimilate it and act so as to avoid disaster.

Isn't that right? And just so, says Jesus, exactly, that is right. And it's plain, isn't it, that Jesus is talking about judgment. Just look at the illustration he uses.

Verse 57, Why do you not judge for yourselves what is right? As you go with your accuser before the magistrate, make an effort to settle with him on the way, lest he drag you to the judge, and the judge hand you over to the officer, and the officer put you in prison.

I tell you, you will never get out until you've paid the very last penny. You're on the way to court with your accuser, says Jesus. So now is the time to settle and avoid disaster, isn't it?

Must be. You must act now, or you will face certain ruin. What time is it? Well, it's time to repent, says Jesus.

[1 0 : 3 4] It's time to sue for mercy. It's time to seek for the forgiveness from the one you've wronged before it's too late. That's what time it is. That's what Jesus is telling his hearers in his day.

That was just what John the Baptist said, wasn't it? That was his message. Repent. And accept your King, the Messiah. Repent or perish. Don't wait. Time's very short.

You see, that's just exactly what God says to every individual in the world also, isn't it? Life, says Jesus, is a journey to the bar of judgment.

That's what it is. And unless you find mercy before that day, the outlook is as bleak as it is certain. Verse 59, you'll never get out until you pay the last penny.

And that means you'll never get out, because where can you earn a penny? In prison. Now, as soon as you mention these days the judgment of God, hands go up in horror.

[11 : 41] I find people react. Many people are very indignant at the very idea of a God who judges. And yet, the irony is, of course, that we're not slow ourselves, are we, as people, to make judgments, to apportion blame.

The common thing we hear, isn't it? That's unfair. That's so unjust. When it seems to us that somebody who's innocent is suffering. Or the opposite.

They deserve that, didn't they? If we think that somebody's guilty. So we're allowed to make judgments, but apparently God isn't allowed to make judgments.

Interesting, isn't it? That's why Jesus actually keeps calling us hypocrites. Because we all judge. And depending on our outlook, or our politics, or our slant in life, we'll react and judge in different ways.

Whether you're on the political right, and a Daily Mail reader, or you're on the liberal left, and you're a Guardian reader. We'll all make our judgments according to our slant. So, for example, if you think about what we read in the secular press after great disasters, maybe a hurricane, or something like that.

[12 : 49] Remember Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. You'll have some on the right, particularly in America, particularly on the religious right, who'll confidently pronounce that, well, this is God's judgment on a wicked city full of gambling, and vice, and homosexuality, and so on.

But then, you'll have others who are absolutely on the opposite extreme, won't you? Who will be horrified at any conception that God could ever, or would ever, possibly judge on this earth at all.

You'll find both of those reactions, actually, within the professing church, won't you? And, of course, in the secular press. So, I remember reading after the Asian tsunami a couple of years ago in the Guardian, Polly Toynbee.

And she said this, I'm an atheist. Gosh, I'd never have guessed she was an atheist. I'm an atheist, she said, but were there a God, he would be to blame. It's interesting, isn't it, that people like Polly Toynbee and others like her are morally superior to God, and they're, therefore, able to give an unbiased judgment on God Almighty.

But our world is very full, isn't it, of morally indignant and self-righteous people who are very angry with God, and at any thought of a God who might himself be indignant or morally outraged at anything.

[14 : 09] Isn't that interesting? That God should ever have the right to make choices that we demand for ourselves. You see, that kind of total confusion about God and God's judgments in the world isn't new.

It's right here in the very next paragraph in verses 1 to 5. Look at them. See, there were some present at that time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices, a terrible atrocity and outrage.

And Jesus answered them, Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the others because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you. But unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those 18 on whom the Tyre in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem?

No. I tell you, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. See, Jesus is faced with exactly the same kind of thing here.

Look at these tragedies, Jesus, they say. You say that we can't judge what's going on and what's right, but we can. We saw what happened to those Galileans, those sinners. They got what they deserved, didn't they?

[15 : 20] We can see that. See, Jesus is speaking here in Judea, isn't he? And the Galileans were despised by the Judeans. They weren't proper Jews.

They were second-raters. They were low-life to the Judeans. They were an immoral bunch. Often, they had bad reputations. So, whatever had happened there, whatever atrocity Herod had perpetrated upon them, though killing them innocently and mingling them with sacrifices on their altars, dreadful.

Well, they must have deserved it. See, we're morally superior, Jesus. We can tell. We can see that God was judging the wicked. Rather like some of the TV evangelist statements you might get today.

God was judging the wicked. That's all there is to it. But you see, Jesus answers them, doesn't he, in verse 2. And he turns the tables on their smugness.

And he adds an example of his own in verse 4, but this time from their own backyard, from Judea, from Jerusalem itself. Eighteen poor people apparently had been crushed when this tower had fallen down on top of them.

[16 : 29] And no doubt they were very nice and clean and religious and acceptable people. No hint of moral inferiority. Perhaps there were even the friends and the neighbours, maybe the relatives of some of those people that Jesus was speaking to.

Well, how do you account for that, says Jesus? Were they worse sinners than all the rest? You can imagine the silence, can't you?

See, Jesus' point is very clear, isn't it? It's very sharp. It's very penetrated. Notice he doesn't say that they are sinners, therefore deserving God's judgment.

Nor does he say they were not sinners. Nor does he deny that God himself must have been ultimately responsible for all of these things happening, both of them, both of these judgments.

But what he does say is very clear, isn't it? He says all of these things, whatever you think about them, are warnings for you. He says it twice, verse 3 and again in verse 5.

[17 : 36] I tell you, unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Because I've come to cast fire on the earth.

and you are all on the way to the bar of judgment in your life, whether you like it or not. You see, that's what we are supposed to think every time we hear of such things.

A terrible earthquake, a hurricane, a 9-11, a 7-7, whatever it is. Not, oh, well, they must have deserved it. They were inferior people. God was judging them.

Nor, oh, how can there possibly be a just God if he can allow this to happen? Neither of those things. No, rather, there but by the grace of God is where I'm going.

And unless I repent, I will also perish. Jesus wants us to know our time, our personal time. That's a psalmist's cry, isn't it?

[18 : 39] In Psalm 90, all our days part away under your wrath, so teach us to number our days that we may get a heart for wisdom. It's hard-hitting, isn't it, this word from Jesus?

But just take note, it is Jesus' word, isn't it? Not a nasty apostle perverting the true gospel. Not the so-called doer Scottish Calvinism that we're accused of in this country.

Not some fire and brimstone preacher. But Jesus, gentle Jesus, meek and mild. And he's saying to you and to me and to our whole culture, why can't you tell the time?

We talk endlessly about other people's deaths and we discuss the failures and the culpabilities of authorities when there's a disaster or the airline, whatever it is, that dreadful crash last week in Phuket.

But do we ever, ever stand back and think when we see one of these things, God is shouting a warning to me and to our society. You see, Jesus is saying very, very plainly that every such happening is but a pale shadow of the ultimate judgment which is going to be absolute and eternal for every human being.

[19 : 58] But nonetheless, he's saying to us that every such episode of judgment in our time is shouting loudly a warning to us. And it's quite clear what it's shouting.

Do you understand? Can you tell the time? Not that they deserve it for their special wickedness or surely they didn't deserve it, they couldn't have. But rather, as verse 4 says, do you think they were worse than you?

No, of course they're not. But unless you repent, you'll also perish. Can't miss the seriousness, can you, of Jesus' message, of his gospel. Can't miss it.

But then this last paragraph, verses 6 to 9 of chapter 13 is also very important too, isn't it? It's all about living on borrowed time. It's a parable.

A man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard and he came seeking fruit on it and found none. He said to the vinedresser, look, for three years now I've come seeking fruit on this fig tree. I find none.

[21 : 03] Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground? And he answered him, Sir, let it alone this year also until I dig around it and put on manure and then if it should bear fruit next year, well and good.

But if not, you can cut it down. You see what this is saying? God is, of course, the judge of all the earth.

But he is most certainly a just judge. We can't ever accuse this God of being hateful and vengeful and spiteful as a judge. It's absolutely the opposite, isn't it?

Don't you see how patient he is with the fig tree? All through the Bible the fig tree is an emblem, a symbol of the people of Israel. Of God's people.

And the whole story of the Bible, if you know it, is the story of God's patience and his mercy and his long-sufferingness with a people who are wayward and recalcitrant and rebellious who constantly reject him.

[22 : 07] And God is merciful. He's slow to anger. He's abounding in love. He says to the people through Ezekiel, the prophet in Ezekiel 33, 11, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked.

Turn back. Turn back. For why will you die, O house of Israel, says the Lord? God is patient. He's merciful. He holds out his hands again and again and again to a wayward people.

He says, another year. See if it bears fruit next year. We'll give it every opportunity possible. We'll dig it. We'll fertilize it. He's patient.

He's merciful. He extends the day of grace. But not forever, of course. If at the end, despite every concession, every extension, every possibility, there's no fruit.

well then it must be. It must be at the last cut down. And you know, Jesus wasn't joking when he said that about Israel.

[23 : 18] Israel as a nation was given every chance imaginable. They had Moses and all the prophets. The last, they had the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God himself in the flesh upon the earth.

And even after their rejection of him, God sent them apostles to proclaim the witness of Jesus Christ. And every single time it came to absolute rejection.

And at last, therefore, just a few years later after Jesus spoke these words in AD 70, the Romans invaded and Jerusalem was destroyed and the temple was burned and the whole nation was scattered.

No, he wasn't joking when he gave that warning. And friends, Jesus is still not joking today. Oh, he's patient. He's so very patient.

He's delayed his coming in judgment again and again. Peter tells us that in 2 Peter 3. That's not because, as Peter says, he's slow to fulfill his promises as some count slowness.

[24 : 23] But he's patient towards you, says Peter. Not desiring that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. He's patient.

But his patience won't last forever. It can't, can it? Because the day will come when our time has run out. And that means that every one of us is living on borrowed time, doesn't it?

None of us know how much time we've got left. Just like the rich fool, a few verses earlier in Luke chapter 12. Tonight, your soul will be required of you, you fool, says Jesus to him.

And that's why, because he is rich in mercy, he's shouting loudly at us. Why can't you tell the time? He's urging us. He's saying, learn how to interpret the present time, your time, your personal time.

Know your own time. Today is the day of salvation. It's time to act. Time to repent. It's time to find mercy and forgiveness from your accuser before it's too late.

[25 : 32] let me read to you a poem that I find a long time ago somewhere. The spirit came in childhood and pleaded, let me in.

But no, the door was bolted by heedlessness and sin. Oh, I'm too young, the child said. My heart is closed today. Sadly, the spirit listened and turned and went away.

Again, he came and pleaded in youth's bright happy hour. He called, but found no answer for, fettered by sin's power, the youth lay idly dreaming. Go, spirit, not today.

Wait till I've tried life's pleasures. Once more, he went away. Once more, he came in mercy and manhood's vigorous prime. He knocked, but found no entrance.

The merchant had no time, no time for true repentance, no time to think or pray. And so, repulsed and saddened, again, he turned away. Yet once again, he pleaded.

[26 : 37] The man was old and ill. He hardly heard the whisper. His heart was seer and chill. Go, leave me. When I want thee, I'll send for thee, he cried.

And turning on a pillow without a hope, he died. None of us know, do we, how far on we are in that extra year of favour, how much borrowed time we've got left.

Could be that the message of Jesus here to you this morning is part of that carefully tending and fertilising in a last effort to bring fruit to bear.

I don't know, neither do you. But it's still not too late if you're here today and if you're alive, if you're listening, because Jesus is merciful.

Were those who died in that awful plane crash in the fireball in Phuket, were they worse people than you or me? No, says Jesus. But unless you repent, you also will likewise perish.

[27 : 48] Can you tell the time? Let me close by reading another short poem that's apparently inscribed on the wall in Chester Cathedral in England.

It's called Time's Paces. When as a child I laughed and wept, time crept. When as a youth I waxed more bold, time strolled.

When I became a full-grown man, time ran. When older still I daily grew, time flew. Soon I shall find in passing on time gone.

For Christ, wilt thou have saved me then? That's the real question, isn't it? Whatever your time is this morning, it's not standing still, is it?

So Jesus says, better learn to tell the time and act now in time for eternity. Let's pray.

[28 : 55] Heavenly Father, we thank you that you are not silent as we walk on the road to judgment, but that you cry out with warnings because you love us and because your desire is that we should find mercy and forgiveness through your grace and through the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Give us ears to hear, we pray, that we may know our time and that in this day of salvation we should bow before you and find the answer of eternity in the sacrifice of our Lord Jesus Christ.

So give us ears to hear, we pray, the voice of Jesus calling to us today. for we ask it in his name. Amen.