**LET THEM LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS**

Luke 16:14-31, Key Verse 16:29

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

In Luke 12 Jesus warned his disciples**: “Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisees, which is hypocrisy”**(12:1). Yet through the parable of the prodigal son, Jesus revealed the Father’s heart for his older son as well, who represents the Pharisees. They too were lost. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, which included even self-righteous, legalistic and self-confident Pharisees! We can view all of Luke 16 as teaching specifically aimed at the Pharisees, especially their value system. In today’s passage, Jesus continues to try to help his hearers understand the big difference between the heavenly and earthly value system. To put it simply, Jesus teaches us to repent and live based on the word of God. Let’s pray that we may do so.

1. The law and self-justification (16:14-18)

In M. Gideon’s message last week, we saw the parable of the shrewd manager, by which Jesus taught us not to worship money, but to use worldly wealth to gain friends and build the kingdom of heaven. Jesus’ last saying in the previous passage was very pointed: “You cannot serve both God and money.” (13) Look at the first verse of today’s passage, verse 14. “The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.” A sneer is a mocking, contemptuous expression. They were trying to react as if they were too good to listen to Jesus. But it only showed that Jesus had touched their spiritual problem.

In response to the sneering, Jesus pointed out the Pharisees’ problems more directly. Look at verse 15. “He said to them, ‘You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but God knows your hearts. What people value highly is detestable in God’s sight.’” He says that despite all their efforts to appear holy, the Pharisees actually did not live before God. To them, it was enough if people thought they were something great. But this meant that their value system was completely wrong, because what people value highly and praise and honor can be detestable, or unclean, to God. The most obvious example is abundant wealth and the showy ways that people show off their riches. It impresses people, but it probably turns God’s stomach. We’ll see that clearly when we get to the parable about the rich man and Lazarus.

The Pharisees were also proud of their observance of the Law. Next, Jesus gave the relationship between his ministry and the law. Look at verses 16 and 17. “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it.”

Up to the time of John the Baptist, the teachings of the Law and the Old Testament Prophets were proclaimed as God’s word. But now that Jesus had come, the proclaiming of the kingdom of God in the gospel superseded that. The gospel, which invites all people freely to the kingdom of God through repentance and faith, has worked much more powerfully on the earth than the ethical teachings of the law. Jesus said it’s like people are now forcing their way in to the kingdom of God. That is a wonderful thing. But it made the Pharisees jealous because they were trying to establish their own righteousness through the law.

Jesus made it clear that despite this change, the law had not passed away. In verse 17 he says, “It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law.” The law remains as God’s law forever. Then, Jesus gave a specific example of one of the law’s requirements in verse 18. “Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.” Why did Jesus suddenly give a teaching about divorce in this context? It was to show that the Pharisees, who were so proud of their law-keeping, actually did not keep the law at all. Many Pharisees approved of divorce for any and every reason, as long as Moses’ requirement of writing a certificate of divorce was followed. So when Jesus showed that divorcing one’s wife to marry another one is committing the sin of adultery, he showed that the Pharisees’ claim to uphold the law was empty. In fact, they twisted the law to whatever suited their desires.

Even this harsh rebuke is part of Jesus’ heart to save the Pharisees. He is knocking the floor out from under their claims to self-righteousness. They should confess their failures to keep the law, repent of their self-justification, and believe the good news. That’s what we need to do as well. The good news of the gospel means that we can let go of all our attempts to justify ourselves in the eyes of people, and receive the free gift of righteousness through faith in Jesus. This gives us a whole new way to live. In Romans 8:3-4 Paul wrote: “For what the law was powerless to do because it was weakened by the flesh, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in the flesh,in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

1. A great reversal of fortune (19-26)

Now Jesus speaks one of his most vivid and visual parables, to show just how meaningless it is to judge people by an earthly standard. Jesus said, “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.” (19-20)

Here we have two people whose earthly situation could not be more different. One of them was a rich man who lived in luxury every day, dressed in purple and fine linen. Today, we synthesize purple dye in factories, and so it doesn’t cost more than any other color, but in Jesus’ day purple dye was extremely rare. It was produced by a gland of a certain snail in the Mediterranean Sea, and twelve thousand snails would yield only 1.4 g of pure dye, enough to color only the trim of a garment. A small tube of dye would cost the equivalent of $120k in today’s currency. Yet this man dressed in purple often; a different coat for every day. He woke up every morning in his big, soft bed, to meals that were prepared and waiting for him. He ate only the finest of foods, a new gourmet dish every meal. Anything he wanted or desired, he could have. His position in society made him the envy of everyone. Sometimes we go to a nice hotel for a conference, and experience some luxury for a day or two, but this man lived in this luxury every single day.

What about Lazarus? He was a beggar living in total poverty and suffering from serious health problems. He had no bed and no shelter from the elements, lying outside at the rich man’s gate. Many days he could not find anything to eat at all. The best medical care he got was from dogs. As much as the rich man lived in luxury every day, Lazarus lived in suffering every day.

It seems intentional that Lazarus was laid at the rich man’s gate. Maybe someone hoped that the richest man in the city would be able to help Lazarus without too much trouble. As we see later in the parable, the rich man knew who Lazarus was. He must have seen him every day as he came out of the house on his business. But apparently the rich man never helped Lazarus at all, never even giving him the scraps from his own table.

The difference in conditions of the rich man and Lazarus really show us how fallen this world is. It seems totally unfair. However, this state of affairs did not continue like this forever. One thing happened that was the same for both the rich man and Lazarus: they both died. What happened to them after that? We don’t normally get to find that out about people, but in this parable, Jesus gives us a glimpse of the afterlife. Verse 22 says, “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side.” Here, “Abraham’s side” is a figurative expression for the paradise where the souls of the saved go after they die. Of course, Abraham is there, along with all God’s other saints, but to the Jews it would have been very meaningful to see Abraham, kind of like we say that someone who died went to be with Jesus.

How Lazarus’ condition had changed! On earth, he was laid at the gate, exposed to elements, but now he had angelic escorts! He had longed to eat crumbs, now he would sit at the feast in the kingdom of God! Once he had no shelter or adequate clothing, but now he was dressed in shining robes and abundantly comforted by God in a place where there’s no burning heat and no freezing cold. Instead of having dogs as his only friends, he now had conversation with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the saints who went before. Lazarus’ condition was now much better than the rich man’s had ever been, even with all his luxuries.

What about the rich man, then? After dying and being buried, he found himself in Hades, that is, the place of punishment for the souls of the wicked. Look at verses 23 and 24. “In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’”

Theologians don’t all agree on whether the punishment of hades is literal fire or not. Can people in hades really have conversations with people in heaven, shouting up to Abraham and getting an answer? I kind of doubt it, because theologians *do* all agree that hell is a condition of permanent separation from God. The purpose of the imagery in this parable is not to give us the literal details of paradise and hades, which anyway are probably beyond our understanding, but to highlight the contrast between the two men’s conditions. In the parable, when the rich man looks up into paradise and sees Lazarus sitting there with Abraham, his jealousy makes his suffering even more unbearable. He calls up to Abraham and asks him to have Lazarus to do a very small thing, just to dip the tip of his finger in water and reach down to cool his tongue with it. On earth he could drink all the water and wine and soda and orange juice he wanted, but now he is desperate for even one small drop of water. His condition now is much worse than the beggar Lazarus’ condition had ever been on earth.

How did this great reversal happen? This parable doesn’t mean to teach that the rich man went to hades because he was rich and the poor man went to heaven because he was poor. They are symbolic characters, but we can imagine the difference in their spiritual lives. Probably, the rich man was the type never humbled himself before God, thinking he was self-sufficient and so he didn’t need to do anything for anyone else—like some of the Pharisees Jesus was talking to. His unbelief was shown by his selfish actions. Jesus taught us to use worldly wealth for heavenly things, but this man used it all for himself. In contrast, Lazarus through his suffering must have learned to deeply trust God and had become a true saint in his inner person.

The point is that we should not judge people by an earthly standard. The rich man’s position and wealth gained him honor and respect from people, but he did not deserve it. Poor Lazarus looked so pitiful that people might think his life was cursed; but in God’s sight he was truly worthy. We can say that great reversal of their fortunes after death simply revealed the true state of the two men’s souls.

Now that this reversal had happened, it could not happen again. Did the rich man get the drop of water he wanted? No, he didn’t. Look at verses 25 and 26. “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’” Abraham pointed out how the rich man and Lazarus’ current situations were the expression of God’s fairness. Most of all, he taught that those situations were now permanent, fixed by an un-crossable chasm between paradise and hades.

The words spoken by Abraham in this parable to the man in hades are really for us, for the living; it we who need to know that after death, it is too late to change our situation. From that point, our destiny is fixed. Our life on this earth is the only chance to change our direction. In fact, the kingdom of God is not a state that begins only after we die. The Bible teaches that when we come to God through Jesus, at that moment we cross over from death to life, and the kingdom of God begins to be a present reality in our hearts. This life is when we can repent and enter the kingdom of God, and begin to be transformed into God’s image through Jesus and be abundantly comforted by his grace. Let’s pray to not miss that chance.

1. Let them listen (27-31)

In an interesting twist, upon learning that his own situation cannot be changed, the rich man in torment begins, for the first time in his life, to think about others. Look at verses 27 and 28. “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, 28for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’” I guess the man knew that his brothers were just as rotten as he was. Maybe the brothers were even now fighting over the inheritance that the rich man had left behind. So he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them. I think it’s humorous that somehow the man still thinks Lazarus should be his servant. Again, this doesn’t mean that people in hades will really be caring about others; in fact, I consider it more likely that they are in an eternal condition of complete self-centeredness.

This time, Abraham answers by saying that the man’s brothers don’t need Lazarus to come. Verse 29: “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’” Here, “Moses and the Prophets” is a shorthand way of referring to all the Scriptures at that time, all of the Old Testament. There is a very clear spiritual principle implied in this statement; it’s that the Holy Scriptures—the Bible—are sufficient to give a person knowledge of the way of salvation and enable them to escape condemnation. The rich man’s brothers, having access to the Scriptures, have all they need. In 2 Timothy, Paul writes to his young disciple Timothy to give him confidence in the word of God, reminding him “how from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” (2Tim 3:15)

But the formerly-rich man is not satisfied with that answer. He replies in verse 30, “No, Father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” He seems to make a valid point. Wouldn’t it be true that seeing a miraculous sign would help them believe more than mere words in a book? I’m sure many of us have also thought that if we could see such a miraculous sign as someone coming back from the dead, we would be much more confirmed in our faith. It seems like common sense. However, this is not correct. Abraham answered for the last time in verse 31, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

There is some dramatic irony here, because of course Jesus himself *did* rise from the dead, but most of the religious leaders still did not believe in him. This shows that Abraham is right: the problem is not a lack of seeing miracles, but that our sinful heart that is hard and does not want to repent. The change in our hearts that the Scriptures teach us we need cannot happen any more easily by our seeing a miracle. Many people claim to have witnessed miracles, but how many of those really became better people as a result?

Notice that in these verses, Abraham twice repeats the word “listen.” The formerly rich man’s brothers were probably familiar with the contents of the scriptures, being brought up Jewish. But they were not actually listening to Moses and the Prophets. When Jesus was baptized, God, speaking from heaven, gave Jesus’ disciples the same direction: “This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him!” Clearly, it is imperative that we listen to Moses, the Prophets, and Jesus—that is, the Old and New Testaments of the Bible. Let’s not forget that the one thing that definitely will help us spiritually is to listen to the word of God. Many people have knowledge of the word of God, but that’s not the same as really listening to it. Really listening means that the Word goes into our inner self and changes us, changes our way of thinking and responding to life. Really listening is not easy to do, especially in this distracting and tempting world. Actually, it requires the work of the Holy Spirit. But that’s what we ought to pray for, and strive to be good listeners to the Word of God.

One of my favorite examples of someone who was really changed by hearing the Bible is the famous composer George Frederic Handel. He was a native German, but he moved to London, England, in 1712, where he worked as a composer with various royal sponsors. But after a time, Handel became deeply discouraged by all the ugly politics and intrigues in London. Then one of Handel’s friends who was a very diligent Bible student sent him a letter with some results of his Bible study, describing how various verses in the Old Testament all connected to make an image of the glory of Christ. Handel was so amazed and inspired that with those verses as the text, he wrote the choral suite known as *The Messiah*, music which to this day seems to have mysterious power to transport people from where they are to the kingdom of heaven. It’s the fruit of how Handel was changed on the inside from listening to the word of God.

Today we learned how this life is our only chance to enter the kingdom of God through repentance and faith when we hear the word of God. Getting great wealth or people’s praise will not benefit us at all in the end if we don’t do that. Let’s pray to listen and be changed and live in the kingdom of God in our hearts.