

LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

Luke 16:19-31

Key Verse: 16:29

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

In the last passage Jesus said, “I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.” Jesus is the best example. Jesus shed his blood and died on the cross to become the source of eternal salvation for all who believe. He won innumerable friends who share eternal life with him in heaven. In the past, many Americans went abroad as missionaries, giving their time and money—even their lives—to preach the gospel. When America sent out missionaries, we made friends with other nations. But these days many are selfish and lazy. Instead of advancing God’s kingdom, we eat too much. Instead of looking for lost sheep, we only look for the lost remote. It is most urgent that we come back to Jesus. It is most urgent that we pray for sending missionaries once again. We embrace this hope and vision. Still, some are ready to send others, not themselves. When we stand before Christ, we will not receive credit for others’ sacrificial lives. Each person must give an account for how he used his own wealth. Let’s analyze our situation in light of God’s word and take drastic action to use worldly wealth to advance the kingdom of God. May God raise one million American missionaries for the whole world in this century.

Today’s passage is a continuation of Jesus’ teaching. When Jesus taught his disciples to use worldly wealth to advance God’s kingdom, the Pharisees sneered at him. Jesus diagnosed their problem as corruption of the heart. In fact, they were greedy and adulterous. They had a worldly value system without any spiritual insight. To them it didn’t make sense to lose worldly goods because they didn’t really believe spiritual reality. Jesus was heartbroken over them. They should be shepherds of their people, but they were useless. They should be the best managers for the work of God. But they were utterly corrupted. They should have a living hope in the kingdom of God. But they were earthbound. Jesus did not leave them alone. Jesus taught them a story about a rich man and Lazarus to help them have a right value system. Most of all, he wanted them to restore a right attitude toward the word of God. This is most important for all of us. In this passage Jesus teaches us the way to eternal life and to the kingdom of God. May God help us listen to Jesus carefully.

First, the rich man and Lazarus (19-21).

Look at verse 19. “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.” The Pharisees must have liked Jesus’ opening sentence. This man sounds like a success story. To put it in modern terms, he wore Italian fashions, ate imported delicacies and drank rare wines. He had the newest entertainment center, computer, cell phone, and so on. He had the most expensive SUV as well as the latest Ferrari. The driveway to his estate was long and winding, decorated with elegant flowers, shrubs and oriental trees. The gate was impressive, his mansion like a fine hotel. His daily life was a succession of pleasures. He was the envy of all.

Look at verses 20-21. “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.” To human eyes, Lazarus was nothing but a poor beggar. His body was covered with sores that constantly oozed puss. He desperately needed nutrition, but he had nothing to eat. The rich man drove by him day after day. At first, he was surprised, and then annoyed, that a sick man made his driveway look shabby. So he let his dogs out to harass Lazarus. They took after him with loud barking and bared teeth. But when they got near and saw his frail body, they were overcome with pity. Instead of biting him, they began to lick his sores. It is most interesting that Jesus gives a name to this poor beggar, calling him, “Lazarus.” It is the only time in all of Jesus’ parables that he names one of the characters. The name means, “whom God helps,” or “comforted by God.” It indicates that Lazarus was known by God. Lazarus had a personal relationship with God. He was a man of faith and hope in God, like father Abraham. Here, Jesus encloses saving faith in the person of Lazarus to teach a lesson. Lazarus had nothing appealing in his appearance. He had no valuable possessions. But he had faith and hope in God. These are the most precious things for any human being.

Second, the great chasm between heaven and hell (22-26).

Look at verse 22. “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried.” After a lifetime of pain and suffering, finding comfort only in God, Lazarus breathed his

last. As his physical eyes closed for the final time, his spiritual eyes awakened to a marvelous sight. He saw heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending in glorious procession. Fascinated by their beauty, he fixed his gaze on them. They were coming closer and closer; they were coming for him. They called him by name to come with them. Gently, they lifted him from his pain-wracked body and began a joyful ascent to the gates of heaven where they were welcomed by singing and celebration. Lazarus was led to presence of the Heavenly Father, who said to him, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. You overcame much suffering and kept your faith. Welcome to everlasting glory." At that, angels and the redeemed praised God for Lazarus' victorious life of faith. Then Lazarus knelt down and offered his loyalty to God the Father Almighty. Amid many songs of praises, Lazarus was led to the side of Abraham, who welcomed him with gladness and joy as an honored member at the great banquet in the kingdom of God.

The rich man also died. Word of his death spread quickly and caught the attention of all as front-page news. His funeral ceremony was elaborate and well attended. However, there was no sound from heaven. There were no angels for him. Even while his dead body was being carried through the streets in an honorable procession, his soul entered the fires of hell and 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." The pain of hell is well expressed here. As we know, burning causes excruciating pain—even to burn the tip of a finger. But this man's entire being was flaming perpetually. In view of his agony, the request for a drop of water on his tongue seems small enough. Implied in his request is the thought that Lazarus should do something for him.

How did Abraham answer? Look at verse 25. "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.'" Abraham essentially says that this man deserved his punishment in hell. It was the price he had to pay for a lifetime of selfish indulgence. At the same time, Abraham defended Lazarus. Lazarus is no longer on the bottom of an unjust society. He is now a child of God whom God is glad to comfort in heaven. Here we see that punishment in hell is clearly punitive. It comes from God's justice and fairness. It makes godless men bow down before the Almighty God and admit that he is right in his judgments. So many people scoff at God in their lifetimes. They think a selfish life brings the most advantage and success. They despise justice as an idealistic concept. But we must know that God is a God of absolute justice. All the injustices of this world will be rectified in the world to come.

Look at verse 26. "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us." Here Jesus teaches us an important fact about heaven and hell. Between heaven and hell there is a great chasm. The separation is complete and absolute. No one can go from heaven to hell, nor can anyone go from hell to heaven. Once one's destiny has been decided, it will not be changed and there is no way out; it is eternal. We cannot take a make-up exam. There will be no appeal. In the end, there will be two kinds of people: those in heaven and those in hell. There will be no intermingling or travel back and forth. Someday the only thing that matters is where we spend eternity. We want to go to heaven, right? How can we do this?

Third, listen to Moses and the Prophets (27-31).

When the former rich man realized the unchangeable nature of his eternal destiny, he thought of his brothers. He seems to be the oldest and was probably their role model, the object of their envy. But now he realized that if they followed his lifestyle, they would follow him to hell. So he begged Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them. He thought that if they were warned from the grave they would take it seriously and escape the punishment of hell by any means.

How did Abraham respond? Look at verse 29. "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'" Abraham did not agree that someone should go from the dead to warn the brothers. Instead, he pointed to Moses and the Prophets and said, "let them listen to them." "Moses and the Prophets" meant the Bible, the word of God. In the Bible God reveals himself to men and teaches us all that we need to know to have a personal relationship with him and to inherit the kingdom of God. The word of God is enough. What matters is whether or not we listen to the word of God as the word of God. Here we learn what kind of attitude we must have toward the word of God. We must listen to the word of God with awesome respect.

Now we can understand the Pharisees' problem; it should be a warning to us. They had the Law and the Prophets. But they did not have a right attitude toward God's word. To justify their sin of adultery, they legalized divorce on demand. To justify their greed they devised man-made rules. Instead of repenting before the word of God, they tried to revise God's word. In doing so they became spiritually blind. That is why they could ignore the misery of the poor and needy around them. That is why they could ignore the universal truth that death comes to all men and that after death comes judgment. We must honor the word of God as the word of God. Otherwise, we become spiritually blind. The spiritually blind can ignore the existence of heaven and hell.

Without the word of God, we cannot maintain the living hope in the kingdom of God. The Pharisees claimed to believe the resurrection and angels and the spiritual world, but they lived as if they would stay in this world forever. But the word of God gives us a true and living hope in the kingdom of God. 1 Peter 1:3,4 says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you...." With this hope, we can live as holy pilgrims.

Look at verse 30. "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'" He knew that is brothers did not like Bible study and were unlikely to write a sincere Bible testimony. So he wanted to send a sensational warning to his brothers. But Abraham said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Here the words "be convinced" mean to have saving faith. Saving faith comes from the word of God, not from spiritual experiences. Without faith in the word of God no one can be saved, even if they meet resurrected people.

For example, there is the resurrection of Lazarus in John's Gospel. It was clear evidence of Jesus' power and identity as the Son of God. The chief priests could see and touch the evidence. But it did not convince them to believe in Jesus. Instead, they made plans to kill Lazarus to prevent gospel faith from spreading (Jn 12:10). Believing in the word of God is not a matter of having more evidence or a more sensational revelation. It is a decision of faith to accept the authority of the Scriptures and to believe the Bible as it is.

Consider the resurrection of Jesus. It happened just as Jesus said it would, but his disciples did not believe it at first. Two of them were on the road to Emmaus ready to go back to an ordinary life, thinking everything was over. The Risen Christ came and walked with them. But they were kept from recognizing him. With a conversational style, Jesus helped them open their hearts and, beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself (Lk 24:27). He wanted them to believe his death and resurrection on the basis of God's word, not their experience. When the Risen Christ appeared in the upper room, he said, "This is what I told you while I was still with you: Everything must be fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms...This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem" (Lk 24:36-48).

Jesus wants us to believe that he died for our sins and rose from the dead according to the Scriptures. Then he forgives our sins. This opens our hearts to the love of God and we can begin to grow. We can be shepherds for the poor and needy around us. We can see the spiritual world and the existence of heaven and hell. We can see the future judgment and reward that our Righteous God will bring upon all people. We can have the assurance that we are God's children and the are going to the kingdom of God to live with Jesus and Abraham and Lazarus and all the children of God forever.

May God help each of us to listen to the word of God. In John 5:24 Jesus says, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life." Praise Jesus for saving us from eternal condemnation through faith in his word!

Sometimes, we tremble to live in America. How can we justify such luxury while so many do not have food and clothes? President Bush has proposed sending a lot of food and medicine to the poor in Africa. It is really good for us to do this. But the real tragedy in America is that so many young people are spiritually blind. We are like the rich man driving by poor Lazarus every day. We must come back to the Bible. We must study the word of God with repentance until we receive the forgiveness of sins. We must open our hearts to be shepherds of God's world. Surely, one-to-one Bible study is very important.

May God bless our spring semester ministry and increase our one-to-one Bible studies to 800 with students on our campuses. May God use us to change America to a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.