

God Knows The Heart
By Jason Huff
Psalm 37:14-18, James 5:1-8, Luke 16:14-31

Today's third Scripture reading is from Luke 16:14-31. Listen now to God's Word. "The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. 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 his way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law. Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. 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. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, 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.' 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 fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

God knows our hearts. God knows everything about us...every move we make, everything we've ever done or said or thought...nothing is outside of His view. Now depending on our viewpoint, this can either be reassuring or terrifying. If we live knowingly defiant of God's law, this means that all we have to look forward to is judgment. But if we know God through His Holy Word and through Scripture, if we've prayed to receive forgiveness through Jesus Christ and believe in faith, God's knowledge of us is incredibly comforting. Even though our hearts are messed up, God has promised those who believe that He will redeem our lives and clean us up and, through the work of the Holy Spirit, make us holy like He is holy. It means that we can live our lives free from having to hide. If God knows everything about us and still loves us, we can live lives of honesty and openness.

Today's passage is one that's often been misunderstood as a teaching on heaven and hell. It describes the afterlife in terms of comfort and torment, but that's not the central point of this passage. Jesus tells this story not to get us thinking about what heaven and hell will be like so much as He illustrates for us why we must be concerned about the attitudes in our hearts.

The passage starts with the Pharisees mocking Jesus. Their anger is no longer just about His teaching; now it's personal and they've decided to shoot the messenger. When they do this, Jesus turns His sites to their larger problem, the problem of their hearts. In ancient Judaism of Jesus' day¹, it was said that there were three snares for Israel, three traps where Israelites would violate God's law and still claim to be righteous. The three snares were improper worship of God, sexual immorality, and riches. Jesus shows that the Pharisees had fallen into all three. Jesus says that what is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. The literal translation says that the things the Pharisees valued were an "abomination", the same word used in the Old Testament to describe those things that were utterly against God's moral law. You can't get any deeper in sin than an abomination.

The first problem is their self-righteousness. They justify their behavior before men, and that's a form of idolatry. Rather than acknowledging their sin and turning to God in repentance, they justified their actions and kept right on in their same routines, acting as the spiritual leaders of the community. But as Jesus says, the Law isn't going away. The moral law that God has established, the law that transcends the ritual codes of Israel, is eternal and binding for all people. And pretending that you are above the law is establishing yourself as your own god.

The second problem is that of sexual immorality. Jewish law said that a man could divorce his wife for "indecency." Rabbis argued that the word "indecency" could mean anything from sexual immorality to burning breakfast, ignoring that God says outright in Malachi 2:16 that He hates divorce. The Pharisees practiced divorce because it was permitted in the law and then remarried. But Jesus says that these supposedly righteous men had broken the law and committed adultery by marrying again! His interpretation of the Law is very strict, but it showed the content of their hearts. This isn't Jesus' only teaching on divorce, and it's not meant to explain how we should deal with divorce in our culture today – that's another sermon in its own right, one I'm not preaching today. What Jesus pointed out was that the Pharisees' hearts went against the very core of God's intent for us, yet they acted as if they were righteous doing it.

The third saying in today's passage is the parable that illustrates the problem of wealth and how it can corrupt a person. The rich man in the story is negligent with his riches and ignores Lazarus, though it's well within His means to help. The passage describes this man as ridiculously wealthy, someone who spared no expense for his own comfort. When it says he lived in luxury every day, it literally says he feasted lavishly every day. It's the same wording as we saw describing the huge banquet given to celebrate the return of the prodigal son that we studied a couple of weeks ago. He had that kind of feast every day. Yet he paid no attention to those in need around him, and he experiences eternal judgment for his choice.

Now we here this morning may feel like we don't fall into those categories. Many of us have confessed our sins to God and acknowledge that we need Him in our lives. Maybe we haven't fallen into traps like sexual immorality. Maybe we don't live our lives surrounded by luxury. But the parable lays out for us three attitudes of the heart that lead to unrighteousness, attitudes that can slowly weave their way into our hearts and destroy our relationship with God and lead us to being pretend Christians. Let's look at what they are and how to avoid them.

¹ As found in the Qumran document *The Damascus Rule*.

First problem attitude: an unwillingness to reach out to solve the problems God has placed in your way. Of all Jesus' parables, this is the only one where Jesus names one of the characters. Part of that is to show God's love for the poor... God knows Lazarus by name and cares for him despite his social position. But what's interesting is that the rich man knows Lazarus' name too. Lazarus isn't a wandering beggar. The rich man knows who Lazarus is. He's lived near Lazarus probably his whole life, but hasn't lifted a finger to help him, even though the rich man had plenty to spare. The rich man had enough money not only to feed Lazarus but to have gotten him medical care without batting an eye. The fact that he doesn't help when the situation has been clearly in front of him all these years makes it inexcusable.

This week, we've been seeing pictures from Haiti at all the devastation down there, and it's a great thing to help. Whether you give money through a relief organization or help in some other way, I think that's awesome if God's called you to do it. At the same time, we can't possibly give to every single organization that asks us for funds; I get a new letter every single day in the church office asking for money. We can't help them all. So what do we do?

Ultimately, we have to ask ourselves: am I helping to solve the problems God has laid on my heart... the problems I know by name? They might be local. As we talked about last week, we need to support our church. We did get some new pledges last week, but we're still only about 2/3rds of the way to being able to support the basic ministry of the church on our pledges. You know this place by name. There may be other local ministries God is naming to you – Turning Point, McRest, soup kitchens, whatever. God may be naming something else for you, a mission worker in a foreign country, maybe the relief efforts in Haiti or a student studying to become a pastor. I don't know what God has laid on your heart. But whatever it is, whatever God is naming for you, you need to be a part of God's solution. We aren't God, we can't solve everything, but we can help solve whatever God has put in our minds and hearts.

Truth is, we have a lot more power than we think. God's resources can make or break businesses, churches, even governments! And God has entrusted *us* with His resources – not just our money but also our intellects and our talents and our manpower. We can reject the attitude of the rich man and say, "I'll use whatever God gives me to help bring about His Kingdom." Don't let the dilemma of riches stop you. Often we think, "If I spend what I have to help other people, *I'm* going to wind up the poor man." Let God worry about that. Our calling is not to figure out how God will take care of us, but to make the most of what He's already given us.

Second problem attitude of the rich man: thinking like a master rather than a servant. Every time I read this passage, I am amazed at the nerve of the rich man. In the afterlife, this guy has no clout, no right to be asking for anything. And yet he demands that Abraham send Lazarus to do his bidding! He's still acting as if he was in control, still trying to keep Lazarus under his feet. The rich man is so audacious, he gets into an argument with Abraham, the father of all of Israel, telling him that he's right and Abraham is wrong! John Milton, in his classic poem *Paradise Lost*, describes the fall of Satan and gives him the line, "Better to reign in hell than serve in heaven." And that attitude is precisely what's on display in this parable. The rich man still sees Lazarus as beneath him. He sees people only for their usefulness to him rather than as equals worthy of love and respect and care. His attitude contributes to his torment.

Jesus set a different example for us. As Philippians 2:5-7 puts it, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.” Jesus lived as a servant, with no place to call home – as He put it, no place to lay His head. He displayed incredible power but never used it for His own benefit, even in His greatest trials and temptations... He used it to serve others. He taught anyone who would listen, even those that mocked Him. His disciples called Him master, yet He washed their feet. And then, at the perfect time, Christ finished His service by dying on the cross for us.

So how do we get this attitude? It’s not just about serving. Anybody can serve; an atheist can serve. People serve for all sorts of reasons. I remember volunteering to serve at Kids’ Club when I was in college. Why did I do it? For the same reason every 18-year-old guy volunteers to serve...to meet girls! Actually, it was to meet a particular girl that I now happen to be married to...and eventually, I served because I wanted to serve. But our attitude makes the difference between our service being selfish and our service being godly. When you’re serving to thank God for His mercy, when you’re serving to model Christ, the work doesn’t become any easier, but it becomes focused on others. Serving isn’t about you; it’s about the other person.

The outgrowth of this is that we see each other as equals. Galatians 3:28 tells us that “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” The boundary lines fall down as we realize that so many things that divide us are not from God. We can’t judge each other by the sins we once committed or socio-economic status or anything else. Even the unbeliever, even the one who belittles God, is still worthy of our respect as someone who God created in His image and who God can still redeem. When we have that attitude, we’ve started to get what it means to be a servant in God’s Kingdom.

Third and final problem attitude: demanding miracles rather than living in faith. The rich man fights with Abraham, saying that his relatives would surely repent and believe if they saw a man return from the dead. Abraham replies that if they don’t believe the Scripture, they aren’t going to be convinced by somebody’s resurrection, either. The argument is about the demand for some sort of convincing, supernatural proof that God is real and that Scripture is valid.

But here’s the rub...nothing is supernatural. I’ll say it again...nothing is supernatural. Now you might think, “Is Jason saying He doesn’t believe in angels and demons and miracles?” And that’s the farthest thing from the truth. I believe in them all. But here’s the truth: anything that God has created is natural. It exists because He created it. There’s nothing unnatural about any part of creation. God created a universe that is totally responsive to Him. There’s nothing more natural than for God to exert His power, so when God heals someone in a way that doesn’t happen normally or has a fish swallow a wayward prophet, it’s natural. Miracles are events we can’t explain or even really comprehend, but for God to work in our world is the definition of natural. Everything was made by Him and for Him! And just because we can’t see some natural things doesn’t mean they don’t exist. We couldn’t see atomic structure or DNA for millennia. Same for the world circling the sun...just because we don’t perceive the truth doesn’t mean it’s not true. What’s often called supernatural is simply what God has naturally created and done that we don’t have the ability to perceive. Sin and death were never intended to be in our world, but they aren’t supernatural. They are sub-natural, less than what God intended for us.

But what this also means is that we have the ability in our hearts to both demand miracles and then claim that there's some natural explanation for what happened that doesn't involve God. The Israelites saw God bring ten plagues on their oppressors, part the Red Sea, lead them as a pillar of fire and a pillar of wind, and send them manna in the desert. Yet the Israelites still grumbled and complained and wanted to go back to Egypt. People have tried to explain away the truly amazing feats that Jesus did – healing the sick, walking on water, bringing the dead back to life. They try to explain away the resurrection. If people can explain away the awesome wonder of God on full display, how will they see the miracles in the little things – the cancer that goes into remission, the accident that almost happened, the random meeting of someone who becomes a best friend? They won't. If Scripture isn't enough for belief, then nothing will be. The truth is, no sign will ever be enough. There's always the request for one more, one more proof, one more evidence. The rich man demands a miracle when a miracle isn't what's needed.

What's needed is faith, plain and simple. The fact that we have the Bible we have, preserved as it has been over the centuries, is pretty amazing. Maybe some of you heard the news this week of a shard of pottery found on an archeological dig that dates back to the 10th century BC, back to the time of King David's reign over Israel. It's the oldest archeological proof of Israel ever found. Many liberal scholars thought it was impossible for Israel to even exist in 1000 BC, let alone have a written language. And yet not only has the writing on the shard been deciphered, it contains a message about worshipping God and giving justice and protection to the poor, the stranger, the widow, and the orphans. No other nation in the area ever spoke about those groups of people in those terms. It shows that Israel as described in the Bible really existed. Or does it? The Dead Sea Scrolls showed that the Old Testament had been preserved faithfully for over a thousand years. But does that make it true? It goes back to faith.

What does living in faith do? How does it change us? First, it affects our worldview. When we live out of faith, everything takes on a different perspective. Disasters like the one in Haiti go from being mindless tragedies to opportunities to show God's love in the midst of suffering. Life goes from being a fruitless pursuit of happiness ended by death to something eternally significant, made joyful by the knowledge that God loves us. The world has meaning. And through that change in worldview, we are empowered by faith. We have motivation to evangelize, to tell the good news, and to work towards holiness. Truthfully, living in faith might be the last of the three ways to avoid the rich man's fate, but it's the one that makes the first two possible. We can solve the problems God puts in our way only when we believe that God exists and that He is the one who orchestrates events so His glory might be seen through us. We can give up our selfishness and become servants only when we have faith that this is truly what God desires from us. Faith in God's reality is what separates us from the rich man, because through faith, we will live and act in ways that reflect that belief, and that faith will eventually shape not just what we do but the very core of who we are by the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

So today I leave you with the challenges Jesus gives us in this passage. Will you ignore the problems God has put in front of you, or will you take a step out in faith and use your time and resources to be a part of the solution? Are you going to keep your crown, or are you going to lay it down to become a servant like Jesus? Are you going to forever want to see one more miracle, or are you going to trust in simple faith that God is real and loves you and wants you to be His ambassador to our world? God knows your heart. Make the right choices today.