

LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

Luke 16:14-31

Key verse 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 man and his two sons, 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! How would he help them? Jesus teaches them to listen to the word of God and repent. Unless they repent, they will end up in eternal torment and agony. So we too learn to listen to God’s word and repent. Our time on earth is so short. Eternity is so long. How should we live?

First, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached (14-18). **“The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.”** These men had been skeptics of Jesus and his ministry from the beginning. They wondered if he was a blasphemer (5:21), questioned his views on discipleship (5:27-35), and his healing on the Sabbath made them furious, since it violated their religious tradition (6:1-11). They accused him of being in collusion with Satan, an obvious lie (11:15). When rebuked they became worse, openly and fiercely opposing him (11:53-54; 13:14; 14:1; 15:1). Now they were sneering at him, expressing open contempt (16:14). We may avoid or try to destroy such people. Instead, Jesus reasoned with them to draw out their hearts (5:21-24, 31-32; 36-39; 6:1-11; 11:17-22; 13:15-16). Three times in Luke’s gospel we find Jesus eating at a Pharisee’s house (7:36; 11:37; 14:1). Two famous and unique parables in Luke’s gospel are given to them (10:25-37; 15). In these later chapters, right up until his betrayal and arrest he works to help them repent (17:20-21; 18:9, 18; 19:39, 45; 20:3-4, 19, 25, 38, 44; 22:51-53). Jesus loves his enemies, and sees them too as his lost sheep. The NIV puts a vague title here called “Additional Teachings.” But I’m convinced Luke wanted us to understand these in the context of Jesus’ teaching to the Pharisees, that somehow they might repent and believe. How did he help them?

LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

Verse 15 reads, **“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.’”** They were quick to justify themselves in the eyes of others, being sensitive to public opinion. What do people value highly? Physical appearance, clothing, achievements, titles, degrees, influence, power, and of course money. They had all these things. People envied them, admired them, feared and respected them. They ridiculed Jesus’ words. This was a huge mistake! They completely ignored the eyes of God, who sees their hearts. The phrase **“detestable in God’s sight”** implies idolatry. Outwardly they looked pious and holy, yet in their hearts they were idol worshippers. How tempting it is to only care what people think and say, and ignore what God sees.

Our hearts are deceitful (Jer 17:9). They will never lead us to live in the truth before God. How can we live before God, or even know what God thinks of us, of what we value, of the world we live in? Verse 16a reads, **“The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John.”** These were proclaimed in every generation since Moses. Those who listened to it found the way of life in a world of death (See Lev 18:5). Psalm 119 may be the best description of such a love for God’s law. Some verses: **“How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word”** (Ps 119:9). **“Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law”** (Ps 119:18). **“Your word is a lamp for my feet, a light for my path”** (Ps 119:105). Yet even the Psalmist realized that he could not keep the law, so he concludes in Psalm 119:176, **“I have strayed like a lost sheep. Seek your servant, for I have not forgotten your commands.”** The Law and the Prophets reveal God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness. It reveals a way of life that is just and true, and at the same time is unattainable by sinful man.

Verse 16 reads, **“Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing their way into it.”** Some may wonder if there is a way to force yourself or push others into the kingdom of God. But the flow of Jesus’ teaching is clear: these are people who realized they are lost and in need of a good shepherd. John came to such people. He preached a message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (3:3). They all came to John because they knew that they had failed to live up to God’s holy standard as laid out in his word. They were selfish people who never shared, and greedy people like tax collectors,

LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

and brutal people like mercenary soldiers (3:11-14). John didn't say, "Oh, you're not that bad. Just try to do better, God understands." He said, "**You brood of vipers! Produce fruit in keeping with repentance!**" They humbly listened to John, and they were baptized. John's message didn't end with repentance. He pointed to where forgiveness of sins is found: in Jesus the Messiah. John proclaimed the good news of the kingdom: The Messiah has opened a way to the kingdom of God! Tax collectors, prostitutes, demon-possessed, the poor, and all kinds of ostracized and marginalized people came to Jesus. Jesus opened a way for them to enter God's kingdom, not on the merits of their own righteous obedience, but by his grace. Jesus would go to the cross and shed his blood for the forgiveness of their sins. They were all entering the kingdom of God by faith in Jesus!

The good news of the kingdom Jesus preached did not end there. Like the Psalmist, we love the Law and truth of God, but in our weakness we aren't able to live up to it. But in Jesus gives new life and strength. He continues to sanctify and empower us to do what we could never do on our own. Zechariah described it like this: "**...to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days**" (1:74-75). This is the good news of the kingdom being preached through the Law, repentance and the gospel of Jesus.

But what about those who tried to justify themselves by the law? Someone once said we tend to drift toward legalism, as our life improves and we forget our past sinful life. After about two years in Bible study I had a moment of victory when I had overcome outward sins of drug addiction, smoking cigarettes and an immoral lifestyle. I was so happy! I thought I had made it! Then I noticed things I hadn't seen in me, sins of pride, laziness, and self-glory seeking. I realized then that I have a long way to go. Jesus says clearly, "**I tell you, it is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law**" (17). The word of God never fails to reveal the awesome holiness of our Perfect Lord, and of our bottomless capacity to fall short. When used properly, this keeps us humble, close to Jesus, dependent on his grace and his cross, and very soft-hearted. But the Pharisees used the law to formulate traditions which they then used to justify themselves. One example was divorce. Genesis 2:24 clearly states: "**That is why a man leaves his father and mother and is united to his wife, and**

LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

they become one flesh.” Jesus taught: **“Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate”** (Mk 10:9). But divorce was a reality. Moses responded by giving some instruction to prevent doing what is detestable in the eyes of the LORD (Dt 24:1-4). Rabbi scholars in Jesus day used this to justify divorce. Did that mean that Genesis 2:24 is no longer God’s truth about marriage? Jesus says in verse 18: **“Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.”** Adultery is a violation of the Ten Commandments. If they listened to Jesus, they may realize they to are sinners, then repent and join the prostitutes and tax collectors who are entering the kingdom of God!

Second, the rich man and Lazarus (19-31). What happens after we die? We know at some point in the future, Jesus will return again, and all will be resurrected and face judgment (Jn 5:28-29). But what about those who die in the meantime? Verses 19-21. **“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.”** What a contrast between these two people! Look at this rich man. Today, we synthesize purple dye in labs, and so it doesn’t cost more than any other color. In Jesus’ day purple dye was extremely rare. Produced by a gland of a certain shellfish in the Mediterranean Sea, twelve thousand snails would yield only 1.4 g of pure dye, enough to color only the trim of a garment¹. One pound of such dye would cost 150,000 denarii, or 500 years of a day-laborer’s wages (a crayon of dye would cost \$120k). Yet this man dressed in purple often; a different coat for every day of the year. He ate only the finest of foods, a new succulent dish every meal. Anything he wanted or desired, he would 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 suffering from serious health problems. He longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. He had no protection from the elements, lying at the rich man’s gate, so the dogs often came

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyrian_purple#Production_from_sea_snails

LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

and licked his sores. It seems intentional that he was laid at the rich man's gate. Outside of his household, Lazarus was the closest human being in proximity to the rich man. Every day on his way to work he would pass by Lazarus. "How are you, Lazarus? Covered in sores, eh? Well, keep the chin up there, man! Have a good day, and God bless you!" Every day the man enjoyed his luxury, while Lazarus suffered in agony.

But this didn't go on forever. Verse 22a reads, **"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side."** Lazarus' suffering came to an end in his death. No one on earth even noticed. There is no mention of burial; perhaps the dogs ate him. But the response in heaven was a totally different matter. Angels came and carried him to Abraham's side. On earth, he was laid at the gate, exposed to elements, now he had angelic escorts! He longed to eat crumbs, now he would sit at the feast in the kingdom of God! His only friends were dogs, whose empathy was dog drool in his wounds. Now, he enjoyed conversation with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and all the saints who went before. What a glorious place to be!

What about the rich man? He likely lived much longer than the beggar Lazarus. He had lived as if he would never die, enjoying his luxurious lifestyle every day without a single thought concerning his eternal destiny. But verse 22b reads, **"The rich man also died and was buried."** This was the end of the life of luxury. All the rich man's possessions were left to others; his purple garments were now on sale cheap at the goodwill store. The world moved on without him. But what of the rich man's fate? Verses 23-24 read, **"In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.²⁴ 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.'"** Hades here refers to the place of the dead. It is a place where those who die await judgment. After Jesus comes again and all people face judgment, Hades and death will all be thrown into the fiery lake of burning sulfur (Rev 20:14). Immediately after death, this man was in torment and agony, burning in a fire. He saw Abraham far away. Shockingly, there was Lazarus, that pitiful beggar, by his side! All the rich man could think about was some comfort for his agony. He assumed that Lazarus should appease his agony and suffering. This man had

LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

always received comfort when he wanted it. His desires were always met on earth. What about now?

Verses 25-26 read, **“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.’”** The rich man’s purpose of life was to enjoy good things, and so he did so, all the while the closest human being, his neighbor, received only bad things. Now, the roles were strikingly reversed, except for one major difference: The chasm put there to ensure such a reversal will never take place again. This new situation would not just endure for a brief time. There would be no crossing over or back. The rich man had invested and received good things for a moment of time, and now would suffer for eternity, while Lazarus suffered bad things for a moment of time, and would now be comforted for eternity. The contrast between their lives on earth cannot compare with the contrast we find in eternity. We are tempted to think of Jesus’ story as just that: another parable, or abstract illustration. But it is more likely, due to his use of Lazarus’ name, that Jesus is pulling back the veil of eternity and giving us a peak to the other side. Jesus speaks frankly and clearly about the eternal destiny that awaits each person after they die. Eternal comfort and life in the kingdom, and eternal torment. It is good for us to think about the reality of hell. Jim Elliot, brutally martyred at the age of 29, has a well known quote that is so relevant here: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose.” For which destiny is my one short life being invested in?

Look at verses 27-28. **“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’”** He realized that his family lived exactly as he did, and that unless they changed, they would also come to this place of torment. Verse 29 reads, **“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’”** Abraham tells us that all the warning and instruction that is needed for ourselves, for our family members, for our society to avoid this horrible fate is available in the word of God. This was a direct message to the Pharisees. They were experts in the law, but missed the most important part.

LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

Due to their identity as “Sons of Abraham,” and the deception of people’s admiration and their materially blessed life, they were confident in their going to the kingdom. This arrogance prevented them from examining themselves based on what the Bible actually says. They never questioned what they were doing. They rejected Jesus, thinking they did not need a Savior. They justified ignoring the suffering and needy around them, while seeking money and their own pursuits.

Verses 30-31 read, “**No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’** ³¹ **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.’**” For some reason people have a fixed idea that a supernatural experience will be enough to lead them to repentance, without any context from God’s word to understand it. The evidence of Jesus’ generation was clear enough. Everywhere Jesus went proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God there were accompanying signs of miraculous healings and demons being driven out. The blind could see, the deaf hear, the lame walk, the leper cleansed. Yet many still refused to believe in him. Jesus gave one last and final sign: the sign of Jonah, alluding to his death on the cross and resurrection three days later. For nearly 2000 years the Risen Jesus has been alive and testifying through his disciples to people all over the world. But the sad reality is, only those who have an attitude to listen to God come to faith in him. The application is clear: **LISTEN** to the word of God. The word “listen” means more than just hear it, letting it go in one ear and out the other. It means to internalize it until we live it out in obedience. Listening to the word of God will lead to repentance. We will come to understand our deep need for a Savior. But those who do not really listen to God’s word will not accept Jesus as Savior, seeing as they don’t realize their need as sinners. Although Jesus is Risen today, unless we understand why he died, we can’t understand why he is risen.

God reveals himself to us **in his word**: who he is, what he has done, what he desires. At the same time, through the study and application of God’s word, we learn who we are, what we were created to be and to do, and how to live our lives with eternity in mind. But this requires a humility to really LISTEN to the word of God and to repent. Repentance is to turn, to change. **Listening to the word of God is to allow it to change me, instead of using it to justify my own opinions,**

LISTEN TO MOSES AND THE PROPHETS

lifestyle, and choices. We need to be transformed through the renewing of our mind (Ro 12:2). In what practical way have I been listening to the word of God and repenting? I remember in 1998 I took the key verse 1 Peter 2:2, which reads, **“Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation.”** My Bible teacher would leave the ministry that year. At the same time, I struggled with pride and focus. This key verse gave me direction. I read the Bible cover to cover, and the reading and deep study of the word of God became a life practice. In 1999, I tried to listen to Romans 6:13, **“Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness.”** I was an undergraduate student at that time, and I was struggling with temptations like pornography and video games. To listen to this word, I made it the passcode on my bank account. God’s word helped me to overcome temptation and to use my time and resources to serve him as a shepherd and Bible teacher for my fellow students at UIC, some who are still among us today. Matthew 6:33 says, **“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well.”** Sarah Barry gave us this word on our wedding day. One month later I lost my job, and we had no income. We listened to this verse, trying to trust God and pray. We had only been fellowship leaders for a few months, so practically seeking his kingdom at that time was serving the members: driving all over Chicagoland to bring students to worship service, and teach the Bible. True to his word, God provided everything, so the time off work was like an extended honeymoon. Reviewing my life, I’m thankful to see again and again how listening to God’s word has been the source of life, peace, and hope. I don’t want to be swept up in the culture of my time, that ignores the Lazarus’ at our gates, or the need for our family members to repent, focusing on pleasure, material things, and this life only. Listening to the word of God is the only way. Time is passing so quickly, and eternity is just around the corner. Who is the Lazarus outside, at the gate, longing to receive something from us? Do we have family members that need to repent, like the rich man did? Today is the day of salvation. Now is the time for the good news of the kingdom to be preached.