

September 29, 2019
Sunday Morning Service
Series: Luke
Community Baptist Church
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Greer, SC 29650
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THE LAW, THE PROPHETS, THE GOOD NEWS Luke 16:14-18

I read a story one time about a young man who decided he wanted to spend a summer working on a fishing boat in the north Pacific Ocean near Alaska. He talked to his pastor about the prospect. The pastor knew enough about the kind of men his parishioner would be working around to be deeply concerned. He tried to dissuade the young man by enlightening him to the fact that the men given to that trade were often hard-drinking, hard-living, hard-cursing men. The pastor feared that such company would discourage the young man in his faith.

Nevertheless, the young man took a job on a fishing trawler out of Juneau, Alaska. After the summer stint ended, the young man returned home and returned to church. Of course the pastor was curious about how the summer went and asked the fellow how he was able to maintain his Christian testimony among such rough sinners of the world. The young man replied, “It was no problem at all. No one found out I was a Christian.” That is a problem.

James taught us that “*friendship with the world is enmity with God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God*” (James 4:4). That is a fairly direct and easy to understand statement. You are either in or you are out. There are no halfway Christians, no part-time Christians, no almost Christians.

That clear line of demarcation is the point of Jesus’ statement to the Pharisees who responded to His story about investing in eternal treasures as opposed to investing in passing treasures of this earth. In our text, Jesus clearly confronted the Pharisees about their criticism of His conclusion that you can’t serve God and money at the same

time. When they ridiculed Jesus for His position on money, Jesus responded by taking them to task regarding their hypocrisy.

The Pharisees, more than anyone else in the Jewish culture, claimed to be the keepers, protectors, doers of the Law God gave through Moses. Jesus pointed out that even if a person was able to keep the Law, it was not sufficient to make them righteous. Rather, the people who are “forcing their way into the kingdom” do so because of the Good News that salvation is not through law-keeping but through faith in Christ.

In order to show how hypocritical those Pharisees were, and how badly they missed God’s standard, Jesus picked out one of their pet matters of law-keeping—divorce. God’s Law addresses the issue of divorce. So did the Pharisees. But their laws were a twisting and perversion of God’s Law. Therefore, through the clear and simple statements of our text, Jesus laid down the truth that God’s Law is steadfast and unchanging. That Law will always reveal to us our need for a Savior from the penalty of sin. The Prophets promised the Savior from sin. The Good News is that Jesus is that needed Savior. The Pharisees rejected Him in favor of pretending to do their laws. Most people still do the same. Our text shows us how Jesus presents Himself as the fulfillment of God’s Law and the fulfillment of God’s promises through the prophets. That is Good News.

God’s Way is not the Human Way (vv.14-15).

The Pharisees have their way. Luke described them as, *The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him (v.14)*. Most obviously, they are accused of loving money. We know from other statements in the Gospel accounts that these were people who withheld help from their needy parents claiming that all they had was “Corban” that is, dedicated to God (Mark 7:11). Jesus rightly accused them of making the outside look religiously clean, while inside they were motivated by greed and wickedness (Luke 11:39). Because they were motivated by greed, they consumed widows’ houses (Luke 20:47). They pretended to give offerings to God’s work when in reality it was all a show for selfish gain (Matthew 6:2).

According to God's word through Timothy, because people love themselves they love money (2 Timothy 3:2). And because they love money they gave themselves to all kinds of evil. These were the kind of religious leaders who set up their tables in the temple in order to rob God's people (Matthew 21:13). And all the while they considered themselves to be the standard of righteousness—and many of the people believed it! No wonder Jesus warned, *"For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven"* (Matthew 5:20).

The self-loving, money-loving Pharisees ridiculed Jesus who stood as a vivid exception to their wickedness. Jesus had just illustrated the need to invest in eternal matters rather than passing earthly stuff (16:1-12). Jesus had just laid down the very stringent standard: *"No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money"* (Luke 16:13).

That truth, that reality cut to the Pharisees' souls which drove them to respond with vituperation. Previously, in the larger context, the Pharisees grumbled when Jesus broke their laws about associating with sinners and tax collectors (15:1). This time *they ridiculed Him*. The word means to deride by turning up the nose and sneering at. Only Luke used the word in his writings. The only other use is when Luke told about the wicked sinners (no doubt some of these same people) who were milling around the cross as Jesus was crucified. *And the people stood by, watching, but the rulers scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God, his Chosen One!"* (Luke 23:35).

Technology changes. People generally don't. We can still observe how religious people respond if we break one of their rules. By the way, breaking one of their rules is not the same as breaking God's Law, even though the religionists think it is. It is not unusual for religious people to become angry, respond unkindly, or be quick to show their displeasure with you when you step over their preferred boundaries. That is because they love themselves. When you break their rule, they become defensive like a mother bear protecting her cubs which belong to her.

In the case of our text, we find a classic case of human laws versus God's Law. Jesus taught that God determines the right way.

God also applies His Law perfectly every time because God knows the heart. *And he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts"* (v.15a).

Notice that Jesus pointed out that the self-lovers were also self-justifiers. Jesus accused the lovers of self and lovers of money of justifying themselves. To *justify* is more than trying to make themselves look good or look right. The word means that those people put themselves to the test regarding righteousness, and concluded or passed judgment that they were indeed righteous. And that was not just regarding the human standard of righteousness, but God's standard. In short, they declared that they measured up to God's standard of righteousness and would therefore inherit the kingdom of God.

But what actually happened was that the hypocrites tried to make themselves look justified in the sight of fellow humans (*before men*). The issue really was not what God concludes about them or us. The Pharisees' goal was to gain the approval of others. To the disciples Jesus assessed the results of the Pharisees' hypocritical self-righteousness. He taught the disciples, *"And when you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward"* (Matthew 6:5). Human approval is all there is. They had no acceptance by God, no declaration of righteousness from God.

Part of the problem was that the Pharisees, like modern hypocrites, were not only self-righteous and self-lovers, but they were self-deceived. Jesus could assess them with perfect accuracy because God knows what no one else knows. It is easy for us to deceive others about the condition of our hearts. The heart, the inner man, in and of itself is invisible to others. But if others watch and listen closely, they will perceive the truth about our hearts. That is because our words betray the truth about our hearts. Jesus taught, *"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks"* (Matthew 12:34b).

Furthermore, our actions betray the truth about our hearts. Jesus also taught, *"For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All*

these evil things come from within, and they defile a person” (Mark 7:21-23).

It is even easy to deceive ourselves about the condition of our hearts. Jeremiah wrote that *the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it (Jeremiah 17:9)?* Because of this natural condition, it is easy for us to be biased toward ourselves. It is easy for us to deny our real motives. It is so easy for us to deny the fact that we want to sin, but we just don't want to get caught sinning. But God knows our heart. *“I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds” (Jeremiah 17:10).*

Knowing what is really going on inside the “real us,” God passes judgment. In light of that truth, God hates what humans praise. *For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. (v.15b)* This is a reminder that people praise good works. Do works of kindness toward the needy, patience, beneficence and you will receive many pats on the back. Your fellow humans believe that all of those are good and beneficial things to do.

But when good works and kindness are attempts to gain God's righteousness, it is an abomination to God. God hates to have people trying to achieve His character through their own efforts. That is the essence of idolatry, replacing God with self. It is impossible for us to make ourselves truly righteous because we are sinners by nature. To attempt to gain God's righteousness through self-righteousness is to offer God blemished and infected sacrifices and expect Him to be satisfied.

There is a huge difference between what is acceptable in the sight of men (v.15a) and what is acceptable in the sight of God (v.15b). You can do enough to make other people think you are in the kingdom of God. But no one can do enough good works to actually get into the kingdom of God.

God's Way is Permanent (vv.16-17).

The scribes and Pharisees had their way, their rules, their laws. But what they decided was true passes away. God's order of how things really are proceeds. Jesus told the hypocrites, *“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the*

kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it” (v.16).

Obviously, we should conclude from this statement that the Law and Prophets are important. *“The Law and the Prophets were until John” (v.16a).* The Law established God's rules and requirements for His people. The Law reveals God's character. Therefore, the Law sets the standard for God's righteousness. The Prophets declared God's message in conjunction with God's Law. The Prophets' messages had two general themes: 1) How badly people miss God's standard by failing to keep His Law; and 2) How God will provide the substitute sacrifice to pay the penalty for sinners who break the Law.

Up until the time of John the Baptist, God's message was the words of the Law and the Prophets. But since John, the good news is preached. What is the good news? It is *the good news of the kingdom of God [that] is preached” (v.16b).* For centuries God's messengers preached the Law and the promised coming of Messiah, the Lamb of God. Before John the message was, “This is God's Law, and the Lamb of God is coming to release us from the penalty associated with that Law.”

Then came John who preached: *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand (Matthew 3:2).* Until John, repentant sinners placed their faith in God's promise that He would provide the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. John introduced the Lamb. The appearance of the promised Lamb meant that God's kingdom was present. John was the bridge between Old Testament promises of the coming Savior and the New Testament fulfillment of the Savior's work of redemption.

And because the kingdom arrived, *“Everyone forces his way into the kingdom” (v.16c).* At this point, God's way sounds contradictory. We know that salvation is by grace through faith in Christ alone. The invitation to enter the kingdom of God is given freely. But we who are born again also know that moving out of Satan's kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God through Christ the door is outright warfare. Jesus made that reality quite clear when He taught, *“If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his*

life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). Death to self is no easy matter.

The difference between being religious and being brought into the kingdom is a matter of death to self-righteousness. The Pharisees never died to self, never endured the violence of the cross, and never entered the kingdom. They were content to be self-righteous as are all religionists and many professing Christians today.

Taking the kingdom by force is God’s Law. God’s Law never changes. In fact, Jesus said, *“It is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void” (v.17)*. Do we really believe that heaven and earth will pass away? That is a hard pill to swallow if we think about it seriously. But God has promised that one day everything we know about creation will be obliterated. *But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed (2 Peter 3:10)*. We need not worry though because God will create a new heaven and a new earth. John wrote in the Revelation, *Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more (Revelation 21:1)*.

The most stable thing we can imagine will be consumed in flames, but no part of the Law will change. God will bring radical change to every aspect of life as we know it. But His Law will never change. In a nut shell, the permanence of God’s Law is the whole problem for self-righteous people. The Law of God still kills us because we cannot keep it, and that is never going to change. Five times Jesus issued the same kind of warning such as, *“For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Matthew 5:18)* and *“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away” (Matthew 24:35)*.

The Law will be God’s standard of judgment at the judgement seat. Thinking about God’s law hanging over us makes life pretty miserable, right? Why does God want His people to be miserable?

God’s Way is Not Miserable (v.18).

We must remember that Jesus has taken the curse of the Law against sin for us. When we trust Christ, we are “in” Him and exempt from the curse of the Law. But religionists and self-righteous people twist the Law so that it appears that they are keeping it. Those people are miserable. Too many professing followers of Christ are miserable people. They have too much religion to be happy with the world, and too much of the world to be happy with Christ.

Jesus brought up an example of how the twisting of His Law actually results in misery. *“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery” (v.18)*. We are bound to wonder why Jesus made this statement at this time? The topic of divorce doesn’t seem to fit the context. It almost looks like the statement was forced into the context. How does the argument go from self-righteous people-pleasing, to the endurance of the Law, to divorce?

Divorce is an example of man’s way versus God’s way. In the beginning God established the standard. When God brought Eve to Adam, He established this rule, *Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh (Genesis 2:24)*. Jesus appealed to this rule as the standard of righteousness in the context of arguing about divorce (Matthew 19:4-5).

The question of divorce is not for every man to decide for himself. Divorce is a matter of Law. As we have already seen, God’s Law is clear enough. Furthermore, God’s opinion about divorce is clear. Through Malachi God said, *“I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel. “I hate the person who covers himself with violence,” says the LORD of Armies. “Be careful not to be unfaithful.” (Malachi 2:16 GWV)*.

But the scribes and Pharisees twisted God’s Law and created their own. That was the background to Matthew’s statement about when the *Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” (Matthew 19:3)*. They allowed for divorce in the smallest, insignificant matters. In doing so,

they appealed to Moses' giving indecency as a reason for divorce (Deuteronomy 22, 24).

So what is God's Law about marriage and divorce? In succinct terms, it is one flesh for life. *He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate"* (Matthew 19:4-6).

And yet the Law is not all that simple and succinct because Jesus also taught that there is an exception to the rule. *"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery"* (Matthew 19:9). Sexual immorality destroys the "one flesh" union. Because it no longer exists, the victim is freed from the union.

That same kind of exception shows up in the case of a unbeliever who desires to divorce a believer. God's rule is, "Let the unbeliever walk." *But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace* (1 Corinthians 7:15).

We need to come to two conclusions about this conversation Jesus had with the hypocrites. First is the great need of trusting God's promise, die to self, and submit to Christ who took the Law's curse against sin for you. Second, we need to live in submission to Christ and enjoy the peace He alone gives (which is the opposite of misery).

Consider the conclusion of J.C. Ryle, written over 100 years ago. "Whose words, after all, are true? Whose estimate is correct? Whose judgment will stand at the last day? By whose standard will all be tried, before they receive their eternal sentence? Before whose bar will the current opinions of the world be tested and weighed at last? These are the only questions which ought to influence our conduct; and to these questions the Bible returns a plain answer. The counsel of the Lord,—it alone shall stand forever. The word of Christ—it alone shall judge man at the last day. By that word let us live. By that word let us measure everything, and every person in this evil world. It matters nothing what man thinks. "What saith the Lord?"—It matters nothing what it is fashionable or customary to think. "Let God be true, and every man a liar" (Romans 3:4). The

more entirely we are of one mind with God, the better we are prepared for the judgment day. To love what God loves, to hate what God hates, and to approve what God approves, is the highest style of Christianity. The moment we find ourselves honoring anything which in the sight of God is lightly esteemed, we may be sure there is something wrong in our souls." (J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels*, "Luke," Grand Rapids: Baker Books, reprint 2007, 207-208.)