

The After Life

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[0 : 00] Our passage today from Luke's Gospel chapter 16 and the second half of that section that we're reading together. Not the easiest section in the Bible and probably not the most comfortable one for us to read and even to preach from.

But it's a great challenge for us in an ongoing way as believers to link our thinking with Jesus' teaching and Jesus' thinking.

And it's very significant to dovetail the two together because that's very much what our lives are about, dovetailing our own Christian lives to what God is and what God wants for us and to see our lives being transformed.

And one thing we really need for that is we need good teaching, we need to take God's word seriously, but we also need the Holy Spirit.

We need the Spirit of God to mould our hearts and mould our thinking. This isn't a university lecture, it's not just a philosophical outpouring, it is a spiritual engagement that we have together with God's word and we recognise it as His living word that He speaks to us from.

[1 : 24] But that requires that we have come with open hearts and that we have come dependent on listening to the Spirit and being dependent on the Spirit ourselves.

So we pray for as we have done and we look for the Spirit of God to bless and to help us as we unpack this teaching today.

And because of the kind of teaching it is sometimes I think it's good to ask questions and I often, you may have noticed by now already that in my preaching style that I often ask rhetorical questions and then seek to answer them through the passage.

Well I've kind of done that, I've not asked questions but I've made statements today. Now I don't know if these are the kind of statements that you're making and I don't know when I ask the questions of the other kind of questions you're asking.

I hope they are. I meet up with quite a lot of you at various times and so get a flavour of the type of spiritual issues and questions that we have. But what I would like to begin to do now and again I think as well is give people the opportunity to ask their own questions after the service of what we've preached on.

[2 : 27] So that maybe when you're going downstairs for coffee you can take your coffee back up and I've made a nice little half semi-circle here so I can come back up and you can maybe ask the questions you want to ask from the sermon or things that weren't answered in the text that you felt should have been addressed or different questions that you may have altogether.

Because we learn a lot don't we from the answers to the questions we have as well as the preaching of God's word into our questions but of course I hope that the Holy Spirit knows your questions and I hope that in the sermons that in many ways miraculously by His grace He answers them I hope so, praise Him.

The first statement that I want to make the scenario or statement that I want to make is one that we sometimes make, I'm waiting for God to act in my life.

You know you're just, we have a kind of attitude that's spiritually passive and maybe you're not yet a Christian and you're waiting for some dramatic evidence of God in your life before you will become a Christian.

Or you are a Christian but you just feel very kind of dry spiritually or whatever and you're wanting or waiting for God to show you things or teach you things and it's all kind of passive.

[3 : 43] You're sitting back maybe in a rut, you're maybe dry, you're maybe dead spiritually but you're just waiting for God to do something and not engaged and not active yourself spiritually.

Well I want just to look at one word in the first section in verses 16 to 18 where Jesus kind of has this little interlude which He talks about the law and the prophets in between different parables and He says the law and the prophets, because remember He's speaking to the Pharisees mainly, the law and the prophets were proclaimed until John and since that time the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached and everyone is forcing His way into it.

I just want to look at that word for a moment. He's forcing, people are forcing their way into the kingdom. Now this is Jesus' word here, He chooses, He chose this word very deliberately.

It's very similar to the word that He uses about entering the kingdom, entering through the narrow door in chapter 1324 where He says strive to enter in at the straight gate or agonize, make every effort to and here He says forcing with the idea vigorously pressing forward and it's a very active word.

The minute I saw that word I thought of my journey, this week or not my journey but being in London, I was in London on Monday and Tuesday and the intense privilege of being in the London Underground at Rush Hour and when I saw that word it immediately reminded me of trying to get onto a tube train when it's really busy.

[5 : 23] You're kind of forcing your way on, you're shoving your way in a very un-gently way to make sure you get onto the tube before it closes on your head.

You don't want that to happen, even though it would open immediately and tall damage could be inflicted on my poor head if it got caught on the doors of the tube train.

So you're kind of vigorously pressing forward to get on before the door closes and that very much is the picture of what Jesus is saying here, that people are forcing themselves into the Kingdom of God or striving or entering and in light of all other scripture He is clearly saying that there is a personal responsibility on us to be active and to be seeking and to be energetic in our pursuit of God.

We can't just sit back on half of scripture and wait for God to act on us in His sovereignty but He wants us, yes, even independence on Him, He wants us to be seeking Him, to be striving after Him.

If you're not a Christian today and you're saying, well I'm waiting for God to save me, but I'm just carrying on with life as normal and not making any spiritual endeavour, then that I believe is a misunderstanding of the scriptural kind of directive for us because God wants us to wrestle for Him, to search for Him, to examine everything, to pray for Him to open our eyes if we're not spiritually awake, to pray to be converted if we're not converted, to seek and to seek and to seek because He promises that we will find Him if we seek Him with all our hearts.

[7 : 19] And there's this sense in which we can't just sit back and be passive as we look for Him and if you know of anyone in that situation then you need to encourage them.

How seriously are you searching for Jesus? How seriously does it matter to you? Is it something that morning, noon and night you're striving after? If you recognise the reality of its truth and are you unhappy that you can't sense and feel God and I hope so, strive after Him, force your way into His reckoning as it were, looking at it from a human point of view.

It's this great reality that we take part by God's grace certainly and by His strength in being sought out by Him. You ever seen the programme, The Crystal Maze? I don't know if it's on anymore, it used to be on and teams used to do various activities in a kind of physical type quiz a lot of the time.

But you could imagine one of the contestants being blindfolded and having to literally maybe make their way through a maze to get to the door at the other side but they needed to be dependent on and listening to their team who was telling them when to turn right, when to turn left, when not to go down a dead end.

And they were tremendously dependent on the other people's voices and the other people's eyes but they still needed to make that journey themselves in response to what they were being told.

[8 : 43] And now I know it's a poor example but the same is true spiritually in our search for God and in our search for salvation we can't just sit back, we listen to all that He says and we cry out to Him that He will guide us, that He will open our eyes, that He will make us see our need of Him so that we're not just sitting back and saying well one day I'm sure I'll become a Christian and it will all happen but rather that we recognise that we are striving.

And that also is true of our lives as Christians. That there's energy and effort and striving and agonising and vigorously pressing forward that involves us and our walk with God and our relationship with Him and our prayer life and our opening of Scripture.

Yes we're Christ dependent, yes we need the Spirit, yes we know who God is but we have thanked God because He gives us such responsibility.

We have responsibility in our lives to be cooperating with and serving Him as believers. I'm waiting for God to act in my life.

I wonder if there's sometimes a subtext there. I'm going to come back to each time I don't want my life to change right now.

[10 : 05] I wonder sometimes if that's the subtext behind our thinking and behind the position we take up.

The second statement and I'm coming round to various bits of this passage is I want easy from God and maybe this is connected with what we've been saying but maybe as believers we want life easy from God.

We want spiritual shortcuts. I thought when I became a Christian it was all going to be a life of blessing. I thought God's favour was shining on me. I thought it would be easy from now on for me because I'm on God's side and God is with me.

Yet the Bible keeps on speaking about the need to follow Him and obey Him and resist temptation and deal with the sin in my own heart.

I thought it was all about grace and about love and acceptance. In a sense we sometimes think when difficult things come in my life that's when it shows itself we kind of, we are hackles rise against God and we say well what are you doing this for?

[11 : 14] Why are you doing this? I'm a believer. Why are you allowing these things to happen? I'm a follower of yours because somehow in our minds we are looking for spiritual ease and spiritual shortcuts and we can't cope when things are difficult with us.

In one way or another we want shortcuts and can do. And Jesus here kind of in between these two powers and the Ark really related it in a genuine sense.

He not only speaks about entering the kingdom of God but also talking about the law of God and saying that it will not disappear.

Not because it's our way to God but it's an expression of God's character that we are to live under and follow out of gratitude because it's the best way.

And there's a particular reason why he uses this example. Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery. And he uses that example of the law because he's speaking to the Pharisees, the religious leaders and there was a lot of Phariseic abuse of the law.

[12 : 34] They think of the Pharisees as guys who were really strict in their obedience to the law and they thought that that is what would get them to heaven. Sometimes they were very legalistic, especially in things that it was easy to be legalistic about.

But also they tampered with the law and they changed the law when it suited them, when it would make life easier for them. And divorce was one of the areas that they made it ridiculously easy and where they completely moved away from God's model and God's pattern which is one man and one woman for life, I moved away from that from the law.

Entirely Rabbi Hillel who lived a half a century before Jesus Christ said that you could divorce your wife if she burned your dinner. It would be all divorced here if that were the case.

In AD 110 another Rabbi Akiba said you could divorce your wife if someone prettier came along. None of us would be divorced here.

But nonetheless, nonetheless the reality is, the truth is that they were tampering with the law because it made it easier for them to loosen the laws of God's model imperative.

[13 : 57] They changed it, they adapted it and Jesus was pointing forward to that. He was saying God's way was different. Matthew 19, he reiterated the law about one man, one woman for life except for marital unfaithfulness because of the hardness of people's hearts.

But that's his model, that's part of his law and that law remains because it's good. It doesn't give us entry into heaven but we recognise as believers if we love the Lord we will obey His commands.

That is as clear as the nose in my face. That is Christ's desire for us, the best way but not the easiest way. Isn't that right?

The best way but not the easiest way. When you imagine if you have a great running, you've got a great running gift, you could run in the Olympics if you had a great gift.

But you've got a trainer who is always on your back and he's always waking you at six in the morning on a dark winter's morning so that you will go out for a run, so that you will keep fit.

[15 : 09] He's watching your diet, he's making sure you go to the right places and do the right things because he sees that your gift needs to be developed and it needs to be developed within the parameters that will allow it to flourish.

He can't just let you live any old way, he can't let you eat any old thing, he can't let you do whatever you like because your gift which has been God given and which can be so blessed has to be channeled and rooted in a certain way.

He knows what needs to develop. These people with gifts resent the trainers because maybe they don't have the same giftings even though they can see with great perception what needs to be done but the great runners will submit to their trainer.

And so as Christians sometimes we resent what God is asking of us but we do it because we are not seeing His love and we are not seeing that He knows exactly what gifts we have as believers and how they need to be channeled and developed and lived for in His way.

Christ offers freedom but the cost of that freedom is to lose all the things that we love that enslave us.

[16 : 28] Christ offers us freedom but the cost is that we need to lose the things that we love that are sinful that enslave us. So we don't get it easy from God at one level but He has already gifted us all in Christ.

Salvation is His gift. We receive that and it puts everything, does it not, into perspective for us. I want it easy from God. And then we come to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus and the, well can I just say before I go on to that again, I wonder about in terms of the easiness that we are looking for from God, whether again there is a subtext there for us, maybe particularly as Christians where we say I don't want to change my life right now.

Maybe it is the same subtext. However we kind of furnish it, it is the same terms. I really don't want to change.

So we come to the third one which is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Jesus speaks about heaven and hell. You are uncomfortable possibly as we read that passage and the scenario or the statement that possibly you ask or the other people certainly do ask is I can't believe in hell.

Jesus clearly speaks about hell here. It is a very uncomfortable subject to consider, very non-postmodern and post-christendom subject to speak about.

[18 : 09] I don't believe in hell, you know. And we can have lots of reasons and we can make these reasons very reasonable. Heaven certainly, not a problem.

I have no problem with heaven. Heaven is beautiful. Heaven is what we are looking for, what we are hoping for, what we are aspiring to. But eternal punishment, a God who sends people to a lost eternity, a God of love for any who simply don't accept Jesus.

However nice they might have been, however good they might have been in their lives. That is an outrageous doctrine, it is an outrageous statement. Well can we look briefly here at this parable, this story that Jesus tells.

And remember Jesus deals with this subject more than anyone in the Bible. It is very real to him. He pre-existed in a spiritual condition as God who saw all things, heaven and hell and life and death.

He came and emptied himself and lived among people and experienced and smelt the reality of evil and darkness. He knew all about hell and evil and he had the cross to face, which wasn't just a bad mistake for a good prophet who was misunderstood, but was his journey, was the conclusion of why he had come, was the reason why he had come to die on the cross by taking our sins, by taking God's wrath and by facing the power of hell.

[19 : 43] He knew all about it. And so he is speaking here in story form about these realities that we must consider.

And can I say in the first place that this parable is not about virtue, it is about faith. Some people have looked at this parable and said, okay this is a parable about virtue, it is about the good, it is about the rich man getting in this life all that he wanted and then not getting anything in heaven so it is bad to be rich and in its virtuous to be poor and the poor man, because he was poor God had favoured him and pity on him and gave him a great life in heaven afterwards.

The rich man had ever in this life, nothing in eternity. The poor man had nothing in this life, everything in eternity. So there is some kind of virtuosity in the material condition of people.

People take all the poor people who have nothing in this world and give them heaven and well all the rich people, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. But it is not about virtue, there is an underlying and clear teaching that cooperates and that agrees with the rest of scripture that this is not about virtue, it is about faith.

It is not saying all riches are bad and you will go to hell and all poverty is good and you will go to heaven. It is not talking about virtue. It is how we have lived our life with the gifts God has given us and a response to the gospel message.

[21 : 18] Because the Bible speaks about rich men who had faith and who used their gifts and it talks about poor people who rejected God. So it is not about these things as virtuous in themselves but it is about faith or lack of it.

Because if you look at the rich man and what Jesus says about him, there was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day of his life.

And Lazarus sat at his gate and yet it did not seem to be that he even got what fell from the rich man's table, although he longed for it. So this guy was overtly rich, he was indulgently rich, he was dressed in purple, this colour of opulence that was tremendously expensive, we told he was dressed in fine linen, soft, expensive linen and not just for a feast or a special occasion but every day he dressed like that.

This guy was seriously filthy rich and yet there is no evidence whatsoever and we move on this silence of this passage and also where he ended up that he showed no mercy whatsoever in his life.

He showed no responsibility to the poor that were at his gate, he showed no understanding of God's gift of salvation. He seems to be that Jesus is saying absolutely and entirely lived for himself and for the indulgence of his riches all his life.

[22 : 52] He did not show any mercy in life and he did not look for any mercy, he did not need any mercy, he had everything he had, expensive, fine, soft, purple clothes to wear every day and he could go out in the heat of the sun and feel cool.

He rejected God's ways and God's grace and God's gifts, did not need them, lived as Abraham says for all his own good things.

Abraham replied in verse 25, son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things. He lived for all his own good things.

And after death for him all the opportunities have gone to get right with God and to have faith in God and he loses any hope of heaven.

It's very solemn passage, you see we have a description here, I believe in pictorial terms but nonetheless real of what hell is, a place where there is no goodness.

[24 : 00] And that's really, I think the focus of the whole parable is talking about good things and Lazarus not even good things and hell is a place where the good things either in providence, material things or salvation, spiritual things are not.

There's no goodness there, it's a place of unmitigated misery, not a good place at all, a place of deep-seated loneliness and aloneness.

The rich man probably could have called any people into his banquets and into his home at any time but here he's alone and it's interesting, some people say, well he's got a bit of mercy and compassion about me, doesn't want his brothers to come and join him there.

But I would argue that might not be the case, it may not be the case for several reasons, one because family doesn't have any love and meaning anymore in hell because all the bonds of goodness have gone, doesn't want his brothers there, they're going to be the worst people there because they're closest to him but maybe also because if they come they're going to accuse him, maybe he's the elder brother and maybe they'll accuse him of not telling and teaching them and leading them to what is important in life spiritually and they could be accusative, I don't think it's ultimately because he cares for them but even there he recognizes in that place his need for mercy, he cries out for mercy, have pity on me father Abraham but it's too late to receive mercy which he never looked for in the past, there's not even a sense of appreciation for Lazarus, he still expects Lazarus to come and be his servant, hang on a poor guy, bring him down here and make him dip his finger in water, make it easy, relieve my suffering, doesn't understand but isn't it interesting that one of our greatest cries always and all of us to a greater lesser degree is we don't deserve that, it's not right, it's unjust, there's no sense here of the rich man making that cry, there's no sense of him saying well what am I doing here, I lived an upright moral life, I tried my bit, there's no sense of injustice, the injustice that we feel very often when we talk about people being sent to a lost eternity but he received his good things, he received in life exactly what he wanted, all that he looked for, he received and his eternity is one which makes clear that that's the case, that he had no place for God in his life, no place for striving, no place for forcing, no place for looking so that is the justice of his condition, but is Lazarus trusted for a better future, you notice the difference when Abraham speaks about Lazarus, he says of the rich man's son you received your good things, because of Lazarus he said you received bad things, not your bad things, not things necessarily that you brought on yourself but you did have a miserable life he says, there's a rotten life, there's a poverty stricken life but the great thing about Lazarus was that he must have come to faith and he mustn't have cried about injustice all his life, ah it's miserable being a beggar here, how could you do that

God but rather he sought out God's mercy and he trusted in God's salvation and lived a life of faith, looking forward to a day when his misery and his degradation and his rejection by society would have ended and it's a beautiful inversion of life, it's a beautiful inversion of experience and expression because Lazarus who was nothing is named here by Jesus, the rich man doesn't have a name but Lazarus who was ignored every day by the rich man and who probably died and had an anonymous funeral different from the rich man but we're talking, we're told he's taken up by the angels and he is brought to Abraham's side, it's the same description of the beloved disciple who leaned on Jesus' breast at the

[28 : 45] Lord's Supper and it's the picture of being at a feast where you used to lie, you didn't sit at a table, you would lie with one elbow leaning on an elbow and leaning back so you would lean back on the person next to you, that's the idea of leaning on someone's breast, it's about closeness and it's about being at a feast and here is this Lazarus who often longed to eat the bits of bread that the rich people would mop their plates with and then throw away and use them like dish towels, he longed to eat that but wasn't giving it and here he is, he's at the feast, he's at God's right hand, he's with Jesus Christ and the ideas there are of protection and of opulence and of light and of love and of joy, now you might not understand or associate with this language that is here, it would have been very clear to the original hearers but we can associate with what it's speaking about, it's speaking about in the rich man's case abject lossness and loneliness and darkness and lack of love and lack of goodness and in Lazarus case it's talking about relationship about closeness, about belonging, about love, about acceptance, we all know these terms and that's what heaven and hell are about and that's what God is speaking about here as He wants us to change our life in the light of what lies ahead, that's what Jesus is speaking about in all these parables but I wonder if there's the same subtext that goes right through this service today when we look at these statements we make, is the same subtext that I can't believe in hell, is that I don't want to change my life right now, don't want to change my life right now because if we believe in eternity, believe in heaven but also if we believe in hell which Christ speaks so clearly about, will it involve a change in our life and a movement from the comfort that we may feel right now, so in conclusion why would I change, why would I change?

Surely the two things are the glory of the cross which is the prism through which we must see all of this, all of this teaching is in the prism of the cross what Jesus has done for us where our needs and our sins and our failings and our doubts and our inabilities and our weakness and our struggles can be redeemed, forgiven and bought back and we can experience His love knowing that at the cross Jesus took all of these things and our hell and experienced it there, defeated it, was raised from the dead and so the cross as the speaker conference that was at this week said the gospel is not the A, B, C of Christian living it's the A to Z of Christian living, the gospel is the A to, we never graduate beyond it because it meets all of what we are and all of what we will become and it is the motivation of our life as we understand it publicly, it's the motivation that will transform us and give us life and give us energy and take away the dryness and take away the dullness of all that we are, the glory of the cross but also the wonder of truth, you know the rich man speaks about sending people back to his brothers, you know if someone rose from the dead they would believe that and God says, Jesus says to them if they don't believe or Abraham says rather if they don't believe in the Moses and the prophets they will not be convinced even if someone was raised from the dead.

How many people around the time of Christ didn't believe in Christ even though he was raised from the dead or didn't believe in what he did to Lazarus his friend when he resurrected him from the dead or didn't believe in his miracles or didn't believe in his power, didn't believe in his ability to calm the waves or to feed the 5,000, how many didn't believe because the reality is it's not about more proof because we have the resurrection of Christ, it's about recognising the truth and responding to the truth as we have it because we have the cross, we can ignore it, we can sit back and wait, we can want it easy, we can reject God's truth and we can reject it because it sits uncomfortable with us in our modern society and we can adapt it and we can chop bits out and we can make it much more pleasing and we can re-mold it but we are left then with something that's an idol, we are left with something that ultimately becomes pretty ugly and we are left with a Christ that is not worth worshiping. We have nobody to worship if we bring the truth down to our own level and our own understanding.

There is no salvation that is going to be worth living for if Christ is just a good guy beside us, there is no sin worth dying to if Christ is not who He says He is and if Christ is someone that we mould ourselves just by adapting little bits of the Bible here and there, our faith will become a graceless, ugly chore because we will have no motivation because our God isn't worthy and He isn't worth following and because we don't feel the need to adapt and we will realign ourselves and change to be remade in His image which He wants for us.

[35 : 02] Why? Because He is the trainer that sees the gold metal. He is the trainer that sees the victory, He sees what we can be in Him and He wants the best for us, He doesn't want us to stravek around in the gutters, He wants the best, He wants us to rise above the punenness of our own resolutions and thinking and depend on Him and be strengthened by Him.

That's why we need Him, that's why we need His Spirit, that's why we need His grace in our lives and we need to ask ourselves whether sometimes the subtext for us is I don't want to change my life right now, I want to be where I am in control of all things, I don't want to give myself over to this Christ who will radically transform what I am.

May God bless our thoughts together on that passage and if you do have questions then please wait behind and we'll have a discussion together if you want to discuss more about the passage or things that I've left out, you should always leave out bits in any passage like that but let's do that together.

Go by our heads and pray. Lord God help us, we ask and pray and guide us and keep us and anoint us with your blessing and with your favour and with your grace and may we be that people of dependency, we long to be more and more dependent on you and be able to breathe through the spiritual power of the Redeemer and to live by faith and to accept that gift, we know that it will not be more evidence that we need in our lives but that we accept your gift and strive in so doing out of gratitude to live for you and to know that you will give us life to the full when we so do.

Help us we ask and go before us in Jesus' name. Amen.