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## SCOFFING OR SUBMITTING?

Luke 16:14-18

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Luke Lesson 75

### Scoffing or Submitting? Luke 16:14-18

A "Frank and Ernest" cartoon shows the perpetual bumbler standing at the Pearly Gates. St. Peter has a scowl on his face. Ernie is smiling innocently, but he's wearing a T-shirt that says, "Question Authority." Frank is whispering to him, "If I were you, I'd change my shirt, Ernie." (Bob Thaves, 10/4/95, NEA.)

Americans generally aren't inclined toward submission to authority, even when that authority is God. Like Ernie, we could easily end up at heaven's gates wearing a "Question Authority" T-shirt! But that's not an advisable thing to do!

Our text deals with the authority of Jesus, although the flow of thought is difficult to track. At first it seems like a disjointed bunch of verses. Verse 14 mentions the Pharisees' scoffing at Jesus' teaching about money, but then the rest of the verses don't deal with the subject of money at all. The final verse of the section (16:18), on divorce, seems totally foreign to the context. Probably what we are looking at is a condensed version of what originally was a longer discourse. The transitions are missing, which makes it more difficult to pick up the flow of thought.

But the overall theme has to do with the authority of Jesus and God's Word versus the self-proclaimed authority of the Pharisees, who are rejecting Jesus and God's Word. They would have protested that they kept the Law, but Jesus brings in the word about divorce to show them an example of how they only keep the Law when it fits with what they want to do. When it doesn't fit, they invent ways to dodge it. Thus while the outcasts (15:1) are flocking into the kingdom, the Pharisees will be cast out, condemned by the very Law they proclaimed to follow.

To paraphrase and give the flow of thought in 16:14-18, Jesus is saying, "You Pharisees pride yourselves on keeping the Law, but God knows your hypocritical hearts. What you're missing is that the old dispensation came to a climax in John's ministry, since he introduced the good news of the coming of God's king and king-

dom. Ironically, while you are scoffing at Me and My kingdom, the very ones you despise—the poor and the notoriously sinful—are stampeding to get in. When I say that there has been a transition from the Law to the Gospel, I don't mean that the Law is set aside. Rather, it has been fulfilled in Me. For example, I uphold the true intent of God's Law regarding divorce and remarriage, but you Pharisees neatly set it aside with your liberal interpretations."

So the issue is Jesus' authority versus the self-proclaimed authority of the Pharisees, who were scoffing at Him. The message for us is:

Since God's kingdom comes in the person of Jesus,  
we must submit to His authority, not scoff at it.

#### 1. God's kingdom comes in the person of Jesus the King.

We need to keep in mind that both John the Baptist as the forerunner and Jesus after him were taking on a powerful religious and cultural establishment. The Jewish religious leaders had great influence and power over the common people. They were the educated ones, the sole interpreters of God's Law. They controlled the activities in the Temple, including the sale of animals for the Jewish sacrifices. The common people feared being put out of the synagogue by the Jewish leaders (John 7:13; 9:22; 12:42; 19:38; 20:19). Even the Roman governor Pilate feared the Jewish leaders enough to deliver up Jesus for crucifixion, although he knew that He was innocent

But Jesus is confronting these religious tyrants head-on. He hits them for their hypocrisy. He hits them for missing the central message of the Law and the Prophets (a term that refers to the entire Old Testament), namely, that it pointed to the good news of the kingdom, announced by John and personified in Jesus Himself. He is pitting His authority, backed by God's Word, against the authority of the Jewish religious leaders.

##### A. Jesus' authority is established by the unchanging Word of God.

Jesus always upheld the sanctity of God's written Word. When tempted by Satan, Jesus three times answered, "It is written," quoting Scripture. That silenced the most powerful and dreadful enemy of righteousness. Jesus asserted that God's Word

is truth (John 17:17). He told the Jewish leaders, "You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me" (John 5:39). He told them, "If you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote of Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?" (John 5:46-47). Jesus affirmed God's Word as truth.

In our text, Jesus affirms that a transition has taken place, from the Law and the Prophets to the gospel of the kingdom. Clearly, Jesus represents a new phase in God's program. What the Law and the Prophets proclaimed and promised found fulfillment in the person of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist was the transitional figure, with a foot in both eras. He was the messenger, prophesied by Malachi, who prepared the way of the Lord. Jesus is that Lord in human flesh, the long-promised Messiah, born of the seed of the woman, who came to crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15).

But Jesus makes it clear that even though a transition has taken place, it did not nullify or set aside the Law. It would be easier for all creation to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail. The "stroke" refers to the tiny extension that distinguishes two very similar-looking Hebrew words from each other. His point is that what God spoke through Moses and the prophets will be fulfilled, down to the very minutiae. God's Word, as Jesus says in John 5:39, bears witness of Him.

The relationship between the Old Testament law and the present age of grace is complicated and difficult. Some, such as Lewis Sperry Chafer (*Grace* [Dunham]), argue that Paul's pronouncement that we are not under law, but under grace (Rom. 6:14), means that no part of the Old Testament law applies directly to believers today. Thus he would not view the Ten Commandments as binding on Christians (p. 105). Others (called Theonomists or Reconstructionists) go to the opposite extreme of saying that we are obligated to live under the law, even those laws that pertained directly to the nation Israel. I think that both of these views are out of balance.

I would go along with the general Reformed view ("The Westminster Confession of Faith," Chapter XIX) that the moral law of God stems from His holy nature and thus is eternally in force. The ceremonial aspects of the Jewish law pointed ahead to Christ, who fulfilled them in His person and work. The civil as-

pects of the law applied specifically to the theocratic nation, Israel. While there may be principles for secular government that can be derived from those laws, they are not binding on nations today.

No person in any age could ever be right before God by keeping the Law, since we all have violated God's holy standards in thought and deed. Thus the Law condemns us and should serve as "our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith" (Gal. 3:24). By His perfect righteousness, Jesus fulfilled the Law, so that He is "the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (Rom. 10:4). But even after a person is justified by faith in Christ, the Law continues to show him God's holy standard for life and conduct. The point is, although the Law came to complete fulfillment in Jesus Christ, it is not set aside. Those who are in Christ should delight in God's Law as the expression of His holy nature. Jesus' high view of Scripture should motivate us to be more diligent in searching out the truths God has revealed there.

B. Jesus' authority extends beyond outward behavior to the heart level.

Outwardly, the Pharisees could compare themselves with others and justify themselves, because they did more and went farther than the average Jew. They were meticulous in keeping all the outward rules, but they were living before men and not before God, who examines our thoughts and motives. They were filled with pride and hypocrisy, which God hates. When they gave alms, they did it to be noticed by men. When they uttered long prayers, it was to impress others with how spiritual they were. Although they may have fooled others, they could never fool God. Jesus rips off their mask of righteousness and exposes them for what they were, detestable in the sight of God.

True religion is a matter of the heart before God. The instant you get a glimpse of God in His absolute holiness, the light of His glory also shows you how vile and filthy your own heart is before Him. Rather than boasting in your good deeds and parading your supposed righteousness before others, you shrink back in fear of being instantly consumed. You despair of ever being righteous enough to present yourself before God, because you know how deceitful and desperately wicked your heart is.

But that is precisely where the gospel breaks in, because you also realize that if you are to stand before God, you need a Savior and Mediator. You need a righteousness other than your own. Jesus is that Savior; He extends a free pardon to every sinner who repents and trusts in Him. He clothes the believing sinner with His perfect righteousness, reconciling us to God. In that new relationship with God, we then learn to live, not as pleasing men, but God, who examines our hearts (1 Thess. 2:4).

Jesus is saying that if you are not living openly before God, judging your sin on the thought level, seeking to please God with your thoughts and attitudes, as well as with your words and deeds, then you are living as a Pharisee, not as His disciple. Christians don't live to impress others with how spiritual they are. Christians live openly in the sight of God, seeking to please Him.

Thus the first thing our text proclaims is that God's kingdom comes in the person of Jesus the King. Christianity is not a matter of following a bunch of outward standards. It is a matter of submitting ourselves to His authority, down to the heart level. But, as our text shows, that is not the only possible response.

2. Two possible responses to Jesus' authority are to scoff at Him or to submit to Him.

A. Some scoff at Jesus and His authority.

We tend to think that all who scoff at Jesus are outside the religious establishment, but the gospel accounts show us that there are many who put on a pretense of being religious, but who scoff at the Savior. The word "scoff" literally means, "to turn up one's nose" at someone. It is a term of utter contempt and disregard.

*Why were these religious leaders scoffing at Jesus?* There is a simple answer, and it still applies to every individual who scoffs at Him, whether that person claims to be an atheist or a Christian: *Jesus convicts him or her of sin, righteousness, and judgment.* An evolutionist may protest: "I do not believe in the Genesis account of creation because it is not scientific." Nonsense! The reason the evolutionist does not believe in the Genesis account of creation is that if God spoke the universe into existence, then there are some serious moral implications for every creature! "In the beginning God cre-

ated the heavens and the earth," means, "He is Lord." I cannot live as I please or I will face His judgment.

The Pharisees scoffed at Jesus because of many sins, but two are specifically mentioned in our text. First, they were *lovers of money* (16:14). They gave a lot to the Temple, but their giving was done to impress men, but it didn't impress God who looks on the heart. They were living for greed, not for God.

You don't have to be rich to fall into the trap of loving money. Many who lack money love it just as much, if not more, than those who possess a lot. As Paul says (1 Tim. 6:9, 10): "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang." The phrase "want to get rich" points to a desire or aim in life. If the bent of your life is to get rich, you are exposing yourself to many spiritually destructive temptations.

Greed is often mentioned in the Bible in the same breath as sexual immorality (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5), and yet it is far more tolerated in the church than sexual sin is. We tolerate TV preachers who flaunt their wealth and luxurious lifestyles, until they fall into sexual sin. But we should be just as intolerant (how's that for a politically *incorrect* word!) of greed as we are of sexual immorality. As Jesus warns (Luke 12:15), "Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions."

If you struggle with greed (and most of us do), I'll tell you a simple way to combat it: Give away everything except what you need to live on. That's what Jesus told the rich young ruler (Luke 18:22). Giving is the antidote for greed. So any time you're struggling with a greedy heart, sit down and write out a big check to the Lord's work. Go through all the junk in your house and give it to the church missions yard sale. Try it and you'll feel free inside!

The second sin that Jesus confronts the Pharisees with was *divorce*. God's Word states that He hates divorce (Mal. 2:16). He declared from the beginning that a man and his wife become one

flesh, implying a lifelong union. But because of the hardness of men's hearts, God *permitted* (not mandated) divorce (Deut. 24:1-4). Many of the Pharisees, however, had taken God's permission for divorce in difficult situations and turned it into virtual approval for divorce for almost any reason. There were two main Pharisaic schools. Rabbi Shammai's school held that divorce was allowable only on the grounds of immorality. Rabbi Hillel's school allowed divorce for many reasons, including something as trivial as a wife burning the meal. Given the hardness of men's hearts, it is not surprising that Hillel's school was quite popular! But Jesus clearly sided with Shammai's school.

Jesus is not here giving the full biblical teaching on divorce. Rather, He is showing His authority by confronting the Pharisees with an area where they often dodged God's Law through their loopholes, while proclaiming their faithfulness to it. He is saying that by playing loose with God's standard for marriage, they were committing adultery. Even though they could justify themselves before men, claiming that they were under the letter of the Mosaic Law, what they were doing was detestable in the eyes of God.

While the biblical teaching on divorce is difficult to synthesize, my understanding is that the Bible *allows* divorce and remarriage in cases of sexual immorality or the desertion of a believer by an unbeliever. But even in marriages where there has been unfaithfulness, I believe that God is most glorified when there is genuine repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. In the context of lifelong commitment, couples can work through their problems before God and grow in self-denying love, learning to esteem their mates more highly than themselves (Phil. 2:3-4). Lifelong commitment in marriage is God's standard for His people.

Don't forget the main point, that the reason people scoff at Jesus is not intellectual; it is moral. They want to dodge the high standards of God's Word regarding sin. But if you justify your sin, even by claiming some biblical loophole, you are scoffing at Jesus, who knows your heart. There is a better alternative:

B. Others submit to Jesus and His authority.

Jesus refers to these as "forcing" their way into the kingdom. This is a difficult phrase, in that the Greek verb can be either mid-

dle or passive voice. If it is passive, it could be translated, "Everyone is urged insistently into it" (Darrell Bock, *Luke* [Baker], 2:1349-1354, argues for this view). But most commentators argue for the middle voice, which views the subject as participating in the results of the action. Here it means that each person takes the initiative to press his way into the kingdom. I believe that contextually this is the better view. "Everyone" does not refer to every single person in Israel, but rather to the great multitude of sinners who were flocking to hear Jesus and respond to His message of grace (15:1), in contrast to the few Pharisees who were responding. Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, "While you guys sit around scoffing, the very people whom you despise are stampeding into the kingdom!"

The phrase, "forcing his way into it," implies that salvation requires strong desire, firm resolution, and earnest effort and focus to obtain it (Jonathan Edwards develops these points in his sermon, "Pressing into the Kingdom of God" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], 1:654-656). You must not be indifferent and passive when the salvation of your soul is at stake! If you are not saved, nothing in life should matter to you more than how you can get saved. You won't accidentally get saved while you devote yourself to everything else under the sun, but never devote any effort to understanding spiritual matters.

While we are not saved by our efforts, but only through faith in the blood of Jesus, the mark of a person who has come to genuine saving faith is a subsequent life of increasing submission to the Lord Jesus Christ. Those who have entered His kingdom have come under His authority as King. They devote their lives to living according to His Word, seeking to bring every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

### Conclusion

In 1881, the wild western town of Cranberry Gulch, California needed a teacher for its one-room school. The last three teachers had not been able to deal with the rowdy students. One lay in the graveyard, another lost his eye, and the third left before noon on his first day.

A slender-built man named Harry Floto applied for the job. The person doing the hiring doubted that he would fare much

better than the others, but there wasn't a flood of applicants, so he got the job. Word spread and the students were relishing how they would get rid of this new victim.

The first day he showed up carrying a traveling bag. One 18-year-old tough joked that he came prepared to take off when he found out that they were too much for him. Ignoring them, Floto went inside. The students followed, curious to see what he'd do next. He opened his bag, took out a belt, and buckled it around his waist. Next, he put three Colt revolvers there, and a Bowie knife. While the students watched, Floto tacked a white card to the wall opposite his desk. Crossing the room, he drew a revolver from his belt and fired six bullets into a spot the size of a silver dollar.

While the pop-eyed students stared, the schoolmaster walked half way across the room, Bowie knife in hand, wheeled, and threw it so that it stuck, quivering, in the center of the card. Leaving it there as a reminder, Floto took two more knives from his bag and stuck them in his belt. He then reloaded his smoking revolver.

He then ordered the 18-year-old to ring the bell to signal the start of class; he did so without a word. After the students were all seated, Floto cocked a revolver and announced, "We will arrange the classes." Then he heard a whisper behind him. Whirling, Floto drew his gun and roared, "No whispering allowed in here!"

"I'll not do so any more," the boy said. "See that you don't," Floto barked. "I never give a second warning."

Within a month, Floto put away his weapons and his pupils learned to love as well as to respect him. He stayed for two years. (Reported in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, 1881.)

Just as those students learned to respect the authority of that teacher, so we need to respect the absolute authority of the Lord Jesus Christ. He is God's King, and we dare not scoff at Him or His Word that tells us how we should live. There is an entire movement in the evangelical camp devoted to promoting the nonsense that it is possible to accept Jesus as Savior, and yet not live under His lordship. I hope that you see that to question Jesus' authority in any way is a most risky thing to do! He is King; we must submit to Him, even on the thought level.

## Discussion Questions

1. Why all the current debate over “lordship” salvation? What are the issues on both sides? Why does it matter?
2. Why is it essential to emphasize that true Christianity is a matter of the heart before God?
3. Scoffers do not have intellectual problems; they have moral problems. What implications does this have in witnessing?
4. How can Christians in affluent America keep themselves from the love of money?

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