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THE PRESENT AND FUTURE KINGDOM

Luke 17:20-37

By

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October 24, 1999

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Luke Lesson 80

The Present and Future Kingdom Luke 17:20-37

There has always been speculation about the Second Coming of Christ, but that is especially true as we come to the close of the millennium. The Y2K computer problem has added fuel to the fire, as many Christians believe that God will bring judgment as computers around the world fail to function on January 1, 2000.

As early as 1991 I read about a group that was predicting the end of the world as the year 2000 draws near, but the unique thing is that this group is completely secular. It is called the Society for Secular Armageddonism, based in California (of course!). They describe themselves as "a non-religious group dedicated to promoting public awareness of the coming end of the world." They believe that the proliferation of nuclear, chemical and biological weapons, the many environmental concerns, the AIDS epidemic, the population explosion, and numerous other such issues are all proof that the end is near and we don't need God to do it for us. It will be a strictly do-it-yourself apocalypse.

The Lord Jesus spoke on several occasions about the coming of His kingdom. Our text is one of two major such passages in Luke (the other being in 21:5-36). Our text falls into two sections: in the first (17:20-21), Jesus responds to the Pharisees' questions as to when the kingdom of God is coming; in the second (17:22-37), He speaks to the disciples on the same topic. He shows us that there is a two-fold nature to the kingdom, both a present and future dimension. Darrel Bock (*Luke* [IVP], p. 287) sums up Jesus' reply here: "You do not need to look for the kingdom in signs, because its King (and so its presence) is right before you. But its display in comprehensive power will come visibly to all one day. You will not need to hunt to find it then." Or, as another commentator puts it, Jesus "teaches that the kingdom of God is already a present reality in Him but that its final consummation lies in the future when He comes in divine majesty" (Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* [Eerdmans], p. 444).

Bible prophecy is not given so that we can sit around and speculate about what will happen in the future. It is always given so that we can apply it to how we live in the present in light of what God has promised to do in the future. Specifically, it is crucial that we understand personally how to be in God's kingdom, because Jesus makes it clear that His awful judgment will fall suddenly and certainly on everyone who is not in His kingdom. He shows us here that ...

To be in God's kingdom, we must be personally related to God's King Jesus and we must faithfully await the kingdom's consummation when He returns in glory to judge everyone.

1. To be in God's present kingdom we must be personally related to God's King Jesus (17:20-21).

We can't be sure whether the Pharisees were questioning Jesus in a hostile sense or not. Given their track record, they may well have been asking skeptically, "When is the kingdom coming?" The general Jewish belief was that the kingdom of God would begin with a bang, with a powerful Messiah establishing His rule in Israel and delivering the nation from her enemies. But here is this carpenter from nowhere with His ragtag band of fishermen, and there is no sign that He is going to defeat the Romans and usher in the glorious new age. Sure, there were some miracles, but where is the clear evidence that He is establishing His kingdom rule?

So Jesus answers them (17:20b-21), "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst." It is important to translate the end of verse 21 "in your midst," not as the NIV and KJV translate, "within you." That translation is possible grammatically, but it is impossible contextually. Jesus never would have told the skeptical and hypocritical Pharisees that the kingdom of God was within them. Besides, Jesus often talks about a person entering the kingdom, but He does not talk about the kingdom entering the person.

So what He meant is, "The kingdom of God is here in your very midst in the person of the King, and yet you have not recognized it because you wrongly expect it to be ushered in with great flourish." When Jesus says that the kingdom is not coming with

signs to be observed, He is referring to the *initial* coming of the kingdom, not to His Second Coming, because He quickly adds (to His disciples) that that coming will be like a flash of lightning in the sky, which is pretty dramatic and obvious. Thus the initial coming of God's kingdom begins relatively unnoticed, like the mustard seed planted in the ground. As people yield their lives to the lordship of Jesus Christ, He begins to reign in their hearts. In that sense His kingdom is presently being established in and through His church, as the gospel is proclaimed and believed. But, this is not the final form of His kingdom. He will return personally in power and glory to judge His enemies and to rule over the whole earth, as He goes on to teach (17:22-37).

As I said, prophecy is never given so that we can sit around and speculate on the future. It is given so that we can submit our lives to God's purpose for history. Thus, the application of verses 20 & 21 is: If you have not personally believed in Jesus Christ as your Savior and thus are not living daily under His lordship, then you are not in the kingdom of God. You are in serious danger of coming under His awful judgment when He returns as suddenly as a flash of lightning, and then it will be too late! To be in God's present kingdom, we must be personally related to God's King Jesus by trusting in Him as our Savior from sin and submitting to Him as the Lord of our thoughts, words, and deeds.

If you are truly in God's present kingdom, then you will be in His future kingdom when He returns in power and glory. But Jesus gives His followers some warnings to take to heart so that they will be sure to endure until He comes.

2. To be in God's future kingdom, we must faithfully await the kingdom's consummation when Jesus returns in glory to judge everyone (17:22-37).

These verses are addressed to Jesus' disciples, not to the Pharisees. The disciples had believed in Jesus, but there was the danger that as time passed and Jesus did not return, they would lose heart. So He gives them not only the warnings of this section, but also the parable of the unjust judge (18:1-8) to encourage them to endure (see 18:1). There are three lessons here:

- A. To be in God's future kingdom requires patient endurance in the present (17:22).

Jesus refers to Himself as the Son of Man, a reference to His authority when He comes in judgment (see Daniel 7:13-14). "One of the days" refers to the time of His return, when He will reign. Jesus is warning the disciples that they will face times when they will inwardly long to see Jesus return in power and glory, but they will have to wait, because it is not yet God's time. This verse is a clear refutation of the notion that Jesus would return shortly after His crucifixion and resurrection.

What believer hasn't longed for the Lord to return and straighten out this messed up world? We look at world problems—war, violence, greed, crime, corruption, immorality, the pollution of God's beautiful creation, and the many other problems—and cry out, "How long, O Lord?" Listen to this description of the times:

It is a gloomy moment in the history of our country. Not in the lifetime of most men has there been so much grave and deep apprehension; never has the future seemed so incalculable as at this time. The domestic economic situation is in chaos. Our dollar is weak throughout the world. Prices are so high as to be utterly impossible. The political cauldron seethes and bubbles with uncertainty. Russia hangs, as usual, like a cloud, dark and silent, upon the horizon. It is a solemn moment. Of our troubles no man can see the end.

That quote is from *Harper's Magazine*, October 10, 1847! I guess that times have always seemed tough! Christians have always known that only Jesus can deliver us from this mess.

We look at the personal problems and trials that we all struggle with—family problems, health problems, financial problems, and other worries and concerns—and cry out, "How long, O Lord?" How wonderful it will be when Jesus delivers us once and for all from all these difficult problems!

But until then, we must patiently endure as we wait with hope for His coming. Peter warns us that while we wait, mockers will come, "following after their own lusts, and saying, 'Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all

continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.'" But as the apostle goes on to show, their mocking does not negate the reality of Jesus' coming to judge the earth (2 Pet. 3:3-10).

B. To be in God's future kingdom requires discernment in the present (17:23).

As we wait and yet do not see His coming, false Christs will arise and people will tempt us to turn to those who seem to have the answers we need right now: "Look there! Look here!" Jesus says, "Do not go away, and do not run after them."

We're always vulnerable to the temptation of turning to quick fix answers rather than patiently waiting on the Lord. This is especially true of us Americans, because we're all pragmatists at heart. If something works, it must be true! If something doesn't work (on our timetable!), it must be false! So if Jesus Christ isn't fixing my problem as quickly as I think He should, and someone says, "Try this approach; it works!" I'm in danger of being led astray from the truth as it is in Jesus. In Luke 21:8, Jesus warns, "See to it that you be not misled; for many will come in My name, saying, 'I am He,' and, 'The time is at hand'; do not go after them." Satan doesn't try to lead us astray by something or someone who is blatantly false, but by those who come in Jesus' name. Be careful!

C. To be in God's future kingdom requires faithful readiness in the present (17:24-37).

Jesus goes on to emphasize the suddenness of His coming, but He is careful to state that first He must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation (17:25). But, after that, when His kingdom does come in its final phase, it will not be hidden and obscure (as is the initial, inner, spiritual phase of His kingdom). Rather, it will be like a lightning flash in the sky, sudden and observable to everyone. But at that point, it will be too late to change sides. Thus, the time to get into Jesus' kingdom is now, not later.

Jesus uses two examples from history, Noah and Lot, to illustrate the same point, namely, the need to be ready for the certain and coming day of judgment when Jesus returns. Contrary to the recent TV drama on Noah's ark, Noah and Lot were not contemporaries! Note also that Jesus assumes the historicity of these two events, the flood and the judgment on Sodom. They were given to

us as two graphic warnings of the coming judgment on the whole earth at the Second Coming.

Both the people of Noah's time and the people in Sodom in Lot's day were notoriously wicked, but Jesus does not focus here on their flagrant evil. Rather, He shows that they just went on about the normal affairs of life, oblivious to God and the coming judgment. There is nothing wrong with eating and drinking or with getting married (17:27). The problem was that the people of Noah's day lived without regard to God and the warnings of the impending flood. They laughed at Noah as a crazy man, but they stopped laughing when the waters of the flood started rising and Noah was secure inside the ark. But by then it was too late.

The same was true in Lot's day. There is nothing wrong with eating, drinking, buying, selling, planting, and building (17:28). The problem was, they were living in total disregard of God. As you know from the story in Genesis 19, the people of Sodom were grossly immoral, but that is not the Lord's focus here. If He had focused on that, decent, moral folks, like the Pharisees, would have thought, "We're in no danger, because we don't live like the people of Sodom did." But, as Jesus states it, the warning is for people who just go on with life as if judgment never will come. They have no regard for the things of God and eternity. But one day, the Son of Man will suddenly be revealed in power and glory, and these foolish people will be destroyed by God's judgment.

Jesus goes on (17:31-35) to give a graphic, specific description of what it will be like when He returns. Someone will be on his housetop, the equivalent of the modern day patio. He is lounging there when the lightning flash of Christ's return suddenly hits. He is not even to take the time to go into his house and collect his personal belongings. Rather, he must flee the judgment that will swiftly follow. If a man is working in the fields, he must not go back to his house, but must head for safety. Then, Jesus pointedly warns, "Remember Lot's wife." She started to flee out of Sodom, but her heart was still there. Disobeying the angel's command, she looked back and was encrusted with the brimstone that rained down from heaven. She perished in that awful judgment.

Then Jesus states the principle: "Whoever seeks to keep his life shall lose it, and whoever loses his life shall preserve it" (17:33).

In other words, to be so attached to the things of this earth that we want to hang on to them more than we want heaven is to jeopardize our eternal souls. But to let go of all the things that the world values and to live in light of Jesus' coming will result in ultimate and final salvation. It may mean hardship and suffering now, in comparison with those who are living for this life only. Like the rich man in contrast with Lazarus (16:19-31), they may have it good now and you may be worse off because you are not striving for those things. But when Jesus comes and God's final judgment falls, you will be the one to preserve your life and they will lose theirs. Remember Lot's wife!

Jesus continues His graphic description with two more examples (17:34, 35; the third example [v. 36] has very weak manuscript support and was probably added by a later scribe from Matthew 24:40). First, two will be in the same bed (the Greek can refer either to two men or to a man and a woman). One will be taken, and the other will be left. Second, two women will be grinding flour at the same place. One will be taken, and the other will be left. It is not clear whether the one taken is taken away to judgment, while the other is left to enter the kingdom, or vice versa. In light of the context, where Noah, Lot, the one on the housetop, and the one in the field all escape judgment by fleeing, whereas those left behind die and are prey for vultures (17:37), probably those taken go to safety whereas those left are overtaken by God's judgment.

But don't get hung up debating the details and miss the crucial point. When Jesus suddenly returns, all humanity will be divided into two groups. Those who have lived for themselves with no regard for God and without submitting themselves to His kingdom will fall under His judgment and be left as carcasses for the vultures. The other group are those who have submitted their lives to King Jesus before He comes. They are not seeking to live for this life only, accumulating all the junk that the world lives for. They have willingly given up their lives for the sake of Jesus' kingdom. Their focus is on their Lord and His soon coming. They will escape His judgment. Note that being close to someone who escapes is not good enough. You must escape God's wrath personally!

Verse 37 is a difficult verse to understand. The disciples' question, "Where, Lord?" is ambiguous. Are they asking where He

will return or where the judgment will take place or where will those taken be taken? In light of Jesus' answer, they probably were asking where the judgment would take place.

Jesus' answer is also hard to understand and there are a variety of interpretations. It could mean that just as vultures gather on dead bodies, so, "Where the spiritually dead are found, there inevitably will there be judgment" (Leon Morris, *Luke* [IVP/Eerdmans], p. 262). Or, the sense could be that when judgment comes, it will be obvious, just as the location of a corpse is obvious by the presence of vultures. Or, it could mean more, that judgment not only will be obvious, but also universal and permanent (Darrell Bock, *Luke* [Baker], 2:1440 lists these last two views, along with five others; he leans to the last view). Once judgment comes, it will be final. Thus Jesus is saying, "Don't worry about where the judgment will occur, because once it comes, it will be too late and all will see it in its horrific finality" (adapted from Bock, *ibid.*).

The overall point that Jesus is making in verses 24-37 is that His coming will be sudden and therefore we must be prepared in advance. To go on about life, oblivious to God's present kingdom and with no concern for His future kingdom is to expose yourself to great danger. Each person must submit to Jesus as King now and live in light of His soon and certain coming. Only then will it not take you by surprise.

Conclusion

As you may know, there are three major views regarding Christ's kingdom. The *amillennial* view teaches that His kingdom is His spiritual reign over His people in this age. The promises made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob regarding their possessing the land of Canaan and their descendants ruling over the nations are all spiritually fulfilled now in Christ. While I greatly respect many men who hold this view, I reject it. It seems to me that Christ's present rule over His people in this wicked and corrupt world is a far cry from the glorious kingdom promised in the Scriptures. I agree that Christ's present reign over His people is the *initial* phase of His kingdom, but I believe that Jesus will literally reign over the nations on the throne of David, in power and great glory.

The *postmillennial* view teaches that Christ's kingdom will come gradually but certainly as the gospel spreads and triumphs over evil. They often cite Habakkuk 2:14, "For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea." While I, too, believe that verse, I do not believe that it will be fulfilled before Jesus returns. Our text makes it clear that the world will not be converted when Jesus returns. Rather, it will be going on with self-centered business as usual.

The *premillennial* view holds that Jesus will return in power and glory to judge this wicked world and establish His kingdom on earth for 1,000 years. This is the view that makes the most sense of the most Scriptures to me. But don't let the variety of views make you throw up your hands and not believe anything! Note that all three views share some things in common: Jesus is coming again bodily, in power and glory. When He comes, He will judge every person. We need to be ready for His coming by trusting Him as Savior and submitting to Him as Lord now. To deny these things that all of the views share in common would be to deny the core of what Jesus Himself taught.

Dr. Joseph Stowell, the President of Moody Bible Institute, once visited a home for retarded children that was operated by a Christian friend. Noticing the children's handprints on the windows, Dr. Stowell remarked about them to his friend. "Oh, those," he replied. "The children here love Jesus and they're so eager for Him to return that they lean against the windows as they look up at the sky." That's *not* a retarded way to live! May we all imitate those simple children by making sure that we are in Christ's present kingdom and by faithfully awaiting His soon coming future kingdom!

Discussion Questions

1. Why is there so much divergence on prophetic views among Bible-believing Christians? Can we be dogmatic on this issue?
2. How can we break free from this present evil world system and keep our focus properly on God's kingdom?
3. What are the pros and cons for each of the major prophetic views? On which prophetic matters must all Christians agree?

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