

Luke 17:20-37**Ready****Scheduled to Preach Live on 1/3/2021**

Happy New Year! We are going to turn to Luke 17 today. We'll begin 2021 with a look at a cheery apocalyptic passage in Luke's gospel.

For those of you who are new or maybe wondering why we talk about what we talk about, one of the values that we have here is teaching through books of the Bible. Most weeks we don't start with the question, "What topic are we going to preach about this week?," but rather with the question, "What is the next passage in our book." So we generally work straight through books of the Bible. For a few reasons:

- 1) We believe that the Bible is God's word to us as Christians and the book He gave us to reach the world with.
- 2) By going through books, it at least limits a bit the tendency to only talk about what the preachers want to talk about. I'd honestly not talk about the apocalypse, 2020 was the year for that, but here we are.
- 3) This keeps us from feeling like we constantly have to respond to the news cycle and everything that's going on in culture. So we don't feel we have to say something about everything that the networks or papers or people on facebook think is the most important thing right now. Church isn't supposed to feel like a twitter feed.
- 4) This also shows us how to read the Bible. Hopefully as we teach through passages, you can look down at your bible or your app and say, "I see where he got that. I see how the passage says that." So it gives more confidence to how to approach the word for our own private study.

So we do what's sometimes called expository preaching, which is an attempt to expose what the text says. As opposed to topical preaching, which starts with a topic and then applies relevant texts. (Topical isn't bad, and we do it sometimes, it just isn't our main diet.)

So we're picking up in Luke 17, well into year two of our study of Luke's Gospel, which is slated to take us at least through spring.

But let's read today's passage:

Luke 17:20 Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, 21 nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you." 22 And he said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it. 23 And they will say to you, 'Look, there!' or 'Look, here!' Do not go out or follow them. 24 For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day. 25 But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. 26 Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. 27 They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

28 Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot--they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, 29 but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all-- 30 so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. 31 On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. 32 Remember Lot's wife. 33 Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. 34 I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. 35 There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left." 37 And they said to him, "Where, Lord?" He said to them, "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."

Apocalyptic passages like this are often hard to interpret. But it's important to read it for what it says, look at what's there, what's plain. We don't need to somehow add a bunch of stuff from outside the text to make it a sci-fi passage - I've heard people read apocalyptic passages and by the time they're done interpreting them somehow there's a helicopter and a microchip in it, and somehow the passage talks about Bill Gates and George Soros.

But one of the indications that you have interpreted a passage the wrong way is that nobody would ever reproduce your interpretation on their own. If nobody in history interpreted it that way, and nobody ever could see what you see there, you are seeing something that isn't there.

So what does this passage say?

One helpful way to figure out what a passage is talking about is to ask yourself, "What question is Jesus answering here?"

This passage starts with the question asked by the Pharisees:

20 Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come,

Jesus has been talking about the kingdom of God. He taught his disciples to pray that kingdom would come. He promised a coming kingdom of God on earth. And so a question the Pharisees ask and that many have asked through history is "When?"

he answered them, "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed,

And the Greek term for "observed" is only used here in the New Testament, and it was a term that meant calculating future events using the stars - essentially astrology.

So you aren't going to be able to say that we know when Jesus will return by looking at astronomical phenomena or astrological signs. So we don't say, "'When the moon is in the seventh house, and Jupiter aligns with Mars, then Jesus will return, and love will steer the stars."

The timing of this kingdom's coming won't be known by astrology or signs in the sky. Which means we can chuck a lot of the teaching that just keeps popping up that somehow, because of what we see in the sky, we know the return of Jesus is near.

So blood moons, planetary alignments, comets, and asteroids won't tell you anything about the timing of the coming of Jesus' kingdom. If your pastor says that the comet in the sky means Jesus has returned and its time to exit the planet, you're actually in a cult. So the stars don't tell us when He'll come back.

Jupiter and Saturn aligning this week is cool, but doesn't say anything about the timing of Jesus' return.

21 nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There!' for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you."

Next, the kingdom of God won't be confined to any one place. This was very different than all of the religions of Jesus' day. They all had a holy mountain, or a holy city, a holy nation. But the kingdom of God won't be in one limited place.

The coming of Jesus's kingdom at his return won't be a local phenomenon.

And the reason, Jesus says, is because the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.

So what does that mean?

Some Philosophers have said that this means that the kingdom of God is inside you - it is in your heart. That we shouldn't expect an external coming of Jesus and his kingdom, because his kingdom is already here, in you.

But remember who he's talking to here - who asked the question? The Pharisees. These are the guys who rejected Jesus, so how could He say the kingdom is within them? He has told them they won't be in the kingdom of God, so He certainly wouldn't say the kingdom was in them.

Also, nowhere else in the NT is the kingdom spoken of in such personal terms. People enter the kingdom, the kingdom doesn't enter people anywhere else in the Bible.

So it isn't just a personal thing inside your heart. So what is it? And how is it in their midst?

The reason Jesus can say that is He is the king. The king is showing up where he reigns, so the kingdom is right there in their midst.

They are missing the most important part of the kingdom right there in front of them. This is a repeated problem with the Pharisees, they just keep looking for signs of the coming kingdom when Jesus, the king, is right there with them.¹

They can't see the forest for the trees!

It's like standing in a whiteout and saying, "I don't see any winter storm!" You're in it!

They ask when the kingdom will arrive, and Jesus' first answer is, "I'm the king and I'm here, in your midst."

When Jesus is there in the flesh, the kingdom is there. And we know that that's what Jesus means because he contrasts that with the days that are to come:

22 And he said to the disciples, "The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.

The Pharisees say, "When will the kingdom arrive." Jesus says, "I'm here now in your midst." And then He turns to the disciples and says, "But there are coming days when you won't see me."

The kingdom is here in the King, but the days are coming when you are going to wish you were living with the king in your midst. This kingdom that arrived in Jesus is going to be interrupted.

¹ Luke 16:27, 12:54-56

There would be days when the king wouldn't be there in their midst, and they'd be left only with the desire to be in His presence.

There are days of waiting coming, days of discontentment with the kingdom's absence that are coming.

And we, today, are in those days.

Jesus came. Jesus died, and rose, and ascended to the Father's side. But He is not here in the flesh walking among us now. And we desire to see the days of the Son of man. The King has come, the king reigns over us, but the kingdom isn't fully here yet. Let's read a little further and then pull out some ways to apply this.

23 And they will say to you, 'Look, there!' or 'Look, here!' Do not go out or follow them. 24 For as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.

There are a couple of layers of application here. One is the most obvious, that there is a future coming of Jesus, bringing in his kingdom, that will be indisputable.

He will clearly, visibly return one day and nobody will be wondering whether he came back or not.

This is important because throughout history, a number of people have predicted a date for the return of Jesus. Which we are not supposed to do. And inevitably, those dates came and went, and the preacher now had to explain why the prediction didn't come true. And they still wanted to stay employed for another decade at the church, so they have had to explain away their failed prophesy.

Charles Taze Russel was the first president of what's now the Watchtower Society of the Jehovah's Witnesses. He prophesied that 1874 would be the year of Jesus' return. Which didn't happen, obviously, but his response was to say He did return spiritually, the Jesus is invisibly present, and he was right about that date. You just couldn't see it because it was a spiritual return, not the kind of return you can see.

(Try that at home. “Honey, you’re late for dinner!” “No, I am home for dinner, I’m just there spiritually.” “Dinner was at 6, you knew that, and you’re not here.” “Nah, you should just be more spiritual, then you’d know I was really there...” Try that on a date! “I thought you were gonna pick me up at 5.” “I did pick you up at 5, in my heart.”) It wouldn’t work at your house at dinner time, wouldn’t work on a date, but apparently it works to start a religion.

But Jesus says His kingdom will come and it will be obvious as lightning flashing in the sky. We won’t have to wonder if he came back. So there is a future coming of his kingdom.

And I know that many of the prophecies of the Bible that we take to be end-time prophecies are actually prophecies of the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD - I would put much of Matthew 24, in that category, for example. But, not all of them are about 70 AD. There is a future return of Jesus, a coming of his kingdom, that everyone will be able to look at and say, “We know without a doubt that he’s here now.”

Until then, He hasn’t returned, there are much better days still to come, because Christ will come again.

And until that day, we are desiring to see one of the days of the Son of man.

Which means the whole era of Christianity between Jesus’ departure and Jesus return is an era of incompleteness. Jesus reigns, but has not yet returned to fully bring his kingdom.

So we shouldn’t believe those who say He has already come.

But also, this is probably even more life-changing - we should not expect to find now what we will only find then.

There are really only a few people running around saying Jesus has returned, that His return is past. But there are an awful lot of people offering hope that the kingdom has finally arrived in its perfect form, often in a person or in a church or ministry.

It's so easy to fall into the trap of believing that the ultimate expression of the kingdom of God is here. That it has arrived in a person or church.

Especially in our day when so much involvement with church is digital and online and done at a distance. (This is temporary, by the way, church is a local in-person gathering, and digital can't fully replace it - watching at home is a band-aid for this pandemic, not a new state of things or a new normal. Churches must gather - so no rush back now, but when things get normal, church has to be 3 dimensional, not 2 dimensional experience on a screen.)

But we can watch the sermons and hear about the ministries of churches and think, "That's it - that's the ultimate church. That's the place where they do everything right, all the leaders are just right theologically or just right in their amount of cool, the music is perfect, every philosophy is just right," and we can, without noticing it, cross the line into believing a church is the ultimate flawless expression of the kingdom.

And though we wouldn't say, "Look, Jesus has returned," we will take all of the attributes of that future kingdom of Jesus and say, "They're all here, in that pastor, in that church." "Look, there!"

And I've known people to move across the country to attend a church only to find it flawed like ours. It isn't what they had hoped.

Or we will romanticize an expression of church: the house church is the kingdom's arrival, the well-programmed megachurch has it just right, the church in countries where it's persecuted is the real authentic one.

And there are gifts and strengths and weaknesses everywhere, and within a range there are a number of different valid expressions of church, but it will save us an awful lot of moving across the country and an awful lot of flakiness by just realizing that Jesus has not returned yet. Church is not the full expression of the kingdom of God anywhere, the only Christian communities there are are flawed communities.

And sometimes churches set their people up for disillusionment by claiming to be the ultimate expression of the kingdom of God on earth. They say, "We are the answer."

During my sabbatical a couple of years ago I attended a couple of churches where the whole service seemed like a commercial for their church. “Here’s how we are the answer for all of your problems” seemed to be the theme of the service. And, without saying it, they were saying, “All you need is to be involved in one of our programs. Then you’ll be made complete.” “Look, here it is.”

But Jesus is the one churches should be calling people to put their hopes in, not the local church or ministry. We can be thankful for all Jesus is doing among us, but we aren’t him, we won’t solve all of your problems, we may even create a few of your problems. Our hope is in Christ - don’t believe anyone who claims that any local church or pastor has finally figured it out and that the kingdom has come.

Don’t put Messianic hopes in a church, in a person, ever believe that the deep discontent that we all have will be relieved until He returns. When we say that it can be, we are saying, in a sense, that He has already returned.

These are the days when we desire to see the days of the son of man and don’t see them. We’re still waiting for the kingdom to fully come.

In His first coming, He was really the king, in their midst. But He didn’t come to fully bring the whole kingdom yet. Because something had to happen first:

25 But first he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation.

This is all the more remarkable in light of what He just said. He’s going to return in power, he will unmistakably return, it will be known like lightning in the night is known.

But first He must suffer and be rejected.

For the king to reign, he would have to suffer first. Because His reign isn’t just over the political nations, it isn’t just over enemies - you can reign like that through brute force.

But His reign would be so complete that it would go all the way down to the hearts of men and women. He would rule over satan, sin, and death, he would conquer every enemy, the last enemy to be destroyed is death.

And this is the Gospel: the good news that Jesus the king came and suffered so that we might be forgiven. He paid for our sins on the cross so that those who trust in Him could be forgiven and reconciled to God. So we could be made new.

Because if He hadn't done that, His kingdom might have come, but nobody would have been able to enter it. He had to make citizens of the kingdom for its coming to do any good. And because He suffered and died, we are made new when we believe, and can enter in.

So He said there would be days of discontentment after He suffered, days when we wouldn't see Him before His kingdom fully came.

And then, the arrival of His kingdom would be characterized by suddenness:

26 Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. 27 They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage, until the day when Noah entered the ark, and the flood came and destroyed them all.

So here Jesus compares the day of His kingdom coming to what it was like in the days of Noah. In Noah's day, mankind was going on as usual. People were marrying, eating, drinking. Life was normal for everybody.

There was this one crazy redneck named Noah building a boat because he preached that the world would be wiped out with a flood. But nobody listened to Him. They had their lives to live.

And then, suddenly, there was judgment.

And Jesus said that's what it would be like when He returns. Life would be normal for just about everybody, but then He'd return suddenly in judgment.

Sometimes we expect an escalation of chaos in the world, to the point where everybody knows this must be the end, and then He returns. But He says here that it would be just like in Noah's day - business as usual.

This is one of the reasons I don't attach much apocalyptic fear to all of the crazy events of 2020. There has been the virus, the social unrest, the government response, the closing of churches, the Bills are in the playoffs - this was not a normal year, nothing is going the way it normally goes. So we think, "This must be the year of Jesus' return."

But Jesus says, "You can actually expect things to keep going as they normally go - until the judgment."

We can actually expect good days and bad days, life as usual, before the coming of His kingdom.

28 Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot--they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, 29 but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all-- 30 so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed.

Jesus then talks about the judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. Lot was there as a believing guy in an unbelieving and corrupt city. But for the people there, life was normal. They were starting farms, harvesting crops, eating and drinking. And then Lot is sent out and judgment came.

It was sudden.

So Jesus uses these two examples of God's judgment to say, "don't expect a really clear ramp-up."

The Pharisees thought you prepared best for the coming kingdom by knowing the time of its coming. But Jesus says to be ready for it any time.

So we are to be prepared for His return.

Ok, so how?

Well notice something about the two people who were prepared in these two stories Jesus refers to: Noah and Lot.

Neither one of these guys was exceptionally virtuous. Noah had an alcohol problem, Lot had other horrendous issues. But both were saved.

They believed, but they weren't always virtuous people. Both would be fired if they were pastors here. But they were saved from the judgment.

So they weren't saved because they deserved it.

Both just realized judgment would come and responded to what God told them to do to be saved.

And they refused to just live life as usual when they were warned of coming judgment. Everybody else was completely taken up with their concerns only about building and planting, marrying and being given in marriage, feasting for the holidays, they were only concerned for life as usual and thinking life as usual would continue.

But Noah and Lot believed God enough to realize this won't always go on like this, and they listened to what he said to do to take shelter. Noah built a boat, Lot escaped the city.

And the people who were condemned weren't condemned because they were worse than everyone else. Again, Noah and Lot had enough problems that we could easily make the case that there were people more moral than them who perished in the judgment.

The people who were condemned, whether more moral than others or not, were condemned because they just didn't have time for listening to God's warnings and taking refuge. God's word, God's warnings, God's judgment just didn't factor in to how they thought about the world.

They conducted their lives with little attention to God.

Noah and Lot, as sinful as they were, asked "What must I do to be saved?"

In Acts 16:29-31, Paul and Silas had been in prison, singing hymns at night, and then an earthquake came, shook the prison, and opened the doors. The jailer sensed that God was at work, he trembled before God, and it says:

Acts 16:29-31 “And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” 31 And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.”

In light of the coming of the king, in light of the coming judgment on mankind, we are called to take refuge in Jesus. We won't be saved by being more moral or worthy, but by trusting in Christ.

We are called to not be people who are so concerned with the cares of this life that we don't listen to the word of God, the warning of God, we don't fear the judgment of God, and we don't seek salvation by God.

And to be saved on that day, we don't need to be morally better than everyone else. We simply believe, we believe that God judges sin. We believe that we are worthy of that judgment. And we hide in Christ, whose death on the cross is our ark that saves us from the flood, our safety from the wrath we deserve.

We have to believe there is more to this life than the day to day. We have to believe that our status with God matters more than our status with man. We have to be willing to let go of the things we hold dear to have Him.

That's what Jesus says next:

Luke 17:31 On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. 32 Remember Lot's wife.

So Jesus says that on that day of judgment, you shouldn't go grab your stuff before you take refuge, just go.

And he says to remember Lot's wife, who was brought out of Sodom, on the road to safety, but she looked back, remembering all of the good things she was leaving behind by being saved, and she turned to a pillar of salt.

All of this is a call to listen more to the voice of God than to the siren call of the simple pleasures of this life.

It's a call to believe that He matters more than our stuff, our comforts, our plans. It's a call to hear his voice and take refuge in Him.

And if we are looking for a New Year's Resolution, which I think pastors are obligated to mention on the first Sunday in January, maybe it could be that in 2021 we will listen to the voice of God more than all other voices.

That we'd make the Lord our refuge and let his scripture be our guide, that we would seek first His kingdom and his righteousness before all the other things. That in all of our planting and harvesting, eating and drinking, we would live coram deo, before the face of God.

That we wouldn't live like Lot's wife who considered the pleasures of this world more important than Him, that we wouldn't live like they did in the days of Noah, like God didn't matter. But that all of life would be lived before His face - so that whether we eat or drink or whatever we do, we do it in a way that shows that we believe that God matters the most.

We are ready for the coming kingdom if we have taken refuge in Christ and if we are refusing to live like God is insignificant in the day-to-day of life.

Jesus goes on in verse 33:

33 Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.

Notice that those who are judged are obsessed with preserving this life, while those that are willing to let go of the pleasures and comforts of this life are prone to cling to Jesus.

And it's true, that some of our day-to-day lives will look the same whether we hope in Jesus or not. We'll still go to work, still eat, still drink, still get

married. But one person does so before the face of God, treasuring God above those things.

The other treasures those things and doesn't give God the time of day. And the day of judgment will sort that out:

34 I tell you, in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. 35 There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left."

Noah was taken, Lot was taken, and the others judged. The difference was making the Lord their refuge. So we are called to make Him our refuge and be saved.

37 And they said to him, "Where, Lord?" He said to them, "Where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather."

So they ask Him where this judgment will take place?

Is it just going to be in one place like Sodom and Gomorrah? Where should we expect this judgment.

And Jesus says, cryptically, wherever there's death there will be vultures. In the same where, wherever death reigns, there will be judgment.

He's saying this judgment is coming on the world where death reigns, so people everywhere should be ready.

And we are ready if we take our refuge in Christ.

Sermon Discussion and Study Guide

Luke 17:20-37 - Ready

Jesus had spent a great deal of time promising the coming of the kingdom. On the one hand, the kingdom had arrived because Jesus the king had arrived. But on the other hand, the kingdom is yet to come fully. So what should we be ready for as we await His kingdom?

I. Be Ready for a Coming Kingdom (Luke 17:20-21)

What did Jesus mean when He said the kingdom of heaven is among you?

How is that consistent with the teaching that followed about His future return?

II. Be Ready for Days of Longing (Luke 17:22)

When are these days of longing?

How does that change how we live?

How does that change what we expect out of church life?

III. Be Ready for His Certain Return (Luke 17:23-24)

Why isn't it possible that we will miss the return of Jesus? Didn't many miss His first coming?

IV. First, the Cross (Luke 17:25)

In light of the things Jesus is saying about His return in glory, how is the cross even more remarkable?

V. Be Ready for His Sudden Return (Luke 17:26-30)

How would we live differently if we expected His return?

VI. Be Ready By Finding the One True Refuge (Luke 17:31-37)

How are we to prepare for His return?