

Believe God's Witnesses!

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Preacher: Mark Chew

- [0 : 0 0] I bet for many of you, the first thing you honed in on when you heard this passage read was verses 18, the topic of divorce and adultery.
- If you're curious for me to say what that passage or those verses mean, then I'm probably going to disappoint you today because that's not the focus of the passage.
- I'm happy to talk about divorce and adultery on a separate occasion, or if you want to talk to me privately after this, more than happy to do that. So why, you may ask then, does Jesus bring it up?
- Why does Luke include it here in his gospel? Well, it goes to the question of context, doesn't it? And at first, as I was working through it, it was actually rather baffling.
- But here we are. Last week, we had the parable about the shrewd manager where Jesus told us not to store riches on earth but in heaven. And then in verse 15, we saw the Pharisees overhear and sneer at Jesus.
- [1 : 0 2] They didn't like what Jesus was saying. He said that you couldn't serve both God and money, and they thought they could. Here they were, rich, and thinking, but we're serving God, so why not?
- Some of them, of course, were not aware of their own love of money. Besides, they thought that they had the law on their side. So if you read Deuteronomy, many of us did that as our studies last year.
- It would have been clear when you read it that one of the things that happens when they served God in the land was that they would be blessed materially with abundant crops, with cattle, with grapes for wine.
- So what's Jesus talking about here? Is he going against the law? Well, that prompts Jesus to explain his view in verses 16 and 17.
- There he says, So what Jesus is saying here is that on the one hand, he's upholding the law and its ongoing importance.
- [2 : 1 9] And yet, at the same time, he's putting it at the service of the gospel or good news. Did Jesus come to abolish the law? No, because he says not one stroke of the pen will drop out of the law.
- Every jot and tittle will remain. And that's because the law is perfect. It reflects God's character and will, and it reveals his plan for salvation.
- And yet, on the other hand, he does say that the law now serves to point to Jesus, to him. He's the final and complete revelation of God.
- Up until now, that is until John, the law and the prophets were proclaimed to prepare God's people for the kingdom. But when John comes, he begins to preach the good news.
- Because the king is here. Jesus is here. God's kingdom is breaking in. That's why we have the words good news or gospel. What is implied in that is that there is a big reveal, a big announcement.

[3 : 24] And now that Jesus has arrived, the good news takes prominence. Everything in the Old Testament about the kingdom is still true, but it points to Jesus.

And then Jesus says people are forcing their way into it. They're no longer waiting, as it were, to come in. The image I always have of this is of Boxing Day at David Jones at 5 o'clock.

We have the crowds there at the door waiting for it to open. And even as it's just slightly not fully open, they can't even wait for it to be fully open, just as it's cracked open, we get the crowds surging forward, don't we?

Of course, they're not going for God's kingdom. They're just going for the cheapest bargain. Well, in this case, Jesus is describing this surge of people finally able to enter God's kingdom because of what Jesus is going to do.

But it doesn't nullify the law. On the contrary, Jesus says, it fulfills it. The law is still true. And I think that's why he mentions the example of divorce.

[4 : 31] It's used as an illustration. At the time, there was a debate going on among the Pharisees about how to interpret these divorce laws. Some of them thought all you needed to do was issue a certificate from a husband to a wife.

That was one of the provisions that Moses had. And as long as you wrote that certificate, then you could divorce your wife for any reason. But that was not to observe the spirit of the law.

Jesus says that divorce was only given as a concession because of the hardness of their hearts. Divorce was only ever going to be used for these most limited circumstances which is described.

But these Pharisees thought as long as we write the certificate, we were obeying the law. And they were getting away with keeping the spirit of the law by just keeping the letter of the law.

Well, Jesus says, no. The law still stands even when I've come. He maintains this high view of marriage and hence of divorce.

[5 : 40] But he doesn't raise this point because divorce is a main point. Rather, the ongoing importance of the law is, even though it pointed to the gospel. And this is the point that forms the basis for his next parable, which he tells, again directed at the Pharisees, and again taking aim at their pride and self-righteousness.

As I said earlier, in their hearts they were thinking, how can God disapprove of me because I'm rich? Because all this blessing that I have must be a sign of God's favor.

Well, in verse 19 Jesus says this. There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried in Hades where he was in torment. He looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

[6 : 53] So he called to him, Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I'm in agony in this fire. Well, let me pause here to say that the first point of this parable is that Jesus makes explicit his teaching about the reality of hell.

Yes, it's a parable and we can discuss how literally Jesus is speaking. But unless hell is a reality to be avoided at all costs, then this parable doesn't make sense, does it?

There's no point for Jesus to tell this parable unless hell is real. And we're not to assume that Jesus is doing this to scare people. What we need to see is that he's trying to warn the Pharisees and us as well to act before it's too late.

If something is real, simply staying silent is not going to make it disappear. Now, of course, Jesus' concern is not to describe hell physically, but actually to show us its spiritual reality.

You know, I've heard people joke that, you know, they don't mind going to hell because they'll still have friends there. Even though it's hot and whatever, they'll still have friends to enjoy their vices with.

[8 : 14] But you know what? The spiritual reality of hell is far from this, isn't it? Elsewhere, Jesus talks about the gnashing of teeth. And here we get a picture of unrelenting agony.

It's a place devoid of God's gracious and loving presence. All that remains is God's holy and righteous anger. And it's also a place where we're going to be left to our own devices.

So even though your friends may still be there, I'm afraid all you experience is the worst of their traits. And you'll be in the worst of your traits as well without the grace of God.

And so I doubt that even you would be able to stand your own company. But the worst thing about that is, you are not able to run away from your own presence.

That's how bad it's going to be. Well, the other thing to note about this parable as well is that our lives at this moment in this life actually bears no resemblance, may not bear any resemblance to where we end up when we die.

[9 : 22] In fact, the parable explicitly talks about the real possibility of a great reversal, doesn't it? You see, the rich man in this life would have considered himself blessed.

For him, it was like living heaven on earth, wasn't it? Dressed in fine linen, living in luxury every day. By contrast, Lazarus at his gates was probably living hell on earth.

So desperate was he that he longed for the crumbs, just the crumbs, of the table. So pathetic was his life that the dogs came and licked his sores.

And yet, upon their deaths, Jesus talks about this total reversal of their roles. Lazarus finds himself at the bosom of Abraham, which is a picture of a blessing.

He's not just rich, but now he's loved as well, cherished among God's people. Incidentally, the name Lazarus means God has helped, which I'm sure people would have laughed at him when he was on earth.

[10 : 30] But actually, when he got to heaven, that's exactly what God has promised him. Now, in contrast, anyone tell me what the name of the rich man was? No.

He doesn't have a name, does he? He's unknown by God, as it were. And now, just the opposite again, another irony. Just as Lazarus longed for a crumb in his mouth, this rich man longs for a drop, just a drop of water to cool his tongue.

Just one moment in this unrelenting agony was still good enough for him. And yet, as we get to the second point, we see that it doesn't happen.

So I think we mustn't allow our comfortable life now to lure us into a false security about life after death. The rich aren't the only ones who go to heaven, nor the poor to hell.

That was the Pharisees' mistake. They thought their riches on this earth meant that they had God's favor, that they were safe. By the same reason, we can take comfort, too, that if life is tough, it does not necessarily mean that it's a sign that God is punishing us.

[11 : 47] But as we go back to the parable in verse 25, as I said, the rich man finds no relief, does he? For Abraham replied, Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things.

But now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you, a great chasm has been put in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor anyone cross over from there to us.

It's not that Abraham and Lazarus don't want to help. They can't, can they? Even if they want. And so Jesus paints this very real picture of an eternal and permanent chasm that separates heaven from hell.

And that's the third thing to notice from this parable. That once you get to that point, there is no crossing over. There's no purgatory, no second chance.

And so that means we need to sort out where we go now. It's too late when we die. And the rich man realizes this, not for himself now, but for his family.

[12 : 52] So he pleads in verse 27, Father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.

Abraham replied, They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them. And so here we begin to see now why the rich man ended up where he is.

He had failed to listen to the law and the prophets. He had failed to obey God's law. He realizes this now and he wants his family to be warned.

Now, in what sense, you may ask, is he failing to obey the law? Well, I presume that it's probably in this way. You see, the law is full of commandments, isn't there?

To look after the poor. So, for instance, if you look at Leviticus, which I've got on the slide, chapter 19, there are laws about gleaning, for instance. When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest.

[13 : 55] Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God. And I think we can safely assume that the rich man failed to do this because Lazarus wasn't even able to glean the crumbs off the table.

I mean, you have to remember that this was an obscenely rich man. So, he didn't just have dinner. He had a feast every day. And when you have a feast, you always have leftovers, don't you?

You don't go to a big banquet and have nothing left over. And so, he would have had leftovers. And the thing about leftovers is that, unlike now where we have fridge and freezers, they have to be thrown away, don't they?

You can't keep food in those days and then eat it the next day. And so, this is the picture that we get, that rather than even give this leftovers to Lazarus, who is at the gates begging, he would rather throw the food away.

That was how nasty his miserliness was. But as if that was not bad enough, I think his actions actually showed what was in his heart. You see, we know that those who are forgiven much, forgive.

[15 : 12] If we are shown grace and generosity, then we are gracious to others, aren't we? And particularly when God is the one that's gracious to us, even more so. But the rich man's miserliness showed that he not just disobeyed the law, but in his heart, he lacked the generosity that God had showed him.

In fact, he probably thought that he deserved the riches in his first place. His heart then was filled with pride and self-righteousness, the very things the Pharisees were guilty of.

And so I think we mustn't just take this parable to mean that, oh, as long as we're generous to the poor, that's all this parable is talking about. Yes, we ought to be generous to the poor, to others, but it goes deeper than that, doesn't it?

It's his attitude to God and his word that was the real issue. That's why Jesus introduced the parable with a reference to the law and the prophets. That's why Jesus introduced the parable with a prophet.

The entire witness of the Old Testament was what the Jews and the Pharisees were meant to heed. And God has been so gracious to the Jews and the Pharisees that in page after page of the Old Testament, God was preparing them not just to obey him, but to welcome Jesus when he come as God's Messiah.

[16 : 30] And as I often say, the Pharisees of all people should have welcomed Jesus with open arms. And yet, their pride blinds them to Jesus.

But that's the truth, isn't it? Pride always hinders us from God. Well, the rich man, he doesn't give up easily, does he?

Because he tries one more time in verse 30. He pleads once more. No, Father Abraham, he said, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent. I think he might even be resentful in saying, look, if someone had come from heaven to warn me, perhaps I would have repented too.

But Abraham says, look, this is all nonsense. If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. Stop making excuses.

You know that the Old Testament is God's authoritative word. They've been sent to you by messengers from God already. Moses and the prophets, they were God's messengers. In fact, the Daniel reading showed us, didn't it?

[17 : 39] And I put it back on the screen, that they have been told of hell and heaven, isn't it? That some will awake to everlasting life and others to everlasting contempt. So no one really has excuse, not even the Pharisees or that rich man who knows the law.

And so even when God's word is clear, the rich man chooses to ignore it. Then what difference would a further messenger make?

He's simply making excuses, isn't he? And again, Jesus is clearly accusing the Pharisees here, isn't he? They knew the law and the prophets. But why didn't they recognize Jesus as king?

As you read the gospels, you see many, many times that they kept asking Jesus for more and more signs, more evidence that he was God's Messiah. And I guess that's true for us as well today.

In fact, that's even more true for us because since Jesus' day, we now don't only have the Old Testament, we have the New Testament as well, don't we? The gospel proclaimed. We have Jesus himself and his words as a further witness, all recorded for us in the New Testament.

[18 : 50] And in fact, the Old Testament, the New Testament actually shows that all the promises of the Old Testament has been fulfilled in Jesus, isn't it? But they both work together, giving us even more assurance that Jesus is God's Messiah.

And of course, the irony of ironies in what Jesus is saying is that Jesus' own witness culminates, does it not, in his resurrection. He was that someone who has risen from the dead and come back and told all of us that we need to believe in him.

So if the rich man had no excuses, then how much more us? Because Jesus has indeed come back from the dead in the flesh to show us the way back to God.

And so I want to play it again as I've been doing for the last few weeks. If anyone here is still in the rich man's position, then please, please do not ignore the witness and warnings of God.

Don't ask for more and more signs. Don't bargain with God and say, look, if you do this or that, then I'll believe. No. We have enough. God's word is enough for us to believe.

[20 : 03] Come. Come. If you need more evidence, come and read God's word and then give your life fully to Jesus. This summer, we've had a lot of warnings, haven't we?

First it was the bushfires and now the coronavirus. I think God is giving us a glimpse of just how fragile life is. And even though we may not personally have been badly impacted, most of us, we've seen others really suffer, haven't we?

But you know what? There is actually something that's worse than the coronavirus and the bushfires. And that's a life without God in eternity.

It gives me no pleasure to say this, but Jesus said it. But hell is real. And it is worse than anything that can happen on this earth. But it doesn't have to be this way, does it?

God has already said, Jesus has already said, I've come. And like Lazarus, no matter how poor we are, we can be rich in heaven if we put our trust in Him. So I urge anyone here who has not believed, put your trust in Jesus.

[21 : 11] Give your life to Him. But those of us who are already rich in Christ, then I think the next thing we should do is be generous. Yes, be generous with our practical, material things, but also be generous with our good news of Jesus.

Share it with others. Because that's ultimately better than feeding the poor, isn't it? By all means, we need to be generous. But the most generous thing we can do is to tell others about Jesus because of what we know will happen after death.

And while I know it's not easy to talk about hell, then perhaps that includes talking about hell because Jesus did not shy away, did He, from warning people about the fate of those who have not put their trust in Him.

This morning I was at church and it was really encouraging. The 8.30 service, most of whom are above 70 years old, they all came in spite of what's been going on.

Same at 10.30. People came and I read Andrew's letter and everyone came up to me afterwards and they said, yep, that was a really good letter because it showed us not to fear, but to trust God.

[22 : 25] And we are trusting God in spite of... Some of these older people, they're most vulnerable. They said, look, it doesn't matter. We're going to come to church anyway. We're going to take precautions, but we're not going to be kept away from God's people.

But, you know, coming to church or not, I mean, that's one thing. But what it showed to me was that these people, Christians, they are not afraid to die because they have a faith in Jesus.

And so we don't have to fear. Whatever the panic's going on, and I know because I've just walked through some supermarket aisles and hang on, what's going on here? And for that moment, and yet we're always afraid, but then we remind ourselves, we do not need to fear because of Jesus.

So let's tell others, let's live that way so that when people ask us, why are you not afraid? We can tell them, it's because of the hope we have in Jesus. Let's pray. Father, thank you that you have made your way known to us, clearly in your Son and through your word.

Help us to search it diligently to find eternal life. Convict us of our pride which so often blinds us to your truth. And we pray for our friends and our family, many who still do not know you, and for the first time perhaps are faced with the mortality, their own mortality.

[23 : 46] Help us to be generous to them and gracious to them. Help us to share the good news of Jesus, but also warn them about hell, about the eternal judgment that awaits them.

And Lord, in your mercy, please open their eyes and help them to turn to Jesus. We pray this in his mighty name. Amen.