

Luke 17:20-37
April 12, 2020

Open with Prayer

HOOK:

Q: If the USA had a king rather than a President, how do you think our lives would be different?
[Let people engage – Would you get to vote?]

Transition: Kings have absolute supremacy, absolute authority, absolute power, absolute will. We don't live under people who we'd call majesties, who can do whatever they like, whenever they like, with whomever they like, without any recourse. In fact, when we find it egregious when someone rules like that. We would label him a dictator who scares us. We become outraged with the idea of autocratic domination, and we amass our political powers and sometimes military powers, to try to liberate people from those who have absolute dominion over them.

Our understanding of authority and power is expressed in a “balance of power.” It's spread out over many people and many agencies and many institutions as a kind of “checks and balance system.” We, the people, collectively determine through a democracy as to who gets to be President. It is the very antithesis to a monarchy. We want to make sure any President doesn't have too much power anywhere, at anytime, over anyone. No one is supreme. No one is sovereign or above the law. No one has absolute right, privilege, power, and authority.

So though we don't live in this material world under a King, we do have a King who rules over the Kingdom God, and His name is Jesus. Let's see how Jesus talks about His Kingdom, first with the Pharisees (v.20-21), and then with His disciples (v.22-37).

BOOK:

The Coming of the Kingdom of God

²⁰ Once, having been asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, Jesus replied, “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation, ²¹ nor will people say, ‘Here it is,’ or ‘There it is,’ because the kingdom of God is within you.”

²² Then he said to his disciples, “The time is coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, but you will not see it. ²³ Men will tell you, ‘There he is!’ or ‘Here he is!’ Do not go running off after them. ²⁴ For the Son of Man in his day will be like the lightning, which flashes and lights up the sky from one end to the other. 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 also will it be in the days of the Son of Man. ²⁷ People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all.

²⁸ “It was the same in the days of Lot. People were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building. ²⁹ But the day Lot left Sodom, fire and sulfur rained down from heaven and destroyed them all.

³⁰ “It will be just like this on the day the Son of Man is revealed. ³¹ On that day no one who is on the roof of his house, with his goods inside, should go down to get them. Likewise, no one in the field should go back for anything. ³² Remember Lot’s wife! ³³ Whoever tries to keep his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life will preserve it. ³⁴ I tell you, on that night two people will be in one bed; one will be taken and the other left. ³⁵ Two women will be grinding grain together; one will be taken and the other left.”

³⁷ “Where, Lord?” they asked.

He replied, “Where there is a dead body, there the vultures (Rev 19:17-19, reference to carnage of Armageddon) will gather.”

Process Observations/Questions:

Q: What did you most like about this passage? What resonated with you? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you least like about this passage? [Let people engage]

Q: What did you find in this passage that you didn’t understand? [Let people engage]

Q: What do we learn about Jesus in this passage? [Let people engage]

LOOK:

The **kingdom of God** begins in the heart of all who believe in Jesus, and it grows and grows like the mustard seed and like leaven until it is fully realized in its millennial glory, which is the final phase of the expanding Kingdom of God on earth. In other words, the Kingdom of God begins as a spiritual Kingdom in the heart but is consummated in a visible Kingdom on earth in the Millennium. In the meantime, we should look for His return and long to see Him come, but at the same time, we should be busy doing His work when He comes.

Close in Prayer

Commentaries for Today's Lesson:

Wiersbe, W. W. (1996). *The Bible Exposition Commentary (Vol. 1, pp. 245-247)*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

Preparedness (Luke 17:20–37)

The Jewish people lived in an excited atmosphere of expectancy, particularly at the Passover season when they commemorated their deliverance from Egypt. They longed for another Moses who would deliver them from their bondage. Some had hoped that John the Baptist would be the deliverer, and then the attention focused on Jesus (John 6:15). The fact that He was going to Jerusalem excited them all the more (Luke 19:11). Perhaps He would establish the promised kingdom!

The Pharisees were the custodians of the Law (Matt. 23:2–3), so they had the right to ask Jesus when He thought the kingdom of God would appear. It was customary for Jewish teachers to discuss these subjects publicly, and Jesus gave them a satisfactory answer. However, He reserved His detailed lessons for His disciples.

The word translated “observation” (Luke 17:20) is used only here in the New Testament and means in classical Greek “to observe the future by signs.” It carries the idea of spying, lying in wait, and even scientific investigation. The point Jesus made was that God’s kingdom would not come with great “outward show” so that people could predict its arrival and plot its progress.

The Pharisees’ question was legitimate, but it was also tragic; for Jesus had been ministering among them for some three years, and these men were still in spiritual darkness. They did not understand who Jesus was or what He was seeking to accomplish. Their views of the kingdom were political, not spiritual; Jewish, not universal. Jesus did not deny that there would be a future earthly kingdom, but He did emphasize the importance of the *spiritual* kingdom that could be entered only by the new birth (John 3:1–8).

The statement “the kingdom of God is within you” has challenged Bible translators and interpreters for centuries, and many explanations have been given. One thing we can be sure of is that He was not telling the unbelieving Pharisees that they had the kingdom of God in their hearts!

The Greek preposition can mean “within,” “among,” or “in the midst of.” Jesus was saying, “Don’t look for the kingdom ‘out there’ unless it is first in your own heart” (see Rom. 14:17). At the same time, He may also have been saying, “The fact that I am here in your midst is what is important, for I am the King. How can you enter the kingdom if you reject the King?” (see Luke 19:38–40) The Pharisees were preoccupied with the great events of the future but were ignoring the opportunities of the present (Luke 12:54–57).

Having answered the Pharisees, Jesus then turned to His disciples to instruct them about the coming of the kingdom. He warned them not to become so obsessed with His return that they ended up doing nothing else but trying to track Him down. This is a good warning to believers who do nothing but study prophecy. Certainly, we should look for His return and long to see Him come, but at the same time, we should be busy doing His work when He comes (note Acts 1:6–11).

To begin with, His coming will affect the whole world, so it is foolish for anyone to follow false prophets who say, “He is here!” or “He is there!” Furthermore, His coming will be as sudden as a flash of lightning (Matt. 24:27, 30). While a study of the prophetic Scriptures will help us understand the general characteristics of the time of His coming, we can not know the day

or the hour (Matt. 25:13; Luke 12:40, 46). It is futile to investigate signs and try to calculate the day of His coming.

Jesus then used two Old Testament events to illustrate the certainty and the suddenness of His coming: the Flood (Gen. 6–8) and the destruction of Sodom (Gen. 19). In both examples, the people of the world were caught unprepared as they engaged in their everyday activities of eating and drinking, marrying, buying, and selling. Noah witnessed to his generation in the years preceding the Flood (2 Peter 2:5), but his preaching did not convert them. Noah and his wife, his three sons, and their wives—only eight people—were saved from destruction because they entered the ark. Peter saw this as an illustration of the salvation Christians have through faith in Jesus Christ (1 Peter 3:18–22).

Both Noah and Lot lived in days of religious compromise and moral declension, not unlike our present time. During “the days of Noah,” population growth was significant (Gen. 6:1), lawlessness was on the increase (Gen. 6:5), and the earth was given over to violence (Gen. 6:11, 13). In Lot’s day, the unnatural lusts of Sodom and Gomorrah were so abhorrent to God that He completely destroyed the cities. Only Lot, two of his daughters, and his wife (who later was destroyed) were saved from the terrible judgment.

Luke 17:30–36 describes what will occur when Jesus Christ returns in judgment to defeat His enemies and establish His kingdom on earth (Rev. 19:11–20:6). Believers in every age of the church can take warning from these verses, but they apply in a special way to Israel at the end of the age (see Matt. 24:29–44). When Jesus comes for His church and takes it to heaven, it will happen “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye” (1 Cor. 15:52). Nobody taking part in the rapture of the church need worry about being on a housetop or in a field and wanting to get something out of the house! However, when the Lord returns *to the earth*, His coming will first be preceded by a “sign” in heaven (Matt. 24:30–31), and some people might try to hurry home to rescue something. “Remember Lot’s wife!”

The verb *taken* in Luke 17:34–36 does not mean “taken to heaven” but “taken away in judgment” (Matt. 24:36–41). The person “left” is a believer who enters into the kingdom. Noah and his family were “left” to enjoy a new beginning, while the whole population of the earth was “taken” in the Flood. In spite of their sins, Lot and his daughters were “left” while the people in Sodom and Gomorrah were “taken” when the fire and brimstone destroyed the cities.

The fact that it is night in Luke 17:34 but day in Luke 17:35–36 indicates that the whole world will be involved in the return of Jesus Christ in glory. “Behold, He cometh with clouds; and every eye shall see Him” (Rev. 1:7).

Three times the disciples had heard Jesus talk about people being “taken” and “left,” so they asked Him a most logical question: “Where, Lord?” Our Lord’s reply has the sound of a familiar proverb: “Just as the eagles [and vultures, Matt. 24:28] gather at a corpse, so the lost will be gathered together for judgment.” The description of the last battle in Revelation 19:17–21 certainly parallels the image of carrion-eating birds gorging themselves on flesh.

In other words, when the Lord Jesus returns to judge His enemies, there will be a separation of the saved and the lost. Whether it be day or night, whether people are working or sleeping, the separation and judgment will come. Those who are saved will be left to enter the glorious kingdom, while those who are lost will be taken away in judgment.

Even though the primary interpretation of these verses is for Israel in the end times, they do emphasize for the church the importance of being ready when Jesus returns. We must not be like Lot’s wife whose heart was so in Sodom that she looked back in spite of the angels’ warning (Gen. 19:17, 26). There are many professed Christians today whose plans would be interrupted if

Jesus returned! (note 1 Thess. 5:1–11) Our Lord’s warning in Luke 17:33 finds parallels in Matthew 10:39; Luke 9:24; and John 12:25 and is a fundamental principle of the Christian life. The only way to save your life is to lose it for the sake of Christ and the Gospel.

Jesus pictured civilization as a “rotting corpse” that would one day be ripe for judgment. The discerning believer sees evidence of this on every hand and realizes that the “days of Noah” and the “days of Lot” are soon on us. Our Lord can return for His church at any time, so we are not looking for signs; but we do know that “coming events cast their shadows before.” As we see many of these things begin to come to pass (Luke 21:28), we know that His return is nearing.

Are we looking for His return, and do we really want to see Him come?

Martin, J. A. (1985). Isaiah. In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 248-249)

b. Jesus’s teaching about the presence of the kingdom (17:20–37) (Matt. 24:23–28, 37–41).

17:20–21. Jesus was **asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come**. This was a logical question to ask, for He had been preaching for quite some time that the kingdom was at hand. **Jesus** responded to the question in two ways. First, He said that the Pharisees would not be able to tell of the coming of **the kingdom** through their observations. Second, he told them that the **kingdom** was in their midst. The term **within you** is often misunderstood. The Pharisees were rejecting Him as the Messiah and were not believers. (They were distinct from the disciples Jesus addressed beginning in v. 22.) Thus, it would not make sense for Jesus to have told the Pharisees that the kingdom of God was within them as if it were some sort of spiritual kingdom. It is better to translate the phrase “within you” (*entos hymōn*) as “in your midst.” Some feel that the force of the expression is “within your possession or within your reach.” Jesus’ point was that He was standing right in their midst. All they needed to do was acknowledge that He is indeed the Messiah who could bring in the kingdom—and then the kingdom would come.

17:22–25. Jesus then gave **His disciples** several facts about the kingdom. First, He said that a **time** would come when the disciples would **long to see** Him return, but they would not see it (v. 22). Second, He said that when the kingdom would come everyone would know it (vv. 23–24). It will not be a hidden (i.e., only an inner, spiritual) kingdom. It will be a kingdom that the whole world will know. His appearing **will be like the lightning** (cf. Matt. 24:27, 30). Third, Jesus told the disciples **He must suffer** before the kingdom comes (Luke 17:25).

17:26–27. Next Jesus compared the coming of the kingdom to the coming of the flood in Noah’s day and to the coming of judgment on Sodom (v. 29). By bringing up these two events, Jesus was stressing the judgmental aspect of the kingdom. When He will establish His kingdom, people will be judged to see if they will be allowed to enter it. In this section (17:26–35) Jesus was not speaking about the Rapture but about the judgment before entering the kingdom.

Jesus reminded His disciples that people in Noah’s day were not prepared for **the Flood**, and therefore they were completely **destroyed** (Gen. 6). The same problem will exist when the kingdom comes—people will not be ready.

17:28–33. In **the same** way the materialistic, indifferent **people of Sodom (eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building)** were not prepared for God’s judgment (Gen. 19). They were living in sin, oblivious to God. Therefore, they were **destroyed**. Jesus reminded His followers that people should not be attached to their material things at the time of

the coming of the kingdom for they, like **Lot's wife**, will be judged accordingly. People who are working or relaxing on their roofs (many of which are flat in Palestine) should not try to get things out of their houses. Nor should those working in the fields go to their houses to save their possessions. Any delay could be fatal. Thus, **whoever tries to keep his life** (Luke 17:33) by going back for his goods (v. 31) will lose it.

17:34–36. Jesus stated that some will be **taken** into judgment. In some parts of the world it will be nighttime (**people will be in ... bed**); in other parts it will be daytime (people will be doing daily tasks, such as **grinding grain**). The taking away means **taken** into judgment, not taken up in the Rapture. The ones left are those who will enter into the kingdom. (Some add the words of v. 36, “Two men will be in the field; one will be taken and the other left.” Most likely the verse was inserted to harmonize this passage with Matt. 24:40.)

17:37. The disciples questioned **where** these people would be taken. Jesus' cryptic answer, **Where there is a dead body, there the vultures will gather**—has been interpreted variously. It seems best to understand that Jesus was reaffirming that these people would be taken into judgment. Much as a dead body causes vultures to “gather” on it, so dead people are consigned to judgment if they are not ready for the kingdom (cf. Matt. 24:28; Rev. 19:17–19).

Cabal, T., Brand, C. O., Clendenen, E. R., Copan, P., Moreland, J. P., & Powell, D. (2007). *The Apologetics Study Bible: Real Questions, Straight Answers, Stronger Faith* (pp. 1548). Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.

17:20–21, 24 By failing to recognize that the kingdom of God was present in the ministry of Jesus, the Pharisees wrongly looked for a future sign of its coming. He said in effect, “If you want to find the kingdom, you have to deal with Me now. You have gotten all the signs you need” (11:20). But He did not thereby deny a future “coming” of the kingdom with signs, as verse 24 makes clear. The manifestation of the kingdom began in the ministry of Jesus, continues in the work of the Spirit in the church, and will culminate in the return and subsequent world rule of Christ.

Butler, T. C. (2000). *Luke* (Vol. 3, pp. 281–283). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

C. Dedication to the Master's Return: The Eschatological Surprise (17:20–37)

SUPPORTING IDEA: *Faith holds out through the normal ups and downs of life, waiting for the moment of surprise when Christ returns to earth.*

17:20–21. The focus shifts again from disciples to Pharisees. They had another question for Jesus: When will the kingdom of God come? The Pharisees had logic and reason behind their question. They knew all the apocalyptic expectations raised by the Jews as Roman oppression grew and the era of prophecy faded further into the dark pages of yesteryear. Would Jesus openly admit he was the Messiah, bringing the kingdom, and thus make himself an enemy of Rome? Would he affirm the signs and wonders of contemporary apocalyptic writings and teachings? Or would his teachings be so radically new that the people would quit listening to him?

As usual, Jesus confounded them. They wanted to know signs of the times. They wanted to be able to be the first to predict and be prepared for the in break of God's kingdom on earth to re-establish David's rule. You will not see anything different, Jesus told them. The kingdom stands

among you right now. People do not have to go out searching for it and come back reporting that they have found it here or there. The kingdom of God is present wherever Jesus is present. It is present in a different manner than they expected. Signs such as the healing of the lepers should show them the presence of the kingdom.

17:22–24. Jesus needed to make sure his disciples understood what he was teaching. He prepared them for the long wait. One day they would want to see the kingdom. They would want the Son of Man, Jesus himself, to return to earth. They would be in such desperate straits they would think their only hope lay in the immediate return of Christ. In such desperate straits, Jesus' word was "wait a little longer."

In such times even the disciples would be tempted to follow false prophets, who would point to different events in history as signs that the kingdom of God was coming to earth. Jesus' warning was simple: ignore them. We will not have to guess where Jesus is when he returns. His return will be as evident as lightning during the night that flashes across the sky, clearly visible to everyone.

17:25. One sign the disciples could count on: Before the kingdom came with the return of the Son of Man, the Son of Man must leave. He would suffer many things and be rejected and betrayed. The disciples must give Jesus up before they could receive him back.

17:26–30. The nearest a person can come to describing the cataclysm the returning Christ will bring is to look all the way back to primeval history when Noah's generation endured the flood (Gen. 6–9). As Noah prepared the ark for the flood, the people continued in their normal daily routine. They ate, drank, and married. One day Noah boarded the ark. The rains came. Everyone except Noah and his family perished without warning.

Similarly, when the Son of Man returns to earth, no one will suspect anything until it is too late. Weddings will be interrupted. Farm routines will give way to God's judgment. The same thing went on in Lot's day. People carried out the normal routines of life. Then one day Lot quietly left the cities, and God rained fire down on Sodom and Gomorrah. The cities vanished from history (Gen. 19).

17:31–32. That will be no normal day, Jesus told them. Do not think you can see the disaster coming and go back to retrieve something before it strikes. Whether you are on the flat roof of your house enjoying the afternoon sun or out in the field working, the coming will be so quick that you will not have an opportunity to go back for something you forgot. Possessions mean nothing in the face of the kingdom. Only faith in Jesus determines your fate. Remember how Lot's wife looked back at the destruction of Sodom. She suddenly became a block of salt. Without faith in Jesus when he comes, you will be destroyed.

17:33. Let's get to the bottom of all this, Jesus continued. You cannot protect yourself in those days. If you try to save yourself from the coming judgment at that time, you will be destroyed like the people of Sodom. When the time comes, you must be willing to give up, to surrender your life, to die.

17:34–36. Past biblical examples show that in times of God's great saving action, many people are left behind, and a few are saved. So when Jesus returns, some will be left on earth and others will be taken by Jesus. Verse 36 is not found in the best Greek manuscripts and is not translated in most modern translations. It simply picks up the agricultural metaphors of the context and makes sure men as well as women are included.

17:37. The disciples had as much trouble learning about the return of Jesus as the Pharisees did. The Pharisees wanted to know when this would happen. It is already here, and you do not see it, Jesus told them. The disciples wanted to know where this would happen. You do not go

out searching here or there for a place, Jesus replied, for it will be everywhere like lightning across the night sky.

The section concludes with a proverbial saying based on Job 39:26–30. It was especially appropriate, since the bird Jesus mentioned seems to be the same as the eagle that appeared on the military banners of the Roman legions. You do not have to know where, just as you do not have to know when, Jesus told them. It will be in plain sight and will be as natural and inevitable as eagles sensing the presence of a dead animal and gathering overhead to eat. Just as you see the eagles from afar and know what they are up to, so you will see the coming of the Son of Man and know what is happening. It is going to happen.

Are you ready? Do you have faith in Jesus, even the faith of the smallest seed imaginable?

The Holy Bible: New International Version. (1984). (Lk 17:20-37). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

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