



## Why, Church? Why Do We Not Listen?

Luke 16:19-31

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Why? Whyyyy?

That is the question we are asking of ourselves in this season of Lent. Why, Church? Why are we so self-obsessed, so focused on power and institution, so complicit with toxic nationalism, and why have we become exclusive like a country club?

The season of Lent invites us to consider our worst, to repent of our brokenness, and to acknowledge our need for a Savior to come and make us whole - to offer us redemption and new life so that we may be the witness of God's love in the world we were created to be at the gifting of the Holy Spirit.

With just a few weeks left, we have just a few more questions to ask. Perhaps this week's question is indicative of the issues we've look at previously, as this morning we ask, "Why, Church, do we not listen?"

In a conversation I was having this past week, I was discussing with some colleagues the challenges we face as a nation and as a Church today. We all agreed that, in our world today, it seems like every topic and item of conversation becomes a heated debate. I've heard some people blame the pandemic for our lost capacity to socially engage with one another. Perhaps we're just out of practice. ... But I've heard others suggest there is something deeper that makes conversation so challenging. There's an interior brokenness that prevents us from having honest, healthy, and life-giving conversations with others, especially around topics on which we might disagree.

I think the root of these problems regarding communication lie in our inability to really *listen*. It seems there are varying reasons to listen, and very few of us actually operate from a healthy place of listening.

In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey offers one corrupt form of listening, saying, "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply." One of our problems – both in our society at large and in the Church – is that we only listen to what another person believes or has to say so that we know how to respond in our attempt to convince them they are wrong. This perhaps picks up on our first "Why" question around self-obsession, but, especially in the Church, we are so convinced we are right that we have lost the ability to accept we might have something to learn from someone else.

This is, in and of itself, problematic for the Church. When the Church only offers to hear what others might have to say so that it can respond in disagreement, well, holy conversation is hardly possible.

But, if I may adapt Covey's statement just a bit, in the framework of the Church, I think a more foundational problem isn't that we are eager to respond, it's that, in listening to the Biblical Word – to

Jesus and his teachings – to the historical framework of the Church – we are eager for affirmation. One might say, “Most people in the Church do not listen with the intent to grow in faithfulness; we listen with the intent to be affirmed.”

Like reading from 1 Corinthians 13 at a wedding simply because the text talks about love, we often skip the greater framework of the scriptural context in hopes of finding that one passage to convince ourselves that the scripture affirms our personal belief or way of living. (To be fair, 1 Corinthians 13 can be a great wedding text, but it isn’t talking about the love of two individuals covenanting together in marriage. As chapter 12 ends, the text makes clear, the love described in chapter 13 is that of a greater way than we as the body of Christ know how to show one another. It is God’s way of loving us. Even as an aspirational text, it is speaking to all of us in the body of Christ, not about the love of husband and wife. And let’s be clear, at the time Paul was writing this letter to the church in Corinth, marriage was not about love, it was about family power and social connections. But I digress.)

We have a tendency, even as knowledgeable disciples, to pervert the text in ways so as to affirm our way of living, even if our way of living is antithetical to the Biblical witness.

As we look at our scripture for this morning, *this* is Jesus’ concern: we don’t listen to the text as it makes the will of God known.

As we have seen the past couple of weeks, Jesus is making his way ever closer to Jerusalem. On his way to the Holy City, he finds himself time and again in confrontation with the Pharisees – the *legal* leaders of the Jewish community. Though our text in verse 19 this morning picks up with Jesus telling something of a parable, the verses preceding this story set the stage and offer us some helpful context for understanding the intent of Jesus’ teaching.

In verses 1-13, Jesus tells a parable that chastises a man of great wealth who was dishonest. He uses the parable to criticize those with great wealth, concluding in verse 13 by saying, “You cannot serve God and wealth.” Verse 14 then picks up with the reaction of the Pharisees, who had been listening to Jesus’ teaching. “The Pharisees,” the text reads, “who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed [Jesus].” The Pharisees weren’t pleased that Jesus was publicly teaching against those who love wealth, and Luke, without skipping a beat, ensures that the readers know just how much the Pharisees loved their wealth.

Jesus has long moved past caring what the Pharisees think of him, and so he says back to them, “You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts, for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.” Jesus continues, “The law and the prophets were in effect until John came; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is proclaimed, and everyone tries to enter it by force. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.”

Jesus’ teaching here is a bit cryptic, but he seems to be indicating that John the Baptist, the final prophet who proclaimed the Messiah was coming, was a kind of “transitional figure between the authority of the Hebrew scriptures and a new authoritative presence, [namely] Jesus himself as the embodied and eternal Torah of God.”<sup>1</sup> Yet, even in the incarnational presence of God in the person of Jesus Christ, the historical law is not written over. Quite contrarily, Jesus is the lived embodiment of

the law, not its replacement. It is Jesus who is now the authority on the will and law of God, not the Pharisees.

To solidify his point, to help the Pharisees see the error of their ways, Jesus then tells this story, which begins in verse 19. The story is *something* of a parable, but it stands apart from the other parables Jesus tells. First off, it doesn't begin with the often used intro, "The kingdom of heaven is like ...", nor does Luke make explicit that Jesus is telling a parable; Jesus just begins to speak. And, unlike *every other parable* Jesus tells, in this story, one of the characters has a name. He's not a prodigal, a farmer, a Samaritan, or a bridegroom, the poor man in this story is Lazarus.

That the poor man has a name is already indicative of this story being in Luke's gospel; throughout Luke's gospel, the apostle's focus is on Jesus ushering in the grand reversal of God's divine plan. It's not enough for the poor to be raised up and the wealthy to be humbled; here, the wealthy man isn't even worthy of a name, but the poor man is Lazarus.

The story doesn't need much retelling. There is a man of great wealth; in fact, so wealthy that he was dressed in purple linen. Scholar Justo González offers, "Roman law codified who had the right to wear purple, at that time a very expensive dye."<sup>ii</sup> That he was *able* to wear purple indicates just how much status this wealthy man had. Yet the other man, Lazarus, was so poor that the street dogs came and licked his sores. The two couldn't have been any further apart in terms of societal worth.

As Jesus tells the story, the two men die. Upon death, Lazarus is carried off by the angels to be with Abraham, an indication that he is in a favorable place. The rich man, having been buried, found himself in Hades being tormented – not quite the same favorable situation.

Keep in mind, Jesus is setting up the story to address the present situation at hand. Jesus never wastes a story; there is a specific lesson he has in mind when offering any teaching of this kind. Given the context of the story, we can see, as outside observers, that Jesus is critiquing the love of wealth that Luke has made abundantly clear is present in the lives of the Pharisees.

Imagine if you will, that you are one of the Pharisees listening to this story. I know, none of us want to see ourselves in the role of the Pharisees, especially as we can see that Jesus is repulsed by their love of wealth. Yet, here we are, by no means an "unwealthy" crowd of faithful disciples. Jesus' story is likely already making us feel a bit uncomfortable, and he hasn't even gotten to the punch line yet.

The wealthy man, from his unfavorable seat in the eternal fiery abyss, looks up to see Lazarus standing beside Abraham. He's got just enough audacity left within him to treat Lazarus as the grunt he knew him to be in life. "Father Abraham," he cries out, "send Lazarus to offer a drip of water to cool my tongue." "Even after such a reversal of fortunes, the rich man considers himself more important than Lazarus."<sup>iii</sup>

Abraham of course refuses. So too does Abraham refuse the wealthy man's follow up request, to send Lazarus to warn the wealthy man's family of the detriment that has befallen him, in hopes it does not become their fate as well.

And then Jesus drops the proverbial mic as he concludes his story:

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ... If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” ... How long before Easter?

For anyone who has ever accused Jesus of not speaking bluntly enough or being afraid to step on the toes of the wealthy and elite within the church, we should ask our question again, “Why, Church, are we not listening?” Jesus here is not mincing words. If one chooses not to hear what he has to say, it is only because they are listening with a hope for self-affirmation, not of actual faithful curiosity.

As Justo González offers, “There is no miracle capable of leading to faith and obedience when one has vested interests and values that one places above obedience to God, such as “the love of money” of the Pharisees whom Jesus is addressing.”<sup>iv</sup>

Jesus is openly critiquing the Pharisees’ ability to listen to the Biblical invitation to faithfulness, citing that any personal motivation that supersedes Biblical faithfulness will hinder their ability to hear God’s will as laid in the Scriptural text. These are the Pharisees he’s critiquing – the legal scholars of the Jewish community.

In other words, it doesn’t matter how well read you are in the Biblical text. If we want to have great wealth, we can read the Biblical text to defend the prosperity gospel that the Pharisees believed in themselves. If we want to have a faith community that excludes foreigners, we can read the Biblical text as limiting the faith community to those who are from Judea; the early church did, until Peter convinced them otherwise. If we want to maintain the power of the church in the hands of men, we can claim that the Biblical text limits church leadership to men, as many churches still do today. If we want to defend slavery using Biblical verses, we could, because as we know, the founders of this church did.

Jesus isn’t hiding that you can *try* to defend your unfaithfulness using scripture. It’s not hard to pick and choose which verses you want to use to justify your personal preference for un-faithful living. But, as *this* Scriptural witness makes clear, no justification will work before Abraham when perverting God’s will for how the people of God are instructed to live. We not only have Moses and the prophets, which the Pharisees had, we also have Jesus whose life is a witness to the way we are to understand the law and the prophets for faithful living.

And so, again, we can ask, “Why, Church, do we not listen?” The witness of the Biblical text, when read in its entirety, and when seen as in-fleshed in the person of Jesus Christ, makes clear, that we are either living for the purpose of God for communal shalom, which lifts up the well-being of humanity on the whole, or we are living for our *own* well-being. We can’t sit back and say, “if only God would give us a sign – like Lazarus resurrected,” for God has. God came, incarnate, in the person of Jesus Christ, both in life, in death, and in life after death, to show us, to teach us, to love us, and to redeem us that we might know God’s will and God’s way. Might we have ears to listen and hearts to receive, that we might share in the glorious work of God in the world. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey. *Luke: Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Justo Gonzalez. *Luke: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>iv</sup> Ibid.