

Assumptions

Luke 10:13-20 | September 21, 2019 | Bryce Beale

It is easier to be wrong than to be right.

For any question, there is one right answer; and for any question, there are almost an unlimited number of wrong answers. So if I ask you the color of this pulpit, the right answer, white, is one answer only; but consider how many wrong replies someone might make. Blue? Wrong. Green? Wrong. Yellow? Wrong. Purple? Wrong. We could go on almost forever.

In the present case we have, thankfully, the gift of sight, and so we can confirm the one right answer easily. We look, we see the thing to be white, we have our answer and can refute the thousand false answers by this piece of evidence.

But imagine if this pulpit were to disappear. Let us say someone steals it—a bold act, and I’m not sure what motivation would stand behind it—but let us say the theft occurs. And let us further say no photograph survives to prove it white.

At first we would have no trouble agreeing on the color of the thing—we just saw it, we remember vividly. But let a decade pass, and then another. Our memories may begin to fail us on this point—I may say, “I think that pulpit was a cream color, I cannot exactly recall.” Another may remember it as gray. The one right answer begins to sink beneath the million wrong ones.

And just when we might despair of uncovering that right answer again, the pulpit is recovered, found under the dust of an old warehouse where it was stored away. The police have confiscated the pulpit and have it in their keeping—and so we would ask, “What color is the pulpit? We have had a hard time remembering.” And the answer that they give of “white” would, by way of eye-witness testimony, restore to us the correct opinion we had begun to lose among the many false opinions.

This scenario is somewhat parallel to the ministry of Jesus while he lived on our earth in his body. In his own words before Pilate, “For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth.” That is, he carried with him the one right answer to our most fundamental human questions—who are we? what were we made for? why are we

here? who is God? what does he want from us?—and Jesus, descended from heaven, brought these singular answers to us. Many of them had already been heard in the annals of Jewish history, in the oracles of God through Moses and the prophets, in the testimony of the sky and trees and ocean, and in the whispers of conscience. Thus Jesus could expect of his listeners that they would already know many of the truths he set before them, starting so many statements with, “Have you never read?”

But we are prone to forget, to pervert, to wander into any one of the million false answers to our most important questions. So Jesus, Light of the World, pierced the darkness of our confusion by his presence. And this morning he does precisely the same thing. He knows the color of the pulpit—he knows the truth that we so easily forget or neglect or reject. He tears down with a word the strongholds of our own mirages, the worldviews and notions which have come out of our own imaginations to replace what actually is.

And this morning Jesus will perform this prophetic function before you. Preserved here in this book are his words. They are truth. And as he corrects the assumptions of his listeners two thousand years ago, so he corrects our mistaken assumptions today. Let us see how he does so.

LUKE 10:13-20

There are contained in these few verses three subjects, which are all connected. First there are the woes on Galilean cities, in verses 13 to 15. Then there is a statement about receiving the disciples in verse 16. And finally, those disciples—the seventy-two whom we saw commissioned as messengers last week—return joyfully to Jesus, and he adjusts their perspective.

What I wish to show this morning is how, in each of these three sections, Jesus thrusts his one truth into the midst of our many false opinions. This ties each section together. May God guide us to see not only the truth that Jesus then presented, but how that truth may dispel our own errors this very day.

Future judgment

Look again at the first subject addressed, which is a subject of judgment in verses 13-15. Continuing his commission to the seventy-two, Jesus says:

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades.

The first truth that Jesus interjects into our errors concerns future judgment.

Jesus has already started speaking of cities in the verse before, verse 12: “I tell you, it will be more bearable on that day for Sodom than for that town”—that is, the town which rejects his message through his seventy-two messengers being sent in the passage. Sodom was the archetype of evil and of divine judgment, yet Jesus stated boldly that any city which rejected him in his day would face worse judgment than the Sodomites.

And now Jesus expands upon that statement by pointing out particular cities which had rejected him, though he had labored in them.

“Woe to you, Chorazin!” he cries. We know nothing of this town except that it was almost certainly in Galilee, and that great deeds of Christ or his disciples were performed in it. “Woe to you, Bethsaida!” Here is the very city which produced at least three of the apostles; Philip, Andrew, and Peter himself claimed Bethsaida as their hometown. Near there the Savior fed five thousand men with five loaves and two fish, as we saw last chapter.

Both of these Galilean cities were nearby the third that is mentioned in verse 15: “Capernaum.” Very often in the gospels Jesus is found in this locale, healing and working the miraculous. Capernaum was Jesus’ base of operations in the north.

Here then are three towns in ancient Palestine that had the privilege of housing so many of Jesus’ words and miracles. To these towns his disciples also no doubt went and worked wonders. Continents in that day slept in silence, untouched by the miraculous hand of God; and yet this one small area was bustling with supernatural activity.

We may suppose the Chorazinians and Bethsaidans, along with the Capernaumites, considered themselves the special objects of

God's favor. Here are three cities, not only set within Israel, the nation chosen by Yahweh to be his own, but now visited directly by the hand of that God. Perhaps this is why Jesus asks Capernaum this question in verse 15: "And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven?" That may well have been the attitude in these towns. If they rejected Jesus' messengers, well, they are still Israelites to whom belong the covenants and the oracles of God; if they received them with apathy, they may have felt smugly secure. The miracles of this Messiah were transpiring here, after all, and not across the sea in Rome, or south along the ancient Nile.

These three cities had probably an idea of future judgment, and that idea was that if any place were promised paradise, it was these cities. If any cities would be exalted to heaven and its citizens spared the wrath of God on the day of his visitation, it would be these cities. That is their assumption.

But Jesus shatters their false notions with one word: "Woe!" He cries, like the Hebrew prophets with their Hebrew interjection of horror and despair, "Woe!" Already he has compared his rejecters to Sodom; now he takes these three Galilean habitations of privilege and puts them on one side of the scales of judgment. And, on the other side, he puts two cities which should prove no contest for them.

Tyre and Sidon were, like Sodom, proverbial for judgment. They were coastal cities of Phoenicia which grew rich through trade, then proud, and then which fell before the army of Alexander the Great. The boasts of Tyre's king, in fact, form the basis of much of what we know of Satan and his fall from heaven. So Satanic were the boasts of that king that they, on the tongue of the prophet, prove echoes of what Satan had thought so long before. "Your heart is proud," Ezekiel says in chapter 28 to the king of Tyre, "and you have said, 'I am a god.'"¹

So Jesus sets these two reprobate cities on the scales of judgment across from Chorazin, Bethsaida, and Capernaum, the scales sink on the side of these three Galilean towns. Their guilt is greater, their judgment will be worse!

Jesus explains:

¹ V. 2 (ESV).

For if the mighty works done in you had been done in Tyre and Sidon, they would have repented long ago, sitting in sackcloth and ashes. But it will be more bearable in the judgment for Tyre and Sidon than for you. And you, Capernaum, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades [that is, to the realm of torment for unrepentant sinners, pictured as underneath the ground].

These villages thought themselves secure; they thought wrong. There was no visible mark of doom upon them, so they could imagine wrongly without knowing it. They could base their lives upon a lie about future judgment—namely, that they of all people would not be subject to it—and yet they could be wrong. One word burst apart their façade: “Woe!”

It is a word that has at some point pierced the façade of every believer. The devil is not only a liar, but also the father of lies, and when we were held in his sway we saw the world only through his lies. We thought that if any could escape judgment after death, it would be ourselves for this reason or for that. We may even have eliminated God in our own minds, or pretended him too distant ever to know, in order to excuse ourselves from judgment.

But then that word boomed from above: “Woe to you!” We assumed our innocence until proven guilty; but in that moment we discovered that all around us was the proof. We were guilty and not good; narcissistic and not innocent. Whatever farce we fabricated to soothe the wound failed in that moment of conviction by the Holy Spirit, and we felt our mortal injuries. The woe struck us, and we felt its faithful blow and cried out for help.

Bless God’s name that he would be so kind as to strike our false security; praise Christ that he should interject into our fake worldview the discomfort of future judgment. And if any here are yet Chorazinians, comfortable within the sound of church bells but cut off from Christ, may this woe touch you this morning. May your comfort be entirely cut off, that you may seek comfort in the only place it may truly be found: the arms of Jesus Christ, crucified to clear the guilt of sinners.

The word of God

There then is the first assumption dispelled by Jesus; now we must move to the second. See verse 16: “The one who hears you

hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me, and the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”

We must not be deceived concerning future judgment; and neither must we fool ourselves when it comes to the word of God through his messengers.

When one of these seventy-two disciples entered a town and urged its inhabitants, “Repent! For the kingdom of God is near,” from a human perspective they were mere people uttering mere words. Likewise, when you open your Bible, from our vantage point on earth we are reading mere words from mere human authors.

In our Bibles we find a compilation of ancient documents. And there are scholars who study these documents no differently than they might study other ancient documents—they see in them only records of a complicated history.

And yet, we know them to be more. Our New Testaments are the teachings of Christ’s disciples concerning Christ—and see what Christ asserts of such teaching: “The one who hears you hears me,” positively, and negatively, “the one who rejects you rejects me.”

If a messenger is faithful to his message, then he becomes invisible.

We saw this when we were in Capernaum in chapter 7—Luke as a careful recorder of history states that a centurion with a sick servant sent some Jewish elders to Jesus with a message: “When the centurion heard about Jesus,” we read, “he sent to him elders of the Jews, asking him to come and heal his servant.”² Yet the parallel account in Matthew 8 asserts that “when [Jesus] had entered Capernaum, a centurion came forward to him, appealing to him.”³

Which is it? Did the messengers speak to Jesus, or did the centurion? And the answer is, “Yes.” For if the messengers convey the message exactly, then it is as if the one who sent them is speaking.

² V. 3.

³ V. 5.

If the seventy-two spoke the message Jesus entrusted to them, then it was as if Jesus himself spoke. Those who heard the seventy-two, heard Jesus; those who accepted them accepted him; and those who turned them away, shut Jesus out of their homes and towns.

And if this book contains in truth the message of Jesus Christ, then we who receive it have received the Savior himself. It becomes invisible, and I, if I preach it rightly, become invisible, and now the Savior stands before you to proclaim his words.

This is what compels us to gather here each Sunday. Though Jesus is enthroned in heaven, his physical body kept there until his return; and though he dwells in all places spiritually; yet when his word is proclaimed in truth, he is here. He speaks. This again is why we stick so closely to this text when preaching from this pulpit. We try to touch on nearly every word, and simply to explain what the authors intended when they wrote. And if we do so, we disappear, and Jesus stands before you and speaks.

So again, if you come and hear and reject what is spoken, so long as what is spoken is accurate, then you reject both Christ and, as he says at the end of verse 16, “the one who rejects me rejects him who sent me.”

Jesus himself was sent as a messenger of his Father. And so, as he asserts in John 5:23, “Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.” And in a later letter the Apostle John confirms the same: “No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also.”⁴

Here then is the logic which confronts you this morning: I speak as a messenger of Scripture, so if I speak correctly, it is not I but Scripture that speaks; and Scripture is the messenger of the apostles, so it is not Scripture but the apostles who speak to you; and the apostles were messengers of Christ, so it is not them but Christ who speaks; and Christ was sent as a messenger from God, the Creator of heaven and earth, the lone Sovereign of all, and so it is not only Christ but God the Father who speaks to you right now.

We need no vision, no dream. We stand under no necessity to hear God’s voice boom from heaven—we have Moses. We have

⁴ 1 John 2:23.

the prophets and the apostles. We have the word of God preserved for us here in Scripture, the messenger of God.

What appears to be, at first glance, only an ancient compilation, is truly the word of God.

Religious experience

Here then is a second assumption set aside by Christ. Which leads us now to the third and final assumption which he dismisses.

In this case Jesus does not direct his correction to the perishing world, but to his own seventy-two disciples who return to him after their mission. Look again at verse 17 and following:

The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, "Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!" And he said to them, "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven. Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you. Nevertheless, do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."

The Savior does not outright reject the joy of the disciples. He in one sense confirms it. Yet, their joy did not go far enough.

The seventy-two were delighted really with the religious experiences they had just had. For whatever span of time they travelled, they were eyewitnesses of God's power manifest through them. Jesus had given them authority over the devils we assume, since he had done this for the Twelve on their earlier mission, and so these seventy-two, bearing the authority of Jesus' name and person, trampled on the enemy. No doubt the reality of God working through them startled their souls and delighted them. What power!

Jesus explains that the power entrusted to them is part of something greater God is doing: "I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven"—probably he means that in their ministry he saw, as a sort of word picture, the devil fall suddenly from his position of glum confidence and power on earth. Still the devil is the prince of the power of the air, still he is at work in the sons of disobedience, but now Jesus has come and bound the strong man to plunder his goods. He has stripped from him all who believe, and he has snatched away his greatest weapon: a fear of death.

The kingdom of God is breaking in upon the domain of darkness, as still it is doing this day. But here, in a special way through the powerful deeds of the seventy-two, it was breaking upon the earth.

So Jesus reaffirms the power that these disciples delighted in: “Behold, I have given you authority to tread on serpents and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy, and nothing shall hurt you.” Again, a word picture is at play: snakes and scorpions are our natural enemies, who kill and destroy. Yet these seventy-two in casting out the devils were trampling upon their dangerous foes. And Jesus was preserving them from the devil’s power.

Yet there is a danger in all of this. The danger is that they might so much delight in these manifestations of power and in these religious experiences that they forget why the experiences were given in the first place. Religious experience may be real—it was in their case—but it is not ultimate. Some people spend much of their time pursuing a tangible experience of God, miracles, visions, mighty works, and if they find these then they are full of joy. But if God withholds these, their joy fails.

Sometimes we may base our joy on our religious experience in our quiet times before the Lord. If we “feel” God in our Bible reading and prayer—which is *good* when it occurs—then we like the seventy-two return from our quiet time with joy. But if that time feels bland, we may lose heart. That is the danger. If we share the gospel and it goes well, our face is lifted up; if we stumble along our words and are rejected, then we are cast down. Our joy becomes unstable because it depends upon our experiences, which will always vary.

If we assume our joy depends on our religious experiences, then we have here a word from Jesus to destroy our assumption. Good as these experiences may be, “nevertheless,” verse 20, “do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Do not set your joy in the uncertain hands of experience. Do not rejoice only in the fact that God’s power seems to be at work in you. Otherwise, what will you do when God hides himself for your good? When James, early in the book of Acts, is beheaded? Or when Peter in Galatians compromises the gospel?

No, here is a better basis for your joy, says Jesus: “your names are written in heaven.”

The Old and New Testaments provide this picture for us of books in heaven, including a book of life, in which is written the names of those who believe.

Moses cries out on behalf of Israel in Exodus 32:32: if you will not forgive their sins, “please blot me out of your book that you have written.” Yet we know that Moses did not really mean it; he was exasperated and desperate, so he spoke strongly. Yet the beauty of being written in a *book* of life is that one who is written in that tome cannot be erased or forgotten. So speaks the Lord in Revelation 3:5: “The one who conquers will be clothed thus in white garments, and I will never blot his name out of the book of life.”

Believer, your name is written in that book, the Lamb’s book of life. You did not write it there, nor did you even earn your place on the page. Revelation 13:8 says that our names were “written before the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain.”

Whatever your experiences at present—whatever discouragements you may face, whatever successes or failures, whether you feel yourself a strong Christian or a weak one, your faith powerful or feeble—yet your joy can be full. The Savior wipes away your assumption that it cannot, and he stands before you to say, “Rejoice that your name is written in heaven.”

A thousand false notions may compete to obscure this fact, and to erase your joy. Yet Jesus speaks the single truth in this matter: “your name is written in heaven.” Do you believe? “Your name is written in heaven.”

And so when God creates a new heaven and a new earth, when all the ills have passed away and all the injustices have been undone, when faith is no longer necessary and our tasks are complete, then Revelation 21:27 will be fulfilled: the only ones who will enter paradise are “those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life.”

No matter what your doubts or hesitations, that is the singular truth.