

April 3, 2022

THE KINDNESS AND SEVERITY OF OUR MIGHTY GOD

Luke 1:39-56

(3 of 13 in a series through Luke 1-7)

The other day I was browsing some social media site (not that I'm recommending that), and someone had posted an interesting question that went like this: If you could say one word to yourself twenty years ago, what would that word be? Of course, my mind was contemplating what would be the most effective thing to say with simply one word, and I was struggling to settle on something. And then as I scrolled down to see what others has said, the first response someone wrote was "Amazon." And I thought, well done.

What they were suggesting, of course, is that if you'd bought Amazon stock twenty years ago, you could be doing quite well today. I actually went to figure out how much the stock price increased over twenty years, but I'm not crafty enough to figure that out. But I can tell you that over the last five years, you could have increased your investment four-fold. So, yes, if you were going to share one word with yourself from twenty years ago, "Amazon" could be quite effective.

But exercises like asking what you'd say to yourself twenty years ago if you could are captivating because we all like to think if we only knew what the future held, we'd make better decisions. If we all knew prices would increase so much this last year plus, we may have bought a few more things before trying to buy them now—like gallons and gallons of gasoline, for example! But have you ever thought about how the Bible does that very thing for us. It tells us what's coming. More than that, it tells us how what we do now will affect the future—either negatively or positively. For example, Jesus tells us to use our financial resources to pour into the work of Christ and we'll actually have treasure in eternity that will last forever. He tell us that if we perseveres in repentance and faith in this life—despite all that we might face in persecution—we'll find eternal life in the end. And we could note more.

So, the questions we should be asking ourselves are, "Do I allow these biblical insights to affect how I live? Do I allow the rewards the Lord promises affect what I do today? Do I allow his warnings to keep from doing certain things? Do I allow what the Bible says about who God is and how he relates to his children affect what I do?" If not, isn't it worth asking, "Why not?" Maybe it's because we're ignorant of what the Bible says. Maybe your heart hasn't been captured by a vision of generous giving because you're ignorant of Jesus telling us that we can store up treasure in heaven, for example. Or could it be that we don't really believe what the Bible says? After all, James tells us that the way we show we have genuine faith is by our works. So, if we're not acting on what the Bible says, then maybe we don't believe.

Whatever our struggle, I want to hold up a text for us this morning that can serve both to ground us in the our faith in what says and remind us of how he works so that it might affect how we choose to live now. And I want to show these things to us from Luke 1:39-56, the text that picks up after the angel Gabriel has just made two announcements about two miraculous births. He's

told Zechariah that he and his elderly and barren wife Elizabeth were going to have a baby named John. And he's told Mary, the virgin betrothed to Joseph, that she was about to conceive by the power of the Holy Spirit and bear a son named Jesus, who is the promised Savior. And our text today picks up right after Mary receives that news and the news that her relative Elizabeth is expecting as well. And the first thing our text shows us is that God's Word is true.

God's Word is true

Luke opens this section of his gospel writing, "In those days Mary arose and went with haste into the hill country, to a town in Judah, and she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth" (vv. 39-40). So it seems, since Luke notes she went "with haste" that as soon as Gabriel left Mary—after giving the news that she would bear a child by the power of the Holy Spirit just as her relative Elizabeth was also amazingly pregnant—she immediately took off to see Elizabeth. There isn't even mention of her discussing with Joseph or anyone else the message she'd just received. She just dashes off on what would have been an 80-100 mile trip to Elizabeth's house.¹

My assumption is that she is eager to see Elizabeth because she wants to rejoice with her over the news that the angel has just told her, but whatever her expectation, she gets more encouragement than she could have imagined. First, as Mary comes into the house greeting Elizabeth from afar, the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps. This alone would have been encouraging for Elizabeth to relay to Mary, and I imagine that if Elizabeth had told her that detail and stopped there, Mary probably would have told her the news of her angelic visit and together they would have said, "It seems that God is doing something amazing." But the Lord doesn't leave them simply to reason together about the likelihood of what God was doing. Rather, the Spirit fills Elizabeth, and she begins to prophesy, saying to Mary, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the sound of your greeting came to my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (vv. 42-45).

If Mary came, thinking she'd simply see Elizabeth and swap stories, she's gotten much more than that. The Spirit has given her gracious confirmation that everything the angel told her is true. Through Elizabeth's prophecy, she is given further confirmation that she's pregnant, that the baby in her womb is the Lord, and even John—while still in the womb—was bearing witness from the womb about the Christ. In other words, she's told that everything the Lord said is true. Or, as we've noted, God's Word is true.

Well, this leads Mary to break forth in singing a song of praise to the Lord, which we will look at in more detail shortly. But for now I want to note how her song ends. In verses 54-55 she says, "He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to

¹ This is the distance noted by Darrell Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 134.

Abraham and to his offspring forever.” Mary ends her song saying that God has acted because he promised he would do so. He’s done the very thing he said he would do. Or, we might say that she ends her song affirming once more that God’s Word is true.

And this isn’t some exception in that what Gabriel told Elizabeth and Mary is turning out to be true and what God promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is turning out to be true. This is the absolute rule. God’s Word is true. It’s always true. It’s always trustworthy and reliable. This is one reason why we spend a lot of time each time we gather reading and preaching God’s Word. How foolish is it to declare that the words of Scripture are the very words of our God and then fail to emphasize them as we gather?

So that’s where our text begins. Mary’s visit with Elizabeth is a setting in which everything the Lord promised is being confirmed. God’s Word is true. And so if we’re struggling to live a certain way in light of what the Bible says because we doubt the truthfulness or trustworthiness of God’s Word, here is a reminder: God’s Word is true, always. You can trust what it says. What then does it say that should affect how we live? Let me note now what this text tells us about how God works. One of these ways God works is that he shows grace to the humble and lowly.

God shows grace to the humble and lowly

We see the humble and lowly state in both Elizabeth and Mary in our text. First, when Mary arrives and Elizabeth is filled with the Spirit and begins prophesying, note that she is overwhelmed that she’s been shown such grace. She says to Mary, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed if the fruit of your womb! And *why is this granted to me* that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (vv. 42-43). There’s nothing in Elizabeth that thinks she’s deserving of any of these blessings that are being shown to her. She’s overwhelmed that the Lord is showing her grace. She’s humble.

And also we see this with Mary. As she launches into her song of praise, she says, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for *he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed*” (vv. 46-48). She is overwhelmed precisely because she sees herself as lowly, undeserving, and the object of overwhelming grace and blessing. She can’t believe that from now on every generation of believers will recognize her as being an object of the Lord’s deep blessing in allowing her to bear the Christ.

So, first, we see both women responding in such a way as to communicate clearly that they know they’re not deserving of any of these blessings but are objects of God’s rich grace. These humble and lowly ladies are being shown great grace. But it doesn’t stop there. As Mary continues her song of praise, she notes that God shows grace to all who are humble, needy, and devoted to him. She continues in verse 50, “And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.” Then again in verses 52-53 she says, “He has . . . exalted those of humble estate. He has filled the hungry with good things.”

Do you see what Mary is doing? Yes, she's been shown exceptional grace in that she's bearing the Messiah. But what she's declaring is that she's no exception. She says that this is just how God works. He exalts the one who is of humble estate, the one who is hungry, and the one who fears God. In other words, those who take a posture of recognizing God as God and bow the knee to him, knowing he is our judge and Lord and we are his servants are shown mercy. Those who are lowly and poor in spirit, knowing that we don't bring anything to the table, aren't deserving of his good gifts, and have done nothing to deserve his favor, he exalts. To those who know we have need and crave what he alone can provide, God fills them with good things. Mary is saying that as the Lord has acted toward her, so he acts toward all those who humble themselves before God, know they need him, and desire what only he can give.

But before we think through how we should live in light of this, let's look at the other end of the spectrum here. We not only see that God exalts the humble and lowly. We also see that God opposes the proud and mighty.

God opposes the proud and lofty

Mary not only declares that God exalts the humble but also that he opposes and brings down the proud and lofty. She says in verses 51-52, "He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones." Then, in verse 53 she notes sings, "The rich he has sent away empty." God opposes those who are proud and lofty. Those who exalt themselves and think they have no need of God will be opposed by him and made to come face-to-face with the fact that they are nothing—though they think they're something.

But, we might say, "Hold on a second. Why is Mary singing a song like this after hearing she's conceived a baby in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit?" I mean, did any of you married couples pick up that positive pregnancy test and think, "The most obvious thing for me to do in light of this good news is to sing a song about God casting down those who are proud in their hearts"? Of course not.

And yet, you probably noticed that Mary's song of praise sounds a lot like Hannah's song that we heard read earlier in the service. And Hannah says all kinds of similar things. After hearing she is pregnant with Samuel, Hannah says, "My mouth derides my enemies . . . talk no more so very proudly. . . . The bows of the mighty are broken. . . . The wicked shall be cut off in darkness. . . . The adversaries of the LORD shall be broken to pieces; against them he will thunder in heaven" (1 Samuel 2:1-10). Again, that's not how we expect a woman to talk who was desperate to have a baby and then finds out she's pregnant. We expect something like the doxology, not, "My mouth derides my enemies." And, as I've mentioned, Mary actually sounds a lot the same. So, what's going on? Is this the Bible's way of warning us that women's hormones get all out of sorts with pregnancy? Of course not. But what then?

Well, I think Hannah's song of praise gives us a hint. She says, "My mouth derides my enemies, *because* I rejoice in your salvation" (1 Sam 2:1). She sees the judgment of the proud, lofty, and

enemies of God *as God's act of salvation*. And this would make more sense to us if we as American Christians hadn't been shown so much grace in our lifetimes. From our vantage point, the idea of our salvation requiring judgment of God's enemies feels out of place. But imagine us living in a world where God's enemies oppose us, oppress us, persecute us, and even try to kill us. If you were huddled in your house, hiding your children, because enemies were seeking out children of believers in order to kill them, then you'd no doubt be praying for the Lord to stop his enemies and save you. Do you see? It not only makes sense to think of salvation involving God judging his enemies, but we can feel why it's necessary, can't we? That's what Hannah and Mary recognize. Salvation involves the judgment of God's enemies, even as we long for the day when Satan and death itself—the final enemy to be judged—will face God's merciless judgment.

Thus, Hannah and Mary are singing a song of praise, celebrating the fact that God is bringing salvation to his people—Hannah sees it in that God is raising up the prophet Samuel in her womb, and in Mary's case it's the promised Messiah himself. And because they're singing about God saving his lowly people, they necessarily sing about him judging his enemies. God brings down those who are proud and lofty.

And it's not just these two women who note this reality in the Bible. A quick survey of Scripture will confirm this reality about how God works. Psalm 138:6 says, "For though the LORD is high, he regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar." Proverbs 29:23: "One's pride will bring him low, but he who is lowly in spirit will obtain honor." Matthew 23:12: "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." James 4:6: "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." And 1 Peter 5:5: "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.'"

And so, for us, the point is plain. There are two paths we can take in this world. We can be those who humble ourselves, bow the knee to the Lord, know we need what only he can provide, and he will lavish grace on us and exalt us. Or, we can be those who are proud and lofty, think we have no need of him, and think we have what we need without him, and we will face his judgment.

But this isn't instructive for us simply in terms of whether or not we profess faith in Christ. This is instructive for us in how we live. First, we must live our lives with an understanding that everything about who we are and what we have is a gift of God's grace. It is not false humility but a right understanding of who we are to acknowledge everything good about us is by the grace of God. We must be a people who respond like Elizabeth and Mary, recognizing that we are simply the objects of God's rich grace when we see good things in our lives. Even as a church, do we recognize that God must oppose us if we are proud? He loves us too much to give us over to that which characterizes his enemies. The community we have, our devotion to the word, or the glory of singing together as a congregation are simply gifts from the Lord. The men whom we get to call my pastors are only good pastors because God has lavished grace on them and through them to you and me. At every point our profession as a church must be, "By the

grace of God we are what we are.” And we must never forget how needy we are for our Lord and his grace to continue. Don’t forget the lessons we learn in Mary’s song of praise.

And let this also instruct us concerning what we value. Let me address our children for a second. There will be a temptation for you to pursue what the world values and tells you is valuable. One thing I’ve often noted in young people is that pursuing what is cool is a path that often leads to hell. It’s quite subtle. But the world values the lofty, those who are sure of themselves, and those who aren’t needy. They will praise you if you fit that profile. But the Lord will oppose you. His grace is toward the humble, the lowly, those who know they are needy for what God can provide, and are more devoted to him than all else. Let that characterize you. It may cost you the world’s praise and even invite their ridicule, but it’ll honor the Lord. And though I’ve addressed that to the young, let us all remember this.

I’m sure it could have been life-changing to some degree if twenty years ago, someone had said, “Amazon,” triggering you to invest some money. But if God’s Word is true—and it is—and if he tells us that if we humble ourselves, live in light of our need of him, and hunger for what only he can give us, and that he will exalt us, then shouldn’t that be life-altering for us? And if he tells us that if we exalt ourselves and seek to be impressive in this world, then we’ll be brought low, then shouldn’t that affect what we do and pursue? Of course it should. So let us follow the path of our Savior who humbled himself to the point of dying on the cross for our sins and then was exalted three days later as he was raised from the dead. Let’s show we believe his Word now and are trusting in him as we come to the table. Amen.