

December 4, 2022

EXPOSING UNBELIEF AND EXAMINING OUR HEARTS

Luke 13:22-14:35

(10 of 11 in a series through Luke 7-15)

My favorite kinds of stories are those where you're following it, enjoying it, trying to figure it out, and then at the end something that you did not anticipate is unveiled. This surprising twist at the end could be that the one you thought was a good character the whole time was actually working for evil, or the person whom you think was far away from the crime was actually the culprit, or any number of such things. But the reason those stories can be so good is that—if done rightly—they actually make you want to instantly go back to the beginning and re-read the book or re-watch the movie in light of the knowledge that was given to you right at the end. Surely even as I say this you can think of books or movies that had that effect on you.

I think the way that Luke frames the section of his gospel we're looking at this morning accomplishes that very thing. As you read the text, you think it's obviously about someone else, those who reject Jesus and thereby reveal great wickedness in their own hearts. And it is. There's no doubt about that. I hope to show that to you as we walk through the text here shortly. However, right at the end Luke includes two verses that suddenly make you stop and realize that before you move on from this section of his gospel, having seen the wickedness of those rejecting Jesus, you need to examine your own heart and see if the realities we've witnessed in the hearts of those rejecting Jesus are becoming true of ours as well. You see, this text is both about exposing the rebellious unbelief of those who reject Jesus, and it's a text that calls us to examine our own hearts lest we find ourselves among them. Let me show you what I mean as we first look through our text at how Jesus exposes the heart of the unbeliever.

Exposing the heart of the unbeliever

One year when my older two boys were little and making noise upstairs on December 26th, I walked upstairs and jokingly said to them, "Boys, I know it's only 364 days till Christmas, but you've got to calm down," and one of them answered, "Wait, how close are we to Christmas?" That should have been the kind of eagerness, expectation, and excitement that gripped the heart of every Israelite coming into the first century as they awaited the coming of Christ. The prophets had made promises. Stories were making their way through the villages of the miraculous pregnancies of Elizabeth and Mary. And now here was Jesus—the long-expected Messiah standing before them—and *they rejected him*. It would be like a four-year-old boy deciding he's got more interesting things to do than to rush toward the tree on Christmas morning. That's where our text begins.

As Jesus was going to through the towns and villages toward Jerusalem, Luke tells us that someone asked him, "Lord, will those who are saved be few?" (13:23). And instead of simply saying, "Yes," Jesus uses this as an opportunity to exhort those hearing him to "strive to enter through the narrow door" before adding, "For many, I tell you, will seek to enter and not be

able” (13:24). Jesus pictures the master of a house shutting a door, people standing on the outside asking to come in, the master answering, “I do not know where you come from,” and those people arguing that he does indeed know them until he is finally forced to say, “Depart from me, all you workers of evil!” (13:25-27). Then, Jesus makes clear that in this picture, he’s the master of the house and those whom he does not know are all the Israelites who should have recognized him as the Messiah but refuse to believe. He tells them, concerning their judgment, “In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out. And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at the table of God” (13:28-29).

The sad reality is that this group was most privileged in that they had the prophets, read the Scriptures, and should have recognized Jesus. But they didn’t. And yet many from all parts of the world who aren’t as privileged will believe and be saved. Thus, Jesus says, some who are last will be first, and some who are first who will be last” (13:30).

And that is what this entire section of Luke’s gospel that we’re looking at this morning is about. Those who should have recognized Jesus didn’t—in large part. And Jesus spends the rest of our text exposing the nature of their unbelieving heart. Every thought or question someone voices, Jesus simply uses it as an opportunity to expose the hearts of those unbelievers around him. He is making clear that the unbelief in those who should’ve been most eager to believe Jesus simply lies with them and in their hearts. So, first, we’ll see in 13:31-35 Jesus shows us that they are hard-hearted.

They are hard-hearted (13:31-35)

Luke tells us at that very hour some Pharisees approached Jesus, telling him that Herod wanted to kill him, and so Jesus should flee. My guess is that this wasn’t motivated by their love for Jesus. I’m sure they hoped to expose Jesus’ cowardice if they could get him to flee or something along those lines. But Jesus’ response was, first, that he was going to finish his course. He was going to go to Jerusalem to die and be raised on the third day, and nothing was going to stop that. He wouldn’t be dying in Herod’s jurisdiction but in Pilate’s—in Jerusalem.

But this focus on Jerusalem leads to a second response from Jesus. He says, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathered her brood under her wings, and *you were not willing!* Behold, your house is forsaken. And I tell you, you will not see me until you say, ‘Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!’” (13:34-35).

Even under the clear providence of God, the Bible makes clear that you and I make significant choices. We’re responsible beings, treated so by God. And when Jesus begins to list why those unbelieving Israelites around him don’t believe, it’s not tricky. They are simply unwilling to come to him. They’re hard hearted. They won’t be able to cast blame on the Lord on the day of

judgment but must acknowledge their own unwillingness to bend the knee. And yet Jesus doesn't stop there. He also shows that they are bent toward irrational rebellion.

They are bent toward irrational rebellion (14:1-6)

In the next scene, a ruler of the Pharisees invites Jesus into his home, but this isn't out of the kindness of his heart. Rather, Luke tells us that "they were watching [Jesus] carefully" (14:1). This may mean that when a man appears before Jesus who has dropsy—a buildup of fluid in the body—that he's been invited intentionally as a plant. But Jesus happily dives into their trap, asking them, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" (14:3). And they remain silent, so Jesus heals the man and sends him away (as the Pharisees remain upset with him).

But Jesus isn't content merely to move on at this moment without exposing that their hearts are bent toward irrational rebellion. He does this by asking if they would have helped their own sons or even rescued an ox from a well on the Sabbath if they could. Now, they don't answer, but the answer is certainly yes. Of course they would. So, why are they mad at Jesus for healing this man on the Sabbath? It's utterly irrational. But that's the very thing Jesus is exposing. They are bent toward irrational rebellion against him. And this explains much that we see in our unbelieving culture today. When you think, "But that's irrational," we must remember that when one refuses to bow the knee to Christ as Lord, the only remaining path is irrational rebellion against him. And, next, Jesus exposes their desire for self-exaltation.

They desire to be exalted (14:7-14)

As Jesus is at this dinner, he looks around and notices that everyone is seeking to sit in the places of honor. Therefore, he tells them that if they're invited to a wedding feast they shouldn't seek the seat of honor. Otherwise, when someone more honorable comes in, they'll be asked to move back to a lesser seat. Whereas if they sit in a lesser seat at the start, they may well be asked to move to a better seat. Then he tells them, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (14:11).

Jesus wasn't simply giving advice about how to choose seats when you're at a wedding. It's a parable (14:7) that is exposing the fact that they are those who seek their own exaltation, and one day, he's noting, they'll be humbled.

Even this dinner itself exposes that about them. After all, it was standard to invite impressive people to your dinner because then they'd be expected to invite you back, and so the whole ordeal was self-serving. Therefore, Jesus tells them that they should instead invite those who cannot repay them but look to the resurrection as their reward. The problem, however, is that their hopes aren't set on the resurrection because they're denying their very means of salvation by denying Jesus. Consequently, all that's left is to pursue their own self-exaltation in this age. And on that note, Jesus finally shows us that they don't treasure eternity.

They don't treasure eternity (14:15-33)

Continuing the scene at the dinner, one of those at the table said to Jesus, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God” (14:15). This is a reference to the wedding feast of the lamb. I made reference to this a couple of weeks ago as Isaiah 25 paints a picture of the Lord making for his people a feast “of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined” where death is gone and all is glorious. Indeed, anyone at that feast is blessed. In this, the man is right. But Jesus uses this as an opportunity to expose that those around him actually don’t desire that eternal blessing as they should.

Jesus points out, they are like those who were invited to a banquet and expressed their interest in coming. Then, however, when everything was ready and they were told to come, they gave every lousy excuse not to come. One said he needed to go check on a field he bought. Another said he needed to go check on his oxen. And still another noted that he needed to spend the day with his new bride. In other words, though they’d claimed they treasured this chance to come to the banquet, when it came right down to it, they really didn’t. And Jesus is picturing these Pharisees in regard to eternity. They talk like it’s glorious, but at the end of the day they simply don’t treasure it and long for it. This world is all they desire.

And so once more Jesus mentions that many will be part of his kingdom that one wouldn’t expect. Just as the poor, crippled, blind, and lame are invited and come to the banquet in the story, so people from all over the world who weren’t looking for or anticipating the Messiah will believe (e.g., you and me). But it won’t be because those around Jesus didn’t have a chance. They simply didn’t want eternity more than they wanted what this world offers, which is why Jesus then mentions in 14:25-33 that his followers need to count the cost up front before they follow him because any one “who does not renounce all that he has cannot be [Jesus’] disciple” (14:33).

We can see, then, in this string of teaching that Luke puts together for us from Jesus’ ministry, that Jesus is exposing the hearts of those who do not believe in him. They’re hard-hearted and unwilling to come to him. They’re bent toward irrational rebellion, even doing things that they know don’t make sense because they have an axe to grind against their creator. They’re pursuing self-exaltation because unless you’re willing to humble yourself before Jesus as your Lord, then you’ll always pursue self-exaltation. And they simply don’t desire eternity like they claim they do. They’d rather hold on to all this world offers and not give it up than to take hold of something infinitely more valuable by acknowledging that Jesus is Lord.

And we could stop there and walk away, seeing that Jesus has once more bested his opponents, exposing their hearts at every turn. We could spend the rest of our afternoon thanking God that you and I are nothing like them and this text has nothing to do with us. We could be tempted to do all that were it not for 14:34-35. This section ends with Jesus saying, “Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

When Jesus says, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear,” that’s always a call for you and me to stop and make sure we’re getting what Jesus has just said because he’s saying, “This is for you.” Nor should we think that Jesus is simply talking about salt. He’s using it as a metaphor for you and me. Salt is something that serves a great purpose. In the ancient world it preserved and flavored foods. But Jesus notes that if salt loses its saltiness—the one element that makes it distinct—then it’s no longer good for anything. Likewise, Jesus is saying that you and I—like salt—are to be distinct in this world. Our distinctiveness, our holiness, serves a function. But if we lose that, becoming just like the unbelieving world around us, then we will be unworthy to bear the name of Christ (just as salt isn’t worth being called salt if it loses its saltiness). And with this statement, like the surprise ending of a story, Jesus is saying to us that we need to go back and pay attention to what he’s just said of the Pharisees. All of this wasn’t simply about Jesus exposing the unbelieving hearts of the Pharisees. Rather, he was exposing their hearts so that we might look at what he exposes and examine our hearts accordingly to make sure these things aren’t true of us as well.

Examining our own hearts

If we start with the place Jesus started, exposing the hard-heartedness of those unwilling to come to him, it’s worth asking whether our hearts are tender toward the Lord. Hard-heartedness is one of the gravest threats we face as believers. Hebrews 3:13 encourages us to exhort each other every day so “that none of [us] may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” And again, that’s a word to professing believers. The more we willingly pursue sin and ignore it, the harder our hearts become. And not only that, but sin grows ever more deceiving. What seemed obviously wrong to you in one moment seems acceptable to you now. That’s the deadly combination of sin’s deceptive and hardening effect. It’s like a spiral that leaves you ultimately unwilling and unable to obey Christ as Lord.

Have you ever looked at someone who is now absolutely unwilling to obey Christ and once professed that he was their Lord and gave evidence of that? How did that happen? It didn’t happen overnight. Rather, it was the decision to pursue and excuse sin that led to the person’s mind being deceived and heart hardened until they’d put themselves in a place where they were unwilling and unable to obey Christ at all. Jesus is calling us to make sure this isn’t us. Make sure to confess and not excuse our sin and make no provision for pursuing sin so that our hearts might remain tender to the Lord.

Jesus also pointed out the irrational rebellion of the Pharisees, so antagonistic toward Jesus that they prized their oxen more than their fellow man. And, brothers and sisters, this must be a warning to us as well. The opposite of God’s truth is irrationality. And so we must make sure that we are constantly exposing ourselves to the truth of Scripture in order that our minds are renewed to what is true and we’re giving our irrational thoughts an opportunity to be rebuked. The word is like the eye doctor saying, “This is how you see the world (all blurry), but this is how you should see the world (much clearer).” So give the word opportunity to have its effect in our lives.

I've mentioned before that Don Carson's first question to a student who comes to him saying, "I'm struggling with believing the Bible is God's word" is, "Who are you sleeping with?" Now, that doesn't mean that everyone who struggles to believe Scripture is fornicating. But Carson is right to acknowledge that the path one often travels is to pursue sin and then want to come up with a way to excuse our sin, even if that means doubting the truthfulness and authority of God's Word that stands over us. So, inevitably those who do not want to turn from sin will ultimately deny the truthfulness and authority of God's word.

But, let's do the opposite. Let's make sure that we're confessing our sins, pursuing righteousness, and constantly taking in Scripture in order to make sure that our minds are being renewed to what is true and right and not conformed to the unbelieving world around us.

Next, it will do us well to examine ourselves in light of Jesus' exposure of the Pharisees' pursuit of self-exaltation. They were pursuing the best seat. They were only doing good to those who could exalt them as well. Is this what we do? Do we find ourselves gravitating only toward those who might elevate our status? Do we find ourselves constantly wishing we were being recognized and praised, maybe even growing bitter in our service of others because we're not getting the praise that is driving that act of service? This can't be who we are.

Perhaps the best thing for us here is to parse out why the unbeliever pursues self-exaltation. And I think it's as simple as this. The unbeliever hasn't entrusted himself to a Heavenly Father doing what is good and right for him. In other words, if you don't trust that the Lord who sees in secret will reward you openly, that the one who sees your humble nature will exalt you before him, then you have to take this into your own hands. You must pursue your own exaltation.

But that's not us. We *do* have a Father who loves us and says that he'll give us in him all that our souls long for. That desire to get the praise of man is a dim picture of the delight we will know in hearing our Father say, "Well done, my good and faithful servant." And so let us remind ourselves of his delight in us and that the goal for which our hearts long is to hear his praises, and let that strengthen you not to pursue self-exaltation.

And, finally, it's helpful to examine our hearts this morning to see if we really do treasure eternity. Are we like the Pharisees who talk about who blessed the man is who eats of the feast in the kingdom of God but meanwhile is content to chase after simply what this world offers and unwilling to bear the cost of walking away from what this world treasures? That's must not be us. Let's make sure that we're willing to give up anything that keeps us from wholeheartedly pursuing eternity. Let's remind ourselves daily that this world, as it is, is simply not all that is. Let's take our cues for living in this world by fixing our eyes on the world to come.

And at the base of all of this is realizing that we have a Lord who has lived, died, and been raised for us so that we might trust and give ourselves in obedience to him. So, let's walk in holiness. Let's be salt that does not lose its saltiness while taking the gospel to those who are still bound in their sin. And let's proclaim our desire for these things now as we come to the table. Amen.