

Committing in the Light of His Coming

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Date: 19 November 2006

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[0 : 00] Well, during the week I had a visit from a class of Year 9 girls from a grammar school not too far from here and their chaplain.

And it was part of their study of different Christian denominations. So I took them around the church, the old church, and sat them in here and explained kind of what the different parts of the church meant and answered their questions, told them what we did during services.

And it was a great opportunity, actually, to share a bit about the uniqueness of Christ and what it meant that he was raised from the dead, amongst other things.

But I have to say, the time when they were most interested, when they were most engaged during our time together, was when one girl asked the question, Do you get paid?

Then they were all ears for my answer. Of course, I explained that traditionally Anglican ministers got a living allowance called a stipend and that things like a house or utilities might be part of what was provided for them.

[1 : 09] And they were just fascinated. And they said, Do you like that? I said, Yeah, yep, it's fine. And then another girl said, How does the church get all its money?

I said, Well, mostly they get it from people who come to church on a Sunday and who give. And that money doesn't just go to pay the ministers, but goes to help people in the community and to send missionaries overseas and to maintain the buildings and put on really great programs for anybody who wants to come.

And the girls had obviously been interested in this topic before at previous visits to other churches, I think, because the chaplain then kind of joined in and reassured them that it wasn't like a membership fee that people had to pay to join the church, which she told me later was a question that one of the girls had asked at another church, but it was a voluntary gift, just one of the number of things that Christians wanted to do to give back to God along with giving their time and their skills, their friendship to people and their care to others in need.

And then I said to them that, Well, there's no set amount that the New Testament part of the Bible stipulates that Christians have to give, but a lot of Christians do work on the Old Testament principle of giving 10%.

And one girl said, Giving 20 cents? I said, No, no, giving 10% of your income. And then they were silent. They were. They were shocked.

[2 : 51] They were gobsmacked that people would voluntarily give money to the church at all, let alone 10% of what they earned. Why would people do that?

Well, it didn't take long for them to start talking and fidgeting again, but their reaction in that brief moment was not actually surprising because just minutes earlier we'd done a little poll of hands to see who out of the class went regularly to church.

And not one girl put up her hand. So these girls just clearly had been brought up in families with little or no concept of what it would practically look like for someone to be committed to God and his people.

Not that they didn't have a social conscience. I did some chaplaincy training at that particular school last year and I was so impressed with how much money they raised for charity throughout the year. And in that respect they were quite distinct from the rest of Australian society. But the focus of their lives seemed to be very much the same as most of us normal Aussies today.

[4 : 06] Their own welfare, their own happiness and that of their loved ones. Commitment to something that might result in such a radical selflessness as giving 10% of your money away seemed completely alien to them.

Because their world view was that all your resources ought to be directed at securing your preferred lifestyle now and in the future.

And yet this morning we heard these words of Jesus from Luke chapter 17 verse 33. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it.

But those who lose their life will keep it. This is not the only place that Jesus makes such a stark and strong call to sacrifice, is it?

In Luke chapter 9 he says, If anyone wants to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. In chapter 14, Whoever comes to me and does not hate father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters and yes, even life itself cannot be my disciple.

[5 : 24] What strong and frankly strange words. Those who try to make their life secure will lose it.

But those who lose their life will keep it. What could motivate someone to respond to that call? Well, the context tells us here in chapter 17.

Such radical commitment can only be made in light of Jesus coming again. Such radical commitment can only be made in light of Jesus coming again.

If we go back to the beginning of our passage, if you want to have that open, it might be helpful.

You can have a look at the verses as we go through. Verse 20, we see that the topic of the coming of the kingdom of God is put on the agenda by the Pharisees, this group of religious leaders.

And they were genuinely interested in when the kingdom of God would come. And seeing that Jesus also spoke about it, they asked him exactly that. When will the kingdom of God be coming?

There were most likely two schools of thought on this.

[6 : 38] One was that the kingdom of God would come as a political kind of historical movement, that a human leader would arise to be the Messiah and would lead the Jewish people in victory against their oppressors so that they would have freedom in their country.

The second school saw it as an apocalyptic, a kind of crisis-type coming with strange happenings in the sky and on the earth and a complete change from life as we know it.

Of course, we know that both schools found supporting images within the Old Testament and each school of thought had its program of signs and events that would signify that the kingdom was coming or had arrived.

So, when Jesus gave his answer, he was challenging both ideas. He said, The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed, nor will they say, Look, here it is, or there it is.

What Jesus is saying is that the true kingdom of God is unlike any kingdom with which the Pharisees were familiar. There would be no series of political movements, there would be no strange cosmic portents that could be observed, that would be leading up to the coming of the kingdom.

[8 : 09] He couldn't look to Jerusalem and see that a leader was on the throne and say, Look, there he is. There it is. But, in fact, none of these things were needed for the Pharisees because, Jesus says, The kingdom of God is among you.

Now, these words are some of the most debated in terms of translation, how you might render the original language. And there's been three suggestions over the centuries as to what this little phrase, The kingdom of God is among you, might mean.

First of all, and if you read a new international version of the Bible, you'll have in there that it says, The kingdom of God is within you. And the sense is inside of you, in your heart.

And certainly, we believe that people who trust in Jesus have the Holy Spirit living inside of them.

And so, in that sense, yes, Jesus' kingdom is within us.

But, Jesus doesn't usually speak about people, the kingdom entering people. Rather, people entering the kingdom.

[9 : 21] And what's more, here he's speaking to Pharisees, who we know are his opponents, and who don't have faith in him as the Son of God. So, it's very unlikely that he'd say to this group in particular, The kingdom of God is within you.

The second idea is that, maybe because Jesus is being asked a future question, when will the kingdom of God be coming, Jesus' answer is, In the future.

The kingdom of God will be, a future tense, in your midst. So, the idea is that, there's no point looking for signs, observing things that will tell you when it is coming, because it will be in your midst, just as quick as that.

But, scholars who know all about these things, say that it's probably unlikely that, Jesus would have used a particular verb he used there, if he meant to say the future.

What he's really saying is, the present tense, the kingdom of God is, in your midst. Yes, Jesus says, you are looking for the kingdom, and that is good.

[10 : 32] But, in fact, the kingdom has already begun, to break into human history. It's like, he's saying to the Pharisees, it's like, when you're looking for your sunglasses, or your reading glasses, and actually, they're right on your face.

Has that ever happened to you? He's saying, the kingdom of God is right in front of you, and yet you can't see it. Remember the evidence that he cited to John's disciples, who were asking the same questions, in Luke chapter 7.

He answered them, Go and tell John what you have seen and heard. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.

This is the evidence that the kingdom is in their midst. The kingdom is present in Jesus' presence, he is saying to them.

The scriptures are fulfilled in their hearing. The king of the kingdom is right there with them, and yet they are blind to his presence, because their hearts would not recognize him as the king.

[11 : 51] And yet the mystery of the kingdom of God is that, although it has broken in, in Jesus, it has not yet fully come.

The Old Testament spoke of the suffering servant, and the glorious Messiah king, who would bring in the new heavens, and the new earth.

But in its teaching, it was more like kind of a bunch of snapshots, rather than a video of God's plan, showing the timeline, when all these things would take place.

So when Jesus came, he revealed that, yes, he was bringing the kingdom, and we can enter it by faith. We can experience its righteousness, joy, its peace.

Actually, the fullness of the kingdom will not come until he returns again. Then, and only then, will the world actually look like what has been promised, without any war, without any poverty, without any unbelief, any pain, any evil.

[13 : 06] This is the now, and the not yet, of our hope. Now, for the Pharisees, of course, there was no point talking about the consummation of the kingdom if they didn't even recognize the king in their midst.

But for the disciples, you'll see that it's to the disciples that Jesus starts to speak in verse 23, 22, it is essential that they understand that this mystery is a two-stage kingdom.

Why is it essential? Because if they believed that the kingdom had fully come in the earthly ministry of Jesus, then their commitment to him would have been slowly eroded away day by day as they experienced opposition, persecution, trials, all the while thinking this was as good as it got.

Their commitment to him, Jesus teaches, will only be strengthened if they have a clear hope of his coming again. They must be prepared to wait, to persevere until that day, and not to be tricked by false reports of his coming, even if that means they do not see his return in their lifetime.

And so he said to his disciples, verse 22, the days are coming when you will long to see one of the days of the Son of Man, and you will not see it.

[14 : 39] They will say to you, look there, or look here, do not go, do not set off in pursuit, for as the lightning flashes and lights up the sky from one side to the other, so will the Son of Man be in his day.

But first he must endure much suffering and be rejected by this generation. Well, in the weird weather we had last week, we experienced everything from hail and snow in some suburbs to wind and even heat, and of course this kind of strange patchy rain.

You know, you could be driving down the road at one set of traffic lights it was pouring and the next set of traffic lights it was dry. But when the storms came, when that lightning came, especially on Sunday night, I recall, it did indeed light up the whole sky.

And this is the image that Jesus is using to speak of his return. Just as the lightning is visible from one side of the land to the other when it comes in a storm, Jesus' return will be visible and obvious to everyone.

It won't be a secret return in a special location that only the privileged few who've decoded the special messages will meet him at.

[16:04] It won't be a spiritual or invisible return like the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, claim happened in 1914. No, Jesus' return will be visible, obvious, universal.

We don't know exactly how that will work, what with some people being up top of the world and others of us being down under, but we know that we won't miss it.

The king will be here again and the waiting will be over. But Jesus says to the disciples in the plan of God something must happen first.

Verse 25, he must suffer and be rejected. He must die on the cross. When they saw their king nailed to a cross, dying in weakness, humiliation, they weren't to be discouraged, he was saying. This is the king of the kingdom's true work. He will not be glorified as the returning king until he first accomplished this mission, to die for the sins of the world.

[17:18] And therefore they were being encouraged to commit to him, persevere with him who first died and rose again for their forgiveness and reconciliation with God.

But to trust in his death, to commit to serve Jesus, to wait for his return is not easy. Because even though the kingdom has broken in and this turning point of history has happened, life appears to go on as normal.

For some people it just seems like it never happened at all. Just like these year nine girls that I met. It will seem to people like there is no evidence that the world will ever be judged, that Jesus is alive, that the wheat and the weeds will one day be separated out, that he is the king and he is simply waiting for God's appointed time to be revealed.

As his disciples, we must not be discouraged that every day still goes on the same. We must maintain our commitment. Why?

Well, there have been two other times in history when things have been exactly like that and yet the judgment came. In Noah's day, and in Lot's day.

[18:48] You have a look at verse 26. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so too it will be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage until the day Noah entered the ark and the flood came and destroyed all of them.

Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot, they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day that Lot left Sodom, it rained fire and sulfur from heaven and destroyed all of them.

It will be like that on the day that the Son of Man is revealed. Imagine what it would have been like to have been Noah, warned by God of the coming flood, told to build the ark, and then what?

Sunny day after sunny day after sunny day. morning. How much easier it would have been if the weather had started looking more and more ominous right from the word go?

How much more notice would the people have taken if the clouds started gathering, if the rivers were slowly rising? Not that the people hadn't had their chance, of course.

[20:03] a righteous man was building a great big whopping boat in the middle of dry land, and yet we don't read of anyone asking Noah what it was for, repenting when they heard him speak about the coming judgment of God upon the wickedness of humanity.

No, they continued in their rebellion against God, going about their daily business, eating, drinking, marrying, and being given in marriage, like the future was assured, but the flood came upon them like a flash, and they were carried off to destruction.

In the same way, I imagine there was no smell of sulfur in the air in the weeks preceding lots leaving Sodom. There was no acid rain.

Housewives didn't bring in their sheets after washing day, and what are these little holes? Oh, it's raining brimstone. I better tell my husband to go and pop down and visit that man who wouldn't partake of any of the sins of this city.

No. Despite the witness of the righteous man among them, they would not repent, but instead went on with everyday life as though no judge existed for their sins.

[21:23] And so the fire came upon them in a flash, and they were destroyed. so it will be with the coming of the Son of Man, Jesus says, his own coming, and the judgment of the earth.

Our world goes on as it always has, believing it can secure its own future, eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, ignoring the fact that one man came with the signs of the kingdom.

one man died and rose again in their midst, and that a people exists today who bear witness to the truth of his promises.

And yet Jesus says, his return is just as assured as the judgment that came upon Noah's people and the town of Sodom.

There will be no second chances when it comes. The opportunity to repent, to be part of the kingdom of God is open now, but on that day, there will be no more opportunity.

[22 : 34] Judgment will be swift, and it will be final. Jesus then gives a further picture about what it will look like for people to be ready for that day.

Verse 31, On that day, anyone on the housetop who has belongings in the house must not come down to take them away. And likewise, anyone in the field must not turn back.

The point of these verses is not that there will be a way to escape the judgment when it comes, just don't stop and grab your photo album. No, the point is that your life on the way to the day of the Son of Man must be one of complete commitment to the Lord, God.

Not being distracted, pulled back by a desire for the things of the world, letting possession, security, preferred lifestyle, sin, be the delight of your heart.

If you're distracted in this way, the day of Jesus' return will not be a day of joy as it could be, but a day of terror. For those who haven't recognized the first coming of the King, the second coming will be a time of judgment, of separation, and of destruction.

[23 : 56] Look at verses 34 to 37. I tell you, on that night there will be two in one bed, one will be taken, and the other left.

There will be two women grinding meal together, one will be taken, and the other left. Then they asked him, where, Lord? He said to them, where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather.

Again, we have two pictures to tell us the same message. The separation that comes at the final judgment of God will cut even between husband and wife, and between closest friends or closest work colleagues.

Knowing someone who knows the king and is serving the king is not enough. We must know him ourselves.

On the day of Christ's return, those who have put their trust in Jesus as the king who died for them will indeed be saved. He's not saved.

[25 : 04] But those who have sought to secure their own life and make their own future without the Lord will be left to the destruction of the judgment. We don't need to make too much of the taken and the left behinds here.

The point is that on the last day there will be separation. your commitments during your life decide your fate on that day.

If your own earthly happiness, your own security were your greatest commitments, then Jesus says, there's a terrible picture awaiting you, a picture of death.

Where will this judgment take place? Ask the disciples. Just as you will see the Son of Man coming as you see lightning in the sky, Jesus is saying, so the judgment will be obvious to all.

Just as you see where the dead animal is lying, by the birds of prey gathering above it, you will know where the judgment takes place.

[26 : 12] But this warning is even for disciples. Look back at verse 35, those three words, remember Lot's wife.

She came as close as possible to deliverance without actually achieving it. She was brought right out of the doomed city, set on the way to safety, but she looked back and lingered, evidently in the longing for the delight she was leaving.

and in the process she was caught up in the destruction of the city and all that was left of her was a pillar of salt. For the disciples, commitment to serving God and being ready for the return of Jesus requires a constant reliance on the grace of God to keep us focused, repentant, always turning toward him and away from the things of the world.

We won't be perfect, but we will by his grace have our priorities set on the things of God. For we will understand verse 33, those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.

those who commit to Jesus, who follow Jesus, who give their all for Jesus, do so in the light of his coming.

[27 : 45] He has promised both vindication to those who love him and justice and swift judgment for those who reject him. that day could be terrible and each of us must avoid it at all costs.

And I don't use that as a cliché. Jesus' message is that as we commit to him, it will be costly, but it will mean great gain in the end.

Well, this morning, what will this look like for us as we wait for Jesus, as we commit in light of his coming. Today is Commitment Sunday, and we have an opportunity through those forms that you may have received or you can still get, to commit in three areas in the year to come.

Our time, our talents, and our treasure, our money. Our time, our talents, our treasure. Each of these things is a resource that we've been given by God.

We can choose to use them first and foremost for our own welfare and security, or we can consider Jesus first. We can consider his first and second comings as we make our choice.

[29 : 10] We can recognize that he is the rightful king of our lives and he ought to have the final say on how we use what he's given us. and if we recognize we need to recognize that if we let these things become our master, we do not actually gain our lives as we hope to, but we lose them on the last day.

So as we close, let me ask you, what will it look like for you, and I need to ask myself the same question, what will it look like for me to give up my security in how I use my time, my skills, and my money in 2007?

What will it look like to give those things fully over to Jesus? What will it look like to give radically to the work of the church here and throughout the world so that we can keep shocking groups of year nine girls for many years to come?

what will it look like to choose to work less and serve in a group here more, or decide as a family to have time together at church events rather than go to the movies, or to give money to the poor rather than get lots of birthday and Christmas presents?

What will it look like for you to commit to Jesus in 2007? what will it look like to commit in light of his coming?

[30 : 49] Let's pray. Lord our God, we hear your strong message this morning. If it makes us afraid, Lord, or a bit cross, would you please work in our hearts?

Draw us to yourself. show us how we can see that day as a joy to be hoped for. Lord our God, please give us your grace and your strength as we seek to give everything to you.

Lord our God, help us to commit in light of the great hope that we have of the coming again of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

We thank you for him. We thank you that your love is shown to us through him and that we can be part of your kingdom because of what he has done for us.

We pray in his name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.