

Luke 17:20-37 "The Gravity of Eternity"

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[0 : 00] You are listening to a message from Southwood Presbyterian Church in Huntsville, Alabama. Our passion is to experience and express grace. Join us.

Turn with me this morning to Luke 17. It's our last Sunday in Luke for a while. Just letting you groan or something.

Nobody's going to cry. We're going to jump just for a little while to the Old Testament this summer. See the gospel of grace in some of those great stories that we love.

But this morning, this passage at the end of Luke 17 has a little bit of everything. And it can be a bit confusing as you get into it. Jesus redirects Pharisees.

He quotes Proverbs. He discusses some Old Testament characters. He even looks forward and talks about end times. But he's responding here to a question about the kingdom of God.

[1 : 03] Now, we need to know what he says about the kingdom of God because that's our vision as a church is to advance the kingdom of God, right? So, Jesus, we really need to know what that means.

What it's all about. I think it's helpful before we read this passage together to give you a little background that may help parts of it make a bit more sense to you as we read it.

In the Bible, the kingdom of God is wherever Yahweh is worshipped, trusted, and obeyed. Where his reign is active.

And people submit to him as king. So, we as a church, in seeking to advance the kingdom of God, are doing that in our hearts, in our lives.

Here and everywhere. People more and more trusting and following the king. That's what we're about. That phrase, kingdom of God, is also used then to talk about eternity.

[2 : 04] When the rule and reign of Yahweh will be fully and finally established, right? Where he's perfectly obeyed and worshipped and trusted in the new heavens, the new earth.

The prophets talk a lot about these days. And Daniel, in particular, explains that the Son of Man, this glorious divine figure, will reign with God the Ancient of Days in an everlasting kingdom.

That's Daniel 7, the Son of Man. He's the king who comes for that everlasting kingdom. Daniel 7, great to read later. Really important to know for this morning.

The Son of Man is the king. So, when those days come that the prophets talk about looking forward to, when the king returns to be enthroned forever, perhaps the most notable theme of everything in the Old Testament about it, is that that day is both a joyful one and a fearful one.

It's a day of judgment as well as a day of salvation at the same time. When that eternal kingdom comes, those who have refused to submit to Yahweh, to bow the knee and trust and follow the king, will be punished.

[3 : 24] On the other hand, those who have suffered much, but who are aligned with the king, will find rescue and rest in his victory.

A day of judgment and salvation. A day of separation. Destinies being settled. In fact, we see at times this eternal kingdom break into human history.

And we get a taste of that reality, of that separation. Think, for example, of Noah and the ark. You may know that story. But judgment comes on the wicked, right?

Many are destroyed. And yet, those inside the ark are rescued, miraculously, from the flood. God's people saved.

His enemies destroyed. It doesn't happen catastrophically like that often. But you can think of, for instance, the entrance into the promised land.

[4 : 23] Idolatrous nations tasting the inbreaking of that eternal judgment, right? And God's people delivered. Or you could think of Sodom and Gomorrah, tasting God's righteous wrath on their sin,

while Lot, who is also a sinner, is spared by God's grace.

Sometimes the eternal kingdom shows up in moments like that in the present. Which, by the way, helps us some with understanding some of those really tough passages and what is God doing in these moments of judgment.

But whether you side with the true king or not, leads to two extremely different outcomes.

Devastating judgment or glorious salvation at the kingdom of God's coming.

Let's read what Jesus says and then we'll pray together. You'll see we need His help always and especially today as we look at this passage.

Luke 17 at verse 20. This is God's Word. Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them, The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, Look, here it is, or there.

[5 : 46] For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. And He said to the disciples, The days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man and you will not see it.

And they will say to you, Look there! Or look here! Do not go out or follow them. 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 suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. Just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man.

They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage until the day when Noah entered the ark and the flood came and destroyed them all. 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 when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all. So will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. On that day let the one who is on the housetop with his goods in the house not come down to take them away.

[6 : 58] And likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his wife, his life, will lose it. But whoever loses his life will keep it.

I tell you in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left. There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left. And they said to him, Where, Lord?

He said to them, Where the corpse is. There the vultures will gather. Let's pray. Father, we do ask for your help.

We want to understand. But more than that, Father, we want to know this message that you have for us. Jesus, we need to know more of you and we want to know what you speak of so clearly and directly and so, Holy Spirit, would you teach us that we might know things that are too lofty for us to understand on our own.

We cry out for your help. Would you teach us and would you change us? In Jesus' name, Amen.

[8 : 18] Let's walk through this passage together this morning, the one we just read, to understand the significant things Jesus is saying and then we'll take a few minutes to talk about what it means for us.

Jesus begins here by saying to the Pharisees, the kingdom may look different from what you expect. The Pharisees ask when the kingdom is coming and Jesus says the kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say, look, here it is or there, for behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you.

See, the Pharisees were one group among many at the time who taught and believed that the kingdom of God, when it showed up, there were going to be some really easy things to notice among which, probably most prominent, was the Romans were going to be defeated and driven out and so the power and prestige of the Jews was going to flourish in some really tangible, exciting ways.

They were looking forward to that, looking for signs that that was happening and perhaps not seeing them the way they'd hoped. And when they say when, Jesus says, let me clear something up for you.

You're looking for the wrong thing. God's kingdom is not tied to or dependent upon any political power or party.

[9 : 53] God's kingdom is not tied to or dependent upon any political power or party, then or now. It doesn't look like God's people increasing earthly success or social influence that they have per se.

It's more about God's people individually and corporately submitting to the king, embodying the values and the priorities of the king.

And friends, I think if we want to see society impacted, if we're confused about political power, we've got a lot to work on just right there, don't we? A lot that will have a big influence in our society when we work on embodying the king's values and priorities, submitting to him ourselves.

Beyond that kind of redirection of the Pharisees, Jesus seems to be saying in some ways the kingdom is already here. The kingdom of God is in the midst of you.

I mean, after all, the king is here, right? Jesus came preaching the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

That's been the message. But in looking for the kind of signs that they wanted to see, the Pharisees were missing the glorious signs that the king was bringing.

[11:15] Outsiders welcomed in. Sick, healed. Poor having good news preached to them. This is what the kingdom is going to be, right? Don't miss it, Jesus says.

But then I love how Jesus comforts and helps his followers in this next section. He turns to them and what he says to them is so much what we need to hear because we live in between Jesus' two comings, don't we?

That's where we find ourselves in the course of history. He's come once but he's coming again. And so we live where his kingdom is already here and not yet here fully.

We feel this every day, don't we? Sin is defeated but it's still fighting against us. Satan is conquered but he's still prowling around and seeking to devour.

The curse has been reversed but we still look around and see evidence of it everywhere. Creation is still longing to be restored to what God created it to be.

[12:29] And so as we live there, Jesus says, don't fear. Listen, when the kingdom comes fully and finally, it may look different from what you expect.

But you won't miss the king when he returns to reign. The days are coming, he says to his disciples, when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man and you will not see it.

When you will long to see the king come and to be in those days where everything's made the way it's supposed to be. In your suffering and pain as Jeremy led us in acknowledging this morning, as you cry out, you'll long for the day when that full and final rescue comes and you won't see it.

You'll still ache. Jesus says we're going to be living in the in-between and he knows it's going to be hard for us.

And when it is, when we're struggling, when it's hard, people will say, look there or look here. Do not go out or follow them 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.

[13:54] You won't miss the king. No one will when he returns to reign. So don't let your focus be distracted from Jesus. People will offer you easier ways.

People will offer you paths of life that avoid suffering. People will tell you there's hope somewhere else. You're crazy to wait for Jesus. Don't you believe it, Jesus says.

You remember that though the kingdom is here only in seed form, it's not yet what it will be. And so in the distress and difficulty of living in the not yet, cling to Jesus peace and hope in him.

I was pulling weeds last week under the shade of a beautiful Japanese maple tree in our front yard. It turns these beautiful orange colors and it's grown just in the few years that we've been in the house all over the place.

It's got some branches that hang out over the front yard and some spread up onto the roof of the house and every year it seems like branches sprout up in a new in different direction. And so keeping cool under that shade, I'm pulling up weeds in the flower bed and I really easily plucked up this little sprig and I looked down to see what it was.

[15:20] You know what I was holding in my hand? A Japanese maple. Right there in my hand. I looked at it. It had a stump, you know, as it were. It had some leaves that sure enough were Japanese maple leaves.

Little sprigs of branches on it. everything that you needed to be a real Japanese maple tree right there in the palm of my hand.

It was already a Japanese maple but one day, not yet, it will look very, very different.

What fit in my hand will be taller than our house if it survives extreme weather and severe storms and careless gardeners who pull them up?

And that's a bit like living in the already and not yet of the kingdom. All the essential properties of the kingdom are here but there are days of smallness, of dryness, windy days where you're sure that the kingdom is never going to come in its fullness and if it ever does you sure won't be able to hang in there until it comes.

[16:42] But it's much more certain that the kingdom is coming in its fullness than the growth of my little Japanese maple tree in my hand. Jesus says, I know it's hard, I know it looks bleak some days, I am coming back, the kingdom will come, I've got you.

So, don't let suffering cause you to lose hope. After all, you're not the only one who suffers, the king must suffer too, right?

Verse 25, first, he must suffer many things and be rejected by this generation. It's the way the kingdom works, isn't it?

Not the way the Pharisees or the disciples perhaps would have planned it, but the seed must fall to the ground and die before it grows. There's a cross coming before the crown even and especially for the king.

Here we are again. Jesus, remember where we are in Luke, marching toward Jerusalem, intent on going to the cross to die and wanting us to understand how utterly essential it is that he do that.

[18:05] He must suffer. We can expect similar struggles to come for us while we wait for our king to come again.

So, keep hoping in him and in his promised return. He's coming. Then Jesus turns to some of those Old Testament examples that we've already mentioned to say in a few different ways, but come what may, no matter how bad it gets, don't get so preoccupied with your life that you are unprepared for the return of the king.

See, nothing could be more important than being prepared, than being ready, for the kingdom. And there are many things every day calling our attention away from that.

He gives these examples so we understand. Verse 26, just as it was in the days of Noah, so will it be in the days of the Son of Man. They were eating and drinking and marrying and being given in marriage until the day when Noah entered the ark and the flood came and destroyed them all.

They were doing normal things, right? Good things. but not trusting the king, not prepared for when the kingdom broke into their world.

[19:31] Most of them received judgment rather than salvation. Same with Sodom and Gomorrah. Verse 28, 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 when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all.

So will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. Again, good, normal stuff to be doing, except they hadn't prepared themselves for the king and the kingdom comes suddenly.

Unmistakably, you see it, inescapably, you can't avoid it, but normal life is interrupted by sudden destruction. And it's disaster for those who don't know the king, isn't it?

So be ready, Jesus says. How? By trusting Jesus and treasuring him above all else.

Verse 31, on that day, let the one who's on the housetop with his goods in the house not come down to take them away and likewise let the one who's in the field not turn back.

[20:49] Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it. Don't look back for anything that's been left there and think, oh, I need that.

That's what's most important. That's what I'm hanging on to. It's something in my house. It's the crops I have. That's what keeps me safe. I need to make sure I take them with me. What did Lot's wife do?

She looked back against God's command as they were leaving Sodom and instead of being rescued, she becomes a pillar of salt.

Anything that makes up this life, even life itself, pales in comparison to eternal life with Jesus. If I asked you today, what's your heart set on?

What are you longing for? What do you most want? Would Jesus and his kingdom come to mind? Be honest. Where's your heart set?

[21:56] Is it on him? Or is it distracted from the king by other things that you love and you long for just a little bit more? Listen to Jesus.

There's a great separation coming. I tell you in that night there will be two in one bed. One will be taken and the other left.

There will be two women grinding together. One will be taken and the other left. A day where two people are sleeping, two people are working, otherwise very similar people receive very different destinies.

Upon what basis? Are they prepared for trusting in the king? Don't tell yourself you'll think about it later.

Don't say other things are more important. Don't let the busyness of life, lots of good things to do, keep you from prioritizing eternity.

[23 : 02] busy. Because Jesus will return suddenly in the midst of that normal busy life and you must be prepared. Perhaps taken aback or not wanting to miss out again on any of this, the disciples ask, where?

And Jesus says, where the corpse is, there the vultures will gather. Now, in some ways that's not a particularly complicated proverb to understand.

He's saying you'll see it, you won't miss it, you'll be able to look up from where you are and find out what's going on, but there's lots of ways to say that, aren't there? This is Jesus in a very pointedly serious way saying it's coming and you'll see it and death will be there.

There will be death around and you'll notice it. Be warned! So that's a summary of what Jesus is teaching in this passage.

God's kingdom may look different from what you expect, but you won't miss the king when he returns to reign, so don't let suffering cause you to lose hope. After all, the king must suffer too, but come what may, don't get so preoccupied with your life that you're unprepared for the return of the king.

[24 : 35] That's pretty direct talk, isn't it? You know, as I was pondering this week Jesus speaking to us this directly and this clearly, it began to have this weight on my heart.

What's Jesus trying to say to us? I looked back to the end of Luke 9, seems like a long time ago.

The end of Luke 9 is where Jesus tells us he set his face to Jerusalem.

He said, I'm going to the cross and everything starts to head in that direction. For us here at Southwood, that's been really this entire school year that we've been following Jesus as he teaches about the kingdom on the way to the cross.

And for some reason, for the first time this week, it kind of sunk in to me that I seem to be talking about eternity a lot.

Heaven and hell and eternal significance and being ready and it's come up over and over and I look back and sure enough, that's what Jesus has been talking about.

[25 : 41] It's interesting, isn't it, that as he makes his way to the cross to die for immortal souls, that these issues of eternity keep being pressed in to us.

He doesn't want anybody to miss it. Over and over he gathers his followers around and says, listen to me. There's something you can't miss here. It's on his heart for us.

Just in these few chapters we've walked through, he said things like, we must repent or we too will perish. That there's a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth for some while others feast at the banquet of God.

A banquet where a lot of religious insiders are not actually going to be present although they expect to be. But actually you must be willing to leave everything else in order to follow him.

He even put words in the mouth of a rich man warning everyone he loved about the seriousness of eternity. How many times have I stood up here and said, this is really weighty.

[26 : 49] We must really consider eternity. We must repent and embrace Jesus. Y'all, please, please hear the call of Jesus.

He's speaking clearly and seriously and lovingly to you. It's a drum that he continues to beat. He's not mincing words.

He's saying, trust me today. Here's what God's particularly been putting on my heart in light of this. We've been watching Jesus and what I'll call the sober passion that he has for bringing this eternity in front of everyone who's around him.

As he pleads with people passionately, I was asking myself, do I share Jesus' sober passion? This passage really drove it home for me.

Let me say it to you this way. There's an eternal separation coming with two different outcomes that couldn't possibly be further apart. One of eternal destruction and one of everlasting glory.

[28 : 09] And two spouses sharing the same bed for a few years will go to different places forever. And two people working in the same office building on the arsenal will be apart from each other for all of eternity.

And two moms playing with their kids on the same playground won't play together again. And two students sitting in the same classroom on the same campus for a whole semester will spend eternity in two different places.

And two people sitting shoulder to shoulder in the same church pew week after week and year after year will do that apart from each other for eternity.

And that has to break our hearts. It's not a reality we like to talk about a lot but it's also not one Jesus is unclear on.

Does it break your heart? Who comes to mind for you? Is that not why God has us here?

[29 : 38] Isn't that why he's put you in Huntsville? In your house? In your neighborhood? In your workplace? With your friends? Are we as committed to eternal souls and eternal realities as Jesus is?

All the examples of God's destruction coming on many with a few being rescued are sobering but perhaps none more than Lot's wife. Because she reminds us that nearness to kingdom people does not equal preparation for the kingdom.

She was walking right there with those who were being rescued and found herself not. There are family, friends, others we would call loved ones.

And y'all I think every neighbor is supposed to be a loved one, yes? Do we really actively love them? It's not merely about wanting to spend eternity with them, although that's sweet and desirable, but wanting them to spend eternity with Jesus.

Pastor Peter, when we were talking about this passage this week, said what comes to mind for him is are we soul conscious? I love that. Consider for a minute how you think of and treat the people in your life.

[31 : 03] Are they merely a means to an end for you? Ways to be entertained? Someone who can care for your kids, an avenue for you to get food or make money or pass the time?

Is that what people are some days for you? Or do you think of them as eternal souls? Do you consider their eternal destiny?

Are you soul conscious? Now listen, that doesn't mean that we all need to go rent megaphones this afternoon, drive around Huntsville announcing heaven and hell to everyone within earshot.

It doesn't have to look like that. It also doesn't mean that we get to put on headphones and start going through life, oblivious to everyone around us, driving by, missing eternal souls all around you every day, forgetting the priority of Jesus for each of them, for each of us.

Al Eller prayed last week, people need the Lord, and he said, Jesus, I need you. This is not us versus them. This is all of us together needing Jesus.

[32 : 24] So what do we do? If our hearts start beating with this same passion that Jesus has, what do we do? You know, it's interesting, there's one specific thing we're told to do, and it's to pray persistently.

It's the next verse actually, chapter 18, it's a passage connected to this one still, Jesus tells a parable, the first verse says, to teach them, in light of all these things, that they ought always to pray, and never to give up.

For someone who's on your heart, for people you haven't met yet, or you'll be with this week, we must be on our knees for our neighbors.

prayers. If you need somewhere to start, take this prayer guide, and the very first item this week, pray for specific opportunities to engage meaningfully with those in your neighborhood who do not know Jesus.

There's one if you need something to pick, pray that this week, and then don't stop praying. Keep praying persistently. I don't know anything better than praying for someone to help lead our hearts toward loving them intentionally.

[33 : 39] Don't be preoccupied with your life. If you get preoccupied with something, let it be with giving others a taste of the kingdom, showing them the love of King Jesus.

How can I love them? How can we get more time together? Some of us are very well trained at this point to say, oh, I don't want to make somebody a project to treat them as though they're just something I can use to get a feather in my Christian cap.

Y'all, that's true, but can I be honest with you? That's just by and large not our problem. Talking about Jesus too much with other people.

When you have two of your friends come to me and complain that you won't leave them alone about Jesus and you keep sharing your heart about eternity with them, then we'll talk about that problem.

Let's not hide behind that. avoid loving people intentionally and sharing with them the hope of our Savior.

[34 : 44] Last thing, we get to do that with great joy. What's so exciting about this? It's because I could berate you and say, leave here with a guilt trip that you should do this more and if you don't, your friends and neighbors will go to hell.

Y'all, what's the one thing that must be done to secure their eternity? There's one thing that's required and it's not on your list.

What did Jesus tell us? One thing that must happen, he must suffer and be rejected. He must go to the cross and he has done it.

It's finished. All that's needed to secure your eternity, my eternity and that of your neighbors, Jesus has done and so we get to go not with intense pressure but with great joy to tell them about a Savior who loves them and has died for them.

It's why we keep pointing each other to Him. As we wait in every circumstance for Him to return, we remember that the hard work to secure eternity has been done.

[36 : 03] It's over. So we exhale. So we rest in hope. And so we rejoice in telling forth the glories of the eternal kingdom and the gracious King to everyone, everywhere.

Amen? Let's pray. Jesus, you have given us eternal hope. Let us see it clearly this morning.

And would you break our hearts for the reality of separate eternal destinies? of anyone not getting to be with you forever.

See, the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. And would we long that all of our family and friends, that all of Huntsville, that everyone we touch would be there with us to know Him, to glory in Him forever.

forever. We ask it in His name. Amen. For more information, visit us online at southwood.org.