

“Do You Have A Place For Prophecy in Your Life?”

Luke 13:31-35

3/18/2001 – Maryvale Drive Presbyterian Church, Philip Siddons

On first reading, this passage might sound as if it was just a pause in Luke’s storytelling, perhaps inconsequential, but it has some rather interesting behind-the-scenes insight into the life of Jesus. This is a passage that only Luke includes in his version of the gospel.



Jesus had been in the county of Perea, across the Jordan river, for the last few days. In his travels, He had been teaching small groups of people. Among His frequent themes from His core of teaching lessons were the kingdom of God and repentance. He had been trying to tell the Jews that the kingdom of God initially begins with repentance and appropriate changes of behavior.

He pointedly told them that their ancestors, the great patriarchs they claimed as heroes, were going to be on the inside of the kingdom of God looking out on them because they had not repented of their sins and had not recognized the authority of God as superior to their own personal autonomy. On this teaching occasion, some Pharisees came up to Jesus and warned him of Herod’s apparent intention to harm Him.

This passage shows us that not all the Pharisees were hostile to Jesus. Some of them had actually sought Him out to advise him to seek safety. Elsewhere, we know that Nicodemus, a Pharisee, believed in Jesus enough to come to Him to talk about salvation but he came at night because he was afraid. Joseph, of Aramathea, was a Pharisee who was on the Sanhedrin Supreme Court and it was he

who offered his family tomb for the body of Jesus. But the majority of accounts in the gospels portray Jesus in tension with these prominent rabbis.

Although the Pharisees were the Puritans of that time, Jesus actually had more in common with them than He did with the Sadducees (who didn’t believe in the afterlife and only counted the first five law books of the Old Testament as actually authoritative. The reasons why Herod thought Jesus was a troublemaker are obvious.

Herod saw that Jesus had established a grass roots network of popular support after a three year traveling ministry of teaching and healing – He might prove to be the center of a revolution. Additionally, Jesus was of the same school of belief as John the Baptist. Apparently Herod had made a statement, in front of these Pharisees, that he would be dealing with Jesus shortly.

*

Jesus’ response to this information seems to be a direct reply for them to take back to Herod, . . . “You tell that fox... .” Kind of a gutsy thing for Jesus to say, referring to Herod, the governor of their police state, as a “fox.” Remember that Herod had already killed John the Baptist and he was a powerful man, not to be threatened. But the Jews, as well as the Greeks then, were not only using the word “fox” as a metaphor for a cunning person. The word also appears in the literature of the rabbis more frequently to mean “an unimportant individual – someone who is without significance.”

So Jesus’ response, essentially meant, ‘*You tell this second-rate puppet king – right to his face – to just deal with the fact that I’m casting out demons and curing people. But heaven knows I better get back into his town because prophets are supposed to be killed off in his backyard, not way out here in Perea.*’

Jesus was not going to be interrupted in His ministry because of any fear of Herod. He was casting out supernatural forces in people and performing miraculous physical cures for others. But His reference that ‘on the third day, He would be perfected’ was a complex reference to how His work would lead to His death.¹ Jesus was anticipating His coming confrontation.

Next, He began to speak of the history of Jerusalem’s persecution of prophets. His saying that He will do his work “today and tomorrow” was a colloquialism meaning ‘in the near future.’



Through history, the Jerusalem power structure had often killed off God’s prophets because prophetic types usually made their powerful leaders uncomfortable. Jesus’ words that were written down here in the 80’s were also reminiscent of the killing of Stephen. Stephen, an articulate speaker and Deacon of the first church in Jerusalem, was killed only after he said: “You always resist the Holy Spirit, ...” in the context of telling the townspeople that their ancestors had killed the prophets and desolated their own house. (*And don’t forget that it was Saul (Paul) the Pharisee who had killed Stephen.*)

Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem shows us the love He had for the city and the nation it represented. Nothing hurts so much as to go to someone and offer love and have that love rejected. So as Jesus neared the end of His ministry, He was sensing its failure to be received by the very people for whom it was tailored to reach. It was out of great sadness and

¹ The unusual phrase about him “becoming perfected,” was probably added to the story in the oral tradition of the early Church, and then written down here by Luke. Here is why some have come to think this. The term meaning “to be perfected or completed” was used in describing the consecration of priests in the Old Testament. In Hebrews the same term is used to refer to Jesus’ consecration to his High Priestly work through his death and resurrection. And so many feel that this phrase was added later on, much like the concepts were expressed in the later book of Hebrews: to help explain the meaning of Jesus’ original words. So by putting this in here, the hope may have been to show that Jesus was really predicting his coming death.

discouragement that Jesus thought that He would have liked to gather them to Him as a hen gathers her young under her for protection.

Their house, in his words, “would be desolate” all right, because as Jesus forewarned elsewhere, their nation would not only be missing their Messiah but would also face the total destruction of their people and buildings from the armies of Rome. In 70 CE,² Jerusalem was leveled and only a handful of survivors escaped with only their lives from Jerusalem.

Jesus’ concluding comment about them not seeing Him until they say, “Blessed be the One Who comes in the name of the Lord.” could refer to one of two things.

❶ Jesus might have been referring to the soon-to-come triumphant entry into Jerusalem, shortly before His death. At least there, people would temporarily hail Him as the Blessed One.

❷ Alternatively, the reverence might have been an elliptical reference to the far off distant future when the Christ would return at the close of the ages. At such time, Jesus told the Sanhedrin, they would see Him return on the clouds in the presence of God Almighty.



This passage, then, has a number of teachings. Jesus was warned of coming physical danger but He responded that He was not going to be deterred by the threats of a second rate politician. His life’s work had, as its goal, the divine necessity to go to the heart of the people and complete the Messianic task of bringing the good news of God’s sacrificial love, even to a city that was sure to murder him – just as they had done to previous prophets who had challenged the status quo.

On other occasions Jesus had harshly confronted the evil and the arrogance of the Jerusalem religious establishment. He called them “blind guides” saying, ‘As for you, Scribes and Pharisees, you’re hypocrites. You are the ones who built the burial vaults of the prophets and decorated the tombs of holy people. While

² CE means The Common Era

doing so, you said, ‘We would never have joined in shedding the blood of the prophets, had we lived in our ancestor’s day.

‘Your own evidence cries out against you. You are the sons of those who murdered the prophets. So finish off the work that your fathers began.’

Jesus had seen, first hand, the alienation and bickering between the religious leaders of His time – the truly petty arguments and personality clashes. He saw how exclusive the Jewish religion had become – to the extent that the widows, orphans and the aged had become cast aside as worthless. Jesus pointed out how the proud Pharisees and Scribes had walled other people out with their esoteric religious shop talk and arrogant piety that thanked God that they were not like “ordinary” people.

So Jesus was leveling a tearful and yet sobering prophecy against the leaders of the Jews. At one point, Jesus stood before the city and wept. But would Jesus do much different standing before our culture today?

The main point of Jesus’ core teaching was repentance and change of behavior in order to recognize God’s authority over our lives. But this prophetic moral and philosophical understanding of life forces most uncomfortable feelings for defenders of today’s status quo religion – as well as for the individuals with political power.

*

It is my impression that a certain amount of organized religion today is functioning in a vacuum. Where is God’s Spirit of prophecy today in American religion? It seems to me that many people today pick their religious involvement by how comfortable they feel about what it demands.

Some people feel very comfortable with being in a legalistic religious subculture that harshly criticizes those who sin the sins that most of the people (in that church) can easily avoid. Judgmental religious circles are comfortable because nothing is demanded of the

listeners. There is no real work, and therefore no growth.

Many others pick their religious expression by the extent that they agree with the primary speaker. Because when you agree with everything you hear and when you are not challenged to think about something in a different way – or challenged to consider other possible options for behavior or thinking – again, there is no work required and therefore no growth. There seems to be no prophecy in these kinds of religious circles – there’s no true spirit of repentance and self-evaluation in these groups because they have just become mere social centers.

There are some who distantly relate to churches but hang out on the fringes, refusing to join in worship or teaching encounters because they don’t want to hear something that doesn’t perpetuate their own established set of beliefs. They not only don’t want to be challenged to think and reevaluate their ethics – they absolutely refuse to come near any gathering where they’re invited to do the work of personal, spiritual, intellectual or social growth. That’s because we can’t grow if we don’t change. We will not change if we refuse to risk.

Some Christians get involved in projects that do good. But while much good is carried out, where is the personal growth, the humility of self reevaluation, repentance, and change that Jesus was talking about that is supposed to characterize one who recognizes the reign of God?

Are these Americanized socially-oriented quasi-religious gatherings actually helping people improve their perceptions of who they are as creations of God? Does membership in these groups actually promote their growth in their relationship with God and others?

These are all questions that violently shake up the legitimacy of the status quo. Because if you walked into some institutions or gatherings and asked these questions, you and your sense of prophetic awareness would be escorted out, at least you would be shunned, being thought of as an unbalanced fanatic. Because like the Jerusalem religious establishment of old,

today, there is sometimes a marked absence of reverent allegiance to the authority of God which brings about the will to grow through *humility, reevaluation, repentance and specific personal and social change.*

A rather prophetic piece of writing appeared in a *Time* magazine essay by Charles Krauthammer.³ In his essay: “On Apologies, Authentic and Otherwise” he raised questions about the (then) Soviet’s refusal to apologize for the destruction of human life in the Korean airplane incident. He said, “For an individual or society, the capacity to apologize is a sign of life – of vitality of a soul that can still be moved.”

He believed that the Soviet leaders’ inability to apologize was a sign that they headed a failed totalitarianism that had descended from the frenzied model of Hitler, Stalin and Mao. He suggested that the Kremlin was unable to mourn at the funeral for Leonid Brezhnev because they, perhaps, had a frozen heart.

I personally feel good about our nation because Christian values still are prominent enough to influence many of our leaders. A dictator could not last long here because the public is still given the freedom to cry out at injustice. However, our leaders would do well to note that few presidents (at least that I have seen or read about) have often publicly said phrases like: “I am sorry” or “I have wronged.”

I would be amazed if the president, one day, went on television and said, “Today I fired (name). He is out of a job because of his outright incompetence and his cruel indifference to other people in the use of his power of leadership. As chief administrator, I think there are too many other people with more talent who could do a better job.” But then again, such stark honesty would not enable that person to find new employment again easily and it would be too harsh.

*

³ Oct. 10, 1983

So I think today’s scripture asks us to take home at least one question for ourselves. The question is ‘What would Jesus say if He was standing on the outskirts of your life? Would Jesus see that you intentionally expose your life to prophecy?’

Better asked: *Where are the prophets in your life?* Where is it that you open yourself up to reevaluation? When do you expose your thoughts and your behavior to the scrutiny of a different perspective on how to think or act? If you can’t even listen to your spouse, will you even cross the street to listen to someone else? How often do you consider change?

Here’s a hard one: How much have you changed in the last five years? How much do you expect to change in the time to come? Be open for prophecy because if we are not, there will be only decay, both personally and as a nation.

