

Luke 17:20-18:8

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Preacher: Reuben Hunter

[0 : 00] In 1966, John Lennon said this, quote, Christianity will go.

! It will vanish and shrink. I needn't argue about that. I'm right and I will be proved right.! End quote. Here we are at the start of a new year, almost 60 years on, and in some ways, it feels like John Lennon's prophecy was just about right.

What we've witnessed recently, over the passing of the time since he said that, is a steady rejection of Christian morality, laws that have been consistently passed that flatly reject the law of God, and this year, over the last couple of years really, it has taken a sharp turn into the fast lane. 2024 was the year that our elected leaders voted to legalize assisted suicide. Plus, we're also in the middle of a spectacularly destructive game of let's pretend on the question of what it means to be a man or a woman. Even though everyone knows what a boy is and what a girl is, the political agendas around the issue are so strong that people don't feel able to say that because of the costly backlash that will inevitably follow.

However, alongside this structural and institutional rebellion and decline, the past year has seen what I would describe as a low-level spiritual awakening. High-profile people who were once opponents of the Christian faith have changed their tune. They've dialed back their rhetoric.

Joe Rogan, Louise Perry, Tucker Carlson, especially Jordan Peterson, even Richard Dawkins described himself this past year as a cultural Christian. Now, he was obviously quick to clarify that it's cultural. He said nothing more than appreciating what Christianity has given to him.

[2 : 08] But it is inconceivable to think that Richard Dawkins, the most famous atheist this country has probably ever produced, would have used that language only a few years ago. And there have been others who've gone even further. They've publicly converted to Christianity. Iyan Hersey Alley, James Dellingle, Russell Brand has had plenty to say about it all.

So, on the one hand, we see the decline. On the other hand, there seems to be this spiritual life.

This tension was really stark to me in the Christmas edition of *The Spectator*.

There were two articles side by side. You open it up on one page. Here we have A.N. Wilson. He'd written an article titled, *The End of Christendom is Nigh*. And he looks at Britain and he concludes this, quote, For those of us who believe, the everlasting gospel will go on being true. But the end of Christendom is not only inevitable. In northwestern Europe, it has already happened. If you don't believe me, go to Scotland. If that doesn't persuade you, go to Sweden. I suspect we in Britain are nearer the equivalent of 529 than we realize. And that in less than 50 years, those in charge of such matters will decide that the Gothic cathedrals of Europe will be allowed to become like the temples of Pestum, bare ruined choirs of a forgotten cult, end quote. That's on the left-hand side. On the right-hand side, on the opposite page, we have Ayaan Hirsi Ali with an article titled, *A Christian Revival is Underway*. She says, quote, Christmas isn't just crass commercialism. It is vital to Western civilization and revival. Celebrating is more important than ever, end quote.

Now, I would prefer that we waited a little longer with some of these high-profile figures before giving them a voice on a topic that they're only starting to understand. But the sense of spiritual awakening is undeniable. So the question is, which is it? Is it the end of things or is it the beginning? Well, I think the answer is both. We have a growing opposition to the Christian faith and we have a growing spiritual hunger. It is both harder to be a Christian and God's kingdom continues to advance.

[4 : 25] And this takes us into our passage this morning. Please turn it up, page 876, Luke 17, beginning of verse 20. At this point in Luke's gospel, we know from our perspective that Christ's ministry is perfectly on track. We know that He is going to Jerusalem where He will conquer decisively Satan, sin, and death at the end of this story. We know that everything is unfolding exactly as God has planned in the ministry of His Son. And yet, the experience of His followers, the

disciples, is getting harder.

When Jesus enters history, He begins His ministry by announcing Himself as God's King who has come to bring in God's kingdom. And here, verse 20, the Pharisees, the religious establishment, come with questions about it all. Verse 20, can you see? Their question is this, well, where is it? When is this kingdom that you're supposed to be bringing in coming? Where is it? And their tone and their demeanor is hostile as it is with the Pharisees' interactions with Jesus throughout the gospels. But on one level, it is a reasonable question to ask, is it not? It actually might be a question that you're asking yourselves. You've been told about Jesus Christ. We made a big old fuss about Him at Christmas, about His coming into the world as God's King and Savior. But you look around and all you see is the opposition bit. All you see is the decline. All you see is the opposition and the difficulty. It doesn't really look like this King that we talk about is reigning. Quite the opposite. But the kingdom of God doesn't all come at once, but little by little. Jesus Himself likens the way that the kingdom grows back in chapter 13 of Luke's gospel to the way yeast spreads through a loaf of bread.

Slow and steady, but eventually filling the hole. Now, we might wish that the progress was a bit quicker, but if we think about it for a moment, actually this slow progress is a good thing. Because at the very most basic level, at the most selfish level, if God had brought everything at once in the first coming of Jesus, none of us would have been included.

[6 : 42] And the opportunity for people to keep entering the kingdom would not still be open. Jesus is clear. His kingdom has come. But we await the fulfillment of that kingdom when He comes again.

And we live in a tension between those two days, between the decline and the progress, between what appears to be the end of things and what is very clearly also the signs of life.

And so the question for us, the question for the church in our day is this, how do we live well in that tension? How do we live well between kingdom come and kingdom coming?

Well, the passage that we have in front of us this morning makes two points. The first is this, how do we live well? Number one, don't get distracted. Don't get distracted. And the first word really on that point is to those of you who aren't sure about the Lord Jesus.

Those of you who aren't convinced that He is who He says He is. Those of you who haven't yet given your lives to Him. Because Jesus' first words here in verse 20 are to His critics. Being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come, He answered them.

[7 : 52] The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed. Nor will they say, look, here it is, or there. For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. The kingdom is in the midst of the Pharisees because the king is in their presence.

He's within their grasp. That's what it literally means. The kingdom of God is within your grasp. And Jesus is saying that to this group who are still outsiders to Him and to His kingdom to urge them to enter His kingdom and to do it now.

And the truth is, even in our day, that urgency remains for us all. Jesus came that first Christmas and He is still within the grasp of all and any who will reach out and receive Him.

Now, perhaps you've been drawn to Jesus, but you're not sure. There's something about Him that you find compelling, magnetic, interesting, but you're not sure.

Well, let me say, don't get distracted from that draw, that magnetism. Don't get distracted by the busyness and the ordinariness of life.

[9 : 12] Don't get distracted by anything for that matter. Come to Him. Keep exploring. Keep coming back to church on Sundays. We're delighted that you're here. You're always welcome. Don't get distracted.

Come along to Hope Explored. Paul mentioned it earlier. Three weeks, this month, Wednesday evenings, when you can come along, explore more about who Jesus is. Ask your questions.

Don't get distracted. Don't let it pass. But then, verse 22, Jesus turns to a different group of people, to His disciples. And He says to His disciples, those who do follow Him, the days are coming when you will desire to see one of the days of the Son of Man.

He's saying in the future, the persecution of the current religio-political establishment will be so hard to endure. You will so long for the kingdom to come. You will long to be vindicated for following the Lord.

And you will love His enemies to be judged in the way that has been promised when His King is due to come again. But He says when you feel that pressure, don't get distracted.

[10:19] Don't take your eye off the ball. And He points to two possible ways that this could happen. We could say the first one is theological. Look at verse 23. Don't be misled about what the work of God looks like.

Verse 23, We're the true people of God doing God's work our way.

But Jesus says, no, don't follow them. You'll not miss it when I come to bring in my kingdom. It'll be like lightning on a dark night. And we often hear stories of cranks who tell the world that they know what God is doing and when He's doing it.

A while ago I discovered a chap called Chris McCann of something called E-Bible Fellowship. He predicted Christ's return on the 7th of October 2014. And it's easy to say, you know, well, okay, where is it, Chris?

Huh, that kind of thing. But when things are hard, the truth is that we can be distracted by theologies that promise other things to us. Look, they say, this is where the work of God is.

[11:44] Over here, they say, this is where the work of God is. The so-called prosperity gospel is very attractive to people who are poor. The no-cost gospel, where we just live the same as everyone else, unwilling to bear the sacrifice of refusing to bow the knee to the gods of the culture, is very attractive to all of us when the pressure is on.

When we live at a time and people are saying, look here, that's God at work, but actually what they're pointing to is some sort of compromise in order that we don't have to stand out when we name the name of Christ.

We've gone off course. And the Lord Jesus says, don't get distracted. Don't get distracted by cultural compromise, even if it has a theological veneer. And, he says, don't just get your head down either.

That's where he goes next with the distraction of, it's not so much a theological one, it's the distraction of ordinary life. He makes this point with two examples from Israel's history.

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.

[13:06] 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 down from heaven and destroyed them all.

So will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. These examples emphasize how unexpected and devastating his coming will be, particularly for those who aren't ready.

The example of Noah is looking back to Genesis 6 and 7. Noah believed the promises of God that he would destroy the earth by flood. So he started building an ark.

And the people were going about their ordinary lives. They were eating and drinking and marrying and so on. Noah, in that case, would have been the laughingstock of his neighborhood. He was building this huge seafaring construction miles away from any sea.

And then the rains came. And they came. And they came. And they came. And everyone was washed away. The same was true with Lot.

[14:12] That story is in Genesis chapter 18, when Sodom was so unjust and inhospitable and immoral that God brought a devastating judgment on the city. People were eating and drinking and striking deals and building new homes and cultivating commerce.

And in the midst of it all, fire and sulfur fell from heaven and destroyed them. It is a terrifying image. Jesus says the same thing will happen when he comes again.

People will be so distracted with their ordinary lives that they'll be completely taken by surprise.

Now, it is so important to keep this in mind when we face persecution.

As we feel the sense of that opposition rising. As it bites for us in the cut and thrust of our lives.

Because the temptation to allow ourselves to be distracted and to retreat into the regular things of life.

Just the regular things that occupy the chat and the kind of discourse of everybody around us. We just are absorbed into that. That temptation is really powerful.

[15:17] We can so easily throw ourselves into the same things as everyone else. Weddings, verse 27. Business, verse 28. Mortgages, verse 28. And we just step back from faithfulness.

Well, Jesus sounds the warning. Look at verse 32. Remember Lot's wife. Whoever seeks to preserve his life will lose it. But whoever loses his life will keep it.

In the process of being rescued from the burning wreckage of Sodom, Lot's wife looked back and was destroyed. Not just because of a backward glance. It wasn't just that she heard something and turned around and that was it.

No. It was because of what that glance represented about where her heart really was. She was longing to go back to everything the world had to offer her. She wanted what was back there. She wanted to preserve life on her terms. And when we cut it back, when we think about it, that is actually a really attractive option to all of us so we can have life on our terms.

[16:21] We love comfort. We hate hardship. We hate being, well, there are some people that hate being the person that stands out, but most of us don't.

Those people, tricky company, let's be honest. There are people that just love a fight. They'd have a fight in an empty room, but most of us aren't like that. We hate hardship. We hate opposition. And we just love to hold on to the way things were when life was easier. And Jesus says to us, don't be distracted. Don't be distracted.

Now, all of this talk is really clear about the judgment aspect. But I think we need to be here. I think we need to see that Jesus is primarily here reassuring the disciples.

You see, His coming judgment is to be a source of strength and encouragement for His people. A day is coming, you see, when everything will be put right.

[17:28] Now, this happened for this generation when God judged the old order and the destruction of the temple in AD 70. What that means for us all these years later is that we can be sure that God keeps His word on these things.

But what it means is that when we face injustice and when we face hardship for being faithful to the Lord Jesus Christ, we know that He's going to put things right.

There is a day coming when justice for that hardship will be done. So as you look ahead in this year, 2025, whatever persecution you are facing, whatever struggles for naming the name of Christ you come up against, in whatever tricky context that might be, hold on.

Don't take your eye off the ball. Jesus will one day sort it all out and you will be vindicated. And your faithfulness, even in small and hidden ways, will be seen as good and right and true on that day. And on that day, your faithfulness now will be worth it. And you will reflect on that faithfulness and be grateful that you persevered.

[18:48] When the Lord smiles at you and says, well done, everything, every moment of struggle for the name of Christ now will be worth it. So don't get distracted.

But the Lord's well done is a great motivator for faithfulness, that's true. But standing against opposition is still tough. It's still hard. As the temperature rises, continuing to be faithful is more difficult.

Jesus knows this, which is why he then goes where he goes next in the passage. So here's the second point. The first is, don't get distracted.

The second is, don't get disconnected. Don't get disconnected. That's the point about the story of the widow in 18, 1 to 8. And he told them a parable to the effect that they ought always to pray and not lose heart.

That's our temptation, isn't it? We lose heart. Whether it's the world around us that have been talking about the opposition, or even just our own sin, even our own struggles, the fact that we fall into that pattern again and again, losing heart is a constant temptation.

[19:55] But here we are, this parable, this woman, shows us how it is that we won't lose heart. Dependent and persistent prayer. That's the means through which God sustains and builds His church in the face of opposition.

Dependent and persistent prayer. Now, it's a parable, so there are limits to what we're supposed to draw from the story. Just because the judge is unjust and grudging doesn't mean that we should think of God like that.

Obviously, He draws the contrast. That's not the point. The point, though, is this. If an unjust judge would give justice, how much more the perfectly just Lord who hears and answers the prayers of His people.

Back in chapter 11, Jesus has taught His disciples how to pray. Our Father in heaven, hallowed be Your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our sins. For we ourselves forgive everyone who is indebted to us and lead us not into temptation.

[21 : 03] It is a pattern prayer. It covers all the areas that we should bring to our Heavenly Father from His glory to our provision. It is the means through which we express a vital and meaningful relationship with Him.

And this is essential when the pressure is on. And that's why we pray this prayer each Lord's Day as a congregation. In fact, did you notice it is the means by which when He returns Jesus will gauge the spiritual temperature of His church.

Look at verse 8. Chapter 18, verse 8. When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on earth? Chapter 17, God will do what He has promised to do.

He will judge His enemies and vindicate those who are His. The question is when He comes to do that, will He find us faithful, trusting Him even through the hardships.

When He comes as He promises in chapter 17, will He find us depending Him as He asks in chapter 18? When things are tough for you personally and you feel like giving up, prayer is the first step you should take.

[22 : 14] When we look around at the spiritual state of our city or our nation, prayer is the first instinct we should have. When we consider the proposed end of Christendom on the one hand and the spiritual hunger on the other, prayer is how one will grow and the other will be turned around.

And it will be turned around. It will be turned around. When Jesus said these things, He had about a dozen followers. Today He has billions. The kingdom is growing.

He keeps His word. He keeps His promises. But as we look ahead to 2025, here is an encouragement to lean on the Lord and know His sustaining grace.

And it is a challenge to depend more deeply on Him in an active and persistent and faith-filled way. Which father among us here, if you've got children, which one doesn't love it when your child comes to you and says, can I talk to you?

Dad, can I talk to you? How much more does our perfect Heavenly Father delight when we talk to Him? See, that's the thing.

[23 : 24] When we come to talk about prayer in a context like this, it's easy, isn't it? Because we all struggle. And it's easy to say, oh, you should try harder. But the fact of the matter is when we come to think about these things, we need to see prayer as the gift that it is.

And we need to recognize that it is something we get to do. We get to speak to the Creator of the universe. You know, it is a struggle.

Here are three things, I hope, to encourage us in this. And the first is that it is a privilege. Prayer is a privilege. We get to pray. Because you are in the Lord Jesus, if you put your faith in Christ, you are in the Lord Jesus and you are given full and free access to the one who holds the whole world in His hands.

And He is pleased to hear your voice. And He is pleased to have you coming back to Him with the same requests again and again. And He is pleased to hear your voice and to answer your requests. Prayer is a privilege. When we think about it like that, it reframes, I think, so much of how we think about prayer. Prayer in general. The second thing, the second encouragement I want to say is this, make use of the church prayer meeting.

[24 : 45] The first Wednesday of the month, if you find prayer difficult, all of us do, on the first Wednesday of the month, there is a time that we have set aside for the church to join together to pray through things that you haven't had to prepare or think through beforehand.

How many of us think, oh, we sit down to pray and we start, we make good intentions and we make a start and we run dry pretty quickly because we haven't really thought about these things.

What should I pray for? How do I go with this? I need to make a list. We lose the list. All of that.

Well, here it is. There are things that we are putting before us as a congregation to pray for and to think through.

It's all given to you. We lead you through the prayers of praise to God, petition for things that are all kinds of good things. And when we come together to do that, when we do it together, it deepens our bones as a fellowship.

Then the third thing to try to kind of recalibrate your prayer life, pray the prayers in Scripture. Open your Bible, particularly the Psalms, and pray the prayers that are there. It's a great place to start if you've dried up and it will help you in tons of ways.

[25 : 50] Not least, you'll pray in a more biblical way, a more God-centered way, and you'll pray in ways that express the real experiences of life. That's what happens when you take up the psalmist's

words.

I know that it's really easy to find something else to do rather than to pray, rather than to depend on God. But if, here's the bottom line, if we will, not just endure, but flourish spiritually in the year ahead, that's what we want.

We don't want to just make it. We want to flourish. We want to grow. If we're going to persist with joy in the face of opposition, we must not get disconnected from the source of that joy.

So, our King has come. That's Christmas. He is coming again. And on that day, justice and joy will link arms.

But while we wait for that day, we have to battle on today. So, don't get distracted and don't get disconnected because the victory is assured and so we're battling on a winning side and we're battling in the strength that He provides.

[27 : 11] Let's pray together. Thank you.