

Last Things

By Bob Vincent

Bible Text: Luke 19:1-10; Matthew 13:47-50

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Lord, help me, Your inadequate servant, to open my mouth with boldness and tenderness to make known the mystery of the gospel with clarity, with conviction, with power, with sweetness, with winsomeness, with practical application and draw Your people to Yourself. Use Your word as You have promised that it will never return to You void. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Well, as I read this parable, I'm struck with an experience that I had in the summer of 1966. I was in the North Sea, and let me tell you, the North Sea is not somewhere you want to be in a small ship, and I was in a small ship and it was amazing. When we first sailed out from North Shields on the Tyne River out into the North Sea, everything was calm and sunny. It was wonderful. You see, I was part of a group that was reaching out to various churches to try to be used by them to reach the people around them, and there in North Shields there was a seaman's mission, in other words, this particular mission reached out to the fishermen and many other people who had boats there in North Shields. And so as we witnessed, as we shared our faith, as we did visitation with others, we were invited to join those deep-sea fishermen as they sailed out into the North Sea and it was wonderful.

I remember eating a peanut butter and banana sandwich. I really remember it. And as we got out, we had to go quite a ways out into the North Sea in order to cast the nets and they would throw the nets out and let them out and then they would circle around to catch all these fish, the trouble is, as I mocked my friend who was quick to lose his banana and peanut butter sandwich—remember when you point, there are three pointing back at you and one pointing up saying, "Help me!" Because as we got into the weather,

it was terrible. I'd never seen seas like that before and sure enough, I joined my friend eventually. But it got worse because it began to rain, and it was bitter cold, and someone said, "You can have my bunk," because the fishermen would all sleep until we got out into the place to cast the nets.

I went down. I never knew how nauseating the smell of diesel fuel is. I went to sit on the bunk. I'd already taken my shoes off and I went climbing up to get out of there and made it just in time to sprawl on the deck as the rains came down in bitter cold, and I spent the rest of the night in the cabin above, where there was a cook-stove, so one side roasted and the other side froze, and I can tell you this: *Terra firma* is a Latin phrase—never did a man thank the Lord more in his life, even more than every time I arrived back in the United States from being in a foreign country. I was so thankful when we finally landed back in North Shields.

So, it's interesting to watch what they did and let me say, while Great Britain has lousy beef, they have the best fish because they don't freeze them. They gather them together, they put them on ice, and they ship them all over the British Isles and people enjoy nice, fresh, delicious, cold-water fish. I'm telling you, I discovered fish and chips that summer, that is the best stuff. But when it's Gorton's Frozen fish sticks... Well, anyhow.

So, the picture of the dragnet I had very vividly in my mind and sometimes feeling queasy as I have that picture, but you see, that's a picture of the kingdom of heaven. Because the church, the people of God are to be like that: We are to cast a broad net. You see, it's not ours to decide who comes into the net and who doesn't. We catch them all.

I learned this lesson theologically to help me explain experientially something and that's this: In a judgment of charity, I view every single solitary soul I ever meet as elect even though I know not everybody has been chosen by God. But I never meet a person that I assume is not someone that God is going to sovereignly call to himself. You see, our job as Christians is to proclaim God's word to every creature, everywhere, and that's why I love COVID-19 so much. That's not tongue-in-cheek.

COVID-19, and hurricanes as well, has gotten people outdoors, and I lived in a neighborhood where most people didn't know each other, because they commuted, and they would come out there after they got off work. They might be there over the weekend, but each person was into his or her business. But with COVID-19 and joining Sandy in her walks, I've met all our neighbors and every neighbor has an interesting story. And what we do is to engage our neighbors, and even yesterday as we were doing a shorter

walk, I saw a neighbor who was up there trying to put together a metal shed and the winds were so strong it kept blowing it over, so I asked, “May I pray for you?”

And you’d be amazed, very few people in my entire life have ever said no to that. I have had people say no, but that’s very rare, and even that, God can use in their lives. So, the church is to be like this North Sea fisherman in a great stormy sea where the waves are very high and very frightening, where you gather in everything because it’s God who sorts them out as we see there.

So, we think about this particular parable in the life of the church and there are several places I’d like us see. First of all, and we’ll come back to this again and again, look over with me, if you will for a moment, to the gospel of Luke 19. The gospel of Luke 19, because this is how Jesus does the work of the kingdom: He does the work of the kingdom indiscriminately. In fact, as you see in Luke 19 here on the page of the story of Zacchaeus, you see an interesting picture, and it’s a picture of religion and religious people, page 1,630, and how they react to things as over against how the Lord Jesus reacts.

Now, in Israel in the time of Jesus, there was no one who was considered more low-down than a tax collector. We still don’t like tax collectors, of course, but think of it in those days. Zacchaeus is a tax collector. That meant he had betrayed his own nation to work for a foreign nation that was oppressing the people of Israel. The Roman Empire was not a kinder and gentler empire. It’s described in the prophecies of Daniel as a ferocious beast and indeed it was (Daniel 7:7).

The Romans are the ones who took the impaling practices of the Persians and transformed them into the amazingly exquisite torture of crucifixion that could go on for days, and how the Romans would—far more than the barbarism of the Assyrian and Babylonian Empires, where they piled up the skulls of their enemies outside of cities—the Romans would line up men on crosses sometimes for miles. That’s what happened in the rebellion of the slave Spartacus, miles and miles of men dying over a period of many days. And so there they are, the Roman Empire. And the Roman Empire, like all empires, used terrorism. Name an empire in history that didn’t practice terrorism. Terrorism is extremely effective to get people to not resist. I mean, you think twice, don’t you, when you see your uncle and your nephew dying slowly over a period of days outside the city?

So, the Roman Empire is an empire founded on terrorism, as is every great empire, and there they are. Think of it. How would you react? Your neighbor, the person who used to be in your church, well, in your synagogue, has gone over to the enemy's side and he's collecting taxes for them. Oh, and really to stick it to you, he decides that he's entitled to a tip.

You know, don't you hate when you go into a restaurant and they automatically put a tip on the ticket? I want to decide whether to tip or not. I always tip but I don't want somebody putting a 20% tip—sometimes that happens, I want to tip.

Think about having to tip the tax collector, of all things. “Well, your taxes, Bob, are going to be X number of denarii but, um, I need a tip.” And it's amazing, we had a daughter who worked at Commander's Palace in New Orleans, which is one of the finest restaurants in the United States, and you'd think she made a ton of money, but every single tip was divided out, and the *Maitre D'* got his cut, and this one got his cut, this one got her cut, and that was the way it was with Roman tax collectors.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector. You see that in verse 2. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector, and he was wealthy. He was the *Maitre D'* of that Roman restaurant, if you will. So, he's hated. In fact, you remember Jesus said to the Pharisees, “The prostitutes and the tax collectors enter into the kingdom of God ahead of you”? So here it is, looking at it there on page 1,630.

1 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. 2 A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. 3 He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he could not see over the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. 5 When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”

What? Why? Do you know the mystery of election? I can tell you why people go to hell. People go to hell because of what they've done. People go to hell because of their deeds. People go to hell because of their own free will, choosing to disobey God and reject the gospel. But for the life of me I have no idea—election. I just have to say, “Why me, Lord? Why did You choose me?” Why? It wasn't because God foresaw good deeds: Good deeds flow out of God's sovereign grace. It wasn't because God foresaw that I would have faith, because we read in Acts 13:48, “And as many as had been ordained to eternal life believed.”

I'm struck with a hymn that's found in the Trinity hymnbook, "How sweet and awful is the place/With Christ within the doors." And the hymnwriter, Isaac Watts, asked the question, "Lord, why was I made to hear Thy voice/And enter while there's room/When thousands make a wretched choice,/And rather starve than come?"

Why? The Bible never answers that question. It never tells us. That's why we refer to election as unconditional election. There's no condition. It just leaves us with a sense of mystery and awe and wonder. "Why was I made to hear Thy voice, and enter while there's room, when thousands make a wretched choice, and rather starve than come?"

You remember when Jesus was preaching in the synagogue at Nazareth and he said, "You know, there were many widows in the day of Elijah, but only one, she was a Gentile. There were many lepers in the day of Elisha, but Naaman..." (Luke 4:25-27) And the Jewish people were enraged because Judaism without the gospel is bent towards racial superiority. What? That's so politically incorrect I can't even say it, I guess. But what I mean is: If election is because of who you are, who I am as over against God's indiscriminate mercy and grace, then you look at Jesus' words in the synagogue at Nazareth when he said those words and you gnash your teeth and you grab him and you want to throw him over the cliff (Luke 4:28-29).

That's exactly what happened because "I'm somebody. I'm not like the *hoi polloi*. I'm not like this riff-raff out here. I'm not like these Gentile dogs."

You see, grace is the great leveler of humankind and it says a Jewish person, a Gentile person, no more deserves God's grace than anyone else. It isn't my ancestors or yours. It isn't their blood. It's the blood of Jesus that makes the difference.

So, there's this anger, there's this rage. They wanted to kill Jesus because he assaulted their sense of pride in race and dignity. Wow.

Have you ever thought of it that way? God's amazing grace and here he is passing through the city of Jericho, a cursed city. You remember the curse that was just issued in 1406 BC by Joshua, "Whoever builds this city back is going to do it at the cost of his eldest and youngest son," and that curse was literally fulfilled hundreds of years later (Joshua 6:26; 1 Kings 16:34).

But listen, dear ones, this is the great blessing of life. No matter what curse might have been pronounced on you or your ancestors for something they did, or you've done, the blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanses us from all sin.

So here we are in a formerly cursed city, and here is an accursed individual who was not only accursed but probably cursed a lot because he gouged people for money for this terrorist empire, the Roman Empire and Jesus says, "Come down immediately. I must stay at your house today."

6 So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

Look at verse 7. People don't like things like this, do they? 7 All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

I tell you what, Jesus loves sinners and he only loves sinners. What do you mean? Jesus loves sinners and he only loves sinners.

He didn't come to call the righteous but the unrighteous. You see, it's only those who are blessed in the Beatitudes who hunger and thirst for righteousness, who mourn over their sins, who want to be holy but know they're not. It's only those who can sing Toplady's hymn, "Nothing in my hands I bring/Simply to Thy cross I cling." And that's the amazing wonder of grace. Jesus' electing grace reaches out and takes a hated man, a crook. I mean, he was a crook, after all. "He was a politician." No, he wasn't. He worked for politicians. He was a crook. He siphoned off money and gouged people, who resented it and hated the Romans, who were so poor.

"I want to go and be your guest today." Jesus? My home? Why would you come there? Why? And again, the wonder, the amazement of grace. Why? And so, he comes and notice what grace does, verse 8; God's grace changes people. Do you know it's the positive word, not the negative word that brings change. Look at the effect of Jesus' unconditional love for this wretched sinner. What is the effect? Verse 8,

8 ... Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

Grace changes. It's not the bad news that changes us. The bad news is the law. The law prepares us for the good news which is, God, in spite of all that you and I have ever done in our whole lives, loves us, and chooses us, and welcomes us, and puts his arm around us. God in the parable of the overly indulgent father, we call it the prodigal son, doesn't throw up in the son's face, "You know, boy, I'm going to accept you back but you really, you have done me wrong, boy." No, what does he do?

The father runs to meet him and embraces him. He has the best robe put on him. He puts a ring on his fingers and sandals on his feet, and he takes the

calf that's been set apart for some wonderful veal and he has it sacrificed, and he hires musicians to come (Luke 15:20-24). That's God's grace and God's grace changes. You see it there. Immediately this man whose fundamental problem was—what is the root of all evil? Not money. It's the love of it. And what is money? It's not just what you hold in your hands that may be no more valuable than wallpaper soon. It's what money provides. It's power. It's influence. It's reputation. It's all of those things.

Wow. "Half of everything I own, I'm giving it away."

I had a very rich friend who died in January. He was 20 years older than me. We had a very honest relationship. I knew that I was going to inherit enough money to get a home of our own when my aunt died in 1999 at 102 ½. How did she live so long? She had no children. And so, I went to my friend and I said, "Dick," I said, "you're a very, very rich man. Tell me something, how is it that you are not a slave to money?" And he said to me, "Bob, it's very, very hard and the only way is to give money away, a lot of it very, very, very regularly." He was a real Christian. I got to speak at his funeral in January.

You see, money, the love of it, "I can't give up my money. I can't give up my power. I can't give up my influence. I can't give up my reputation." When God's amazing electing grace came home to Zacchaeus, and he began to realize, "Huh, God loves me. God loves me, a sinner. God accepts me just the way I am. I don't have to turn over a new leaf. I don't have to change. I just come to Him because He came to me, and when I come to Him, He changes me." And that's why this amazing change in Zacchaeus.

Going back to Luke 13, so, as we cast a broad net to all men and women and children everywhere and gather in the motliest assortment of weird people you could ever imagine, because that's what the gospel does: It draws from the ends of the earth the most wretched of the earth, some high and mighty, some influential, some with power, some with great wealth, and some just the dregs of society—that's the call of the church. As Voncile was singing, I was struck, "Here am I, Lord." That's not for preachers, that's for every Christian. God has called us all to cast that gospel net to draw in as many as possible, to assume in a judgment of charity not the judgment of fact, that every single solitary person we meet is a Zacchaeus, one chosen by God before the foundation of the world.

Well, what does the church do with this vast dragnet of motliest people in the world, some of the most bizarre people in the world? I think about bizarre people, and I think about a member of Trinity Presbyterian Church

and she's with Jesus now and I'm thinking of Butterfly. I have to say among the people I've ever known, Butterfly was one of the most interesting. Think of an older woman dressing up as a clown, carrying bunny rabbits around and doing all these things, traveling in her own motorhome dragging her car behind it and going and reaching out to little children to tell them, "Jesus loves you." You see, that's the dragnet. It drags in people like Butterfly. Wow. And she's gone to be with Jesus and before she did, she wanted to join this church and she did. Wow. And that big net, it draws in a Larry Coleman who's going to be getting out of prison very soon. And it drew you in and drew me in.

But not all in the fish catch are true believers and we see that there. Verse 48 of Matthew 13, page 1,519,

48 When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets but threw the bad away.

49 This is how it will be at the end of the age.

Now, it's amazing. I think of another passage in John 6 for a moment, if we turn there quickly, John 6. That's one of those amazing chapters in John where he talks and says things that contain significant hyperbole. What is hyperbole? It's exaggeration but it's exaggeration to a point, to get a point across. And here it is, Jesus says in John 6 and beginning there on page 1,657 and he talks about being the bread that came down from heaven in verse 41.

In verse 43 he says, "'Stop grumbling among yourselves,' Jesus answered." Verse 44, look at that, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them, and I will raise them up at the last day." And then, wow, He goes on, look at this, look at verse 53, "Jesus said to them, 'I tell you, unless you eat the flesh,' and the word there is gnaw, unless you gnaw on the flesh "of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day." Now think about it for a moment. Does Jesus mean that we have to come up to him as the living Christ walking the earth and grab ahold of him and start biting chunks of flesh out of his body? Or is there a sacramental mystery here? I would say it is. But the point is Jesus didn't explain himself. Why? Well, we'll read further.

Look at verse 60, "On hearing it," the top of page 1,658, "many of his disciples said, 'This is a hard teaching. Who can accept it?'" Verse 61, "Aware that his disciples were grumbling about this, Jesus said to them, 'Does this offend you? Then what if you see the Son of Man ascend to

where he was before! The Spirit gives life; the flesh counts for nothing. The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life.” And that’s the whole explanation of that hyperbolic, very dramatic, grotesque, gnaw my flesh, drink my blood, explanation, this is what it really means, but then he says in verse 64, “Yet there are some of you who do not believe.”

We cast a broad net. We want everybody in this church, every single solitary soul in the entire Texarkana area, we want them in this church. Crooks, sure. I remember we had a child molester come to my congregation in Alexandria, and I went and talked to him and I said, “So-and-so,” I said, “I want you know you are welcome in this church but I have assigned a deacon to be with you at all times.” “What?” He got mad. He never came back. But he needed to be welcomed, but he did not need to be alone and permitted to wander the halls or the bathrooms because he was a child molester. Do you mean that a church should accept people like that? Yes. Yes. Yes. But you know what happened when I told him, “We’ve assigned deacons to you. You will always have somebody with you.” What did he do? He never came back.

And that’s what we read here. “‘Yet there are some of you who do not believe.’ For Jesus had known from the beginning which of them did not believe and who would betray him.” Notice what he says in verse 65, “He went on to say, ‘This is why I told you that no one can come to me unless the Father has enabled them.’ From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him.”

Ponder that for a moment as we come near the end. The church is to be very broad in terms of its invitation to all men and women everywhere, rich and poor, black and white, bond and free, Jew and Gentile, but what happens? What do you do before the end? Well, it’s very plain what happens, God’s word does two things, God’s word draws his elect, “Come to Me all who labor and are heavy-laden,” and in 2 Corinthians 2 it also drives out. It has a twofold purpose. God’s word is a double-edged sword to draw the elect, to drive out the reprobate (2 Corinthians 2:15-16). That’s its purpose.

What drives people out? I want to share with you an application that hit me this morning right between the eyes as I was reading 2 Chronicles 7:14. That’s God’s revelation to Solomon in the second great dream after the temple has been dedicated, and he talks about, “When I send famine, when I send COVID-19, when I send pestilence.”

Who sent this? This didn’t happen because God was sleeping like Elijah mocked the prophets of Baal. God sent it. God sent COVID-19. He used the

devil whose purpose was utterly malignant and malevolent, and all the things that COVID-19 has released in our land. Economic distress. Political strife and division the likes of which I have never seen in my lifetime. In that context is 2 Chronicles 7:14, “if my people,” that’s not the people of the United States, “if my people,” that’s God’s people in Africa, in China, in Russia, in England and the United States, “if my people who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face, then I will hear from heaven and will heal their land.”

And as I meditated on that verse today, I thought, “Lord, why have You not heard the prayers of Your people around the world with this disease that afflicts one sort of person one way, another sort of person another way?”

Where the Rio Grande Valley two months ago my friend, Hector Reynoso, told me that they had had over 2,000 deaths in the four county area on the Rio Grande—where I buried someone, a member of my former congregation and yet other people, it’s like not even a bad cold. Why did God send it? Why is God allowing our nation to be ripped apart politically at the present time as we wait for the election of the President which takes place on December 14? Why? Why hasn’t he given relief?

And here’s the answer, “if my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray.” All I see in the Christian church as I look at it nationally with the big preachers and sometimes small preachers and monitoring stuff, is arrogance. Arrogance. Arrogance. Arrogance. What does God want of you and me?

He wants humility. He wants brokenness. He wants you to cry over your sins. He wants you to say to God, “God, I deserve much worse than COVID-19 and economic disaster, to have all of my investments and savings wiped out. I deserve nothing less than to go to hell.” And anything less than hell is a gift of grace. God doesn’t want to see an arrogant church that is turning aside so many people. Young people look at the church today and they say, “I don’t want to have anything to do with it. All it is, is a cluster of self-righteous, self-satisfied people.”

So, what am I doing? I’m appealing to you to cast this great big net to assemble the motliest crew of people in the world and yet as we proclaim biblical truth, humbleness, brokenness, contrition, seeking God’s face and understanding God’s sovereignty on the one hand, his compassion on the other.

But the fact that he’s destroying the Christian church in the Western world, what else can you say but that as you look at this because worse is coming

on the church, particularly in places like California. What does God want? God wants a broken church made up of a broken people who like Zacchaeus, say, "Lord, You want me to entertain You?" The wonder of grace! Do you know that God of grace? He loves you just the way you are and he invites you to come to him just the way you are, and may you and I, who know the Lord, make sure that everybody in our whole circle of acquaintances knows the truth of God's amazing grace.

May we pray.

Lord, bless these words that we may be a faithful church, not congratulating ourselves that we're better than the Baptists, that we're cleaner than the Pentecostals, that we've got the truth unlike the Catholics, much less the Jews, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Jehovah's Witnesses. Lord, You want us to be broken people who lose themselves at the foot of the cross and find themselves. For Jesus' sake. Amen.