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May 29th: Deuteronomy 30 & Luke 16

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Circumcising Israel's heart. The Parable of the Unjust Steward and the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Deuteronomy 30 1. And the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed, that you may possess it. 2. And He will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers. 3. And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.

4. And the Lord your God will put all these curses on your foes and enemies who persecuted you. 5. And you shall again obey the voice of the Lord, and keep all His commandments that I command you today. 6. The Lord your God will make you abundantly prosperous in all the work of your hand, in the fruit of your womb, and in the fruit of your cattle, and in the fruit of your ground.

7. For the Lord will again take delight in prospering you, as He took delight in your

fathers, when you obey the voice of the Lord your God, to keep His commandments and His statutes that are written in this book of the law, when you turn to the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul. 8. For this commandment that I command you today is not too hard for you, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that you should say, Who will ascend to heaven for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it? 9. Neither is it beyond the sea, that you should say, Who will go over the sea for us and bring it to us, that we may hear it and do it? But the word is very near you.

It is in your mouth and in your heart, so that you can do it. 10. See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil.

If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in His ways, and by keeping His commandments and His statutes and His rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. 11. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today that you will surely perish.

You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. 12. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse.

Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying His voice, and holding fast to Him. For He is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them. When the curse described at the end of Deuteronomy chapter 29 has fallen upon Israel, is there any hope left? In chapter 30 Moses makes clear that there is a way back from such a position.

The language of returning, turning and restoring is prominent here, as is the expression with all your heart and with all your soul in verses 2, 6 and 10. Moses speaks of a twofold return, a return to the Lord and a return to the land from exile. It's a double homecoming, to borrow Jonathan Sacks' expression.

And this recalls chapter 4 verses 29 to 31. But from there you will seek the Lord your God and you will find Him, if you search after Him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in tribulation and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will return to the Lord your God and obey His voice.

For the Lord your God is a merciful God. He will not leave you or destroy you or forget the covenant with your fathers that He swore to them. The Lord will hear them and restore them from their exile.

And this chapter anticipates Israel experiencing a time of blessing and faithfulness in the

land, but then turning away from the Lord and facing the curse of the covenant described in different ways in the last few chapters. They will be in the state of exile, then they will call to mind the blessing and the curse which explain the course of their history and will wholeheartedly turn back to the Lord. It will be the act of remembrance that provides a way back to the Lord and to the blessing.

The devastating experience of the curses falling upon them need not be the end of the story. When they return to the Lord, the Lord will restore their fortunes. He will even make them more numerous and prosperous than they were before.

The Lord is not setting up His people to fail. His desire is that they thrive in His land, in fellowship with Him and He will ultimately secure the purpose of the covenant by bringing them back to Himself. He will accomplish their renewal Himself, circumcising their hearts.

Circumcision was the sign of the covenant, but the problem had always been that the covenant was just external to them, they had not taken it into themselves. And yet God promises that He will internalise the covenant for them, marking their hearts with it. The Lord had earlier charged them to circumcise their hearts in chapter 10 verse 16.

Circumcise therefore the foreskin of your heart, and be no longer stubborn. Jeremiah chapter 4 verse 4 is similar. Circumcise your souls to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts.

O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds. Yet God promises that this charge that He gives to Israel to circumcise their hearts will ultimately be something that He fulfils Himself. In Jeremiah chapter 31 verses 31 to 34 we have the great promise of the new covenant.

Behold the days are coming declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband declares the Lord. For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the Lord. I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor, and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more. The weak point of the covenant was always the wayward hearts of the people, and the Lord is promising that he is going to address this problem personally.

When this occurs, they will be blessed in all respects of their national life, as the Lord takes delight in prospering them. The covenant was never something that the Lord was ambivalent towards. His intent was always that the covenant achieve its purpose, and loving communion between him and the people be secured.

And as the people themselves will prove insufficient for this, God assures his people that he will accomplish it in their hearts himself. Verses 11-14 look back to chapter 29 verse 29. The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.

Robert Alter comments upon the teaching of these verses, remarking that in Deuteronomy, having given God's teaching a local place and habitation in a text available to all, proceeds to reject the older mythological notion of the secrets or wisdom of the gods. It is the daring hero of the pagan epic, who unlike ordinary men, makes bold to climb the sky or cross the great sea to bring back the secret of immortality. This mythological and heroic era is at an end, for God's word, inscribed in a book, has become the intimate property of every person.

The law contains great depths and wealth of wisdom, but it isn't far off from anyone. This word is in the mouths of Israel and can be in their hearts as they memorize it, meditate upon it, learn its principles of wisdom, delight in it and sing it forth. This was always the calling of the law.

In Deuteronomy chapter 6 verses 4-6, Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. Now on the immediate level that's clearly a commandment, but we could also read it as a promise.

God is promising that one day these words will be on the hearts of his people. He's going to write them on their hearts, so that each one of his people are acquainted with him, know his character and feel that they can approach him. The law is at its heart a remarkably democratic document.

It isn't written merely for a scribal, judicial or royal elite. It doesn't require the great feats of epic heroes, the deep learning of philosophers or the wandering of mystical pilgrims. It is written for the learning, understanding and practice of every Israelite, from the least to the greatest.

It isn't a shadowy and arbitrary set of principles imposed upon them from without. It's a book full of rationales, explanations, persuasion. It's designed to enlist the will, the desires and the understanding.

God is close to every single Israelite, not just the high priest, the sage, the prophet or the

king, but in his presence at the heart of the nation, every single Israelite can know what it is to have fellowship with the living God. The reality of Israel's calling and the law has to be taken into the heart of each Israelite individual. Oliver O'Donovan describes something of this.

We may say that the conscience of the individual members of a community is a repository of the moral understanding which shaped it and may serve to perpetuate it in a crisis of collapsing morale or institution. It is not as bearer of its own primitive pre-social or pre-political rights that the individual demands the respect of the community, but as the bearer of a social understanding which recalls the formative self-understanding of the community itself, the conscientious individual speaks with society's own forgotten voice. Each individual Israelite has to take the history of the nation into himself or herself, to make it their own, to make it part of the fabric of their being, to memorize this word, to reflect upon this word, to delight in this word.

They are to live out the word, to make it the source of their self-understanding, their sense of the world around them and their purpose within it. The chapter ends with Moses placing the choice that Israel faces before them in its starkest form. It's a choice between life and death, prosperity and destruction.

These two things are not symmetrical, as Moses makes very clear the Lord is on the side of life. To reject the Lord and the giver of life is to choose death. Death isn't just a punishment that the Lord strikes Israel with if they reject him, rather it is the natural consequence of rejecting him.

Heaven and earth are summoned as witnesses to the covenant that Israel is entering into. With the blessings of the fertility of the earth and the rain from the heaven, they will be sources of God's blessing to Israel. While the law generally comes in the form of command, in this sort of chapter we see that the law is also a promise.

The Lord will ultimately realize the intent of the covenant so that people enjoy faithful life in fellowship with him. However, the challenge to Israel that day is whether they will achieve this end the easier way, by heeding the Lord's voice and responding to him, or whether they must learn the hard way through experiencing the devastation of the curse. A question to consider, in what ways could we see the work of Christ and the Spirit as fulfilling the promise of God in this chapter to circumcise the heart? Luke chapter 16.

He also said to the disciples, there was a rich man who had a manager, and charges were brought to him that this man was wasting his possessions. And he called him and said to him, what is this that I hear about you? Turn in the account of your management, for you can no longer be manager. And the manager said to himself, what shall I do, since my master is taking the management away from me? I am not strong enough to dig, and I am ashamed to beg.

I have decided what to do, so that when I am removed from management, people may receive me into their houses. So summoning his master's debtors one by one, he said to the first, how much do you owe my master? He said, a hundred measures of oil. He said to him, take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.

Then he said to another, and how much do you owe? He said, a hundred measures of wheat. He said to him, take your bill, and write eighty. The master commended the dishonest manager for his shrewdness, for the sons of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than the sons of light.

And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings. One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? And if you have not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and money. The Pharisees who were lovers of money heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.

For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were untold John. Since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the law to become void. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously every day.

And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.

The rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off, and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.

But Abraham said, Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things. But now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from

there to us.

And he said, Then I beg you, Father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment. But Abraham said, They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them. And he said, No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.

He said to him, If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead. The parables of chapter 16 of Luke are some of the trickiest of all. There's a lot here to reward closer attention though.

Jesus is still speaking in the context set by chapter 15 verses 1 to 2, where the scribes and the Pharisees grumbled about the fact that he was eating with and he'll continue to speak into that sort of context until chapter 17 verse 10. While he's more directly addressing his disciples, as we see in verse 1, the Pharisees are also listening in, as becomes apparent in verse 14. In the parable of the unjust steward, it's important to keep in mind that Jesus is praising his shrewdness, not his morality.

This steward would have been responsible for managing his master's estate in his absence, sorting out rents and the like. Reference to squandering might suggest some connection with the parable of the last son that's proceeding. The steward hasn't been faithful to his master and now he faces the crisis time, imminent removal from his position.

What is he to do? And the steward comes up with quite an ingenious scheme. While he is about to lose his position, apart from his master, no one else knows this yet. So he goes around all his master's debtors and reduces their debts.

This would make him a hero in the neighborhood and his master would appear to be generous and good. The master is also now put in something of a bind. He can't easily remove the steward from his position or recover full debts without appearing grasping or courting public disfavor.

Even if he removed the steward from his position, the steward would be welcomed by people in the neighborhood who appreciated that he had taken a concern for their interests in their debts with his master. The steward was accused of wasting his master's goods. So there's a distinct possibility that he was raising the rents.

Perhaps the reduced rents were largely taken from his unjust cut. He'd been placing heavy burdens upon the people. What is the point of this parable? I believe the Pharisees and the scribes are in view here.

The Pharisees and the scribes are unjust stewards. They've been squandering God's riches, not managing his house well, laying heavy burdens upon the people and the time for their accounting to their master is just about to come. They are now faced with a

choice similar to that of the unjust steward.

Will they double down on their injustice or will they use that brief remaining window of opportunity of their stewardship to take emergency action to prepare for their future? And the action that Jesus implies that they should take is that of getting on the right side of their master's servants and debtors before it is too late. Using the remaining time and authority that they have to give to the poor and take concern for the burdens that are placed upon the poor and the vulnerable of Israel. In this parable, as in the parable that comes later in this chapter, the rich man and Lazarus, the relationship between rich and powerful religious leaders and the poor and indebted of the population is really highlighted.

Of course, unlike the shrewd steward, the Pharisees, scribes and lawyers were oblivious to their predicament and they remained unjust. The scribes and the Pharisees have not been faithful with the old covenant least and so God will not entrust them with the new covenant riches. He'll remove them from their office.

Jesus is clearly accusing the money serving Pharisees of abusing their power for the sake of dishonest gain from the poor. There is a change in the world order of foot and people are pressing into the kingdom and the Pharisees must hurry or be left out. And the use of money is especially important as a theme here.

If as a matter of urgency they gave to the poor they would be lending to the Lord and building up treasure in heaven before they are to be finally removed from their position and their power. Investing their money in such a manner would make it possible for them to be welcomed into eternal dwellings. And Jesus draws our attention to the importance of money in this picture.

Money has become a master to these people. It's a sort of idolatry that they have committed themselves to. Our powers place us under their power.

Our liberties take liberties with us. Our technologies can often render us subject to them. We can think that the economy makes us rich while enslaving ourselves to the cause of its continual growth.

It preoccupies our attention. We become fixated upon it. Jesus wants his disciples to see the danger of money.

The way that money can become a master of people and the way that ultimately that master can lead people to destruction. Jesus directly rebukes the Pharisees. They present themselves as righteous before men but God knows their hearts.

And the testimony of the law and the prophets led up to John the Baptist. But since John the Baptist the gospel is being proclaimed and people are pressing into the kingdom. The Pharisees need to recognize what is happening.

The law is not going to be overridden by the kingdom but will be validated, confirmed and fulfilled. Why is there a reference to divorce here? It seems to me that the implication is that the religious leaders were abusing their role as guardians of the law to exploit the poor and to gain wealth but also to loosen God's standards of marital faithfulness and sexual sin in their favor. As we see elsewhere in Jesus challenging of the scribes and the Pharisees they use technicalities to undermine the intent of the law.

For instance people divorcing in order to marry someone else. That is quite manifestly a form of adultery but yet being able to do it under the guise of legality dulls people's sense of the sin that is taking place. In contrast to the Pharisees' nullification of the law by their tradition and their practice, Jesus is going to fulfill and confirm the law.

The parable of the rich man of Lazarus with which this chapter ends should probably not be read as a literal account of the postmortem state. Rather it's using a particular picture of the postmortem state as a parable of something else. The rich man in the parable is clothed in purple and fine linen.

This clothing should probably remind us of the priesthood as we see in Exodus chapter 28 and elsewhere. Lazarus on the other hand is like the leprous outcast. Lazarus and the rich man are sharply contrasted in their dress, in their food and in the place where they live.

And the deaths of the end of the old order and the bringing in of the kingdom, or at least they anticipated on the near horizon. Lazarus is now welcomed and the rich man finds himself excluded and seeking the mercy of the poor man. Lazarus however is not the center of this parable.

He's someone who doesn't really do anything at all. He's passive for most of the story. Whereas Abraham and the rich man are the active parties.

Lazarus mostly serves as a foil against which the reversal that the rich man experiences and the utter finality of the state that he ends up in can be described more aptly. He also addresses Abraham directly, asking Abraham to send Lazarus to do something for him. Some have suggested that this gives a clue as to the importance of Lazarus as a figure.

Lazarus is a form of the name Eliezer and Eliezer was the chief servant of Abraham. And the rich man addresses Abraham as if Eliezer was his servant to be sent to do particular tasks, whether to quench the fire of his tongue or whether to bring the message to his brothers. If this reading were accurate, the son of Abraham, the one who addresses Abraham's father, finds himself excluded from paradise.

Whereas the servant of Abraham finds himself in Abraham's bosom as one inheriting the blessing. When the rich man finally realizes that there is no hope for him, he begs for Lazarus to be resurrected to warn his brothers. But Abraham makes clear that that is not

going to help the situation.

They already have Moses and the prophets. The word is not far from them. It doesn't require someone to come back from the dead to bring it to them.

It's in their mouths and it should be in their hearts. And indeed, if they don't accept what they already have, someone coming back from the dead won't change anything. Why does the rich man have five brothers? Why are we given a close description of the clothes that he wears? I believe it's because he's the high priest.

He represents Caiaphas. Caiaphas, the son-in-law of Annas, has five brothers, all of whom became high priests. The high priesthood of Caiaphas and his five brothers would lead all the way up to the destruction of Jerusalem.

In fact, they did receive the witness of one come back from the dead and they rejected that witness. And as a result, they faced destruction. This fits in with the parables that we've had to this point.

The parables of the preceding chapter in chapter 15 are about the religious leader's failure to welcome in the lost sheep, to welcome the returning lost sons, and the way that they are excluding themselves from the father's table, and the renewed fellowship of the family as a result. The parable of the unjust steward with which this chapter begins is about the need for dishonest managers to be removed from their office, and the urgency of them overcoming their love of money and using their money to give to the poor in a last-ditch attempt to secure a future for themselves when they are removed from their post. The parable of the rich man of Lazarus then presents us with a stark image that culminates this larger body of teaching, challenging the religious leaders for their failure to welcome and serve the poor.

The rich man, symbolizing the priesthood, will be cast out into torment, while Abraham, the father of Israel, welcomes the poor Lazarus as his child. The lines of the family of Abraham are being redrawn in surprising ways. A question to consider, this chapter presents us with images of the very rich relating to the very poor, and of people with power relating to those with debt.

Jesus' teaching around these parables makes clear that the riches cannot just be spiritualized, nor can the poverty. The relationship between rich and poor, between the indebted and those who have the power over their debts, is a matter of spiritual consequence. How might Jesus' teaching here on these points relate to teaching elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke?