“In Christ We Have Good News,” Luke 16:14-18 (Third Sunday After Epiphany, January 21, 2024)

**14**The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. **15**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.

**16**“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. **17**But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the Law to become void.

**18**“Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

PRAY

We are studying the book of Luke this spring, we are in chapter 16, and sandwiched between two far more famous parables is this little section of five verses that we’re looking at this morning. It’s often skipped over when people read this chapter. People don’t know quite what to do with it. Some have argued that Luke just threw these verses together without rhyme or reason.

But there is a theme running through this passage, and the theme is the good news of Jesus Christ. That’s from verse 16: “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, **the good news** of the kingdom of God is being preached …”

We’re going to study the text through the filter of three points: *first, Christianity is about good news, not good advice.* *Second, we’ll talk about what that good news is.* *Third, we’ll talk about how you can know you believe the good news.*

First, Christianity is about good news, not good advice. What is something when it’s called “news”? **It means a report about something that’s already happened.** It’s in the past, it’s done. **And when that event, that happening, is big enough** nothing will be the same as a result.

It used to be that you can ask anyone, “Where were you on September 11, 2001,” and they could tell you. However, now it’s been more than twenty years, so a lot of people in this town don’t remember that day, but I do. I was in grad school at Ole Miss, I left the apartment on campus where my wife and I lived to go for a run, I had my headphones on and was listening to the radio (this is before iPhones!) when I heard two planes crashed into the World Trade Center.

I ran back to our apartment as quickly as I could, turned on the TV, and saw what the rest of the world saw: first I saw the south tower fall, then the north tower fall, and our lives literally have not been the same ever since. **The world changed as a result of what happened on that day.** ***We were transformed.*** You can’t go to an airport now without being reminded of 9/11.

A lot of people remember where they were on September 11, but far fewer remember where they were on November 23, 2007. I vividly remember it. It was the 2007 Egg Bowl. Now I went to grad school at Ole Miss but I did my undergraduate work at Mississippi State, and while I want Ole Miss to win every other game of the year, I can’t help it, I pull for the Bulldogs during the Egg Bowl. I used to get really worked up about the rivalry, but moving here and having so many friends who are Ole Miss fans has moderated my zeal, so I put forth a lot of effort not to care.

That November of 2007 I was where I almost always am during Thanksgiving week: at my older sister’s house in Louisiana. The whole family gathers there. But the Egg Bowl was not televised in Louisiana that year. Back then there weren’t streaming services, you couldn’t get on radio that far into Louisiana, so my family and I were watching the Arkansas/LSU game waiting for Tim Brando to do game breaks with an update on the Egg Bowl.

For the first two hours it looked really bad if you were a State fan. They were down 14-0 with ten minutes left in the game. But then an update: Ed Orgeron decides to go for it on fourth down on the Ole Miss side of the fifty, State stops it, and a few plays later scores a touchdown. Now it’s a seven-point game. Then, a couple of minutes later, another update: State has run a punt back for a touchdown, and the game is tied. Finally, one last update: Ole Miss punted, and State drove down the field to kick a field goal to win it with 18 seconds left on the clock.

**What happened to me as a result of that news?** My Thanksgiving was transformed. I have two sisters and a niece who were Tri-Delts at Ole Miss, I have a brother-in-law and a nephew who went to Ole Miss, and because of that news my week in Louisiana was far more enjoyable than it would have otherwise been.

Here’s my point: what did I have to do, how hard did I have to work, in order to enjoy that Thanksgiving because of that good news? **I didn’t have to do anything. I just had to hear the report and believe it.**

Of course, when the good news is about sports, the effect is short-lived. The next year the game was televised in Louisiana, Ole Miss destroyed State 45-0 in the Egg Bowl (it was the worst beatdown in series history), and I had to sit there and watch it with all the same people.

**But the good news of Christianity is such that once you hear it and believe it, the effect doesn’t wear off. In fact, it gets stronger and stronger with every year that goes by.**

Christianity is not good advice on how you should live. Nothing wrong with good advice, good advice on how to study or how to manage your money or how to exercise or how to get organized is helpful. But good advice depends on you acting on it, or nothing changes in your life.

Good news changes you **just because it happened and you believe it. Do you see the difference? That’s what we’re talking about when we talk about Christianity. Good news, not good advice.**

Second, what is the good news of Christianity? Let’s read verse 14: “The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.”

I need to tell you who the Pharisees were. They were the religious leaders of Jesus’ day. Don’t just think “pastors” because they had a lot more authority and power in the culture than pastors today do. They were like doctors, professors, lawyers, and pastors all rolled into one.

It took a lot of work to become a Pharisee, but once you became one you instantly were a person of respect. They were on the top of their world, and they enjoyed it. In Matthew 23:6-7 Jesus says about them, “[T]hey love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues; 7 they love to be greeted in the marketplaces and to have men call them ‘Rabbi’ [or, ‘Teacher’].” The Pharisees loved their power and as a result they sneered at Jesus when he taught about the kingdom of God.

But Jesus looks at the learning, the position, the status of the Pharisees and says it’s all worthless. In fact, he says in Luke 16:15, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.” All the things that the Pharisees thought set them apart from everyone else, all the things that made them feel superior, it’s all detestable according to Jesus.

Friends, ***is there something about you that makes you think you are better than other people?***  Is it your money or your good looks? Is it your family or the neighborhood you grew up in? Is it the school you went to, or your job, or your brains?

Conversely, what do you constantly beat yourself up about? What are you ashamed of about yourself, because it makes you feel worthless or inferior to other people? Is it your body? Is it the car you drive, or because your family doesn’t have any money? Is it because you don’t make the money other people do, or that you aren’t married, or you don’t have the relationship with your children you wish you had?

Jesus warns us that if you build your life on any of those things, if you look to them to give you your self-worth and make you happy, you’re committing idolatry.

And to Jesus, it’s detestable. Why? I can think of two reasons. **First, idolatry is detestable because those things won’t bring you any lasting sense of happiness.** Say you lose some weight and for the first time in a long time, you like how you look in a dress. There’s nothing wrong with that. But now you’ve got to keep it off. Now you stress every day when you look in the mirror or when you think about eating because everything depends on you being able to fit into a size-whatever dress. Say you’re big into politics, and your party wins the election, and you celebrate. But there’s always another election coming, and so you can never truly enjoy it.

Now there’s nothing inherently wrong with any of those things. But if you build your life on them, then you have to chase them down the rest of your days and **what starts off as a blessing makes you miserable.**

**Secondly, idolatry is detestable because it dishonors God.** God is no idol; he is our creator, and he is worthy of all our devotion and worship. Plus, the God of the Bible is the only thing you can get that will fulfill you, and he’s the only good that, if you build your life on him, ***won’t turn you into a monster.***

Mississippi is unfortunately known as the worst state in the Union. We’re last in all the categories you don’t want to be last in. In fact, Arkansas’ state motto used to be, “Thank God we’re not Mississippi.” But there is one area in which Mississippi has excelled above all other states: writers. We have William Faulkner, Barry Hannah, Tennessee Williams, Eudora Welty, Richard Ford, Willie Morris, Richard Wright, and John Grisham. A few years ago one of these gifted, talented Mississippi-born writers [Brad Watson] died. He was respected by authors all over the country. But, apparently, he sacrificed his family for his career. He gave all his attention to his books, not to his family. He made his career an idol.

When his first novel came out, it received honors and won all kinds of national book awards, but his ex-wife went on Amazon and wrote these words in a review: “Well, it must be true that great writers are horrible human beings because this book ruined my life and my son’s life. I hope it was worth it.”

We worship idols, by nature we build our lives on false gods, and to God it’s all detestable. ***Therefore, the Bible mandates one penalty for sin: death and judgment that culminates in hell.***

Yet even though we deserve punishment for our sins, God loves us so much that he sent his Son Jesus Christ. Jesus was truly God but also truly a man, and he came to earth to live a life in perfect obedience to the law of God. Jesus never trusted in the things of this world to make him happy. He received good gifts, but he didn’t worship good gifts. He lived to worship God alone. He’s the only man in human history who deserved God’s blessing rather than his curse.

But rather than give Jesus what he deserved **God gave Him what we deserve**. Jesus substituted himself for us. Jesus went to the cross to die the death we deserve for our sins and now, in him, we who are by nature enemies of God … have been reconciled to him. We are in Jesus Christ God’s children, he loves us, and he will protect and provide for us forever.

That’s the good news of Christianity, **and it’s already happened**, all you have to do is believe it … ***and nothing else***. You don’t have to lift a finger; just believe this report I’m telling you.

You don’t have to prove yourself to God to become a Christian. You don’t have to start reading your Bible and go to church to become a Christian. You don’t even have to go six months without obsessing over grades or money or sex or your kids or anything else to prove that you’re serious about all this Christian stuff.

No, all you must do is **believe this news about what’s happened,** that God loves you and accepts you totally because of what Jesus has already done, you’re in the kingdom of God, and you truly have nothing to worry about ever again. ***Because if you’re in the kingdom of God, even the hard things that happen to you in your life will work out for your good.***

Third, how can you know you believe the good news? It’s important to ask this question, because here in the southern part of the United States so many people think they have believed the gospel. They think because they grew up going to church, or because their parents are believers, or because they actually have a lot of head knowledge about the Bible, they are Christians. But all those things can be true yet you can still not believe the good news.

So how can you know if you do? Let’s read all of verse 16: “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John [that’s talking about the last prophet of Israel, John the Baptist]. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, **and everyone is forcing his way into it**.” One old version of the Bible, the Douay-Rheims Bible, translates verse 16 like this: “The law and the prophets were until John, from that time the kingdom of God is preached, and **every one uses violence towards it.”**

The way you can know you believe the good news of is that your life is marked by “holy violence.” What do I mean by that?

Can you look at yourself and say, “I hate it how enslaved I am by my sin”? Can you say, “***I hate*** how I look down on people who have less money than me. ***I hate*** how I assume people who have more money than me are selfish and spoiled. ***I hate*** the racism in my heart. ***I hate*** how I can’t just enjoy my children for who they are but have to constantly compare them to how other kids are doing in order to feel good about my job as a parent. ***I hate*** how obsessed I am over appearances. ***I hate*** how easily I lose my temper”?

Scholars have often been confused about verse 18: “Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.” This verse feels out of place; what does it have to do with everything else Jesus is saying in this passage?

I think it’s this: in the Jewish culture of the time men could easily divorce their wives (women, however, could never divorce their husbands). One rabbi infamously said you can send your wife away if you don’t like how she cooks your meals. Therefore, many men (and probably not a few Pharisees) used women and, when they got tired of them, kicked them out of the house and moved on to the next one.

Even though laws around divorce are very different now (praise God), we might be able to apply verse 18 like this: have you ever been told that you don’t seem to care about people, but you use them to get what you want? Are you guilty of talking to someone but constantly looking over their shoulder to see if someone more important has walked into the room? Can you say, “***I hate*** how I care about people only when they can help me”?

Do you **hate** those things about yourself? And would you, if you had the ability, use violence on yourself by taking a spiritual scalpel and cutting those things out of heart to get rid of them forever?

That’s the holy violence Jesus is talking about, and **you can know you believe the good news of Jesus Christ when you see how desperately you need what only he can give.**

The truth is there is no spiritual scalpel anyone can give you to cut it out. You can’t get rid of the stuff inside of you. **But Jesus can. If you want more than anything else to be fixed, to be right, to be made into someone different than you are right now, and you are willing to ask Jesus to do it, then you can know you believe this good news.**

The Pharisees didn’t believe. They scoffed at all this. They sneered at Jesus and thought they were fine.

Are you scoffing? Be honest: are you scoffing at this message? Do you think this is the kind of thing only a religious nut would say? Then you don’t believe the gospel, and it’s my duty as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ to warn you that you are endangering your immortal soul.

But if you can honestly say, “Yes, I see my brokenness, I want someone to fix it because I know I can’t, and I think Jesus might just be able to do it,” then you have entered the kingdom of God and now you, through trusting in Jesus Christ, one of his children and ***that will never change.***

Friends, please don’t wait. Follow Jesus wherever he leads. It begins with a decision: I will follow Jesus. I will admit the broken nature of my condition and trust him. But don’t stop there. Talk to one of the elders following the service. Get involved in a church that takes the Bible seriously you can learn what it looks like to walk for the rest of your life.

And God will bless you. C.S. Lewis famously wrote, “Aim at heaven and get earth thrown in. Aim at earth and get neither.” Believe this good news and leave here this afternoon ***transformed by the power that comes from heaven through Jesus Christ.*** PRAY