

THE POWER OF UNBELIEF AND THE POWER OF THE WORD

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is one of Jesus' best-known parables. A poor man by the name of Lazarus lies sick and hungry right next to the gates of a rich man's mansion. Instead of offering to help him, the rich man ignores him as he comes and goes. Finally Lazarus dies. Later on, the rich man himself dies and finds himself in the torments of hell. Seeing Lazarus in heaven, he begs father Abraham to send Lazarus with some water to relieve his agony in the flames of hell. But his request cannot be granted; he is told by Abraham that no travel between heaven and hell is permitted. *"Then I beg you, father,"* said the rich man, *"to send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."* But Abraham replied, *"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."* *"No, father Abraham,"* the rich man said, *"but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."* To which Abraham replied, **"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets [the Scriptures], they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."** And we can say in our day and age that Someone did rise from the dead and most of the world remains unconvinced.

If a person has hardened his heart against the Scriptural promise that there is a life after this one, and that that life will be spent either in heaven or hell, he will not change his mind and accept that fact even if a dead person comes back to life and testifies to it. Such is the state of mind which the Bible calls "unbelief" or hardness of heart.

Of course unbelievers don't see it that way. They think they are being rational and objective. They say something like: *"If I were to experience even a small dose of hell or heaven, or see them from afar, or talk to someone I really trusted who had—I might believe in them. But I only hear about them through the Bible and from pastors. So how can I know that they are real?"* This may well have been the opinion of the rich man in the parable—just as it is the opinion of many people in the world today. It's the old "I'll believe it when I see it" attitude—like the one doubting Thomas had. And it sounds reasonable. But is it true?

God says no. As it turns out, a faith that is based on a firsthand experience of supernatural events or "miracles" is a shaky faith at best. The ancient Israelites witnessed God parting the waters of the Red Sea so that they could escape from Pharaoh and his armies. Then they saw him let the same waters close over the heads of their enemies and destroy them. Those are two major miracles. Yet only three days later the Israelites doubted that the same God who had parted the waters of a sea could supply them with water in the wilderness. So much for the staying power of a faith based on witnessing a miracle.

Or take the case of people who report having had a "life after death" experience. These are experiences that usually follow heart attacks or other physical traumas where a person "dies" for a short period of time and has an "out-of-body" experience before he or she is resuscitated. Some of those who have these experiences describe them as either ecstatically pleasurable or unbelievably painful and equate them with brief experiences of heaven or hell. Back in 1978 a man by the name of Dr. Maurice Rawlings interviewed a large number people who had had life after death experiences and collected their stories in a book entitled *Beyond Death's Door*. Whether you believe that such experiences are authentic or hallucinatory, one interesting fact emerged about them all: *the intensity of the experiences faded very rapidly from people's memories*. Experiences of hell which had been described as agonizing immediately after

resuscitation faded after two or three weeks. One man, who earlier in his life had been run over by a train and lost both legs, described his life-after-death experience of hell as a thousand times more painful than when he had been run over by the train. Yet three weeks later he had very little memory of the hell-experience. This doesn't necessarily mean that the experience was not authentic: *it simply illustrates the power of unbelief—or, perhaps better, the staying power of unbelief.* We desperately want to think of ourselves as rational beings who base our opinions upon facts and logic, but the truth is that we tend to believe what we want to believe and reject what we DON'T want to believe whether it's logical or not—especially when it comes to spiritual matters.

Unbelief or hardness of heart is not just a lack of belief in God or hell or heaven; it is active rebellion against God's revealed truth. In the language of the Bible, unbelief is darkness striving to overcome the light, as John wrote in his Gospel: *"The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it."* Unbelief and hardness of heart masquerade as rationality in the same way that the prince of darkness masquerades as an angel of light. Do you know how powerful unbelief is—and how irrational? Consider this: after Jesus rose from the dead He appeared to Mary Magdalene, to Joanna, to Mary the mother of James, to the twelve apostles, to James himself and to five hundred other people. He showed them his wounds and invited them to touch them. He spoke with people and he ate and drank with them. In Luke's words, *"...he gave them many convincing proofs that he was alive"* over a period of some forty days. John wrote, *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life."* (1st John"1-2) And yet Matthew tells us that when he gathered *the apostles* together on a mountain just before he ascended into heaven, *"...some [of them still] doubted."* Such is the power of unbelief. *"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."*

But the good news I have for you today is that as powerful as unbelief is, **God's Word is even more powerful.** God, who knows what is best for us, has vested His power to save us not in miracles or ecstatic visions, but in His Word—the Word that cleaved the darkness and created everything that exists. *"If you continue in my Word, you are truly my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."* The incarnate Word, Jesus Christ, and the words of Scripture, are God's means of creating faith in our hearts—faith that calls us out of darkness into His marvelous light. One of the verses of a hymn by Charles Wesley entitled *"And Can It Be?"* says it all: *"Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fast bound in sin and nature's night; Thine eye diffused the quickening ray; I woke—the dungeon flamed with light; My chains fell off, my heart was free: I rose, went forth and followed thee."*

There is nowhere that we can see the Word more powerfully at work than in the lives of children. Some of Satan's favorite weapons of unbelief—sarcasm, irony, jadedness, skepticism, cynicism—these have no place in the life of a child. You can see faith in the eyes of children every time they come up front for a children's sermon: they have no problem believing that the Word of God is the truth. Children believe what adults tell them and that's why telling them about Jesus Christ is one of our most important jobs in the church, and one of your most important jobs as parents.

I'd like to give you a little example of how it works. This last Wednesday our preschool started up. Our three-year-old grandson, Pasha, is enrolled and of course we—or at least, I—went through the usual jitters about how his first day was going to go. When we picked him up after class he was in good spirits, but when we asked him what things he had done he wasn't particularly interested in talking about it. But since he was in good spirits, we figured things

couldn't have gone too badly. When we were looking at the materials they send home with the kids, one of the things we found out was that they teach the children a new Bible verse every month. The first one they taught Pasha's class was: "*God made me.*" Still, when we asked him about it, he acted as if he didn't know what we were talking about.

The next day, our daughter was telling us that as her husband was taking Pasha for a walk that evening, he was explaining to him that he had a little of his Mommy in him and a little of his Daddy because they were the ones who had made him. Pasha replied, "No—God made me." I think that for once, my son-in-law was speechless.

That's how it works, folks! The Bible tells us that if we "*train up a child in the way he should go, in his old age he will not depart from it.*" (*Proverbs 22:6*) That's why we're honoring the Sunday School today during a worship service, and that's why we're going to do everything we can to persuade you parents to have your sons and daughters in Sunday School every Sunday.

If you will give your children a regular diet of God's Word by bringing them to Sunday School every week, by saying grace before meals and by having devotions with them at home, it will keep their hearts open and trusting so that God can mold them into whatever He wants them to be. True, the time may come when they rebel and question their faith—it happens all the time. But unbelief will never gain a lasting foothold in their heart and we have every reason to believe that in the end, they will return to their faith. It will be in God's time, not yours, but we have God's promise and God cannot lie. "*Train a child up in the way he should go and in his old age he will not depart from it.*" Isn't that worth one hour a week?

Amen.

Luke 16:19-31 The Rich Man and Lazarus

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

²⁵ "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

²⁷ "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

²⁹ "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

³⁰ "'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

³¹ "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"