

August 7, 2022
Sermon: Biblical Wokeness
Luke 12:32 – 40

There's a buzz word floating around in political space that is like the debris that fills the orbit around the earth. That word is "wokeness." Some liberals accuse conservatives of not being woke enough. Conservatives make fun of "wokeness." The word, for a time, took the place of political correctness. Both words became emotional weapons to be thrown at one another. They became words that stick to the bodies of others – critical, demeaning, hurtful words. Well, that should be a biblical response to this sort of confusion. And you guessed it, I'm making such a response: A BIBLICAL RESPONSE.

In Luke 12 Jesus sounds like he's giving us a motivational speech. His followers seem to be asleep, lukewarm, unaware. Jesus says, "Wake up!" BE AWAKE It is written large in the New Testament. Flip through the pages and read for yourself.

Keep **awake**, therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. Keep **awake**, therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep **awake**."

When Jesus was pouring out his heart in the Garden of Gethsemane, his disciples fell asleep. What a parable of the church. Jesus at work, prayer, discerning God's will; his disciples asleep. What does Jesus say? Of all things, he asks Peter, "So, could you not stay **awake** with me one hour? Stay **awake** and pray that you may not come into the time of trial; the spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak."

What will it take to motivate us to be the best possible followers of Jesus? Even the self-motivated need encouragement at times. Jesus himself needed encouragement to complete his mission. Moses and Elijah met him on the mount of transfiguration to motivate him: Law and Prophets, the word of God.

How can we be motivated to acquire the "unfailing treasure in heaven" instead of collecting the secular trash of our politics? Jesus makes it clear: "Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." I suspect that our heart is where the trash is today, but let's explore this a bit more.

What does it mean to be biblically woke? Sometimes wokeness is a matter of being motivated by someone else to shake us out of apathy, the doldrums, or from being complacent.

Bobby Knight, coaching the 1984 US Olympic basketball team was up 29 points on Spain at halftime. On the way to the locker room, he was trying to think of something to motivate his team. It was hard to think because they were playing so great and they knew it. Bobby walked into the dressing room and the first player he saw was Michael Jordan. He thought he would light into Michael a bit and the other players would think, "Man he's getting on Mike and he's having a great game. What's he going to say about us?" Knight said, "Michael, I haven't seen you set a screen the whole game. You are just passing, scoring, and rebounding. I got four players setting screens for you and you haven't set a single screen. The only way I'm going to get 5 guys setting screens on the court is to take you out of the game." Michael, grinned at Coach Knight and said, "Last week you told me I was the quickest player you had ever seen. Well, coach I'm setting screens so quick you can't see them."

One of a preacher's job is to be the motivational coach. Paul tells his church members: "Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarrelling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Wake up. Pay attention. There's work to be done.

Motivation may be lacking in the church today because of the onset of individualism and people not wanting to be told what to do or told much of anything. We can get sloppy in our worship practices – going through the motions, resting on our laurels. Taking it easy. Not doing the work. Not practicing enough. In November 1968, I was running laps in the gym with the pitchers on the Northeast Louisiana University baseball team. I was a freshman. I was still reading the headlines about being an All-State pitcher with a career record of 36-2, and I was not putting my whole effort into running laps. I wanted to pitch. The coach blew his whistle. "Kennedy," he yelled across the gym floor. "Look, I have 10 All-State pitchers and 2 All-Americans. If you don't pick it up, you will not even be the batting practice pitcher. I will have you bringing the real pitchers water to drink." Motivation.

No one wants to struggle with a Holy Book that tells us we must rethink how we have been thinking. We all think we have as much epistemic power as the next person. "Who do you think you are telling me I have to do this or that?" The Bible is a strange book for us. We are not much interested in

rethinking much of anything. Sometimes we need motivation. Persuasion. We are not all self-starters. There's a lazy streak in the church. People who flock to churches these days are more fans than followers of Jesus. Fandom rules the church. And fans are there for the enjoyment, the pleasure, the fun, not the commitment, not rethinking, not struggling with commitment.

What does it mean to be biblically woke? It means for our eyes to be opened to the teaching of Jesus. Once we lived one way, thought one way, preached one way. Now, we are "woke," and we are different. As Paul puts it in I Corinthians 13: "When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. When I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways." Harder to make this journey than we realize huh?

As a child, I believed Adam and Eve were real people, historical characters in an actual garden. My daddy believed it and his daddy before him. My preacher believed it. My Sunday school teachers believed it. I wasn't going to go against all the family tradition, all those generations of Bible teaching. If someone had asked me why I believed these things, I would have said, "I'm just carrying on an old family tradition." Raney, one of my favorite characters in a novel: "I've been going to Bethel Free Will Baptist Church for twenty-four years now, and Mr. Brooks, Mr. Tolley, Mr. Honeycutt, and all these other men have been studying the Bible for all their lives and they say it's grape juice. All added together they've probably studied the Bible over a hundred years. I'm not going to sit in my own kitchen and go against that." That's how I felt back then. But I don't believe that now. I became woke. Here, the word means I learned better. I became educated. I learned that the story was true but didn't actually happen. Being biblically woke means learning to read the Bible with a view to repentance, to change, to finding and doing God's will.

What does it mean to be woke? Sometimes being woke means learning something new in other areas of life. The Wright Brothers were determined to fly, and nobody believed they could fly. Their hometown newspaper, the *Dayton Daily News*, didn't even bother to send a reporter to find out what those Wright boys were up to at Hoffman Prairie. Later the publisher would say, "We were just too dumb." Successful businesspeople are "woke." They figured out how to be better at what they do than others. I did a little research and found out that the Wright Brothers did business with General Electric. And there's still a jet engine GE plant in Cincinnati, Ohio.

What does it mean to be biblically woke? Here's one powerful example. Saul, on the road to Damascus, was one of the great unwoke. He was on a mission to arrest, imprison, and execute all the followers of Jesus he could

find. In Acts 9:1, Luke describes the pathos of Saul: "Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest, and asked for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any that belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." This biblical description fits evangelical attitudes like a fine leather glove – an amalgamation of at least a century of perceived persecution, bitterness, anger, revenge, and a need to strike out at the enemy. This story nearly yells at us: Religious people can get it wrong, badly wrong.

Generations and generations and generations of being the people of God, and now it's as if it never counted for much. All your family and national traditions, all that you have ever known and believed, now challenged, and dismissed from the board. Every belief held dear, every moment toward which your life is pointed, now meaningless? Everything that grandfather and father and now you believed, gone? Every stance your family has taken over the decades, every sacred law, rule, commandment, and principle now discarded. Of course, Saul was bitter. Then Jesus "woke" him. This is the paradigmatic case of biblical wokeness.

Saul shows up how easy it is for highly educated, highly opinionated, really smart people, religious people to get it wrong. There's some good advice in the New Testament from a Jewish teacher of the law, a member of the Jewish Supreme Court. His name was Gamaliel, a man respected by all the people. He said, "Consider carefully what you propose to do to these men. Because if their plan is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God!" One can only imagine the outcome if smart people on both sides had enough wisdom to listen to this wise man. But we don't. Instead of listening, we keep up our bitter antagonism against one another.

Wokeness occurs when there is a seismic shift in how people are viewed and treated. Jesus healing on the Sabbath. A woman caught in adultery forgiven. Lepers by the busload healed. Jesus turning water to wine. The story insists it was the best wine. I think today Jesus would turn our grape juice to wine. Screaming Eagle Cabernet 1992 – \$500,000/bottle will be good.

Yet in our culture wokeness becomes a battle over words. This is how we do business in the USA today. We fight over words, ideas, catchphrases, slogans. None of this does a thing for actual people. Instead of just pointing out who is racist, we need to move from words to action. We think slogans will save us. If we are fighting over words, we don't have to have actual conversations with people with whom we disagree. American historian David

Blight: "Liberals sometimes invite scorn with their devotion to diversity training and insistence on fighting over words rather than genuine inequality." Cornel West on wokeness: Cornel West has argued that it's all words; it doesn't lead to collective action. How woke you are becomes more important than what wrongs you are going to right. Instead of calling people "racist," model what it means to be anti-racist.

Who do you know who really wants to compromise with their ideas? Who on the left will volunteer to be part of a conversation with conservatives? Who on the right will come to a symposium with 10 of the finest writers on democracy, its history and its philosophy, and help create a blueprint for American renewal? I am more interested in American renewal than I am in wokeness. I am more interested in an awake church than I am wokeness.

From my perspective, here in the pulpit, the church needs to stop digging around in the trash cans of secular politics and get on with the business of being biblically woke. We need to rediscover the treasure that thieves can't steal, moths can't destroy, and rust cannot consume. Trash – throw it out. Treasure – cherish and share with others. "The good person brings good things out of a good treasure." No wonder Jesus says, "Give alms." Share your treasures. Wake up. Strengthen what remains. Restore your first love for Jesus. Maintain spiritual zeal. Be about the Master's business. Get motivated. Care about people and all this human need. Be biblically woke!