

Luke 16:19-31 (NRSV)

¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Do we really hear God’s call for us to serve and to care for others, to be generous and compassionate in all things? Or do we let anxieties and problems distract us from an authentic life of discipleship?

What is this parable about? Is it about caring for the poor and disadvantaged? Is it about what happens to us when we die? Is it a warning about wealth? Or something else altogether? As always, the context of the parable tells us a lot about the point Jesus is making. This parable is “double-wrapped” in two layers of context. The first is easy for us to see; the second, not so much.

Luke 16 opens with a parable about a shrewd manager (16:1-13). It is a perplexing parable, but Jesus’ closing point can’t be missed: “You cannot serve God and money.” Luke tells us that the Pharisees, “lovers of money,” heard all that Jesus said and ridiculed him for it. After all, wasn’t wealth a sign that God had blessed the rich? Wasn’t it the poor who were coping with the consequences of God’s punishment? But Jesus tells the Pharisees that “what is prized by humans is an abomination in the sight of God” (16:15). It seems pretty clear that Jesus has the dangers of wealth on his mind, a favorite Lukan topic.

But then, Jesus tells the Pharisees that “it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter in the law to be dropped.” Next, Jesus delivers what seems to be an isolated saying about marriage and divorce.¹ But it is a response to certain readings of the Law, Deuteronomy 24 in particular, around the subject of divorce. And, if we zoom ahead to the end of today’s parable, verse 31, we see Jesus again appealing to a proper reading of “Moses and the prophets,” meaning, the Hebrew Scriptures.

So it seems that Jesus is working two angles at the same time – the dangers of wealth and the proper reading of Scripture. How could they be related? The answer lies in grasping that the Pharisees, in particular, and the Jews, in general, interpreted Scripture to say that the accumulation of wealth meant one had been blessed by God and poverty meant one had been cursed by God.² Frankly, given much of the Old Testament perspective on blessings and curses, it was a reasonable, though incorrect, conclusion to reach. Therefore, Jesus goes on to tell a parable about a rich man and a very poor man who is named Lazarus:

¹ Luke may also have in mind the connection between marriage and money. Marriages then, as in most of human history, were much more about economics than romance.

²This perspective was common throughout the ancient world. It is why Job’s friends are convinced that Job or his family must have sinned when they lose everything. Having money, being healthy, and so on were all taken to be the results of God’s favor (or for the pagans, the gods’ favor). Conversely, poverty, illness, and injury were the result of God’s disfavor. This all flowed from the perspective that God or the gods were the cause of all things – the direction of the wind, the arrival of storms, where a tree falls, or who succeeds in commerce – everything. It is hard to train ourselves to read the Bible with this perspective in view, but our interpretation improves when we do.

The rich man is not just rich, but really, really loaded. And he wants everyone to know it, spending money just for the sake of show. He's the sort of fellow who lights his cigars with hundred dollar bills. Outside the gates of his palatial home, there sits a man who is not just poor, but abysmally, irretrievably poor. He is so pathetic that dogs gather around him just to lick his sores. His name is Lazarus, which means, probably ironically to him, "God helps."

When Lazarus dies, he finds himself in the midst of God's great banquet, the lap of luxury as it were. But when the rich man dies, he finds himself in the place of the dead (Hades),³ even in torment. Indeed, it is as if the two men are experiencing a foretaste of what awaits them on the great Day of Judgment at the end of time. The distance between the two could hardly be greater. And when the rich man begs for mercy, there is none to be found. Even when he asks that his family be warned about the consequences of their wasteful, extravagant lives, no warnings can be sent – for his family has already been told all this in the Law and the Prophets. They will even have the fact of Jesus' resurrection to help them see the truth. But they will probably remain blind and, it seems, will someday join their brother.

The Great Reversal writ small

One of Jesus' driving themes in the Gospels is often referred to as the Great Reversal. The arrival of God's kingdom will turn the world upside down, the mighty and the rich will be brought low, while the poor and oppressed will be lifted up. This is even Mary's theme when she sings of her miraculous pregnancy, "He has brought down the powerful from their throne, and lifted up the lowly; and he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty," (Luke 1:52-53) all of it drawn from the OT.

In today's parable this reversal is brought down to two men, one whose corrupt and indifferent heart made him blind to the needs of the other. He assumed that, because he had money, he had been blessed by God, blessed in his self-centeredness and greed and lack of compassion. He wants mercy for himself, though he has not shown it to others. We

How much does this parable tell us about the after-life?

The short answer is "not much." As Fred Craddock writes, this parable shouldn't be used as the basis for a sermon titled "Five Minutes in Heaven." There's nothing in the parable's context that would lead us to think that we can turn to it for our much-desired information on the after-life. Rather, the parable is told in the context of reading Scripture correctly, of avoiding the dangers of wealth, and the setting of priorities.

So why do we want to read so much into this parable? Because the New Testament says so little about our existence immediately after death, what we sometimes call our afterlife. Jesus tells the rebel next to him on a cross that "Today, you will be with me in paradise" and Paul refers to his being ready to go on and "be with Christ." And that is about it. The Bible spends a lot of time on the great Day of the Lord when God's kingdom will be consummated and God's people will spend eternity with one another and God in a restored cosmos. But on the time between my death and that great day, the Bible is largely silent.

don't even have to assume that he was a "bad" man in the sense of purposely ignoring Lazarus. Rather, perhaps he was simply blind, unable or unwilling to see the needs of others even when they are thrust in his face. Perhaps Lazarus was just invisible to him. And, in some ways, that is even more monstrous a heart.

This is the deep and abiding problem of the so-called "prosperity gospel:" love Jesus and you will prosper and be richly blessed, with jobs and money, it promises. After all, doesn't God want the best for his children. . . . or so it goes.

But the New Testament, especially the gospels, tell a very different story. Story after story warns of the dangers of wealth, that wealth blinds and subverts, that what the world sees as blessings may not be blessings at all.

We are going through financially-anxious times. We are, of course, concerned for our families and our futures. It is tempting to turn inward, to focus on our own fears and concerns to the exclusion of others. But it is just such times and trials that test our faith, that force us to examine where and in whom our trust really lies. Will we see and love Lazarus more now than ever?

³Hades was the ancient Greek word for the place of the dead where everyone went when they died. It was a gray, shadowy, generally unpleasant place of limited individual consciousness. In Hades, people were no more than shadows. The Jews called this place Sheol. Hades was simply the place where the dead existed and it was a place from which there could be no return. In the ancient cosmology, God was "up there" and the dead were "down there" in Hades/Sheol. However, it is interesting that this parable includes a conception of "torment" in the place of the dead as well as having the rich man "look up" to Abraham, who seems to be with God "up there" in the "bosom of Abraham, and not in the place of the dead. By the first-century, the Jewish understanding of Hades/Sheol was that it was divided into regions according to people's moral state. I think Jesus has in mind that Lazarus is transported to "paradise," the blissful place to which Jesus will take the man who dies on the cross next to him.

Fred Craddock on the Pharisees, Wealth, and Interpretation of Scripture

Fred Craddock is one of those preacher-teacher-scholar types who is always worth reading. His commentary on Luke in the *Interpretation* series is one of the most helpful to other preachers and teachers. A copy of it is in the St. Andrew library. The following are some of his reflections on today's parable.

Let us pause to remind ourselves that whatever this story meant in other contexts, it is here used by Luke to address Pharisees who loved wealth and scoffed at Jesus' position on the subject (v. 14). As Pharisees whose religion was of the Book, their love of wealth found its confirmation in the law and the prophets, as pointed out at verses 14-15 above. Whoever is careful to obey the commands of God shall be highly favored: "Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field. Blessed shall be the fruit of your body, and the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your beasts, the increase of your cattle, and the young of your flock" (Deut. 28:3-4). The equations are quite clear to them: wealth = blessed of God = obedience to God's commandments. If, then, the parable is to address them, the rich man cannot be an exaggeration of godless materialism but a realistic portrait of a man whose wealth was taken as evidence of God's favor, a man with whom the Pharisees can identify. Otherwise the story has interest but no power. And as for the poor man, is not his condition the punishment of God on a life unknown to us but known to God? It is true that Luke reveals nothing directly about the characters of these two men, and some have faulted the story for its apparent economic prejudice: the rich go to hell, the poor go to heaven. But there is a theology assumed in the parable that Luke is attacking, a theology that says of the one who delights in God's law, "In all that he does, he prospers," but "the wicked are not so" (Ps. 1:3-4). In fact, and may this thought self-destruct immediately, the rich man could have defended his not helping Lazarus with the argument that one should not interfere when God is punishing a person. Such has been the reasoning of some church people in this country who have refused to minister to the hungry and the homeless.

This portrait of the rich man has been drawn to fit the Pharisees before whom he is placed. Whatever confirmation and support the rich man and the Pharisees found in the Scriptures for their love of wealth, it is a fact that the situation presented in the parable is a clear violation of those same Scriptures. The law of Moses specifically required that the harvest be shared with the poor and the transient (Lev. 19:9-10), and the law spelled out other ways to carry out the fundamental injunction, "You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land" (Deut. 15:7-11). And the prophets offered no release from the law:

Is not this the fast that I choose:
to loose the bonds of wickedness,
to undo the thongs of the yoke,
to let the oppressed go free,
and to break every yoke?
Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,
and bring the homeless poor into your house;
when you see the naked, to cover him,
and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?
Isaiah 58:6-7

Neither did Jesus: "But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, than for one dot of the law to become void" (v. 17). It is because of this point about the law and the prophets that for Luke the parable must continue, even though stopping at verse 26 would have already made a point vital not only for Luke but for all disciples of Jesus: wherever some eat and others do not eat, there the kingdom does not exist, quote whatever Scripture you will.

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Luke 18:1-19:27 is an entire section of the gospel devoted to Jesus' teachings on the poor and the privileged. What do you think are a few of Jesus' most important themes?

Monday, Luke 18:1-8 The parable of the unjust judge and the persistent widow

Tuesday, Luke 18:9-14 The Pharisee and the tax collector

Wednesday, Luke 18:15-30 The little children and the rich ruler

Thursday, Luke 18:35-43 Jesus and the blind beggar

Friday, Luke 19:1-10 Jesus meets Zacchaeus, a wealthy tax collector

Saturday, Luke 19:11-27 The parable of the greedy and vengeful king

Sermon Notes

Our Family Tree: The Stories of the Christian Denominations

A new series in Scott Engle's 11:00 class on Sunday mornings in Festival Hall. This has always been a much-requested series and is the first time it has been offered.

Today: *The Church of England, Methodists, and the Middle Way*

Next Week: *Rev. Kathy McLean Davis on Wesley and Wesleyanism*

All the Sermon Background Studies (now more than 350) can be found at www.thebibleacademy.com.

They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Today's parable is, in part, about the proper reading of Scripture. The Pharisees and pretty much the rest of the world at the time saw wealth as a sign of God's blessings on a person. They didn't "love money" so much for what it bought, but for the status it conferred as a God-blessed person. Have you ever known Christians who tended to see things this way? You might begin by talking about the ways this perspective manifests itself. For example, are you ever tempted to see someone in trouble and see it as a sign of God's punishment? Or see someone who seems to have it all going for them and take it as God's blessings? How might this shape the way we see the world and those around us?
2. This parable is also about the dangers of wealth, of which Jesus has a lot to say. What do you see as some of the dangers wealth poses to our growth as disciples of Jesus? Here's a verse from Deuteronomy 8:17: "Do not say to yourself, 'My power and the might of my own hand have gotten me this wealth.'" This is the sort of Bible verse to which we often pay lip service, but rarely let seep into our souls. Somehow, we have to figure out how to hang on to the goodness of hard work and accomplishment but still acknowledge that all we have is a gift from God. I bet that most of us would like to trust God more and cling less tightly to our bank accounts in these difficult economic times. We'd like to believe Jesus when he says "do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear." (Matthew 5:25). But we lack the spiritual resources to actually do so. How can we begin to wear our wealth lightly, to be more generous, and to place our security in God's hands rather than our own?