Hi,

Today’s updates:

* My noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet today on [my new Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.

Another very powerful parable from Jesus. As you read through it, ask yourself, “What point is Jesus making?”

***Luke 16:19-31 (NRSV)***

**“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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.’ But 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. Besides 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.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ 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 listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”**

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. 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. 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:

*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 - more on this below), 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 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:” it promises that if you love Jesus, you will prosper and be richly blessed with jobs and money. 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 extraordinarily 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?

*A bit more #1: 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 resurrected people will spend eternity with one another and God in a restored cosmos. But on the time between our deaths and that great day, the Bible is largely silent.

*A bit more #2: Hades?*

Hades 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. But always remember -- resurrection and the new heavens and earth still lie ahead.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott