

WPC
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Money Matters
Luke 16:19-31

The story of the rich man (called Dives in the Latin translation of the Bible, *dives* meaning “wealthy” in Latin, though that was not the man’s name) and Lazarus (not the same Lazarus raised from the dead in John’s gospel) is a parable told by Jesus in the context of Luke 16, which inaugurates a series of passages concerning money. Last Sunday we looked at Jesus’ story of the dishonest manager, in which an employee gets caught swindling his boss out of a great deal of money, juggles the books of his master’s debtors so that he’ll have some friends when he loses his job, and then gets commended by the master for his shrewdness. This week Jesus tells a parable about the contrast between a rich man and a poor man, both in life and in death. Both last week’s and this week’s parable begin the same way: “There was a rich man...”

We’ll get to the main point of today’s parable shortly, but first let’s take a look at a couple of the minor points, because this parable raises a number of questions, especially for modern readers.

Notice that the story reveals that Abraham is in heaven. Jesus makes it clear that, as Earl Palmer says, “the Law of the Old Testament (Moses)

and the prophetic messages of the Old Testament (prophets) faithfully prepare the way for every man or woman to discover God's will for life...By this teaching Jesus show his own solidarity with the Jewish sacred Scriptures; he stands *with* the Old Testament and not against it.”¹ There are some people who want to do away with the Old Testament because they feel the Old Testament God is too judgmental. This parable shows us two things: Jesus stands with the Old Testament, and you also find judgment in the New Testament and in the teachings of Jesus.

Secondly, many are struck with the description of Hades, or hell, as the place of the dead where you're tormented by flames for eternity. Hell is not a popular topic to preach on in most Presbyterian churches. In fact, many people don't even believe in hell anymore. But that wasn't always the case.

I've heard stories of years past when youth were frightened into joining the church by being asked at a campfire to quickly put their hands near the flames and then even more quickly pulling them out. They were then told to consider imagining the pain of enduring those flames forever. Don't worry – this is not a practice I'd ever consider doing with our youth! I don't believe that we should frighten anyone into the Christian faith. In fact,

¹ Earl Palmer, *Laughter in Heaven*, p. 42-3.

Martin Luther once said, “If [you] are converted because of fear [you] will later hate your conversion.”

The image of hell as a place of fire appears in another part of the New Testament: Revelation 20:14 talks about the dead being ultimately cast into a “lake of fire.” Another word used for hell in Jesus’ day is the word Gehenna, which means “Valley of Hinnom.” It was an actual place outside Jerusalem where they dumped garbage and burned the trash.² Because it was a dump, that’s where all of the flies gathered. There was a title that the Israelites used for the Evil One: Beelzebub (Lord of the Flies).³

I do believe in hell, but I don’t necessarily believe that this parable gives a literal picture of what hell is like. Since God has given humans actual free will, then we have the ability to totally reject God. Hell is when we ultimately say to God, “I reject you – leave me alone,” and God finally, reluctantly responds, “Thy will be done” and totally removes his presence from us.

All that said, though, *this* parable is not mainly concerned about what hell is like. Let’s return to the main points of this parable. Let’s keep in mind the larger context and the debate Jesus was having with the Pharisees. The Pharisees’ theology understood wealth as always a sign of

² Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible, Vol 2, p. 361-362.

³ John Ortberg, *It All Goes Back in the Box* video.

God's favor; implicit in this theology is that those, like Lazarus, who are poor are in that situation because they sinned and therefore deserve their lot in life. Jesus is saying that this is a misinterpretation of the Scriptures. He's telling the Pharisees to be careful, because there very well could be a grand reversal of fortunes in this world and the next.

The sharp contrast between the rich man and Lazarus is vivid. The rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen, is opulently rich. Purple was an extremely difficult dye to obtain. It came from a special shell and only the very wealthy could afford it. Fine linen contrasted with the everyday cloth of the common person. The rich man lived in luxury every day. He didn't need to work. For him, life was a daily banquet. He had an abundance of wealth and lacked for nothing. Even his dogs are well fed. He was so rich that food fell from his table, in an amount that evidently would sustain Lazarus. He was extravagant in every way and blind to the people in need around him.

The poor man lays at the rich man's gate, covered with sores, longing to satisfy his hunger from the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. In other words, Lazarus is at the exact opposite of the rich man on the socioeconomic scale. He's a beggar. He has no job. He's homeless. He has to be laid at the rich man's door, which leads us to believe he is physically handicapped and suffering. He has to depend on others to move him, and once in a place, he's stuck there. He's in need of medical attention because he's covered with sores. In Jewish thought, running sores made you unclean and were a sign that God's judgment was upon you. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

Kenneth Bailey notes that the saliva of a dog's mouth is sterile, and the ancients discovered that when a dog licks a person's sores or wounds, healing occurs more rapidly. “In this parable the master refuses to help the poor sick man outside his gate - but his wild guard dogs will do what they can. They will lick his wounds. Their master will not help Lazarus. They will” (Textweek, 9-26-10).

The sharp contrast between the two is true even in death: the rich man died and *was buried*; the poor man died. But in the world to come, their roles are reversed. The rich man’s character is reflected in his refusal of charity to the poor, a violation of the law of Moses (Deut. 15:4-11), not to mention basic human compassion. The other man, though he was poor and suffering in our world, now rests in Abraham’s bosom.

The second part of the story carries a different theme. The rich man carries on a conversation with Abraham in which we learn that the Scriptures – that is, Moses and the prophets – are effective and adequate for faith (v.31). Earl Palmer says that this is a parable of a man who makes a major discovery of truth, but, unfortunately, his discovery is made too late. God will not take away our free will to choose. The rich man’s brothers must decide on the basis of the witness available to everyone.

William Willimon believes this story really isn't about the hereafter. This story is mostly about this life and what we do or don't do with our wealth. While there are many good things we can do with our money, there are also many dangers to wealth: we can try to find our identity in our possessions; we find false security in our possessions; we can become blinded to the needs of others. And finally, it's hard to satisfy our craving for more wealth.

Here's a joke for you: who's more satisfied, someone with a million dollars or someone with 12 children? The person with 12 children, because he doesn't want more. It seems we're never satisfied with the wealth we have – we always want more, even if that means not showing any compassion to the poor who lay outside our gates.

William Willimon says, “Perhaps we need to reassert a gospel truth: The church is not about ‘meeting my needs’; the church is also about judging my alleged ‘need,’ about giving me needs that I would not have had if I had not met Jesus. We live in a society that has long since moved beyond the satisfaction of basic human needs to the gratification of all our wants and desires, and the expectation that it is my God-given right to have

those wants satisfied...The church is countercultural, a critique of present cultural arrangements and an incitement to resistance and nonconformity.”⁴

That’s why stewardship is a spiritual discipline as important as prayer, studying the Bible, and worshiping regularly. Stewardship helps us “deepen our awareness of God’s presence, open our hearts to God’s guidance, and nurture our understanding toward Christian maturity... Intentional generosity is a foundational spiritual discipline.”⁵

Stewardship is more about our need to give than the church’s need to receive. Trust me, God is rich enough on his own. But God has given us the privilege of partnering with him in ministry and of being his disciples. In so doing, we will gain a different kind of wealth than worldly riches.

A man was once described as someone who "knew the cost of everything and the value of nothing."⁶ That’s a striking indictment. God help us to put our trust in those things that really have value. Amen.

⁴ Willimon, Pulpit Resource, July-Sept. 2010, p. 56.

⁵ Karl Travis, Presbyterians Today, Sept. 2010, p. 12.

⁶ Lindy Black, Sermon Nuggets, Pentecost 18C, 2010.