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The Gospel of Luke
LVI. The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man
Luke 16:19-31

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On the surface, this parable reads like a simple reversal story of the sort popular then and still popular now – where, in the end, the rich man ends up afflicted and the afflicted man ends up blessed. Moral of the story: don't be a rich jerk. The problem is that Jesus' parables rarely, if ever, mean what they seem to mean on the surface. These little stories require us to dig beneath the surface to get at what they really mean – and this parable is no exception. So, let's start digging!¹

“There was a rich man . . .” Right away, we learn something about this man. He is not given a name, only a description – “rich man.” And given everything that Jesus said last week about the dangers of money and about not trying to serve both God and money, we are right in assuming that this description is not intended to be flattering. This is a “rich” man, meaning someone whose whole life is summed up by the pursuit and possession of wealth. He is not described in any other way – such as generous or kind or even industrious. He's just rich and is really enjoying the lifestyle his money affords. And his heart belongs, not to God, but to mammon.

And that judgement against this rich man is confirmed when we meet his counterpart in the story – Lazarus, the poor man. Every day Lazarus is carried by his friends to lay at the gates of the rich man's courtyard, hoping for even just table scraps from the rich man's daily feasts. And given the way houses were built in those days, Lazarus would have seen these feasts – and, more to the point, the rich man could easily have seen Lazarus. But what does Lazarus receive from the rich man? Nothing. In fact, Lazarus meets with more kindness and compassion from the rich man's guard dogs out in the courtyard than he does from the rich man himself. At least the dogs come to Lazarus and, out of canine kindness, lick his wounds in order to ease his suffering. But from the rich man – nothing. It is as if Lazarus doesn't even exist in the eyes of the rich man.

So, then, Lazarus dies and is carried by the angels of God straight to heaven. Which tells us something more about Lazarus – that, despite his poverty, he was a good man. That, despite his sufferings, he never wavered in his love for God, his trust in God. In fact, his very name, “Lazarus,” is suggestive of this – it means, “one whom God helps.” And, in heaven, Lazarus' faith in God is justified and rewarded. He is given a place at the right hand of no less than Abraham himself – a place of great honor and significance. And he now feasts upon the glory of God's table in eternity.

The rich man dies also – just imagine the poor preacher trying to think of something both good and true to say about this man at the funeral: *“Well, he always paid his bills on time.”* But, instead of heaven, the rich man is delivered instantly into the torment of Hades. And there he receives his just desserts for his devotion to money instead of to God. His just desserts for hoarding up his wealth and partying, instead of using his wealth to show compassion to the likes of Lazarus.

And remember how, during their earthly lives, the rich man could look out from his feast and see Lazarus lying in the dust, and Lazarus could look in from the courtyard and see the rich man at his leisure – well now the rich man looks up and sees Lazarus seated at the right hand of Father Abraham; and Abraham and Lazarus could look down and see the rich man in his torment. At this point, given his suffering, we would expect the rich man to cry out in repentance and regret for his sin against God and against Lazarus – an earnest, heartfelt plea for mercy for such a malformed and selfish life on earth. But nope! Instead, what he says is this: *“Father Abraham, command Lazarus to come bring me a cup of water!”* He still thinks he is large and in charge, even in the flames of Hades! And, more to the point, is absolutely unrepentant before God and towards Lazarus. In fact, he still doesn’t really see Lazarus as a person he has wronged – he sees him still as a poor man to be ordered about to serve his needs, as if his physical comfort were still the only thing which mattered to him. Not even an apology to Lazarus, just a command – *“Tell him to fetch me some water!”*

Abraham rebukes the rich man, reminding him that he had his good things in life, while Lazarus had none – implying that the rich man had his chance to bring Lazarus some water on earth and did not, so why should Lazarus bring him water now. And so, says Abraham, you have earned your torment, while Lazarus is entitled to his comfort. And then Abraham adds that, in any case, there is fixed between heaven and Hades a chasm no one can cross – even those who would want to pass from here to there cannot do so. Which sounds a lot like Lazarus had whispered in Abraham’s ear that, in spite of everything, he would be happy to take water to the rich man. Lazarus, the one helped by God, and with a heart after God’s own heart, is willing even to help the man who could have helped him on earth and did not.

The rich man now changes his tune – slightly. *“Then at least command Lazarus to go to earth to warn my five brothers about where I am and what I am suffering, so that they won’t share my fate.”* Sounds almost thoughtful, doesn’t it, the rich man caring so about his brothers? But notice he still sees Lazarus as just a worthless bum to be commanded to serve the rich man’s own interests. Little side note here – I’ve long wondered if that verse isn’t where Charles Dickens found his inspiration for A Christmas Carol. Marley coming back from the dead to warn Scrooge to change his ways before it is too late. It makes for a good story – but Father Abraham says it cannot be done. More than that, Abraham tells the rich man that his brothers already have Moses and the Prophets – the Bible, in other words – to tell them all they need to know about how to live on earth to avoid the rich man’s punishment. The rich man presses his case: *Yes, but if someone came back to them from the dead, then they would really listen!* Abraham rejects him again – that if they won’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, the very Word of God revealed to them, then even a man come back from the dead won’t impress them. Thinking of what is ahead for Jesus, and of the resistance of the scribes and Pharisees even after His resurrection – well, it is hard not to see Abraham’s point.

And there the story ends, with Lazarus in heaven and the rich man in Hades – and justice seemingly done, the tables turned, and so forth. And if the story had ended with just that much – Lazarus comforted in heaven and the rich man suffering in Hades, then that would indeed be the meaning of this parable for us: don't be a rich jerk on earth, because if you do you will get what's coming to you in the end. Or, maybe a little more positively stated: that we should, in this life, keep our eyes, and our wallets, open to the needs of others – especially to those we are tempted to overlook as “beneath us” or “unworthy of our compassion.” And certainly this is an important theme greatly present in Scripture, and one we should indeed take very seriously in our lives here on earth – Jesus' command that we should love our neighbor as ourselves.² But the parable doesn't end simply with Lazarus in heaven and the rich man in Hades, does it? Which means that this message, however useful and important, is not the real message of the parable for us.

The real message of this parable for us is what happens, what is said, after Lazarus is in heaven and the rich man is in Hades. Indeed, the crucial words of this parable – spoken twice – are what Abraham says to the rich man about his brothers. That not only should they live on earth with their eyes open to those in need, but – and even more importantly – that they are to live, we are to live, with ears and hearts and minds open to the Word of God. In this story, you and I are those five brothers, still with a chance to repent and to get life right.

And again, Abraham says this twice – that if the brothers are to avoid the fate of the rich man, they already have everything they need to do so. They just need to pay attention to it, take it seriously, make it a priority, and take it to heart. They already have the Word of God spoken to them – something of far more value than a big bank account and a feast at every meal and Hades to pay for it. What Jesus is saying in this parable is that the single most important thing we can do in this life is to learn to listen to the Lord our God speaking to us. Learn to love His Word, learn how to take it to heart and put it into practice. And so learn to love the Lord our God above all else, in all else, before all else, including money. For this is the firm foundation upon which, alone upon which, a Kingdom of heaven life is built on earth, in preparation for eternity. To love God first.

So, in that sense, then, this parable acts as a summing up of everything Jesus has been teaching us since the start of chapter 15. Luke 15 – those three parables of God's gracious love searching for us in this world, wanting to find us and rescue us and bring us to dwell with Him in eternal joy. And then Luke 16, beginning with that provocative parable about the dishonest manager – in which Jesus tells us that the only right response to God's gracious love, and the only solution to our humanly insurmountable problems of sin and death, is to bet the whole of our lives upon His grace. And then, last week, those challenging words about then letting God's grace rebuild our lives – our values, our goals, our pursuits, and our daily living. Putting God first, and the things of God, the commands of God – before all other earthly ventures and values.

And now, at the end of chapter 16, this parable of Lazarus and the rich man – telling us to hear what He has just said to us, these teachings of Jesus. To hear them, to receive them, to let them live in us and through us before it is too late. To choose Jesus and His Word above every earthly pleasure and treasure – if we desire to live a life here on earth that has meaning and depth; and then to come to know that heavenly joy which shall be without end. That's what Jesus is telling us in this parable – that the single most important goal and daily work of our lives must be

to hear and to respond and to build our lives here and now upon His offer to us of grace, amazing grace.

Which reminds me of another story. Not as good as any of the ones Jesus has told us – but a good story, nonetheless. And one that also summarizes all that Jesus has told us today and since the beginning of Luke 15. Here it is: Once upon a time there lived a man with a deadly disease. It filled him with great sadness, for he had dreamed dreams and seen visions – and now they would never come true. One day he heard there was a God who could do wonderful things for people, so he decided to visit this God.

“What is it you want?” asked God.

“I have dreamed dreams and seen visions, but now I am to die,” replied the man.

“Tell me, what is it you have dreamed, and what are your visions?” asked God.

“I have dreamed of a home, a home of my own to live in. A big home with many rooms and fine furniture.”

“You had only to ask,” said the Lord.

And with a snap of His fingers, God created for the man a beautiful home – a castle, far bigger than the man had ever imagined. Too many rooms to count, and all of them filled with beautiful furniture. Full of joy, the man entered the house and began to explore it. But it was so large, that before long the man began to grow faint from the exertion. And he remembered his illness and returned to God with fear and sadness:

“What is it you want of me?” God asked.

“I have dreamed dreams and seen visions, but I am still going to die,” the man said.

“What have you dreamed?”

“I have dreamed of food and clothing fit for a king. Food such as I’ve never eaten before, clothes of rich and beautiful cloth.”

“You had only to ask,” said God.

And with a snap of his fingers, God covered the castle table with the finest foods, and clothed the man in the finest robes. And the man walked through his magnificent castle in his beautiful clothes. He sat at the banquet table overflowing with wonderful dishes. And he was filled with happiness. But as he ate, his stomach began to grow queasy, and he remembered his mortal illness. And looking into a silver goblet, he noticed in his reflection that the beautiful clothes only seemed to emphasize the pallor of his skin. And he was again overcome by fear and sadness, and returned to God:

“Why are you still sad and fearful?” asked God. “Have I not fulfilled your every dream and vision? What more could you want?”

“To be cured of this mortal illness,” said the man. “Then I will be truly happy. Will you give me that?”

“No,” said God. “I’m sorry, but I cannot give you that. No man can be cured of this illness. But I can give you one thing more, something which is even better.”

“What could be better than being cured from a mortal illness,” asked the man.

And God answered: “I, too, have dreamed dreams and seen visions. What I can give you is my dream, my vision.”

“Will that make me happy in spite of my disease?” asked the man.

“Very happy indeed,” God answered.

“Then give me your dream and your vision,” said the man.

“You had only to ask,” said God.

And with another snap of His fingers, there was Jesus, standing before the man. Standing on the shattered remains of a broken cross, standing in front of an empty tomb. Jesus, who had been dead just as this man would one day be dead, now alive and well and smiling. And after a moment, the man also began to smile. And then he turned and walked away from the castle, away from the fancy clothes, away from the fine food. The man just walked away from them as if they were nothing – which they seemed to him now to be. He walked now with Jesus, following Him wherever He led. And he was no longer afraid of his mortal illness – in fact, he sensed that, with Jesus, he no longer had anything to fear. And he was happy, happier than he had ever been – for now he had seen, and come to live, a dream and a vision that was better than anything he had ever seen or lived before. In fact, he was happy the rest of his days. And he truly lived until he died. And when he died, he was carried by the angels to heaven, where he lives forevermore in a joy and peace and love far beyond anything he had ever dreamed.³

Jesus. Brothers and sisters in Christ, that’s what it’s all about, these lives of ours. Jesus and His amazing grace. Don’t wait until it is too late to figure that out.

¹ My reading of this parable was greatly helped and informed by Kenneth E. Bailey, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2008), pp. 378-396.

² Luke 10:27 (29-37).

³ Lynn A. Miller, Firstfruits Living (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1991), pp. 37-40