

BLESSED ARE YOU WHO ARE POOR

Luke 16:19-31

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Series C)

September 25, 2022

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

Ny Stavanger Free Lutheran Church, Buxton, ND

The gospel lesson comes from *The Gospel According to Luke*, chapter 16, verses 19 through 31. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us what will fail and what will last. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From Luke 16, beginning at verse 19, we read in Jesus' name.

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’ ”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

In the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus turns everything around. The rich become poor. The poor become rich. Those who are full now hunger. Those who hunger now are satisfied.

Earlier in *The Gospel of Luke*, back in chapter 6, Jesus said, “Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry, for you shall be satisfied” (6:20-21). Then he said, “But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry” (6:24-25).

Those words come to pass in this story. And we hear them echoed by Abraham when he says to the formerly rich man, “ ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish’ ” (6:25). In the Kingdom of Heaven, Jesus turns everything around. The rich become poor. The poor become rich. Those who are full now hunger. Those who hunger now are satisfied.

At first glance, this story might sound like a parable. Jesus often taught in parables. They were stories, probably fictional, at least most of the time, that Jesus used to illustrate something

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about the Kingdom of God. For example, in the last few weeks we've heard the parables of the lost coin, the lost sheep, and the dishonest manager. There are many, many more. And in Jesus' parables, certain characters, objects, or events represent something in the Kingdom of God. They're metaphors. So in one parable, there's a shepherd who represents Jesus. In another parable, there is some seed that represents the Word of God. In another, some wicked tenants represent the chief priests and Pharisees. In a few others, a wedding feast represents heaven. There's always a metaphor. But the story of the rich man and Lazarus is different. There are no metaphors. Heaven is not represented by something else. Heaven is heaven. The angels are the angels. Abraham is Abraham. Hades is Hades. The rich man is the rich man. And Lazarus is Lazarus. There are no metaphors. Things are simply what they are. And this leads us to think that Jesus is not telling a parable. He's telling a true story. And here's the kicker. Here's the big reason why we should think of this not as a parable, but as a true story: the poor man has a name. Nowhere in any of Jesus' parables does anyone have a name. Not the shepherd, not the prodigal son, not the good Samaritan, nobody. But in this story, the poor man has a name. And his name is Lazarus. Therefore, we should recognize this to be a true story. There really was a poor man named Lazarus. And he really died, and he really went to heaven. There he was comforted. And there really was a rich man. And he really died, and he really went to Hades. There he was in torment.

Now I suspect, I can't prove this, but I suspect that at least some of the people in Jesus' audience knew these two men. I think that's one of the reasons why Jesus names Lazarus. And if the people knew Lazarus, they would also be able to identify the rich man, even though Jesus doesn't name him. Because this was Lazarus' spot. He would lay at the gate of this rich man's house. So I suspect some of the people in Jesus' audience remembered Lazarus, and they remembered where he used to lay, and so they also remembered this rich man. Perhaps some of those Pharisees even remember walking past Lazarus on their way to a feast at the rich man's house. And they remember that both of these men died. But after that, they don't know the rest of the story. But now Jesus tells them the rest of the story. Lazarus was carried to heaven where he is comforted. But the rich man went to Hades, where he has been in torment ever since. The man they honored was dishonored by God, and the man they thought nothing of was honored by God.

And that seems to be the other reason why Jesus names Lazarus, but not the rich man. That rich man, who was honored in his life, is now forgotten. But Lazarus, this poor man whom few people gave any regard to in this life, will be remembered by name until the end of time.

There is much we can learn from this story. It certainly teaches the concern we should have for the poor and needy among us. And we clearly see Jesus' concern for them. Now Jesus doesn't say, "Therefore, you should give to the needy." He doesn't say that here. There are other places where he commands his disciples to care for the poor and needy (e.g., Matt. 19:21; Luke 14:13), but he doesn't say it here, and it's not really the main point of the story. But we clearly see his love for the poor and needy. And Jesus at least implies that the rich man should have cared for Lazarus in this life. So while it's not the main point of the story, we can see it as a secondary point. God desires for us to care for the poor and needy.

I see passages like this one politicized ... a lot. And it's not always this passage. Sometimes it is. Sometimes it's the parable of the good Samaritan. Sometimes it's another passage. Sometimes it's just a general appeal to Jesus' concern for the poor. I don't know how often you see it, but I hear it or see it probably a few times a week. The idea is that Jesus commands us to

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care for the poor and needy. Therefore, government should fund things like healthcare, social welfare programs, or student loans. Now, you can support those things. I'm not preaching against them. But you really can't use Jesus to do it, because Jesus does not command government to do those things. And the Bible, as a whole, does not command the state to provide social care for the poor. It commands other things, especially military defense and criminal prosecution (e.g., Rom. 13:1-7), but not social programs. Now this does not forbid government from doing these things, nor does it command government to do these things. So you can argue for those things on the basis of logic, reason, or just the general welfare of mankind. But you can't use Jesus to do it, because Jesus does not command government to care for the poor and needy. Do you know who Jesus does command to care for the poor and needy? You! And me! He commands his disciples to do it. So a Christian can be against government social care. But, assuming you have some ability to do so, you had better be sure that you are doing the thing you don't think government should do. And a Christian can argue for government social care, but you had better not think that paying your taxes or voting to use other people's taxes fulfills your duty to the poor. Assuming you have some ability to do so, Scripture commands you to do it. This may involve giving to charities or, better yet, individuals in your circle who need help. God commands us to care for the poor.

And we see that Jesus' greatest concern for the poor is not that they would become rich in this life, because this world is fading, but that they would become rich in heaven.

There are other things we should learn from this passage. It teaches that heaven and hell are real, and real people go to both places. Jesus uses the word "Hades" here instead of "hell." But we see that it's a real place. And it's a place of torment and flame. There also is no pathway between heaven and Hades. Those in heaven cannot cross over, and those in Hades cannot cross over.

And it's interesting that the rich man doesn't come to repentance in Hades. It's not like he realizes his mistake and asks for forgiveness. He asks for mercy, but it's not the kind of mercy a person of faith would ask for. He asks for Abraham to send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and cool his tongue. He actually thinks Lazarus should walk into the fire to serve him. He still thinks that he is better than Lazarus. We might have the impression that hell is filled with people who are sorry for their sins, and they're trying to repent, but it's just too late. That's makes God seem cruel and unforgiving. But that's not the picture we get here. Here we get a picture of a man who persists in his sin, even in hell.

We also see something about the power of the Word of God. The man has concern for his brothers. Apparently he cared about them in his life. So his second request is that Abraham would send Lazarus to warn his brothers. But Abraham says no. **"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead"** (16:31). Signs and wonders do not really create faith, but the Word of God does. If someone rejects the Word of God, nothing is going to convince them. But God sends his Holy Spirit to convert hearts and minds through his Word.

There's something ominously prophetic about the last part: **"Neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."** Perhaps you remember the other Lazarus, not the poor beggar we read about here, but the brother of Mary and Martha. He was a friend of Jesus, and he died. And after four days, Jesus brought him back from the dead. There were many witnesses. And some of the Jews believed in Jesus, but others still did not. The chief priests and the

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Pharisees actually plotted to kill Jesus because of it. And they even planned to kill Lazarus (John 12:9-11).

And it's especially prophetic of Jesus. Even after Jesus himself was crucified and raised from the dead, they did not believe. They did not believe, because they did not want to believe. And this is simply human nature. We believe the things we want to believe.

The Pharisees had fallen in love with money. It had become their god, and it pushed out their trust in the one true God. Just a few verses before this story, Luke says that the Pharisees were lovers of money. That comes right after the parable of the dishonest manager. Luke says, "The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him" (16:14). They did not want to believe in Jesus. No matter how many signs he performed, even if he raised the dead, and even if Jesus himself rose from the dead, they would not believe, because they had another god. And they had learned to trust this other god.

That's the danger of having wealth in this world. It's not like God just hates rich people. He "desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:4). And heaven isn't just about making up for the inequity of this world. That's not why Lazarus went to heaven and the rich man went to Hades. They both received the reward of the god they trusted in. Lazarus had no earthly wealth to trust in, so he trusted in the one true God. He trusted in Jesus and was saved. But the rich man's heart was pulled away by his wealth.

Wealth creates a false sense of security. If we have it in this life, and most Americans do have it, far more than people in other countries or in other ages ... If we have it in this life, we learn to trust it. We get the impression that it can fix any problem. If you're hungry, you can buy some food. If you're cold, you can buy a sweater and heat your house. If you're tired of walking, you can buy a car. If your car breaks, you can pay someone to fix it, or you can just buy a new one. If you're bored, or lonely, or sad, money probably has an answer, even if it's just a temporary answer. In Ecclesiastes, King Solomon says, "Money answers everything" (10:19), or at least it seems to, and Solomon knew that very well.

The rich have little or no idea what it means to be hungry or cold. Their wealth shields them from all the signs that their bodies will fail. But the poor know these things. The poor know that their bodies will fail, and they know that this world will fail them. They see the world for the way it really is. And this makes them more open to an eternal Savior.

But the rich have a false sense of security. It's like a frozen lake in the winter time. Imagine that all you know is winter, like you've been living in Narnia during the reign of the white witch. Every lake is frozen and completely safe to walk, ski, or even drive on. But then spring comes for the first time in your life. And this is completely new to you, so you don't know that the ice is getting thinner, and thinner, and thinner. But then it fails you. That's money in this life. It works in this life. No doubt about it. But when things change, and they will, it will fail you. This dark and cold world will give way to the glorious warmth and light of the new creation. And the money that proves so powerful in this world will fail, and you will sink, like the rich man, into the tormenting flames of hell.

Jesus desires to spare us from this. That's why he tells this story. The point is not, "You rich people are all going to get what's coming to you." Jesus came to save the poor and rich alike. He suffered and died for the sins of the rich and poor alike. The point is that the one who trusts in Jesus will be saved.

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We are all poor. We all need to recognize this. In the economy of earth, some are rich, and some are poor. But in the economy of heaven, we are all poor without Jesus. We have nothing that is worth anything there. Your money is no good there. The exchange rate is zero. Your good works are no good there. Everything that seems pretty good, or at least above average on earth, is garbage in heaven. In the economy of heaven, we are all poor without Jesus.

He is our great hope. He is the only wealth that will last. He gave up the glories of heaven in order to be born like us, to suffer with us, and to suffer for us. He died with us and for us, so that he can bring us with him through his resurrection. He accepted poverty so that he can lift us from the universal poverty of this world and give us the eternal wealth of the new creation. **“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.”**

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.