

Luke 16:19-31  
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Darrell W. Johnson

### **Listening to See**

(Series: "Parables of Jesus: Posing The Scandal of His Good News")

Since the beginning of the fall, we have been engaged in a series of studies in the parables of Jesus recorded in the gospel according to Luke, and we have been experiencing one of the major reasons He speaks in parables. Jesus is making us think! Sometimes really hard! Like last Sunday, when we grappled with the Unrighteous Steward, with what nearly every scholar of the gospels all the most difficult of all Jesus' parables!

Jesus speaks in parables not, as it is commonly thought, to make things simpler. He speaks in parables to challenge and expand our understanding of reality. He has designed His parables to initially disorient us, unsettling our understanding of "the way things are" and are "supposed to be," so that He can then reorient us, centering us in His understanding of "the way things are" and are "supposed to be."

That is, through His parables Jesus is converting us: calling us out of our understanding of what the Kingdom of God is all about, and what the God of the Kingdom is like, so that He can bring us into His understanding of the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom.

Sometimes we "get it" right away. But more often than not it takes some time for the converting to take place. Through His stories, Jesus plants the seed of His good news, and one day the seed bears fruit. One day, we wake up and realize that we are living in a very different world than we had known before He spoke, with a wonderfully different God than we had known before He spoke.

Today we will listen to Jesus tell His parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, as it is usually called. How many of you have ever studied it? Not many. For the fact is, the parable has largely been ignored. Oh, it is taught in Sunday School as a kind of morality play. But it has, for the most part, not yet gotten the hearing it deserves.

Why does Jesus speak this parable? Luke tells us that Jesus speaks the parable to Pharisees (Luke 16:15). Pharisees are, for the most part, well-motivated people. They wanted to be holy; and they wanted to help others be holy. They wanted to know the Holy God and to be in right relationship with the Holy God. So do I. So do you.

But a number of factors kept the Pharisees from fulfilling their great longing. One of them was their problematic relationship with wealth. Right before he records Jesus' parable, Luke says, "Now the Pharisees who were lovers of money" (Luke 16:14), which tells us that in His parable of the Rich Man & Lazarus, Jesus is going to, in some way, address how money relates to our seeking to know God.

But something more is going on in the story, something more fundamental. William Barclay says of this parable that it is "... constructed with such masterly skill that not one phrase is wasted" (*Luke*, 213). Constructed unto what end?

We get at the primary burden of any parable by paying attention to the unexpected turn, or turns, in the story line. As I read the Rich Man and Lazarus, the unexpected turn comes when the Rich Man, having lived his whole life in this world totally for himself, in the after life feels concern for his five brothers. He says to Abraham "I beg you, father, that you send him [Lazarus] to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, lest they come to this place or torment" (*Luke* 16:27). All his life, on this side of the divide, he lived pre-occupied with his own pleasure. He apparently never expressed any compassion toward anyone. But on the other side of the divide, he has one a great moment; he feels deeply for his brothers.

The burden of the parable is, therefore, the well-being of those still living on this side. The burden of the story is not the Rich Man; his fate has been settled. The burden of the story is not the poor man; he is in a great place! He has experienced the "great reversal" of Kingdom justice. Although, we should note that he does not gloat over it. The burden of the story is the Rich Man's brothers ... who need to be warned.

So, let us now walk line-by-line through the parable, "constructed with masterly skill that not one phrase is wasted." And then, let us draw out that to which Jesus wants us converted. I grew up being told that a parable has only one point. Scholars now rightly argue that parables can have many points. So, let us walk through the text, observing and commenting on the details of the story. And then suggesting the cluster of truths Jesus wants Pharisees, and disciples to know.

Walk through:

*"A certain rich man"* (v. 19). Such an introduction is typical of the parables in Luke. In Matthew the introduction is typically, "the Kingdom of heaven is like..." In Luke it is, "a certain man," or "which one of you?"

*"Habitually dressed in purple"* (v. 19). In that day, purple cloth was extremely expensive. Only the super rich could afford it. It was the colour of royalty. Whether this rich man was from a royal family or not is not clear. But he liked to portray himself as royal. "Everyday'," says Jesus. Every day he dressed in purple.

*"And fine linen"* (v. 19) The word refers to the very fine Egyptian cloth used for the best underwear. White linen garments "underneath a purple robe – this was the sign of the highest opulence" (Joel Green, *Luke*, 605).

*"Joyously living in splendour every day"* (v. 19). The words Jesus uses mean living "sumptuously or making merry brilliantly and magnificently. The picture is one of limitless wealth and indulgent, luxuriant prosperity" (Lloyd Ogilvie, *The Autobiography of God*, 310).

*"Habitually"* (v. 19), *"Every day"* (v. 19). Including the Sabbath! This means that this particular rich man was so absorbed in his own pleasure that he ignored God's commandments, and he made his servants disobey God by forcing them to work on the Sabbath.

The picture thus far is of a human being so self-absorbed he pays no attention to the world around him. He uncritically accepts a “two-tier society” (Arland Hultgren, *Parables*, 112). There are the “haves” and the “have-nots.” It is the way it is. He luxuriates in being a “have.”

*“And a certain poor man named Lazarus”* (v. 20). This is the only time in all of His parables that Jesus names one of the characters. Lazarus is the Latinized form of the Hebrew name Eleazer which means “God is my help,” or “One whom God helps.” This Lazarus... about whom we learn more in a moment ... one who God helps? It appears to be precisely the opposite. This Lazarus seems to be abandoned by God. Some would even say punished by God. But no. He is one whom God helps, as the story will make clear. The rich man does not help the poor man.... but God does.

*“Was laid at his gate”* (v. 20) – at the rich man’s gate. The rich man has insulated himself in a “gated-community” to protect himself from Lazarus-type people.

*“Was laid”* (v. 20), implying Lazarus was an invalid. He has to be carried each day to the gate. To be placed in front of the house of the only man in town who has the resources to help. The word translated “laid” (*ebebleto*) suggests he was actually thrown there, as an act of contempt. By his family, who could not care? By his neighbours, who could not care? By his friend or neighbours who did not care? This suggests that the suffering of Lazarus goes deeper than physical. It is relational, and therefore, psychic. No one cares... except God. Lazarus, “one whom God helps,” the reality of which sustains him in his misery.

*“Covered with sores”* (v. 20). Suggesting a disease like leprosy, which would explain why he was thrown at the gate. No one wanted to be near him out of fear of catching the disease.

*“Longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man’s table”* (v. 21). In that day people – rich or poor – did not eat their meals using forks or knives or napkins. The food was served in a big, common bowl. Loaves of bread were passed around. People broke off chunks of bread, dipping them into the bowl, scooping up the food, and eating it with the bread. And, given no napkins, they also used chunks of bread to clean their hands. They would break off a chunk, wipe their hands with it, and then throw it away. That is what Lazarus longed to eat! The unbitten-into bread chunks used as napkins.

*“Besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores”* (v. 21). A disgusting picture. People in the first century did not keep dogs as pets. Oh, some did. But dogs were the vacuum cleaners. They ate up what was dropped from the table. The dogs were getting what a human being longed to eat. But in that disgusting picture there is compassion. In fact, the picture is primarily of compassion. The text should be rendered “But [*alla*] the dogs were coming and licking his sores.” The “but” sets up a contrast. The Rich Man could care less... but the dogs....

As Kenneth Bailey argues, in the story the dogs are not abusing Lazarus ... they are caring for Lazarus! “Dogs lick their own wounds. They lick people as a sign of affection.” Recent medical studies have shown that the saliva of dogs contains “endogenous peptide” antibiotics, which can actually facilitate healing. The rich man ignores Lazarus, but not the dogs. They care. This says something about the character of Lazarus; a gentle human being, whom dogs did not fear, whom dogs sensed was in need.

*“The poor man died”* (v. 22). This time he is not named. The implication being he did not have a public funeral. A discarded, forgotten human being.

*“And was carried away by the angels”* (v. 22). This is the beginning of a great reversal in the story. The rich man... and the community .. may have forgotten Lazarus. But God has not. God sends the angels to bring Lazarus home. God sends His heavenly entourage to escort His chosen one into eternal life. We are reminded of God coming for Enoch (Genesis 5:24) – “and God took him up,” and we are reminded of God coming for Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) – “went up in a whirlwind.” “Carried away by the angels” suggests great honour. And it suggests ascending into heaven (Hultgren, 113, fn. 12)

*“Carried to Abraham’s bosom”* (v. 22). Abraham is the father of faith, and the father of many nations brought to faith. Abraham is the one in whom all the families of the earth are blessed (Genesis 12:1-3). “Abraham’s bosom,” therefore, is a picture of the fulfillment of God’s promise to bring people from all over the world into the banquet of the Kingdom of God. It is also a picture of the intimacy of heaven. The word “bosom” makes me think of what the apostle John says in the Prologue to his gospel: “No one has ever seen God at any time. But the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father” .... referring to Jesus (1:18). And it makes me think of John, lying in the bosom of Jesus at the last Supper (John 13:23).

Lazarus is “carried away.” And, as he once was laid on the ground before the rich man’s gate, he is now laid into the bosom of the great patriarch.

*“And the rich man also died and was buried”* (v. 22). “Was buried” implies he does have a public funeral ... likely with all the pomp and ceremony possible. Laid in a tomb, likely covered with precious jewels.

*“And in Hades he lifted up his eyes”* (v. 23). In the Bible, Hades is the place of the departed. It is not a permanent place, but a place of waiting for one’s final destiny. It was thought that both heaven and hell were close to Hades. Technically, the terms are Gehenna and Paradise. Gehenna, the place of burning fire, like the town garbage heaps. Paradise, the place of comfort and joy. Both the Rich Man and Lazarus are in Hades. But the Rich Man is already moving into Gehenna. And Lazarus is already moving into Paradise.

Thus, *“being in torment”* (v. 23). The Rich Man experiences what Lazarus had experienced for years outside the rich man’s gates.

A chasm lies between where the Rich Man is and where Lazarus is. The Rich Man looks across the chasm at Lazarus. Finally, he sees Lazarus. For years Lazarus laid outside his gates, but he never saw him. Finally he sees, and calls him by name – “send Lazarus.” For the first time perhaps, he calls a poor man by name?

And then we hear a passionate dialogue between the Rich Man and Abraham.

*“Father Abraham”* (v. 24). He appeals to family connections. He, as a Hebrew, biologically belonged to Abraham’s family. But by his life-choices, he proved he did not. But he appeals on that basis anyway, “Father Abraham.”

*“Have mercy on me!”* (v. 24). For the first time in his life? For the first time, does he recognize need? “Have mercy on me!” In other parts of the gospels, it is usually the beggars who say that. The Rich Man is now a beggar!

*“Send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in the water to cool off my tongue”* (v. 24). This suggests that he does not understand yet. He still thinks he is the boss. He is still treating Lazarus as an errand boy, as a means to his own ends. The audacity! To ask that Lazarus now do for him what he never bothered doing for Lazarus! he has not repented. Even in the flames ... he is still the center of his world.

Abraham responds, *“Child”* (v. 25), a tender term. Abraham is gentle with a man who is suffering judgment.

*“Remember”* says Abraham *“that during your life you received your good things and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted her and you are in agony”* (v. 25). “You received,” passive, implying that the good things the Rich Man had were gifts – gifts from God. Gifts given to bless others, like Abraham was called to do. “You missed the point,” is the implication. Your whole life ... you missed the point of being so richly blessed.

*“Besides,”* says Abraham *“between us and you there is a chasm fixed”* (v. 25), so that there can be no travel between the parts of Hades.

So the Rich Man cries out *“Then I beg You”* (v. 27) – he accepts the reality of the chasm. *“Then I beg you, send Lazarus to my father’s house.” “I have five brothers.”* Send Lazarus to warn them. Warn them of what? Missing the point. “I beg you ... send Lazarus to warn them.”

Finally, some compassion. Finally, the Rich Man cares for someone else’s welfare.

Abraham responds *“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them”* (v. 29). Let them listen to Moses and the Prophets, and they will not miss the point.

Deuteronomy 15:7-8, Moses says: “If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.”

Isaiah 58:6, God says through the prophet: “Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free, and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?”

On it goes. On page after page. God revealing His compassion for orphan, widow, the poor, the marginalized, the disenfranchised. “They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them.”

Then the Rich Man, out of desperation, argues with Abraham. *“No, Father Abraham”* (v. 30). The man is still operating as if the world revolves around his view of reality. “You are wrong, Abraham.”

*“But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”* We can appreciate his thinking, can we not? Surely if Lazarus, who had died, showed up, the man’s brothers would be startled. Surely they would repent, change their minds, think in new ways, and care for the poor in their cities.

But Abraham disagrees. *“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead”* (v. 31). And Abraham is right. Another Lazarus was raised from the dead. Remember? Jesus calls His friend Lazarus back from the dead. And the High Priest sees the miracle. And he not only does not repent ... he orders that both Jesus and Lazarus be killed (John 11:45-50).

The Rich Man himself sees poor Lazarus alive, but he does not repent. He is concerned for his brothers, but his cry *“have mercy on me”* is not the cry for forgiveness.

And then, like so many of Jesus’ parables, the story ends ... no wrap up, leaving us to decide where the story goes from here.

Now, let us gather up the cluster of truths Jesus is speaking in His masterfully crafted story.

1. One, we live in a multi-dimensional universe. *“Reality”* is not just what we can see, hear, taste, feel. There is more to reality than meets the eye. There are more beings than humans – there are angels. There are more *“places”* than the world we know – there is another world.
2. Thus, there is an afterlife. When we die it is not the end. There is more to come.
3. There are two destinies in the afterlife. One, in intimacy with God, pictured as the bosom of Abraham. The other, excluded from God, pictured by the tormenting flames.
4. Our destiny is determined by our life-choices. Not that we *“earn”* our destiny. But our life-choices reveal the fundamental orientation of our lives. Either toward God, in trust and obedience, or away from God in indifference and disobedience.
5. All wrongs will be righted. In the afterlife, God rights all wrongs. Not that every rich person ends up in flames ... and not every poor person ends up in comfort. Not all rich people are sinfully rich; not all poor are humbly poor. It is just that God works justice where justice is needed.
6. Grace is given in this life as we wait for that justice. Lazarus, *“God is my help,”* was given grace to endure; he was given the gifts of patience and longsuffering; he was given the grace to be gracious as he suffered. Oh to be so graced!
7. Our wealth can blind us. The Rich Man simply did not see Lazarus lying at the gate every day. His sin was not being wealthy. His sin was letting his wealth blind him to the plight of others.

In the gospel of Luke, one of the first signs of being saved is repenting of having ignored others. Zaccheus, the wealthy tax-collector encounters Jesus. And he says, *“half of my possessions I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much”* (Luke 19:8). What made Zaccheus do that? Who told him to do that? No one. It is what happens when we finally see. When we see Jesus, and in Jesus, the embodiment of the will of God. *“Today,”* Jesus said, *“salvation has come to this house.”*

8. What unblinds us – “They have Moses and the Prophets ... let them listen to them.” When we listen we see. When we listen to Moses and the Prophets we see. We really see the person right in front of us. We see. And we see in the person right in front of us, Jesus. We see the One to whom Moses and the Prophets are point.

So, what do we do in light of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus?

We keep listening to the voice of God in Scripture. We keep soaking in His Word ... so that we see. So that we see like Jesus sees, to see the people around us as Jesus sees. Beyond their presenting needs to the deeper need.

And, when we see, we attend like Jesus attends. To the people at the gates of our homes. To Lazarus as he meets us in so many different persons.

We see... and see. We do not just walk by. We ask the person, “What is your name?” No one is nameless to Jesus. And we ask Jesus, “how are You helping this person right now?” And, “in what way do you want me to participate in Your helping?”

Malcolm Guite, a pastor in England, who spoke at the induction of the C.S. Lewis Memorial in Westminster Abbey on Friday, tries to write a sonnet for each Sunday in the Christian year. Monica Westerholm passed on to me Reverend Guite’s sonnet for Christ the King Sunday. And with it, I conclude:

Our King is calling from the hungry furrows  
 Whilst we are cruising through the aisles of plenty,  
 Our hoardings screen us from the man of sorrows,  
 Our soundtracks drown his murmur: ‘I am thirsty’.  
 He stands in line to sign in as a stranger  
 And seek a welcome from the world he made,  
 We see him only as a threat, a danger,  
 He asks for clothes, we strip-search him instead.  
 And if he should fall sick then we take care  
 That he does not infect our private health,  
 We lock him in the prisons of our fear  
 Lest he unlock the prison of our wealth.  
 But still on Sunday we shall stand and sing  
 The praises of our hidden Lord and King.