

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

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Luke 16:19–31 (NIV)

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’”

I’ve called this story “The Punishment of the Man Who Never Noticed.” We do this story a grave injustice if we assume Jesus is saying the rich go to hell and the poor go to heaven. Far more is involved in this story than anything that simplistic or false. Abraham and Joseph of

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

Arimathea, as well as others in Scripture, were persons who possessed great wealth, yet they served God.

The actual setting of this story and understanding of what has happened to the rich man is found in the earlier part of the chapter, where Jesus has been in conflict with the Pharisees who lived for self. He told them, in verse 14, “You cannot serve God and money.” When He said this, they sneered at Him. So this is a story told against them. It is the story of a man who, like the Pharisees, had the Law and the Prophets, which told him how to spend his wealth and use it, but who did not even obey the Law and the Prophets. And if they did not obey the Law and the Prophets, neither would they obey someone who rose from the dead.

This story of Jesus is divided into three acts. We can consider it a drama. The first act: life; the second act: death; the third act: the afterlife.

I. Life.

Two men spent their lives a few feet from one another: one in a mansion and the other on a sidewalk. Actually, because they didn’t have concrete in those days, he spent it on the dirt pathway, with his feet in the gutter. They lived adjacent to one another. They were in visible distance of one another, every day of their life. But, while being so close together, they were worlds apart, cultures apart, societies apart and economies apart.

Jesus tells us first of the life of the rich man. If you read the story carefully, you will notice something. That is he has no name. The poor man has a name. His name is Lazarus. But the rich man has no name. What a flip-flop of values, because on earth, in life, the beggar was really “Mr. No Name,” and the rich man had the name. His name had to be well-known. His initials were monogrammed on his designer clothes, on his towels, on his sheets and his pillows and on the door of his personal carriage. His name was in the social pages. It was graphically well

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

represented in the letterhead of his company's stationary. His name went with being chairman of the board and president of the company and owner of the business. Politicians knew his name. Religious leaders knew his name and said their prayers at his house. Venture capitalists knew his name. Every charity project in his community sought him to buy the one thousand dollar ticket to the annual cocktail bash. He was well-known, but to Jesus he was anonymous—nothing. To Jesus he is not “John” or “Thomas.” He is simply a rich man. And by refusing to give him a name, Jesus is saying what a terrible tragedy of life when the only and ultimate thing that can be said about a person is that he is rich.

Church tradition tells us that he has the name of Dives, but that's only the Latin term for “money.” “There was a rich man who...” There's nothing wrong with being the rich man.

Cornelius was “a rich man who...” It's what comes after the phrase “who.” Cornelius was a rich man who gave generously to those in need and prayed to God regularly (Acts 10:2). The centurion in Luke 7 was “a rich man who loves our nation and has built our synagogue.” But this rich man simply spent his money on himself. His crime was not that he had money. His crime was that he only used it for himself.

He dressed in purple and fine linen. Purple was the expensive dress of the time. It was made through the process of dying clothes from the product of murex shells. Lydia, the first convert in Europe (Acts 16), was a dealer of such a dye. People that are well-dressed today, men, that is, don't go around wearing purple togas, but purple was big then. We would say today that this man bought his clothes in the expensive shops along Rodeo Drive.

The *LA Times* this last week reported the study of garbage. Students in an anthropology class, I think it was in UCLA (it may have been USC), go through people's garbage to determine what's going on in the culture. They went through the garbage in Beverly Hills and compared it to

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

garbage in other parts of the great LA basin. They found that people who live in Beverly Hills' garbage says, among other things, that they wear more designer clothes.

That's what Jesus is saying about this man. He wore designer clothes. There's nothing wrong with good clothes. Jesus wore a garment of sufficient value that people gambled over it. It wasn't some cheap piece of cloth or a rag. The rich man lived in luxury. It was at his gate that Lazarus lay, meaning that there was a closed access to his mansion. The gate would suggest a mansion. But earlier followers of Jesus also had fine homes. However they opened their homes to the body of Christ. And they opened them to others. This man's home was open only to himself. He dressed in fine linen and purple and lived in luxury and did this everyday.

In contrast, there is this beggar—the man at the other extreme. What do we notice about him? We notice that he is at the bottom of the pile in any culture, in any society, in any country. To be a beggar is to be the lowest. He was laid at the gate. Notice that somebody had to carry him there. We don't know who that somebody was. But the fact that he couldn't get there himself suggests that he was a paraplegic or a quadriplegic. And the fact that he was dropped off—in the Greek “laid at the gate” is the word “dropped” or “dropped off”—suggests some rather unfeeling and uncaring treatment. He had open sores all over, a mangy kind of looking person. He was desperately hungry all the time. “Give me some scraps to eat from the table.” He was defenseless, so defenseless that the dogs came to lick his sores. Lest we think that this is an imaginary picture, I still remember the scene from the Orient as a child, living in China, of beggars whom dogs would come and lick their sores. This man had nothing except a name. Of all the persons Jesus ever told about in the parables, this is the only character that has a name, and his name means “God is my help.” What a joke! If you look at him, you say, “God has not been his help. He lies at the gate of a rich man, wallowing in the dirt. How can he have a name

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

like that? ‘God is my help!’ Everybody knows God helps those who help themselves. God is on the side of those who have positive imaging and who can dream their way into financial success.

There must be something wrong with a man who lies at the gate of life. “God is my help!””

These two men lived close to one another but apart, day after day. The pop song is true of them:

“Two different worlds. We live in two different worlds.”

It was this story, by the way, that called Albert Schweitzer, the brilliant professor and musician, out of the luxury of Europe to the poor of Africa where he would open hospitals and care for the needy. Life: a contrast. That’s act one.

II. Act two: Death is also a contrast.

Both died. Lazarus dies first. That’s understandable, given his pitiful condition, his lack of medical assistance, and his poverty. Death would be expected first for him, but the rich man also died. Now comes the difference, because we read the rich man was buried. Buried. No doubt there was an elaborate funeral, an elaborate procession to the grave, many good and glowing words said about him, then a massive monument in the cemetery that was a reflection of his status and wealth.

If you’ll notice the text carefully, nothing is said about Lazarus being buried. It’s only the rich man who is buried. Lazarus isn’t buried. He probably didn’t have a burial. The corpse collectors picked up his emaciated body in their evening or their morning rounds, threw it on a cart, and trashed his body in the burning garbage dump of the city.

But things are different than they seem to the natural eye. The rich man is buried, but the angels carry Lazarus to Abraham’s bosom. Right then we all of a sudden know in the story that things are going to be much different than they were in life.

That brings us to the third act of the drama which is...

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

III. The Afterlife.

Life, death, afterlife. Everyone is interested in life after life. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross is conducting research in this area and has awakened great popular interest in the theme of life after life, although her context has been in the cultic realm. There's only one person who's qualified to speak authoritatively about life after life. That's Jesus of Nazareth. Here in His teaching He draws the curtain back from life after life and tells us what's on the other side and what we're to do about it. There are three things that Jesus tells us in the story about the afterlife.

A. The first thing He tells us in the story is that there is an afterlife. Immortality is not our choice. When you and I were created, we were made immortal. Although a person may commit suicide, mortally, no one can extinguish himself. That is not an option. We are a created being who is created with immortality. There will never be, for any of us, a moment when we will ever cease to exist. We will exist forever and ever. We will exist when the stars have blinked out in the night sky and when the sun has lost its heat and when this universe has been replaced by others. We will live on. We were created to be immortal. The rich man is conscious in death and Lazarus is conscious in death. Between them there is a great gulf fixed.

Because this story is a parable, not every detail of the story is meant to be pressed into a theological truth. For example, there is a conversation going on between the rich man and Abraham. Yet we are not to picture the heaven that we are going to as a place where there is a phone line connecting the two sides. The story is told to give us perspective on the present. The rich man is in hell.

The Old Testament developed an understanding of what the afterlife was. It was added to by the teaching of the Pharisees, which Jesus here appears to endorse. Jesus will change the very nature of the afterlife by virtue of His resurrection. That's a little detail we should catch.

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

Jacob, when he was dying—as well as Abraham, as well as the patriarchs—talked about “going down” to Hades; “I will go down.” As time went on, the righteous and the faithful came to understand that the place of the dead was divided into two compartments, one of which was called “Abraham’s Bosom” or “Paradise” and the other, which was called “Gehenna” or the place of punishment. Jesus, when He was on the cross, said to the thief, “Today you’ll be with Me in paradise.” He’s talking about the place also known as Abraham’s Bosom. It was not a place at God’s side, because Jesus had not ascended to the Father when He died. He went down to the place of the dead.

So there was the place of the righteous dead—Abraham’s Bosom or Paradise; and the place of the unrighteous dead, the Gehenna—both in Hades. When Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to heaven, Ephesians 4 tells us that He led captivity captive, which is the New Testament’s way of telling us that He emptied Paradise of all of its inhabitants, took them from the righteous place of the dead and lifted them up into the eternal presence of the Father with Himself. So, when the apostle Paul looks forward to dying, he is not looking forward to going down to Abraham’s Bosom or to Paradise, but he is looking forward to going to be with the Lord, “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord.” But at the time Jesus is giving these words He has not yet emptied Paradise and taken it with Him up to heaven. It is still there. So He tells the story from that frame of reference.

There is an afterlife and there are two places—only two to which any of us can go.

B. The second thing Jesus tells us about the afterlife is that our place in the afterlife is settled in this life. We make that decision now. We will not make it then, because our choices become frozen. The rich man’s choice is frozen. He cannot undo his choice. Lazarus’ choice is frozen.

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

We're not, by the way, told why Lazarus is in Abraham's Bosom. It's certainly not just because he was poor. He must have lived up to his name and trusted God and taken God as his help.

But we do know why the rich man is in hell. He is not in hell because he had money. He is in hell for a different reason. It may be surprising to us, when we read this, that we don't find Abraham saying to him, "You are there because you did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah. That's the only way to get into heaven. You must believe in Him." But Abraham doesn't say that. Because Jesus has not yet died on the cross or risen from the dead, so there was a different qualification that was in place for going to the place of the righteous dead or Paradise.

The key to why the man is in Gehenna is in verse 29. He wants Lazarus to go and tell his five brothers, and Abraham refuses and says, "They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them." The problem with the rich man is exactly that. He did not live in obedience to the Word of God that he had. If he had read and understood the Law and the Prophets he would have known you cannot treat a man the way he treated Lazarus. You cannot ignore a man the way he ignored Lazarus.

Jesus is saying this against the Pharisees who loved money and ignored human need and rebuked Him for eating with sinners and tax collectors. The Law of Moses says, "If any one of your countrymen becomes poor and is unable to support himself among you, help him as you would an alien or a temporary resident, so he can continue to live among you" (Leviticus 25:35). This Dives did not do it. Then Deuteronomy 10:18, "God defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the alien giving him food and clothing." If God gives the alien food and clothing, then a follower of God needs to imitate Him. Dives, the rich man, had not done this.

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

Or Deuteronomy 15:7, “If there is a poor man among your brothers in any of the towns of the land the Lord your God is giving you, do not be hardhearted or tightfisted toward your brother.”

He was hardhearted and tightfisted.

Isaiah 25:4, “You have been a refuge for the poor, a refuge for the needy in his distress, a shelter from the storm and a shade from the heat.” The rich man had not been this to Lazarus. He had not been a refuge. The man had lain at his gate. He had not been a shelter for him in those cold sleeting nights when the rain had come down. He thought it was ok for his house to be heated and for Lazarus to be out there, shivering in the cold. When the hot Palestinian sun was baking, he thought it was ok for him to be on his veranda with a shaded cool breeze, and Lazarus to be out there, unadorned, in the hot heat. He was neither a refuge nor a shade nor a shelter.

Amos 2:7 says, “They trample on the heads of the poor as upon the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed.” Micah 6:8 says, “He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.” Zechariah 7:9, “Administer true justice, show mercy and compassion to one another.”

The rich man’s sins were not that he had money nor even that he had gotten it wrongfully. As far as we know, he made his money in an appropriate way. His sin was that he failed to obey the clear written Word of God and failed to model his character after God. For him, Lazarus had no name. He was just one of the fixtures on the landscape. He never bothered to learn his name. The rich man’s relationship to Lazarus reflects his relationship to God. He had none. Wealth was not his crime, it was his opportunity. He is the Scrooge of Dickens’ *Christmas Carol*, who’s speaking from the rude awakening of the shades of death and seeing what is coming, because he has been so tight-fisted all of his life as he looks remorsefully at the business profits that had absorbed him and says, “Business. Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

business. Charity, mercy, forbearance and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop in the water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.” He’s come to realize that business is more than the balance sheet and the bottom line. Business is life and you’ve got to pay attention to life.

Even in hell, the rich man is unchanged. He still wants to order Lazarus around. “Get Lazarus down here, the servant, the guy who lay at my gate. Get him down here to get my tongue cooled. And send him to my brothers.” Never once does he apologize to Lazarus, notice that. Never once. Never does he repent for his behavior. Never does he say, “Lazarus, I’m sorry for all those days I let you lay there. All those days, I could have fed you. Never once did I send a servant to bring you a meal. Will you please forgive me? Will you forgive me for not sending my nurse to bandage up your sores? Will you forgive me for not protecting you? Will you please, please forgive me?” Never once is there an ounce of remorse in his breath.

There is a great gulf fixed. People think that if a person goes to hell, they’ll be sorry they went to hell. No, he’s not sorry because hell doesn’t change his basic disposition of life. He’s as selfish in hell as he was on earth. He’s just sorry that it happened to him. But he cannot fathom the reason why.

This leads us to a third truth about the afterlife...

C. Not only the fact that there is an afterlife and we choose now which side of the afterlife we will live in, but we must act now on the information we have.

We must act now. The rich man expresses concern for his brothers. But Jesus, through this story, is saying that if a person refuses Moses and the Prophets, they will not listen to one who has risen from the dead either. This He says of Himself. It should also be noted that it could apply to

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

Lazarus as well, because when he raises Lazarus from the dead (John 11) the plots against Jesus from the Pharisees do not cease, but only intensify.

Have you ever attended a funeral and wondered what messages the deceased would send back? I wonder what message the rich man would send back. But God allows no communication to or from the land of the grave. And any purported communication is either fraud or of the occult, which is basically fraudulent anyway. There's only one voice from the dead. It is the voice of Jesus. "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the living one. I was dead and behold I am alive. Forever and ever. And I hold the key of death and Hades" (Revelation 1:17-18).

This story is told by Jesus to make a difference in our life. The difference is this: Have you acted on God's clear word of salvation? This man had Moses and the Prophets and had ignored them. Now we have one step beyond. We have the Man raised from the dead. Is your life holy and unreservedly given to Him who speaks to you from His own authority, the authority of the Son of God?

Then the story speaks to us about the needy and about the person at our gate.

Is it possible that we could live in Costa Mesa and not know that Fairview State Hospital exists and not know that there are volunteer opportunities to minister to mentally retarded people? Is it possible for us to live in this community and not know that lying at our gate are nursing homes and rest homes with people who have been abandoned and who, for the world's point of view, no longer have a name, but whose names are known to God? Is it possible we could live in a county where ten thousand children are abandoned and abused every single year and not be aware there is a need for foster care and for reaching out? Is it possible that with the amount of abused women and children that are in our community we are not aware of the need to help with shelter

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

and with practical assistance? Is it possible that we have forgotten there is the prisoner, the lonely, the needy?

Jesus says, “Think about that.” Are there no-name situations in our experience? God is saying, “I want you to meet that person at the gate and to realize they have a name. Is it possible we live in an egocentric world, where the call of Christ to lift up our eyes to the harvest and to the world for missions is lost because we’re too busy to consider what our worldwide task is, let alone what our community responsibilities are?”

I am so grateful for what I see happening in this body. How increasingly people in this body are seeing the Lazarus at the gate. I thank God for the fifty people who were present this weekend for an Intensive Care Seminar that taught how to reach out to people going through critical moments, dark moments in their life. I thank the Lord for people who’ve seen the vision to minister to the Asian refugees in our community. I thank the Lord that, this very Sunday, we have people on Three Sister’s Island, a Federal Penitentiary of Mexico, bringing the gospel of Jesus Christ to people whose names were unknown to us but whose names will become known. I thank God that every week there are people in this body that are calling on the sick and the lonely in nursing homes and retirement homes.

Jesus says, “To him who has, much more will be given” (see Matthew 13:12). That’s suggestive to me that we don’t all of a sudden begin walking in a ministry of noticing the Lazaruses at our door, but that we build on it. I pray that in the coming days we, as an entire church body and individual members, will have a heart for the people. I pray that at our door there will be more than a path built to Fairview, that there will be a street, then an avenue, then a boulevard, then a highway of persons who you can bless—even if you do nothing more than push a wheelchair and be faithful. That God will somehow help us to realize there are people in this world who are at

THE PUNISHMENT OF THE MAN WHO NEVER NOTICED

Luke 16:19–31

our door, because we can live all of life and never be aware of it. Or we can choose to ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to the Lazarus at our gate and open our hearts and our hands to serve and give, even if it's only by giving a cup of water—to give our presence in Christ's name.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, our prayer today is very simple. Help us to be like You. Give us eyes to see as You would see. Help us to avoid the attitude that caring for a Lazarus is someone else's responsibility. It's not easy to care for a Lazarus—who's so dirty and coming from another world. It's hard to care for a Lazarus. And it's hard to see mental retardation. It's hard to see old people in rest homes. It's hard to go to prisons. It's hard to care for the alien and the immigrant and the refugee. It's hard to care for an abused child. But when we begin to do it, there's such joy in service we wonder about all the joy we missed because we did not serve earlier. The rich man had a party in his house but he never had a party in his heart. Because the party in his heart awaits those who will truly serve one another and care with the care of Christ. Teach us, Lord, to care. Teach us to be sensitive to the unfortunate—to the Lazaruses. We pray in Your name.

Amen.