

## Wha's like Us? The Rich Man and Lazarus: Luke 16:19-31

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Troy Taylor

When my dad and I travelled to Scotland to look into our family roots, I came across a traditional Scottish toast on a postcard. It read, "here's tae us: Wha's like us? Gey few, an' they're a' died!" (It means: Here's to us! Who's like us? Very few, and they're all dead!) Scottish pride is one thing, and whether it is justified or not depends on which side of the clan you are on! But what happens when we only see the people who are like us? It is that prejudice, that narrowness of vision that today's parable challenges.

One of the things that I've been noticing as we've been going through the parables of Jesus is that they are getting a little bit repetitive. We find ourselves being called to take care of others, especially the lost, the lonely, the ones who are overlooked or in need. We find ourselves being told over and over again that how we consider value and priorities are wrong, that God looks at things differently. And here's the spoiler for this sermon: this one isn't any different! In the end, Jesus was super repetitive because the people were struggling to understand the implications of what he was saying. My question is, are we different? Who are we?

Often, when we consider this parable of Jesus, we think primarily in terms of the afterlife – a description of life after death. To be sure, there are ideas in here that we've come to associate with the afterlife – burning, torment, and suffering, as well as comfort, Abraham's side, and a great chasm to prevent defectors.

Yet there are serious problems with making this parable about life after death. For example, do those in heaven have to watch and hear those in hell be tormented for eternity, with no hope of rescue, respite, or end. Tell me, does that sound like paradise to you? Most of all, the way that the rich man ends up in hell is because he has a good life on earth – Abraham says it in verse 25! And the reason that Lazarus is in heaven is because he suffered on earth. There is no mention of what we know to be true – that salvation comes from belief in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the only way to receive release from our sin and death, and the only way to enter into the presence of God when we die.

The audience that Jesus was targeting, the Pharisees, would see this rich man as the hero – obviously, blessed by God because he is wealthy! He is a member of the family of God because he can trace his ancestry to Abraham. Therefore, it is simply a foregone conclusion that he would be a shoe-in for the kingdom feast after he dies. Lazarus, on the other hand, is the anti-hero. He is poor, and sick, two obvious indications that he is under God’s judgement. Further, he is continually unclean, practically dead already, since the scavengers are already at his body! He is definitely cursed of God according to the prevailing thought of the day.

So, then, what are we to make of this story?

First of all, let’s notice some of the details that Luke includes here.

First, look at all of the contrasts! The rich man is clothed in expensive cloth, including fine linens – this is like wearing silk underwear! It’s the best money can buy! Lazarus, on the other hand, is clothed in sores, which unclean scavengers lick to receive small sustenance from Lazarus’ suffering. Lazarus is starving, while the rich man is contemptuous of the wasted food that falls off a laden table. Even their funerals are different! The rich man has a gate that serves as an entrance to, and security for, what would be the equivalent of a sprawling estate to us – designed to keep people like Lazarus from bothering the rich man, and making his stuff unclean with his sores and sickness. The gate was Lazarus’s only home, and even that belongs to someone else.

The one thing that they have in common is that they both die, ironically on the same day! The rich man is celebrated with a burial, which would be accompanied with eulogies and lamentations, all of which assume that his great wealth was due to God’s blessing, which combined with his Jewishness, ensured him a seat at the table close to Abraham. Lazarus’s death is marked only by the angels of God who carry his spirit away. He dies as he lived, unnoticed, and uncared for.

But here comes the twist, and it is hard for us to wrap our heads around exactly how strange this is to his audience. The contrasts continue in this story, although now we note something that was hinted at in the beginning of the parable – only Lazarus has a name! This is hugely important to note. A name implies family, belonging, and security. This is something like knowing the name of the red-shirt

security person that dies in Star Trek, and never knowing the name of the captain of the enterprise!

From here on in, the surprises keep on coming. Both the rich man and Lazarus find themselves in Hades, which simply means the holding place of the dead, while they await judgement. Yet their experiences there are very different. The rich man experiences desperate separation from his family, his people (Abraham), and torment from the blazing heat of the fires of hell. Lazarus, on the other hand, finally experiences relief from the burning of his sores, and experiences the closeness to Abraham that being named implies.

I think that most of the audience listening to this story would have expected it to end here. Jesus' point is made: the Pharisees, lovers of money that they are, have been condemned, while Jesus has once again upheld the plight of the forgotten and ignored. Thank you, Jesus. We've seen the movie before.

Yet, the story goes on, and it is in the second half that I believe the heart of the parable is revealed.

First, the rich man knows Lazarus's name! This is incredibly shocking, because it begins to reveal exactly how hard his heart has become. Living in his gate, known by first name, yet the rich man has not deemed Lazarus worthy of any compassion, help, or notice.

Second, the rich man makes a demand of Lazarus, through begging to Abraham, that he be sent on an errand for the rich man's comfort. What he denied to Lazarus for the duration of their lives, he now requests Lazarus deliver to him. Keep in mind where the rich man is. For Lazarus to deliver water, he has to be exposed to the burning flames and torment of the rich man! He asks Lazarus to suffer his own torment in order to bring temporary relief for himself! This is a despicable, hateful act of entitlement and selfishness. Further, what comfort the rich man willingly and knowingly denied to Lazarus, Lazarus is prevented from sharing with him not because of selfishness or ignorance, but because of impossibility.

Finally, the rich man accepts his fate, yet seeks to spare his family, who are living the same entitled, indulgent lifestyle. Once again, remember where they are. He would have Lazarus leave the first moments of relief from his suffering to return

to the place of his torment and pain, simply to relieve the rich man's conscience. Abraham assures him, in one of the most deliciously ironic statements of scripture that even a resurrection will not convince the people of the truth, which is proven true when Jesus rises from the dead, and the Pharisees seek to lie and fabricate explanations for the empty tomb of Jesus.

While this parable carries with it sober realities regarding human fate after death, the primary purpose of this parable is to lay bare the hidden prejudice of our hearts. The problem with the Pharisees, with the people, with society in general, is that religion does not change who they are, how they act. How many times have you heard someone say, "I'm a good person. God will know that!" As Bruce mentioned last week, this parable moves us beyond "saved by grace and faith" theology, and shows us what is expected of those who have such faith and grace! As Luke 12:48 says, "But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."

This isn't a new idea. According to the Lord's prayer, we are forgiven in the same way that we forgive others. According to the parable of the unmerciful servant, we are given mercy in the same way that we offer mercy. According to the royal law of scripture, we are to love others with the same love we give ourselves.

The crux of the rich man's error is that he fails to see Lazarus as someone who is the same as him. Someone with needs that he can meet, someone to whom he can relate, with whom he can converse, and to whom he is obligated as though to a brother or a sister. Bruce challenged us to think about how we treat others last week: do we treat them the way that we would treat Jesus? In this parable, we are being invited to something similar: do we see ourselves in the eyes of others?

There are plenty of reasons that the rich man doesn't recognize Lazarus as being part of his own family. They are from different social circles, different economic classes, and they smell different, dress different, look different, and act different. One has privilege, the other lacks all favour. To the rich man, God looks like him – clean, privileged, blessed. He does not see God's image reflected in Lazarus, and so is able to ignore him. The problem that I have with the rich man is not how entitled he is, but rather how relatable he is!

I've often heard a criticism about how Jesus is portrayed in art. This is the usual picture of Jesus that people are talking about. The blond hair, the blue eyes, the clean clothes. Isn't it odd how much Jesus resembles the proverbial patriarchy? He is a wealthy, clean, white man. Therefore, the obvious assumption is that those who look like Jesus are the ones who are favoured by God! Friends, this has more in common with Naziism than it does with the Gospel of Jesus.

It isn't that white people should not see themselves in Jesus – in fact this is crucial, because it calls white folks to live like Jesus. The sin is when white people begin to assume that White Jesus is the only Jesus out there, and begin to impose him on other cultures.

Jesus is beautifully diverse. There is art from around the world that celebrates him, that shows how cultures around the world see Jesus as theirs, taking ownership of the Messiah, the Gospel, and the changed life that Jesus demands of us. Jesus is shared among us all. It is these images of Jesus that have been showing on the PowerPoint as I've been speaking. My point is this. If Jesus is reflected in all of the diverse faces and cultures of creation, then I can never see another human being as other than me.

This is, sadly, as countercultural today as it was for Jesus's original audience. Organizations like the Proud Boys, Soldiers of Odin, and other white supremacy groups are finding new legitimacy online, and have shown up in public rallies in Alberta in recent months. Marchers in Edmonton carried tiki torches, symbolic of the torches carried during Ku Klux Klan lynchings in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Asian-Canadians have experienced race-motivated assaults over COVID-19, Muslim businesses and places of worship have been vandalized, visible minorities have been told to go home. These, friends, are happening in our province. Albertans are failing to see Jesus reflected in the faces of those who do not look like a stereotypical Albertan, and even more, each of these demographics are more likely to be overlooked or trapped in poverty than others. I tell you, Lazarus lives at the gates of Lethbridge.

This is why we must be vocal and visible in our lives as the people of God. This is why we need to deliberately, and intentionally seek out those who are not like us. We work at the shelters and the soup kitchen. First B Lethbridge is represented in Bolivia, in Kenya, in Zambia, and in Guatemala. The relationship with the Cubans

that we celebrate today. We sing in a language we don't know. We sponsor immigrants and refugees. We do these things because our community, our province, needs to know that we will not tolerate the actions nor the voice of racism, ignorance, or indifference. We refuse to participate in a culture that ignores the humanity of all people, regardless of age, gender, nationality, religion, economic status, or any other division that people impose on humanity. With Paul, we proudly proclaim that "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."

Friends, we are doing this. It is as important now as it ever has been, for the church to be loud and proud, but not for what we are against. We must become known for what we are for. We are for Lazarus. We celebrate the diversity of our friendship with Cuba. We celebrate the richness of God gathering the nations into Lethbridge through immigration, and the opportunity that we have to know people from around the world! We celebrate the gift of each other. Let's be deliberate, then, to make that phone call, to share that time, to send that email that crosses your mind. Let's extend a kind word to the person we pass on the street, in the grocery store, in traffic. Each one is made in the image of God. Let's live lives that celebrate that.