

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Luke 16:19-31

(questions at the end)

Contextually we want to make sure we connect this parable to what was stated earlier...specifically 16:14-17, *"The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, 'You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the law.'"*

So the Pharisees are the focus/target of this parable, but also keep in mind that this was spoken amongst "large crowds" (going all the way back to 14:25).

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus (like much of Jesus' teachings) is designed to confront the prevailing assumptions of the day. The specific prevailing assumption that was challenged here is that money is good, that money is a sign/fruit of righteousness, the idea that the more money you had the more righteous you must be. What is so often not seen/understood is that money (and all that goes along with it—power, privilege, status, position) is easily corrupted and becomes greed, idolatry, and injustice. This links back to what Jesus said earlier, *"What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight."* Even more striking, that religiously bent people—then and now (so, us)—have a knack for justifying/rationalizing what we "highly value" into a blessing from God. We interpret (or twist) Scripture to endorse our value system, instead of letting it shape our value system. The extreme of this would be the "Prosperity Gospel" but it happens in more subtle ways as well. For example, we value "peace", which sounds very Biblical (and in once sense it certainly is...Scripture has much to say about peace). But peace at what cost or by what means? The Roman empire valued "peace"...and enforced it with an iron fist...i.e. peace through violence. The myth of "redemptive violence" undergirds every empire, including the American Empire. And the Church, sadly, supports that myth without questioning if it's actually in-line with the Kingdom of God. It is all too easy for us to not take into consideration our cultural context, and the narrative that supports it, when we approach Scripture...so our view, understanding, interpretation of Scripture becomes very flawed.

For your consideration...

"When we read the New Testament through the lenses of colonialism and consumer capitalism, we cannot help but accentuate those bits of Scripture that portray expansion and growth. This means that it is easy for us to concentrate on the Great Commission and consider this to be the pinnacle of all of Jesus' vision for the church. Interestingly, the most stringent and forceful teaching — the Sermon on the Mount, for instance — can be all but lost in a leadership culture that is committed to growth without limits....[The contemporary church and her leadership] have been captivated by the values of a culture that demands progress toward the goals of bigger, better, stronger, higher, faster — cultural markers that are foreign to the gospel story.

Hauerwas and Willimon write, 'The world has declared war upon the gospel in the most subtle of ways, ways so subtle that sometimes we do not know we are losing the battle until it is over.'...If we honestly and critically assess the basic underlying assumptions on which we operate as Christian leaders, at the heart of the current leadership conversation we will find not the Christian narrative, but the American narrative of growth and expansion. When it comes to the common conception of what the church is and what it is for, we have allowed the culture in which we live to become more determinative than the gospel Jesus preached. Even the gospel has been adapted to fit the culture. Crisis evangelism and the reduction of the gospel to a means of getting into heaven when we die are both examples of the way the gospel has become purposefully adapted to our culture. We need a better story. We need a leadership narrative built not on the American vision of success but on Jesus' vision of the kingdom. The Jesus way is always down, always the way of descent. We need a leadership that is built on the gospel and the way of life Jesus lived and taught.' (From the book "Shrink: Faithful Ministry in a Church-Growth Culture" by Tim Suttle.)

All that to say, the same tension that Jesus had with the religious leaders of His day is alive and well within the Church today. And the "zinger" of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is that Jesus challenges their faulty assumption of "success". The Rich Man would have been considered "successful" by all accounts...except the account that matters...God's. So, in the parable, Father Abraham tells the Rich Man, *"in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony."* (16:25).

So, we see a faulty understanding of success, built upon a false narrative, reinforced by a faulty understanding of Scripture...which can happen when we selectively choose which portions of Scripture we're going to focus/fixate on, and ignore other portions. It's not an issue of not having the availability or accessibility of the Scriptures; Jesus emphasized that they had the Law/Moses and the Prophets. The issue is: do we approach Scripture with a heart/mind to submit to it; or do we approach it with an agenda we want it to back? (Verse 18 could be seen as an example of a portion of Scripture the supposedly "righteous" people were choosing to ignore.)

This brings us to whom within this parable the broader audience (the crowds then, the readers now) ought to identify with in this parable. The Rich Man and Lazarus represent two extreme categories which most people aren't going to fall into. I would suggest that the "five brothers" of the Rich Man are who we are meant to identify with: *"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them...if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."* (16:29,31)

"Convinced" of what? The Rich Man wants his brothers to be "warned" about the reality of *"this place of torment"*...and we can assume also how such a place can be avoided. This whole parable seems to suggest that our focus should not be on self-indulgent enjoyment of what this life has to offer, especially at the ignoring of people in need. Moses and the Prophets certainly warn of this. The Rich Man (and we can assume his brothers as well) had all the markings of "successfulness" and "righteousness"...at least based on one (flawed) standard. This parable

should cause us to ask the question of whether the standard we are using to gauge such important things is accurate. Since we will spend a vast amount of time, energy, and resources pursuing “success” and “righteousness”, it behooves us to know what the target is. The target is NOT selfish, self-centered, self-indulgent ends. It is knowing and pursuing the will and heart of God as revealed to us in Scripture, and more fully in the Resurrected One Himself. And the reality is that His Kingdom turns just about everything we think we know upside down.

It would be tempting for us to think to ourselves, “I believe that Jesus rose from the dead. I believe He paid for the penalty of my sins on the cross. I have ‘accepted Him’ as my Lord and Savior. I go to church...I must be a righteous person...what more does God want?” But our goal should never be to “appease” God...with the hope that will somehow allow us to get what we want (think: the older brother in the parable of the prodigal son). Rather our goal should be to live into our created purpose, which is to partner with God in the ongoing unfolding of Creation (or now New Creation). We are called/invited to participate in the redeeming, restoring, renewing project that God is working on. If we don’t participate in that, we are essentially just building our own tiny little kingdom built around ourselves, our wants/desires/agendas...and the warning laid out in this parable applies full force.

- Q. Describe from your own experience how Jesus has confronted a prevailing assumption you functioned with. How was your assumption challenged and what caused you to change it?**
- Q. Describe, or list, some things that are “highly valued among people” but is “detestable in God’s sight”.**
- Q. When you think of a “righteous” person, what traits, attributes, characteristics come to mind? When you think of an “unrighteous” person, what traits, attributes, characteristics come to mind? How did you come up with that way of making such an evaluation?**
- Q. Describe how you’ve seen the corruptible nature of money. How would you know if you were corrupted by it?**
- Q. How have you seen Scripture twisted to support a value system it doesn’t actually support, or rationalize a course of action it doesn’t actually endorse?**
- Q. Describe what it would look like for someone to be “successful” at being a Christian. How do you compare to the portrait you just described? (This question can be handled on an individual/personal basis or on a communal basis.)**
- Q. Lazarus was laid at the gate of the Rich Man. So the Rich Man had ample opportunity to use his vast wealth to bless Lazarus...but obviously chose not to. What opportunities to bless others are right under your/our noses? Are we taking the opportunities to bless others?**