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Riverside Covenant Church
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Luke 16:19-31 – Good Things

Albert Schweitzer was a German/French theologian, musician, and philosopher who was born in the late 1800's. He won the Noble Peace Prize in 1952, but well before that was a renowned musician and teacher. He was a genius and destined for European fame, when he dropped it all, went to medical school, became a medical missionary and started a medical clinic in West Central Africa. When people wondered why he did this, he answered their questions by pointing them to the parable we are going to read this morning.

So let's read it. **Read Luke 16:19-31.**

Last week we mentioned that **Jesus has big concerns with money.** And this parable in Luke again speaks of the temptations and struggles that arise with money. Again, Jesus' point is exceptionally clear. Do not become too comfortable in riches in this lifetime.

We have looked at a lot of parables this summer and this is definitely one of the most unique. It is actually really odd as far as the parables go. This is the only parable where the characters in the parable have names and only here does a parable not just talk about life on earth, but about the after-life. The parable does not have any explanation. There is no introduction to it and there is certainly no summary of its meaning at the end. It just begins and then it ends with no clear application or even a transition.

The story itself is not that complicated though. There was a rich guy, adorned in fancy clothes, who lived in luxury every day. The text said that he was **“dressed in purple and fine linen.”** There are lots of texts from the ancient world that attest that linen and purple clothing were marks of luxurious living, particularly fitting for royalty and those proud of their wealth. At the time, purple was rare and expensive because of the difficult process of obtaining the best dye from marine snails. All this to say that the guy was loaded.

Outside the gate to his house laid a beggar. And the beggar was everything that he was not. No purple or linen. The text actually says that, **“he was covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.”** It says, **“even the dogs came and licked his sores.”** Interestingly, the food falling from the

table was not likely the result of sloppy eating. Often in the ancient world, wealthy people would wipe off their hands on slices of bread. So what was falling from the table was likely the bread that the rich man had used to clean his hands. The point is the same though, the beggar longed for even the waste of the rich man. It reminds us of the prodigal son, who after taking his inheritance and running, found himself coveting the food of pigs. The beggar was in a desperate condition and Jesus goes to great lengths to contrast just how desperate his position was in comparison to the rich man.

The deep differences between the two men is extraordinarily obvious. And add to this the idea, which we have talked about before, that Jews in the ancient world believed that one's lot in life was primarily determined by God's blessing. Thus to Jesus' hearers, the rich man was presumed to be blessed by God while the poor beggar was presumed to be cursed by God. And this makes complete sense in many respects. Simply looking at the characteristics of their lives seems to suggest that God favors the rich guy over the poor man.

We will spend more time discussing this, but picture in your own minds the imagery that Jesus is using in this parable. The rich man lives in a beautiful home, with signs of luxury all around, including the fence that surrounds it and what we can imagine is a pretty impressive gate. The rich man and all of his stuff are inside. And we can imagine why he would have a fence and a gate, because he certainly has a lot of stuff that he wants to protect. On the other side of the gate is the beggar. He has nothing. The rich man lives luxuriously and in honor on one side of the gate and Lazarus miserably on the other. They were literally only separated by a few feet, but their lives could not be more drastically different.

In Jesus' parable both guys eventually die. When the beggar dies Jesus says “**the angels carried him to Abraham's side.**” When the rich man dies Jesus says, he was in hell, “**where he was in torment.**” This would have been a shock to Jesus' listeners. Wrestle with this a little. We all have particular people in our minds that we presume are right with God and will be in heaven. They go to church every Sunday. They say the right things at Bible study. They put big checks in the collection plate. We also have a group of people in our minds that we presume will not be in heaven for various reasons. They have earrings in too many places. They don't smile very often. They are socially awkward. Now imagine that in reality those we presumed would be heaven are not and those we presumed would not be are.

What we immediately find is that our classifications for who is in and who is out are wrong. Jesus flips our notions of what it means to be his follower.

While in hell in Jesus' parable the rich man looks over an enormous chasm and sees Lazarus, this former beggar outside of his gate, by Abraham's side. And he calls out to Abraham, "have pity on me." And he shows just how desperate and in agony he is because he says, "**send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.**" Before death, it was Lazarus scavenging for the scrap bread of the rich guy. Now it is the rich guy scavenging for one drop of water from Lazarus' finger.

Abraham's response to the rich guy's request is clear. You got everything you wanted in your physical lifetime. Lazarus got all the bad things. Now he is comforted and you are in agony. And guess what, it gets worse, there is an enormous chasm between us and you and there is no crossing it.

The rich guy's response is then very interesting. He is somewhat resigned to his fate. He could not dispute that he had settled for the good things during his lifetime as opposed to storing up treasures for his post-lifetime. But what he is now very concerned with is the fate of his brothers, for which he is presumably very concerned. Apparently they are walking down a very similar path to his and he asks if Abraham will send Lazarus to his father's house to warn his brothers. But Abraham, tells him that they already have Moses and the prophets. And the rich man, still not fully understanding, says, "**that is not enough, if someone from the dead goes to them then they will repent**" And Abraham simply says at the climax of Jesus' story, "**if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**"

The problem is not access to the truth. The problem is and always has been willingness to accept and believe it. We often give ourselves far too much credit. People are always saying, "I wish I saw Jesus walk on water or I wish something miraculous would happen, maybe Jesus could write next week's lottery numbers on a piece of paper for me. Or maybe my mortgage payment could just start getting paid automatically." We convince ourselves that if something like this were to happen, then we would have no problem believing in God or Jesus. But the truth is that we are the masters of self-deception and no matter what happened we would come up with some way to rationalize it or to tame it or to write it off as coincidence. The obstacle to belief, and this is what Jesus is saying, is not that God has not revealed

enough of himself. The obstacle is our insatiable desire for more evidence or proof or miracles so that we don't have to believe . . . so that we don't have to risk anything.

The fact that the rich guy wants his brothers to repent shows that he recognizes his own error. He likely realizes the injustice of his enormous wealth and Lazarus' poverty and his neglect to do anything about it. It is not until the rich man is in hell though that he first raises his eyes to see Lazarus. And this is the primary point of this parable. There is no prescription on what particularly the rich guy was to do with Lazarus, how much money he was to give him or whether he was supposed to welcome him in his home. Jesus' point is so much more basic than all that. Jesus is simply pointing out that the rich man did not even notice Lazarus. He did not even see him.

There is nothing less demeaning in our world than failing to notice someone. In some respects, it is even worse than acknowledging someone's existence and treating them poorly. I figure that is why kids even want negative attention at times. At least they are getting some attention. Getting no attention is more devastating than getting ridiculed. Failing to acknowledge someone is saying they are of so little value that it is as if they do not exist.

Here is Jesus' very clear call to us this morning. If you are living your life as if poor, disenfranchised, despised, hurting people do not exist . . . you do not see the world as God does.

When I first got to town about a year and a half ago, I attended the National Day of Prayer breakfast and my assigned seat was at a table in the front and center of the banquet hall. I didn't really know anyone yet. I sat next to a bigger guy that had a great personality and seemed to be very popular in the room. He was really funny and talkative. So I just listened at the table for a while, but when the conversation calmed down, I initiated conversation with the guy next to me. I said, "my name is Dan, what is your name?" He said his name was Tony. I said great, nice to meet you and we chatted for a while. I explained that I was a pastor and had moved here from Chicago and so on. I then asked him what he did and he said he was the mayor of Lafayette. Nice! About 3 minutes later he got up and gave the guest address.

That moment made me think though. I don't generally get too worked up about public people, but if I am really honest with myself I know that I would have acted differently if I would have known he was the

mayor. And if I had had the mayor sitting on one side of me and Jon Doe, the horse stall cleaner for Teefeey farms on the other side of me, I would have tried a lot harder to start conversation with the mayor.

Again, here is the irony of Jesus' story. If we just had the beginning of the story. If I told you to choose. Do you want to be the guy with fancy clothes, a sweet crib, washing his hands with leftover bread, hanging out inside his gated estate or do you want to be a beggar, laying on the street, open sores that dogs come to lick . . . I imagine that there would not be much thought needed. We would jump at the chance to be the rich guy. But then we hear the rest of the story and find out the rich man is in hell and the beggar is in heaven. Knowing the end of the story we would switch our minds, but it is too late after death.

Perhaps the question that we must pursue in our hearts is how much would we be willing to give up to be that rich guy? What would we not be willing to give up to see all people as God sees them? Are we prideful? Do we have a death grip on certain things in our lives? Don't answer this with a yes or no, but do an inventory of your life. Go through everything in your mind. Your car, your TV, your vacation, your house, your career, your looks, your education . . . could you give it up? If God told you tomorrow that He needed you for a particular task and you needed to give up your attachment to one of those things, could you pick up and go?

As I said last week, we cannot vilify money and Jesus does not do this. We need it. Poverty is not lifted up as an ideal in the gospels. We don't have to be beggars to go to heaven. Poverty is a problem and needs relieving. All that said, though, the parables' attacks are no less stinging. The more you have, the less likely you are to notice those who don't have much. And if you don't notice those that don't have much, then you do not have the eyes and heart that God desires for you.

The parable does not tell us how the wealthy are to assist the poor, but it insists that the poor are brothers and sisters of the wealthy and that the discrepancy between the rich and the poor cannot be tolerated. This is not just a problem in the cities either. Everyone knows that in Chicago and other big cities, parts of the city are extraordinarily affluent while other parts are tragically poor. **But we have our own examples in Tippecanoe County.** I have heard how some people talk about West Lafayette schools compared to Lafayette schools. I have heard how some people talk about the folks that live in smaller

towns around Tippecanoe County. There are plenty of Lazarus' in our community that are either ridiculed or unnoticed entirely.

The issue here is the willingness and ability to see a person in need and respond. The rich man's wealth and self-centeredness do not allow him to see Lazarus. But this ability to see is the mark of Christian discipleship.

I meet with several people each week to discuss how to grow in Christian discipleship. We talk about prayer and Bible study and scripture memory and all the other tools to help us connect with God and develop a relationship with him. And each of these tools indeed help us understand God better. The true mark of discipleship though, what makes someone truly Christ-like, is whether they are developing the ears, eyes and heart of God. We can debate all we want about the right approaches to poverty, but if we are not seeing the poor, we are not seeing the world through God's eyes.

We are without excuse when we close our eyes. Claims of ignorance about our responsibility for the poor are plainly rejected in the parable. In effect, the rich man's plea that someone be sent to his brothers implies that he himself has been deprived of sufficient knowledge. By implication he blames God for his predicament. Moses and the prophets are fully clear about issues of justice and assistance for the poor. The action required at the coming of the kingdom are the actions God always wanted from humans.

Lazarus which means, "God helps." If we can presume that the meaning was understood by the hearers of the parable, then it signifies God's identification with the poor and does not permit the hearer to think Lazarus is cursed because of his condition. He is poor and miserable, but God is still on his side. At least the parable must be understood as expressing God's identification with the poor.

When Mary is anticipating the birth of her son, Jesus, she sings a song. In it she says in Luke 1, **"he has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty."** Good things. What do we consider good things? The rich man had good things in this world. Actually, he had them all. But he had no room for the good things God wanted to give. He was already full.

Have we filled up on the good things of this world and left no room for the really good things of God in the next? Are we like our kids that stuff ourselves full of desserts with no nutritional value only to be too full for the good and healthy stuff?

May we begin to see as God sees. May we be patient for the good things.

References consulted:

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