

11.10.19

It All Belongs to God

Luke 16:10-14, 19-31

Pastor Doug Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Jesus frequently speaks about money and material possessions and whether we use them faithfully, honestly, and generously, or unfaithfully, dishonestly, and selfishly. What Jesus says is just as relevant as when he first spoke these words in Luke 16, 10 *"Whoever **is faithful** in a very little **is faithful** also in much; & whoever is **dishonest** in a very little is **dishonest** also in much.* 11 *If then you have **not been faithful** with the **dishonest** wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?* 12 *And if you have not **been faithful** with what belongs to another, who will give you what is your own?* 13 *No slave can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. **You cannot serve God and wealth.**"* 14 The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him."

Jesus then says, "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple & fine linen & who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come & lick his sores. The poor man died **& was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.** The rich man also died & was buried.

In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up & saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, *'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, & send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water & cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.'* But Abraham said, *Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, & Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, & you are in agony. Besides all this, between us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, & no one can cross from there to us.'* He said, *'Then father, I beg you to send him to my father's house – for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, so that they will not come to this place of torment.'* Abraham replied, *'They have Moses & the prophets; they should listen to them.'* He said, *'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'*

He said to him, *'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'*

This Jesus story tells us a vitally important truth - **what we do with our money we do with our life** – how we use what we have reflects who we are, what we care about and value, **and demonstrates whether we believe what we have is ours, or whether it all belongs to God**. Show someone your calendar & your bank statement & you show them what's important to you. Jesus speaks repeatedly of the importance of a proper attitude toward & stewardship of whatever money or material goods we have. Those of us who are blessed to have much have a wonderful opportunity to glorify God & to be a blessing to others. There's tremendous joy & satisfaction in being able to give in a way that honors God and blesses other people. It's also wonderful to be the recipient of generosity. On the other hand, it's always sad when people don't realize until the end of their life, when it's too late, **that there are eternal consequences to what we do with our money & our life, for good or bad**.

Dr. Jerome Groopman's book, *The Measure Of Our Days, New Beginnings at Life's End*, details the responses of eight different individuals to life threatening illness. Kirk is a 54-year-old president of an investment company. At the end of his life, after a brief remission from cancer, he & his doctor shared these words. The doctor speaks first, *"I'm sorry the magic didn't work longer."* *"It did more than anyone expected, Jerry. But you shouldn't feel sorry. There was no reason to live anyway."*

"You closed a few more deals. Cathy & the children & your mother had you for four pretty healthy months." They went on & spoke about newspapers & Kirk stated he couldn't read them anymore because his deals & trades seemed pointless. Kirk said of his life, *"I had no patience for the long term. I had no interest in creating something, not a product in business or a partnership with a person. And now I have no equity. No dividends coming in. Nothing to show in my portfolio. How do you like that for my great epiphany? No voice of God or holy star, but a newspaper left unread in its wrapper."*

What about your wife & children? Jerry asked. *“They’ll be fine without me. The remission meant nothing because it was too late to relive my life. I once asked for hell. Maybe God made this miracle to have me know what it will feel like.”* Dr. Groopman writes, *“I felt the crushing weight of Kirk’s burden choke my heart. There is no more awful death than to die with regret, feeling that you had lived a wasted life, death delivering this shattering final sentence on your empty soul.”* *“Have you thought about telling Cathy & the children what you have told me?”* Kirk recoiled in shock. *“Why so they can hear what they already know? That I was a self-absorbed uncaring s...? That’s really going to be a comforting deathbed interchange.”*

“Kirk, you can’t relive your life. There is no time. But Cathy & Roanna & Paul can learn from you. And when you’re gone, the memory of your words may help guide them.”¹

The similarities of Kirk’s life story with the parable of the rich man & Lazarus are striking. In the Biblical story, life for the rich man is a daily banquet. He’s clothed in the purple robes that symbolize wealth over fine linen Egyptian undergarments. Nothing about him hints of need. The poor man covered with open sores, lies among the stray dogs, gaunt, hollow eyed, & famished, his face toward the rich man’s house. Both men die but to different ends. The rich man died, perhaps from overeating, & was buried. The poor man died, perhaps of starvation, **& was carried away by angels**. In death, their roles are reversed. Lazarus, whose name comes from Eleazar which means *“God helps,”* is an honored guest with Abraham at God’s table. Neglected by others in life, Lazarus is prized by God. Meanwhile, the rich man is in anguish and torment in flames. Both their conditions are final. Part of what makes this parable so uncomfortable for most of us is that our condition is closer to that of the rich man than the poor, starving beggar. Jesus is driving home a crucial point about how our money & possessions can be a barrier or a blessing in our relationship with our neighbors & with God.

A focus on self, money & material consumption can lead to a shriveled & impoverished soul and a heart lacking in empathy, compassion, and generosity. Even after the rich man has died & gone to Hades, he doesn’t understand what has

¹ The Measure of Our Days, Dr. Jerome Groopman, pages 35-38.

happened & where his selfishness, greed, and lack of compassion and empathy has led him. He still arrogantly regards Lazarus as a servant to be sent on an errand to cool his thirst or to pay a visit to his brothers! Talk about someone who doesn't get it! Even after death he doesn't think of Lazarus as an equal.

The rich man failed in life & in death to grasp the truth about how our lives are to be invested. Our task is to accept a sacred partnership with God; to be compassionately generous; to be good stewards, to combat the deadly sin of covetousness by accepting the Bible's standard of good giving, the tithe, which is the first 10% of what God blesses us with; & to encourage people to give proportionately & systematically in keeping with their ability. Church consultants teach that growth in a congregation's understanding of financial giving can be measured by the number of people giving by check or online instead of in cash because it shows people are thinking about their giving ahead of time & planning it rather than giving on the spur of the moment when an usher shows up at the end of their pew with an offering plate. Our sons usually call us on Sunday afternoons and part of our discussion with Nathan last week was about giving and church finances because of a stewardship series at the church he attends in New York. He was shocked when a speaker related what a small percentage of Christians tithe.

Gilbert Davis, served as director of church relations for Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas, for many years and he used to tell a story of when he was a seminary student at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth. One day he was stopped in the hallway by an elderly gentleman. Gilbert had never met the man, so he was surprised when the man asked, "*Young man, are you studying to be a preacher?*" Gilbert replied that he was, & the man asked if he might talk with him for a few minutes. Not sure what he was getting into, Gilbert consented. It wasn't until some weeks later that he discovered who Arthur Everts was. He owned what was at the time the largest jewelry store west of the Mississippi, & it was in his living room that the East Dallas Christian Church began. Everts led Gilbert into an empty classroom, where he asked him whether he preached tithing in the student church he served on weekends. Before Gilbert could reply, Everts began giving him a lengthy & forceful set of arguments in

favor of tithing, indicating that this was essential for any young pastor who hoped to amount to anything for Jesus Christ. At the end of his several minute sermon, Everts urged Gilbert to become a tither. Finally getting a chance to speak, Gilbert said, *“But sir, we’re Christians now. We’re New Testament people; not Old Testament. We’re not under the law; we’re under grace.”* To which Everts replied, *“Young man, if you can show me anywhere in the New Testament where it says less is expected of a Christian under grace than of a Jew under the law, I’ll be glad to subscribe to your position.”*

Those who follow Jesus are expected to be faithful to God in all aspects of our life. We give of our money, time, & spiritual gifts out of gratitude to God and for our own spiritual development, not because the church needs to receive. That is why we shouldn’t substitute giving of one kind for another, because we deny ourselves the spiritual growth which comes from giving of ourselves & our resources in different ways. We encourage folks to give unselfishly as an act of discipleship; an act of trust, an act of obedience, act of love, an act of gratitude which grows the soul. A church that fails to speak about the cost of discipleship in every aspect of one’s life including our handling of money, is neglecting to care for the souls of its members

Jesus says in Matthew 23 that we should pay attention to the weightier issues of the law - justice, mercy, & faith without neglecting smaller matters like tithing. If Jesus says tithing is important to the worship of God, does it seem wise for us to decide it isn’t? Yet to Jesus, tithing was a smaller matter compared to justice, mercy, and faith – three things that were lacking in the rich man in Luke 16 who ignored the poor man right in front of his house and never did anything to help him or alleviate his suffering.

After he dies and it’s too late to relive his own life, the rich man in the story pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus as a messenger to warn his five brothers of the fate that awaits those who fail to heed God’s teaching. Abraham tells him they already have a sufficient message in the law & the prophets, just as the rich man did. We have the further benefit of the gospels which tell us of Jesus and all he taught and did as well as his death on the cross and rising from the dead & the rest of the New Testament as well. The story leaves us to wonder if his brothers ever get the message about living

generous, compassionate, trusting lives, or did they suffer the same fate? We're not told because that's the question the parable wants us to answer – how will we live. Each of us is a sister or brother of the rich man & we will write our own ending to the story.

In his book, *What Is A Christian?*, Leonard Griffith retells a classic story by the Russian novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky about a woman who died & was consigned to eternal torment like the rich man in Luke 16. In her agony she cried out for mercy. After much time had passed, an angel answered, *"I can help you if you can remember one altogether unselfish thing you did while on earth."* It seemed easy, but when she began to recite her good deeds, she realized that every one of them had been done from a motive of self-interest. Finally, at the point of despair, she remembered a carrot she had once given to a beggar. She feared to mention it, because it had been a poor withered carrot that she never would have used in the stew she was preparing anyway.

But the angel consulted the record, & the record showed that the act had been prompted by unselfishness—not great unselfishness, or it would have been a better gift, but it did qualify as unselfishness. The carrot was lowered on a slender string down through the space between heaven & hell. Could this weak thing bear her weight? Desperation made her try. When she grasped the withered carrot, she found herself slowly rising. Then, she felt a weight dragging at her. She looked down & saw other tormented souls clinging to her, hoping to escape with her. *"Let go! Let go!"* she cried. *"The carrot won't hold us all!"* But grimly, desperately they held on. Again, she cried, *"Let go! This is my carrot, I tell you. It's mine."* At that point, the string broke. Still clutching the carrot she had reclaimed for herself, the woman fell back into the torment of hell.

Dostoyevsky's story is an illustration of Jesus' parable of the rich man & the beggar. Both stories sum up the fate of people who live by the philosophy, *"What's mine is mine!"*—on this side of death & on the other side. If we wish to extend our personality in this way, we'll get the carrot, but that's all we'll get.²

² From Herb Miller's, *Money Is Everything*, page 32

We're the sisters & brothers of the rich man. We've been blessed, we've been encouraged, we've been warned, to live generously & compassionately. Our money & possessions can be a barrier to our relationship with our neighbors. Or our money & possessions can be used to bless & build a bridge to our neighbors. Either way the handling of our money demonstrates the nature of our relationship with God. What are we holding on to? A carrot won't hold us all, but a cross will.

Let's write a happy ending to our story.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. How do the lives of the rich man and Lazarus compare on earth (verses 19-21), and after death (verses 22-24)?
2. According to this teaching of Jesus only, what determines who enters heaven? Why do you think the poor man is welcomed and the rich man is kept out?
3. What do the contrasting fates of the two men make you think and feel about your own life and your priorities?
4. What does this story reveal about human nature? Why is it so difficult for us to be convinced of God's ways and to live by them?
5. How would those who know you best describe your attitude toward giving, sharing, and using money and possessions? How do we know if our life reflects the belief that it all belongs to God or not?
6. Based on this teaching of Jesus in Luke 16.19-31, what should be doing with our lives on earth?