

Luke 16:19-31 PM

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Preacher: Kathy Shain-Ross

[0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, thank you for the gift of your word. We thank you that you have given us the law and the prophets and your own self. We pray tonight that as we open your word, your spirit would go before me, that you would open our hearts, we would hear you, we would turn towards you, and we would be encouraged. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.

You can feel free to have a seat. Well, good evening. I'm going to add my welcome to Ryan's. If you don't know me, my name is Kathy Shane Ross. I've been on staff working with the youth here for the last few years at St. John's.

These youth service takeovers have become an absolute highlight, and I truly can't tell you what a privilege it is to be here with you and opening scripture with you this evening. So our passage today has some pretty intense imagery.

I don't know if anybody else cringed while they were reading it. It's unsettling. It might make us uncomfortable. And if you're anything like me, the language and imagery of judgment in this passage might make you squirm a little bit.

And I think it's supposed to. But this is a parable. So Jesus is using a story to make a point. Not every element of the story has to map directly onto life, and so it's not especially helpful to get bogged down in details about the role of angels and Abraham and the specific details of Hades in the story.

[1 : 2 1] These were common images of the afterlife from the time when Jesus was speaking. And he's using familiar and culturally relevant images to make a point.

The intention in this passage is not to tell us what happens to an individual after death step by step, but to challenge the hearts of his listeners, specifically the Pharisees, and I think also us.

Right before this, Jesus has been teaching about money. Taboo. He warned his disciples that no servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or love the one and hate the other, be devoted to one and despise the other.

He said you cannot serve God and money. And apparently some Pharisees, some religious leaders, were in earshot, because then we're told in verses 14 to 16 that Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard these things and they ridiculed him.

And he said to them, he had something to say. He said, you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

[2 : 3 2] The law and the prophets were until John. Since then the good news of the kingdom is preached, and everyone is forcefully urged into it. So Jesus has responded to the Pharisees with three things.

One, those who love money justify themselves before men. Two, God knows the truth of our hearts, and he has a totally different set of priorities than the earthly priorities.

And three, there's a direct connection, continuation between the law and the prophets, and the good news of the kingdom of God that's arriving in the person of Jesus.

So he's made these three points, and now he tells a story. Jesus knows that a good story has the power to shake up our expectations and shape our imaginations, and he's challenging not just what the Pharisees think, but what they love.

And he's challenging us too. So the story comes in three parts, and we're going to look at the three parts and see how each part does two things. The first thing it does is illustrates these three points Jesus has just made, and warns us of the blinding and dangerous power of loving money.

[3 : 44] The first part shows us how loving money makes us justify ourselves and blinds us to the needs of our neighbor. The second shows us that God knows and will reveal our hearts, but loving money blinds us to the eternal seriousness of our sin.

And the third part shows that there's a direct continuation between the law and the prophets and the kingdom of God, but loving money blinds us to the goodness of God's grace.

So that's where we're going. Act one. We meet two characters. The first is a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

So this man's not just living a life of ease and comfort, but luxury. We're talking bacon and waffles for brunch every morning, Thanksgiving dinner every night. He was clothed in purple and fine linen.

Purple was one of the most expensive dye colors of the time, and fine linen probably describes an extra soft fabric worn next to the skin. So we're talking, this is Louis Vuitton and cashmere undies.

[4 : 48] It's not just comfortable. It's showy. It's an indicator of status. It's our hiker in Arcteric. Straight fire, right? Then we meet a second character.

At his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. If the rich man is living his hashtag best life, Lazarus is living no life at all.

Unlike the rich man's soft clothes, Lazarus wears the pain of his poverty on his ulcerated skin. And though he desired to be fed with even just scraps from the rich man's table, there's no indication that he's given even a crumb.

And the rich man is blind. He's blind to the need right in front of him, even though he could easily meet it with just his leftovers. Lazarus. But the contrast here is not just between rich and poor, but religiously clean and unclean.

We have this note that even the dogs came and licked Lazarus' sores. And this tells us that this man would have been considered ritually unclean, tainted. These are not comforting lap dogs.

[5 : 58] These would have been street dogs who eat garbage. They might even have licked human corpses and other decomposing remains. This would make Lazarus not just pitiful, but repulsive.

Everyone would have recoiled from him in disgust. And the Pharisees and the rich man would probably have interpreted this as evidence of God's punishment against him. One commentator writes that money for the Pharisees was a sure sign of God's favor, and therefore of their place in the kingdom.

Observing this scene, the original listeners might well conclude that God has blessed the rich man, and the poor man must be the object of God's punishment and judgment. And it's really easy for us to fall into this kind of belief.

We really want to interpret that the good things we have, we deserve. And we use them as evidence to justify ourselves. This is actually scientifically proven. There's a fairly famous psychology experiment where researchers would invite pairs of strangers to play a rigged Monopoly game.

Who's played Monopoly? Okay, I've got hands in the audience. And they'd flip a coin at the beginning of the game, and it would decide one player got to start rich and one player got to start poor. The rich players received twice as much money to start with.

[7 : 13] On each turn, they got to roll two dice instead of one. And when they passed go, they collected \$200 instead of their opponent's \$100. So who do you think won?

Well, at the end of the game, when researchers asked the rich players, who inevitably had won, why they had won the game, did they talk about good luck or a head start? Nope.

They don't talk about the coin flip. They talk about the things they did. Their skills, their strategies, their good decisions. The winners had no empathy for the losers, and as the game went on and their leads got bigger, they exhibited more and more rude and dominating behavior towards them.

And not one person attributed their win to their unfair advantage. And this is not a once-off. This study has been repeated several times in different countries, different social settings, always the same results.

This is the power that money has to blind us. Even when the money is fake, it tempts us to justify ourselves, and it blinds us to our neighbors.

[8 : 18] So this is the scene we have. And then we shift to Act 2. The stark contrast between the rich man and Lazarus on earth is reversed when the two men die. Lazarus is taken by the angels to be with Abraham, while the rich man is suffering torment and pain in Hades.

And the point here is not simply that the poor will be saved and the rich will be punished. This is not a social revolution. This illustrates Jesus' point that God knows what's in your hearts, and what's exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

See, a lot of commentators talk about this scene being a reversal, but it's not just a reversal. It's a revelation. Their state in the afterlife reveals the truth of their hearts in their earthly life.

God knows what's truly in our hearts, but a love of money and a desire to justify ourselves blinds us, not only to our neighbor's needs, but to the eternal seriousness of our own sin.

The rich man doesn't suffer in Hades because he was rich, and certainly not for wearing purple. Abraham was very wealthy, but he's not in torment in the story. What we see here is the rich man's heart revealed, and his blindness to his own sin.

[9 : 36] See, even here in Hades, he calls out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame. He doesn't call out, Lazarus, I'm sorry.

He doesn't call out, Abraham, forgive me. No, the request is both painful and awkward, because first, the one who showed no Lazarus to mercy and would not even give him a crumb now begs Lazarus to show mercy to him.

Seriously? But also, he doesn't even address Lazarus directly. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to him like a servant. He calls Abraham Father, which tells us that this man is a Jew.

And even now, he still somehow believes that that alone entitles him to relief or reward from Abraham. And he still sees Lazarus as someone beneath him.

We see his heart. He doesn't repent or even seem to realize that earth's values no longer apply. But Abraham says to him, And child, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus and like man are bad things.

[10 : 47] But now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you, a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.

We're reading a small section in the middle of Luke in this series, but if we were reading Luke from the beginning, our ears would be ringing right now with John the Baptist's words from Luke 3, verse 8, when he says to the Jews, Bear fruits worthy of repentance.

Do not begin to say to yourselves, We have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. When all is said and done, calling Abraham father, does not help the rich man, when a love of money blinds us from seeing our sin and repenting.

And while the rich man could and should have crossed the space between his table and his gate to help Lazarus in life, no one's able to cross the space between the unrighteous and the righteous in death.

The rich man on earth chose feasting and fashion over mercy and compassion. And now that his heart is revealed, he experiences the fruit of his own mercilessness instead of the fruit of repentance.

[12 : 10] And on the other side is Lazarus, who received bad things in life that now he's comforted. And yet, we never hear Lazarus speak.

Did you notice that? Why is that? Well, many commentators are quick to point out that in all of Jesus' parables, in all of the Gospels, Lazarus is the only character ever given a name.

Other characters are always a rich man, a shepherd, a woman, a father. Lazarus alone gets a name. And the name Lazarus is from the Hebrew, Eleazar, which means, God has helped, or God is my salvation.

Lazarus isn't taken to paradise because he was poor. He's taken to paradise because God has helped him. God is his salvation. Just as Abraham's righteousness was not his own, but a gift of God through faith.

Lazarus never speaks in this story because Lazarus does not justify himself. God has justified him. Lazarus' earthly condition is actually a picture of the spiritual condition we're all in as humans.

[13 : 25] outside the gate, hungry and needy, tainted and unclean. Earthly poverty is not righteous in and of itself, but it certainly can make it easier to see our desperate need for a saving God.

In contrast, earthly wealth and comfort can blind us to our spiritual poverty and the eternal seriousness of our sin. So we've seen in part one how love of money makes us justify ourselves and it blinds us to the needs of our neighbors and that our hearts will be revealed but love of money blinds us to the seriousness of our sin.

Now we see part three of the story which illustrates Jesus' point that there is a direct continuation between the law and the prophets of the Old Testament and the kingdom of God that's being ushered in in Jesus.

But the love of money blinds us to God's grace and goodness. So after Abraham's judgment, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers but Abraham says, they have Moses and the prophets.

Let them hear them. And he says, no, Father Abraham, if someone goes to them from the dead, they'll repent. And at first, this seems like the rich man's finally thinking of someone other than himself showing concern for his brothers.

[14 : 44] But we very quickly see that he's still justifying himself. He's finally getting that repentance is probably necessary, but he's not actually repenting.

He's blame-shifting. It wasn't my fault. It was him. He says, if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent, implying, if someone had come to me from the dead, if I'd really been warned properly, if I'd been given a fair chance, I would have repented too.

It's not fair. I didn't get a fair deal. It's an amazing picture of how when we receive good things, we want to believe that we've earned or deserve them. But when judgment or consequences come along, we always somehow find a way to feel like they're unjust.

I don't deserve this. It wasn't fair. The rich man is still justifying himself. This man had the law and the prophets, but if he'd listened to them, he would know that Deuteronomy 15 says there should be no poor person in Israel's midst.

And that Micah instructs the children of God to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly. The Old Testament is riddled with instructions to be generous and merciful, especially to the poor and the outcast.

[15 : 59] And this because it's a reflection of God's character toward us, which his people were supposed to reflect to the world. But when we love money and justify ourselves, we're not only blind to our neighbors and our sin, we're blind to the grace of God, too.

The rich man's love of money and self-justification blinded him to the grace and mercy and generosity of God that was present throughout the Hebrew Scriptures because he would rather use his money for feasting and fashion than give his money for the glory of God.

And here's where the story reaches its peak irony because Abraham says if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

And yet this is the very thing that Jesus is about to do. Abraham said no one could cross the chasm to rescue the unrighteous, but Christ would do exactly that.

He took on the death that sinners deserved and he suffered the torment of Hades for our sin. And then God did what Abraham in the story would not do. Christ was raised from the dead and preached eternal life and his apostles were sent as witnesses to call Israel and all the world to repent on the basis of both the Scriptures and the one raised from the dead.

[17 : 22] And the Pharisees who loved money and justified themselves were blind to God's goodness and grace. Jesus, the very fulfillment of the law and of the prophets is standing in front of them performing miracles, preaching the good news of the kingdom of God and urging people to come into it and instead of receiving and rejoicing, they're offended by his judgment.

They ridicule him, they reject him, and they plot to kill him. Because their love of money blinded them to God's generosity and grace in the law and the prophets, they failed to see that generosity and grace of the word made flesh, standing in front of them, preaching the good news of eternal life.

Friends, one of the reasons that this story makes us squirm is that we do not like the idea of God's judgment. We don't like it. And the warning of judgment in this passage is very real and very stark, and we must not brush it away because it is a call.

It offends us because we long to justify ourselves. But when we're too busy being offended that Jesus is warning us about judgment, we blind ourselves to the marvelous mercy that he's offering us his grace and urging us to accept it.

The point of this parable is not, be more generous, although that may well be a side effect. The point is that what we most desperately need is a reversal in our own hearts.

[18 : 59] The story shows how loving money and the power money has over us blinds us to the needs of our neighbors, to the eternal seriousness of our sin, and it blinds us to the grace of God on offer to us.

And the thing is, we can't fix our hearts ourselves. We can't just give more money to fix our hearts. Only Jesus can heal the blind, just as he did for the Pharisee Saul on the road to Damascus.

We need this story reversed. First, we must see and receive the grace of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Pay attention, listen, understand, and know him through the revelation of his word and the gift of his spirit.

And then when we see his grace clearly, we see our sin revealed for what it is, and we can wholly throw ourselves on his goodness, say, God is my help, God is my salvation, and bear the fruit of repentance in our lives.

Friends, are we offended by the warning of judgment? Or are we joyfully seeing the fruit of repentance in our lives? And when we receive God's grace and respond with grateful repentance, our hearts are reshaped.

[20 : 20] We don't have to muster up generosity for our neighbors, because instead of loving money and using our neighbors, we're freed to use money to love our neighbors for the glory of God.

We not only see them clearly as image bearers of God, but we take joy in generously responding to their needs because we have eternity in mind. So I invite you to prayerfully ask Jesus to reveal to you where your heart might be blind.

Is it to your neighbor? Is it to your sin? Is it to God's goodness in sending us a Savior? God knows what's in our hearts.

So I invite you to pray to him to reveal to you now in this life where you might be spiritually blind and to reshape your vision to see and participate in the kingdom that he's ushering in.

Glory be to God.