

## Discipleship in the Lectionary – 09/25/2022



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Revised Common Lectionary Year C

Sunday, September 25<sup>th</sup>

Luke 16:19-31

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### The Culture of Self-Indulgence

Coming on the heels of teaching about stewardship (Luke 16:1-9), cautions over attempting to serve both God and money (16:13), and accusations about the Pharisees being lovers of money (16:14f), the famous story of the Rich Man and Lazarus appears to keep the money and wealth theme going. Some scholars are not convinced this story, which is unique to Luke, is a parable at all because no other parable has a character who is named. It is easy to oversimplify this parable to rich=bad; poor=good and thus dismiss any personal relevance. This parable challenges us to reflect whether we have the heart of Lazarus or the concerns of the rich man. How might things have been different if the rich man had taken the time to help Lazarus and the two of them had become friends?

#### Luke 16:19-31

*<sup>19</sup>“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup> And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup> who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

The narrative opens with a description of the two primary actors. The unnamed rich man (sometimes call *Dives* after the Latin name for rich) is clothed in purple, the color of royalty. Such cloth was dyed with a very costly dye originating from a shellfish. This is a first century example of conspicuous consumption. In contrast, Lazarus (originating from *Eleazar*, meaning "God has helped") lies at the gate of the rich man in such a state where only the dogs minister to him - a sight that still did not move the rich man to compassion. While the rich man "*feasted sumptuously every day,*" Lazarus desired only the rich man's scraps.

*<sup>22</sup> The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, <sup>23</sup> and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. <sup>24</sup> And he called 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.' <sup>25</sup> But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. <sup>26</sup> 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.'*

Both men die. The rich man had a burial while we can only assume Lazarus was put into some mass grave. We read how Lazarus was carried to Abraham's side. The original Greek translates as being in the bosom of Abraham.

This expression refers to the image of two people reclining at a table (see also John 13:23 for a similar description of the apostle John and Jesus). Lazarus reclines next to Abraham and thus occupies a place of honor. The table theme is not lost. The rich man's plight is somewhat different. He is in Hades being in torment from the fire and asks Abraham (not Lazarus himself -perhaps continuing to depersonalize him even after death) to send Lazarus to help relieve his anguish. Abraham explains to the rich man the reversal of fortunes.

*27 And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' 29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' 30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"*

Only in death does the rich man appear to be concerned about someone else besides himself. Now he wants Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers. The significance of five brothers is debatable. Some argue the number five represents wholeness and thus is perhaps meant to represent image for his entire family. Others argue it is merely arbitrary. Still others point to the High Priest Caiaphas who oversaw the trial of Jesus having five brothers. Abraham points to the fact that the rich man's brothers already have Moses and the Prophets and if they will not listen to these then neither will they be convinced if someone rises from the dead - perhaps an allusion here to the resurrection of Jesus.

### Reflections

What did the rich man do to deserve his fate? Nothing - and that is the point. It was not some heinous sin he committed but his sins of omission. His problem was not his wealth. His problem was his wealth had made him self-indulgent and indifferent to the suffering around him. His wealth had hardened his heart. Lazarus at his gate had become nothing more than permanent landscape. The gulf between Lazarus and the rich man in death was as wide as the gulf between them in life. Let us not also forget the role of culture and theology. The Jews believed that Lazarus' predicament was God's judgement whereas people like the unnamed rich man were blessed by God. This made it easier for the rich man to ignore Lazarus. What cultural and theological blinkers are at work in our lives? Who is the Lazarus at our gate?

As we seek to apply this text to our lives, having nice clothes, eating well every day (perhaps too well!), and living in a gated community is not really the issue at stake. The real issue here is indifference caused by self-indulgence. The extremes of individualism and consumerism in our culture have produced levels of self-reliance and self-centeredness that are undermining the fundamentals of coexistence. Our culture places trust in vanity, pride, and riches rather than in God. Yet we are only stewards of our resources - our talents, time, and treasure. We are all merely beggars in this world. Some have a better spot than others. We do not know what tomorrow will bring. "*What is your life? For you are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes*" (James 4:14b). Perhaps Luke's intention is that we should see ourselves as the siblings of the rich man in this parable?

The often-overlooked person in this parable is Lazarus. Was he saved just because he was poor? Verse 25 seems to imply such, but we would have to throw out much of the rest of the Bible if this were the case. It is easy to overlook the heart of Lazarus. The wild and viscous dogs rendered aid to Lazarus. The dogs see the goodness in Lazarus, even if the rich man did not. Lazarus was quiet. He bore no anger. He did not riot or burn. Like Job, his response to his situation brought meaning. Lazarus models mercy despite the anguish he suffered. Even in death, perhaps Lazarus was willing to help the rich man who refused to help him in life. Perhaps Lazarus was willing to do exactly what the rich man asked of Abraham and why Abraham had to explain about the great chasm.