

Puzzling Parables

The Rich Man and Lazarus

March 11, 2018

Welcome to where we're learning how to soften our hearts!

How hard is your heart? How do you know? *It's deceitful.* (Jer 17:9)



As I told you last week, I believe we've got the timeline of the Gospels locked in; and, I can't wait to show you what the Gospels can do! But, first I had to move a couple pieces. So, we returned to Jesus' Sermon on the Mount and the training of His newly appointed twelve.



This is shortly after John is imprisoned for rebuking the immoral marriage of Herod Antipas, who divorced his wife and arranged the divorce of his brother's wife, so he could marry her.



Last week we read the parable of The Shrewd Manager, and we left off with Jesus saying that **you can't be devoted to God and Money.**



Jesus aims this parable at the Pharisees who loved money more than God. And justified Herod's divorce rather than join John in denouncing this obvious violation of the Law.



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 [i.e. the display of wealth, power, and position] is detestable in God's sight. **"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John [was locked up; because, they aren't proclaiming it].** Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached [by Jesus in fulfillment of the law and the prophets], and **everyone is forcing his way into it** [because the crushing masses are receiving no help or encouragement from their religious rulers]. It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law. [You can't ignore it] **"Anyone [especially Herod Antipas, the Roman appointed king of the Jews] who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and [not only that, it's a double violation, because] the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.** – Luke 16:15-18 NIV



Jesus is exposing these Pharisees' money-motivated hypocrisy. **They saw health, wealth, and status as God's approval. And, they saw sickness, poverty, and prison as God's disapproval.**



Just before this, Jesus calls attention to how these hypocrites give, pray, and dress to be seen as righteous. (Mt 6:1-6) And, He says:

“It has been said, ‘*Anyone who divorces his wife must give her a certificate of divorce.*’ [That’s how they were justifying Herod] But I tell you that *anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness,* [like Herod Antipas’ complicit brother Philip II (who had to give his consent)] *causes* her to become an *adulteress*, and *anyone who marries the divorced woman* [as Herod Antipas had] *commits adultery.*” – Matthew 5:31-32 NIV

The Law is law. John spoke truth. And, these men are hypocrites. **Divorce to replace a spouse is adultery; as is looking at a woman with lust.** (Mt 5:28) **That’s the Law. The Good News, thanks to Jesus: it’s forgivable for a repentant heart; but, call it what it is.**



Then Jesus tells about *The Rich Man* (who dresses like a Pharisee) and *Lazarus*, **the only parable character given a proper name.** Got’a wonder why. **You know there’s a reason.**

In this parable, the position of both men is suddenly reversed.

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.” But Abraham replied, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” He answered, “Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” “No, father Abraham,” he said, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” - Luke 16:19-31 NIV



The lesson isn’t that wealth is bad. Lazarus is carried to Abraham’s side (a Jewish expression for paradise) and **Abraham was “very wealthy,”** (Gen 13:2) **but Abraham was also rich in compassion.** In the story, **even the dogs competing for scraps offer more compassion and comfort** than this well-dressed lover-of-money. Lazarus is laid at the rich man’s gate (where trash is piled to be taken away) to feed on whatever refuse he can reach.



... longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. [The crowd is going, “Oooh!” And Jesus leans in ...] Even the dogs came and licked his sores. [“Gross!”] – Luke 16:21 NIV

The Pharisees like the story so far. There’s not much they can imagine being more unclean or indicative of God’s judgment and punishment.

Then comes a classic Jesus twist: both die; the rich man is buried whereas beggars were thrown into the burning dump. But, **though Lazarus isn't buried, he's carried to paradise.** And, just as Lazarus had once longed for scraps from the rich man, now he longs for mere drips from Lazarus.

... Father Abraham, have pity on me and **send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue**, because I am in agony in this fire.' – Luke 16:24b NIV



Though he no longer sees Lazarus as unclean, **he's unrepentant.** No sorrow. No remorse. Just a craving to be attended and served. **Don't underestimate the hardness of a self-centered heart.** If you can step over a crippled man each day as you pass your trash, *that's messed up.* Yet, **He's not punished for not helping Lazarus, but for what his inaction reveals about his heart.** So, **how hard is your heart?**

Abraham says something very telling, but often overlooked.

... between us and you **a great chasm has been fixed**, [Why?] **so that those who want to go from here to you cannot** ... – Luke 16:26a NIV

"The people on this side are *on this side* because their hearts are *so filled* with compassion that we had to build a barricade to keep them from crossing over!" **We can't help everyone.** Not possible. **But, Lazarus represents those who are laid on our path, whose needs we know to be genuine, and the means by which to help we possess.**



So, don't stop at good intentions or stirred emotions.

They should have to build a barricade to stop us from doing whatever we can! Just watch and act and say to yourself: "Well, I can't help *everyone*; but, I can sure help *you!*"

Until some action has happened, compassion hasn't.

I'll let you in on a big secret: **our eternity has already begun!** If I live only to bless myself, **the temporary joys and thrills of this short life will be as close as I get to Heaven.** But if I live to bless others in Jesus' name, *in spite of* my own poor health, wealth, and afflictions, **these temporary trials and troubles will be as close as I get to Hell!**

Now, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus back to his **"father's house"** to warn his **"five brothers"**. Doesn't that seem oddly specific? Abraham explains that they've been given Moses (i.e. the Law) and the Prophets. That's shorthand for the OT (i.e. Jesus' Bible).

"No, father Abraham," he said, **["That won't work! They don't know that thing!"]** "but if someone from the dead **[like Lazarus]** goes to them, they will repent." "He said to him, "If they do not listen to **Moses and the Prophets**, **[i.e. Jesus' Bible]** they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." – Luke 16:30-31 NIV

Really? 'Cause it *sure seems* like it'd have an impact! **"Hey, I'm Lazarus. You know me better as the corpse. I've been sent back for you."** But, maybe I underestimate the hardness of a self-centered heart. And, maybe that's why Jesus named this character Lazarus.



Three years later, a friend named Lazarus bookends Jesus ministry by returning from the dead in Jesus' final attempt to reach these hard-hearted religious rulers. This is the interior of what is believed to be the very tomb where Lazarus returned from the dead and ascended those stairs.



Jesus looked up and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but **I said this for the benefit of the people standing here, that they may believe that you sent me.**" [But, if they won't listen to Scripture, they won't listen to Lazarus (Lk 16:31)] When he had said this, Jesus called in a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out!" – John 11:41b-43 NIV

Just picture Lazarus stumbling up those stairs all wrapped up. Outside nobody's breathing; and then they hear, "I'm coming, I'm coming!"

The dead man came out, his hands and feet wrapped with strips of linen, and a cloth around his face. Jesus said to them, "Take off the grave clothes and let him go." Therefore **many of the Jews who had come to visit Mary, and had seen what Jesus did, put their faith in him.** – John 11:44-45 NIV

Wait. "Many"?! Shouldn't it say, "Every last person, capable of joining two words, fell on their face and cried, 'My Lord!'"? What were the *rest* holding out for?! You see, **miracles can shake us up, but only His Spirit and Word can wake us up.** And, *that's* what Jesus was getting at three years before on that hillside. **Here's this astonishingly insane three-year payoff happening, and tragically, disturbingly, proving the point of His parable.** "How many layers of hardness does a heart have to have to miss *this one*? I even named him *Lazarus!*"

Then **the chief priests and the Pharisees called a meeting of the Sanhedrin** [which included the former High Priest, Annas (Jn 18:13) and his five sons (who each later serve as High Priest)¹]. ... Then one of them, named **Caiaphas**, [who married into the household of Annas (Jn 18:13)] who was **high priest** that year, [and as such wore a violet robe and fine linen (Ex 28:31, 39)] spoke up, "... it is better for you that one man die for the people than that the whole nation perish." ... So from that day on they plotted to take [Jesus] life. – John 11:47-50, 53 NIV

But a man returned *from the dead* to the *father's house* and *five brothers* of Caiaphas (a rich man dressed in purple and fine linen) saying: "**Hey, I'm Lazarus. You know me better as the corpse. I've been sent back for you.**"



So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him **many [but, not all]** of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. – John 12:10-11 NIV

Don't underestimate the hardness of a self-centered heart. And, **do all you can, while you can, to soften yours. So that when you're buried, you'll be carried.**

¹ "[Annas] had five sons, all of whom ... became high priests of God ..." (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* XX, 9.1)