

### **Love in a World on Fire: Who Are We Overlooking**

As we look further into how to love people in the time of Covid19, we come to a parable in the book of Luke. Let's see what this passage can teach us about loving others.

Luke 16:19-31

<sup>19</sup>“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. <sup>20</sup>At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores <sup>21</sup>and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

<sup>22</sup>“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup>In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup>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.’

<sup>25</sup>“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. <sup>26</sup>And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

<sup>27</sup>“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, <sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

<sup>29</sup>“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

<sup>30</sup>“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

<sup>31</sup>“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.’”

This is the Word of the Lord.

This parable is part of a collection of parables in the middle of the book of Luke. This particular parable is only found in Luke. It is not repeated in any of the other Gospels. It is a tough parable. And it is important to remember that this is a parable. It is a story told for the purpose of teaching. A parable is a story, not an account of something that actually happened. Just because a character in the story is named, poor Lazarus, it does not make it an account. We need to remember that is a teaching story. So what are we being taught?

Well, for starters (and this may sound silly) I want to be clear about what this parable is not teaching. This parable has an interesting affect on people so I want to de-mystify a few things so that we can concentrate on what is really here. First, this is not a parable about salvation. It is not teaching that if you are good or poor you go to heaven and if you don't do good works you go to hell. That is not what this is teaching. If you put this parable in the context of all of scripture, it is clear only God saves, not our works. So this is not teaching us about salvation. It is also not a parable teaching about the afterlife. This is not meant to tell us what heaven or hell are like. It does confirm that there is an afterlife, but it is not account what it is actually like. What this parable IS about is (and I will give you three things this parable teachers) how God expects us to use our wealth,

it is about paying attention to scripture, and it addresses how we should treat each other in this life. Wealth, paying attention to scripture, and how we should treat each other.

First, wealth and how God views wealth. Actually, at the beginning of Luke 16, earlier in this same chapter, there is another parable about wealth. So there is a theme going on here. And the theme is that God is displeased with people that do not use their wealth to help others. Jesus was even more harsh. In Mark and Matthew he is recorded saying that it is easier for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Now, that is hyperbole. He is exaggerating. But Jesus does that to make a point and get our attention. Collecting as much wealth as we can is not the point of the Christian life. I think we would all agree that the Christian life is much much more. And this parable reminds us of this. When we don't use our wealth for God's purposes, we are misusing our wealth.

This parable is also a great reminder that your wealth in this life does not follow you to the afterlife. You can't take it with you as you may have heard before. But more than that, what you do with your wealth in this life also matters. God expects people with wealth to use it to care for others that have less. Lazarus was at that gate every day. Every day he begged and the rich man did nothing. And we know the rich man knew he was there. He didn't accidentally miss him, He knew Lazarus was there. How do we know this? We know this because the rich man calls out to Lazarus by name for help in verse 24. He knows his name. This is one of the fun details about this parable. The poor man is named and the rich man is not. Why? To prove the rich man knew him and did not use his wealth to help him. It is the nail in the coffin if you will. He knew who Lazarus was and that he was at his gate that whole time.

What are you doing with your wealth to help others? And I do not mean just throwing money at things. I think God wants something more engaged than that. God wants us to invest our time as well. That is part of what we are rich with. Time and money. And we are given these to help others, not hoard them. And this is something you need to reflect on for yourself. The answer of what you should be doing will be different for each one of you. You are all living in different circumstances. So you have to take a look at yourself, your resources, and look at who God is putting in your path that needs help. The rich man was not in trouble for not helping poor people in general, he was in trouble because Lazarus was right in front of his nose, he knew him, and he did not show compassion for him. So as yourself; Who is in your path? Who is at your gate? Think about it and pray about it and I bet you will figure it out.

So, this parable is about wealth. Second, it is about paying attention to scripture. This is the "what" part of the sermon title. What are we overlooking? Starting in verse 27 the rich man says this: " 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, <sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' <sup>29</sup> 'Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' <sup>30</sup> ' 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' <sup>31</sup> '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.' " This parable reminds us that what we need to know about God and how to live this life is in here (the Bible). We have it. This is it. I know I am jumping ahead to the third teaching point of this parable, but Abraham is pointing out to the rich man that passages about how we should live and treat each other go back to Deuteronomy chapters 14-25 multiple places in Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Zachariah, Micah, Malachi, not to mention Jesus' sermon on the mount. Its all here. If we refuse to read it, or read it but not respond to it, God is not going to intervene with some grand writing in the sky and lightening to point us in the right direction. We have been given what we need. This is called the sufficiency of scripture. The Bible is sufficient for what we need to know about God and a Christian life. The question is what are we going to do with it?

Well, first you need to read it. And I will easily argue that no matter how much you have read the Bible, there is still more to learn. You honestly cannot read it too much. And I would encourage you to read the Bible with

others. Set up a zoom meeting to talk about it. Or read the Bible with a friend and discuss it over the phone. Read the Bible together. Parents read the Bible to your children. It is one of the most important things you can do for them. So read it, and then respond to it. Let it change you. The religious leaders in Jesus' day knew the scriptures. They knew them well. But they didn't let it change them. Instead they used it as a weapon for being right and making everyone else wrong. That was what Jesus was constantly criticizing them for. They knew scripture, they knew prophecy, but they didn't know the Messiah who was standing right in front of them. You need to read scripture, and then you need to let it change you to be more like the image of Christ, who was the image of God.

So far I have covered that this parable is about wealth and about paying attention to scripture. The last point is the biggest point from this parable. It is about treating each other with compassion. About having compassion for others and acting on it. How we treat each other matters. There is a great warning here from the grave. We need to live and act with compassion. This is not a new concept. As I listed earlier, the message on how we treat each other goes back all through the Old Testament. The sin that lands the rich man in hell is that he had no compassion. Even when he is suffering in hell he still has no compassion for Lazarus. He still doesn't get it. Instead he wants Lazarus to help him. He is not even apologetic. His lack of compassion is striking.

Why should we have compassion? Because God has compassion for us. God has not given us what we deserve. God has sacrificed for us even when we sin. If we are going to respond to a compassionate God, we have to have compassion on each other as well. The gap in this parable is amazing. God has compassion and has given us everything, and the rich man cannot give one poor man anything. It is a striking picture of lack of compassion. It is teaching us that we must have compassion for others. This is the "who" part of the sermon title. Who might we be overlooking? That's a good question. I will get to that in a moment.

But here is a really interesting point. The rich man's sin is by omission. It is what he didn't do. Usually we think of sin as something we do. We do something wrong. But here it is what he failed to do. Sin by omission. It is similar to the parable of the Good Samaritan. The first two people that walk by the suffering man just keep going. Not doing anything about that which is wrong and right front of you is sinning. We sin by omission when we don't act. Now can we do something about every evil in the world? No. As I told you earlier, God will put in your path who you should help. It is not a blanket demand for the whole world. None of us could do that.

However, we have an obvious challenge and wrong in front of us right now. It is called racism. And unfortunately the American church does not have a good history of addressing racism. We have a history of sinning by omission. Not doing anything about something that we do not suffer from as much as others. And when I say "we" that includes "me."

In Birmingham Alabama in 1963 a young Martin Luther King Jr. sat in a jail cell for protesting peacefully. While in jail he received a letter from eight white fellow clergy. Some of the most prominent clergy in the city. A Methodist, Catholic, Episcopal, mainline Protestants, and one rabbi. The letter criticized King for the civil rights campaign. They called it "unwise and untimely." They accused him of "provoking hatred and violence." They appealed "to both our white and Negro citizenry to observe the principles of law and order and common sense." This is what white clergy were saying to a fellow pastor who was being oppressed. Keep in mind the law and order that they were referring to at that time were the Jim Crow laws. The law that didn't allow people of color in certain places. A law that kept them separated in substandard schools. The law that allowed lynching of black people whenever suspected of doing something wrong. Law that did not even define lynching as murder. It was considered justice. This is the law that these white clergy wanted to uphold to keep the peace. They failed King when he needed them.

In response King wrote a letter back. It is now called "Letter from Birmingham Jail." It is one of his most famous letters now. And in it King agonizes that the church and fellow clergy could be willing to turn a blind eye to the suffering of African Americans. King writes this: "There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. In those days the church was not merely a thermometer that recorded the ideas and principles of popular opinion; it was a thermostat that transformed the mores of society. Whenever the early Christians entered a town, the people in power became disturbed and immediately sought to convict the Christians for being "disturbers of the peace" and "outside agitators." But the Christians pressed on, in the conviction that they were "a colony of heaven," called to obey God rather than man. Small in number, they were big in commitment... Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an arch defender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent--and often even vocal--sanction of things as they are."

Is this the legacy we want to have? That letter was written in 1963. And here we are in 2020 and racism still poisons our society. It is so deeply rooted in our culture that we don't even realize it. Did you know that when the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1920 was formed that White Democrats in the south wanted a separate rate for black workers. They wanted a white rate of unemployment benefits and a black rate that was lower. Of course they were told by the Dems in the North they could not do that. So as they bargained to get the act passed, they settled for instead excluding farm workers and household workers from unemployment benefits. The two primarily black jobs at that time. They did not want the workers picking their cotton and cleaning their houses getting unemployment. The act passed. Racism built right into legislation. I bet a lot of you didn't know that. This is how pervasive it is. And things need to change. The African American community still makes less money than white people, they still have less access to good education, they still have more poverty, they still have less health care, they still have lower graduation rates, they are proportionately hit harder by Covid19, and the list goes on. And what you have seen in the last few weeks is the anger boiling over. African Americans are asking when is enough enough already?

Now I do understand that racism is hard to talk about. It brings up a lot of emotions on all sides. It is hard to talk about. But if we don't get to the point where we can talk about it and agree that it needs to change and how, we are sinning by omission. And I know that is not who First Pres is. So I am going to ask you to read a book with me. It is titled *Race talk and the conspiracy of silence*. I want as many of us as possible to read this together. I especially want elders and deacons to read it. It will help us stop tripping over the issue and be able to better dialogue so that we can have meaningful conversations with people in our community, the community we are called to serve. I have a colleague who is African American and a professor and she has led discussions on this book many times and she will facilitate our discussions on zoom. So I am not going to lead this book study. I am going to participate just like you. And we can learn together and hopefully change together. If you can afford to buy your own copy, please do. If you cannot, email me this week and I will order one for you. There is a link to the book information on our website under "getting involved." To sign up for this book study you need to email me this week and then more information will be sent to you to get started. This is something we can do during the pandemic to start understanding racism so we are ready to address it when things are safer to be out and with others.

There is a lot in this parable. We have been reminded that we need to use our wealth for God's purposes and to help others. We have been reminded by Abraham that scripture and what we need to know is all there in the Bible, we just need to read and respond. And the biggest lesson is that we need to live and act with compassion. The rich man had no compassion, not even in hell. He lacked compassion and sinned by doing nothing about the suffering that was right in front of him. I know this church has compassion. You are an amazing

compassionate group of people that love God and want to love others. And I am trusting that we will not fail to act in the crazy world we are in today. First Pres can do it. I know we can.