

# A Beggar Named Lazarus

Luke 16:19-33

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Today is the fourth Sunday of Lent. The theme we are exploring this year is called “Christ Collides.”

Each week during Lent, our texts and themes are exploring how Jesus’ teachings, his interactions with others, his actions, and his stories collide with us and with our world.

Today, Jesus, collides with a lot of things. Our natural selfishness, our relationship to wealth, our ideas about who matters and who doesn’t (whether this is explicit or, more often, implicit), our priorities, our apathy...

There’s a lot going on in this parable that Jesus tells (which is not an easy one to hear!).

A few quick things to note before we get into a few of the ways in which this story collides with our expectations and assumptions and dispositions.

First, just a quick note that this is not the same Lazarus as the Lazarus Jesus raised from the dead in John’s gospel (the brother of Mary and Martha). Some have conflated these two Lazaruses but they are not the same guy.

Second, why does Jesus say that Lazarus was carried to “Abraham’s side?” Why not to God himself or to “heaven?”

The “Bosom of Abraham” was an ancient Jewish phrase that referred to a place of comfort.

Many conceived of the reward of the righteous dead as a sharing in a banquet given by Abraham, “the father of the faithful, and of the highest form of that reward as lying in “Abraham’s Bosom.”

So, Jesus is working with a common first century Jewish understanding of the afterlife here, even as he is casting an unlikely character in the place of highest honour.

It is also important to note that this is a parable. Jesus is telling a story to make a specific point in a specific context. In this case, the story is told in the larger context of a dispute with the Pharisees who Luke describes as “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14).

We should guard against the temptation to spin out a very detailed eschatology or to overly literalize our conceptions of the afterlife based on one parable. The bible has many other things to say about these things which must also be factored in (and which we can’t get into now!). Much of it relies heavily on metaphor and symbolism which we are often too quick to literalize.

But we should also avoid the temptation to just explain the severity of this story away as hyperbole or an overwrought metaphor.

Jesus says hard things. All the time. Things that make us squirm and shuffle our feet and quickly turn the page.

On Wednesday, Jose Luis Moraga from MCC Alberta was here for an evening presentation. During the day, he was showing me how he had used ChatGPT to create the image on the promotional poster that he sent out to churches.

I was kind of blown away. I don’t have much experience with AI. The principled part of me resents its very existence!

But the curious part of me also exists. I had to give it a try. I thought about the story I would be preaching on this Sunday and typed the following into the text box: “Create an interesting image based on the story of the rich man and Lazarus from Luke 16.”

I waited expectantly.

I didn’t get an image. What I got was the following message:

I wasn’t able to generate an image for the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus because it didn’t meet the platform’s content policy. This often happens with depictions involving suffering, violence, or graphic depictions of hell or torment—even if they’re symbolic or biblical in nature.

Want to try a different angle on it?

Well, Jesus didn't sanitize things to meet a tech platform's content policy. He told stories to jolt, to provoke change, to get his listeners to take an honest look at their lives and to think about the consequences.

So, whatever we might make of references to literal fire and whether this represents the precise topography of the afterlife, we should not miss that Jesus is very serious in this story.

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How does Christ collide with us today? I want to focus on two main collisions.

The first collision is between Jesus and our relationship to wealth.

Money is a touchy subject. And yet it is one that Jesus talked about a lot more than we might prefer.

In the four gospels, Jesus talks about money more than any topic except the kingdom of God.

He talks about money three times more than love and seven times more than prayer. He talks about money more than heaven or hell or sex or race or gender.

Some scholarly estimates suggest that fully one quarter of Jesus' teaching are directly or indirectly connected to money.

Tyler Staton is a pastor from Portland who I sometimes listen to. In a recent sermon, he did the uncomfortable math on Jesus' teaching and his own.

He searched his sermon database and found that he had devoted just under one percent of his sermons to money.<sup>1</sup>

I didn't have the courage to do my own math. But I doubt it would be much different.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://podcasts.apple.com/ca/podcast/john-mark-comer-teachings/id1592847144?i=1000700572806>

Simply put, Jesus reminds us that good things are for sharing. Good things are not for hoarding and wasting and consuming recklessly, but for distributing to those more familiar with bad things.

We are called to voluntarily do with less so that others can have more, to resist the lie that is sold to us every day and in countless ways that contentment and happiness are things that can be bought and fortified and maintained and insured.

John Mark Comer is a pastor and writer from California, and he recently wrote a bestselling book called *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry*. In one chapter, he talks about passage earlier in Luke where Jesus says “the eye is the lamp of the body” and that if “your eyes are unhealthy, your whole body will be full of darkness” (Luke 11:34).

Listen to what he says:

If you’re thinking, *Wait, what does optometry have to do with money?* this is a first-century idiom that’s lost on our modern ears. In Jesus’ day, if people said you had a “healthy” eye, it had a double meaning. It meant that (1) you were focused and living with a high degree of intentionality in life, and (2) you were generous to the poor. When you looked at the world, you saw those in need and did your best to help out. An “unhealthy” eye... was the exact opposite. **When you looked out on the world, you were distracted by all that glitters and lost your focus on what really matters. In turn, you closed your fist to the poor.**

I wonder if this was the rich man in Jesus’ story. He had lost focus on what matters. He had grown distracted by all that glitters.

I wonder how often this describes us.

A few verses before our reading began, we read that the Pharisees, who, again, *were lovers of money*, were sneering at Jesus’ teachings. To them, Jesus says these words:

No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money (Luke 16:13).

About this famous teaching of Jesus’, John Mark Comer has this to say:

... cannot, not should not.

For Jesus it's a non-option. You cannot serve God and the system. You simply can't live the freedom way of Jesus *and* get sucked into the overconsumption that is normal in our society. The two are mutually exclusive. You have to pick.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus' call to simplicity and open-handed generosity collides with our tight-fistedness, our endless distraction, our chasing after the next glittery thing.

It's a violent collision, particularly for those of us who have more than we need. We must pick. Who will we serve?

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The second collision has to do with who and how and even *if* we see other people.

What was the rich man's sin in Jesus' story?

We're not told. At least not explicitly.

We're not told that he deliberately mistreated Lazarus. We're not told that he hurled abuse at him or that he kicked him as he walked by outside his gate. We're not told that he despised Lazarus or thought that he was impure or unclean.

Any or all these things *could* be true. But we don't know.

We're also not told why the rich man responds as he does from Hades. Why does he want Lazarus to touch his *tongue* with water? Why not his feet or his hands or his head?

Is it because our tongues are such potent instruments for bringing good and evil (as James 3 reminds us)? Is it because sometimes all it takes is a kind word or a verbal expression of common humanity to bridge the gap between "invisible" and "unworthy" to "visible" and "valuable?"

We're not told.

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<sup>2</sup> John Mark Comer, *The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2019), 196-97.

Perhaps the silence regarding the precise nature of the rich man's sins is *itself* meant to speak volumes.

This was how he treated the rich man. Utter silence. Lazarus didn't even exist.

I wonder if the chief sin of the rich man in this story was his utter failure to notice another human being, and to acknowledge, even in some very small way, his value, his common humanity as a child of God.

Last Monday at the jail, I told the guys that I had a hard passage to preach on this Sunday and I asked them to help me preach my sermon. I wanted to hear how Scripture sounds from a perspective other than my own.

We read the passage. And I threw it open. *What did you hear? What should I say?*

They were a bit tentative at first. I suspect it was the first any of them had been consulted for sermon advice.

But eventually we had a good conversation about who's on top and who's at the bottom in our world, and about how we all have a duty to notice each other and help those in need.

Nothing terribly remarkable about that. But we also spent some time talking about the way the parable begins.

*There was a rich man...*

*There was a beggar named Lazarus...*

It's interesting who gets a name and who doesn't, isn't it? We would expect the rich man to be named and the poor beggar to remain anonymous.

But as is so often the case, with Jesus it's the exact opposite. The beggar is named, and it is the rich man who remains anonymous.

The guys found this very interesting. So do I.

We talked about how much names matter. In the jail, each of guys is given a number. They have to sign in with it every time they attend chapel or any other program. They all wear the same blue coveralls, the same orange crocs.

There is a flattening sameness to their experience there. All individuality is deliberately snuffed out.

Now, this is the jail. It's not a retreat centre. They get this.

But we talked about how we all need to hear our names spoken out loud, to acknowledge that we are each unique, that we all have a story, that none of us can be reduced to our worst decisions, or to a number.

How we all have a longing to be recognized for who we are and who we long to be, however often we fail.

I told them that one of my deepest convictions is that no matter how we are evaluated by the world, God knows us by name and calls us by name and loves us as precious, individual *named* human beings.

I believe it for them. I believe it for each one of us.

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There was a beggar *named* Lazarus. Later on Wednesday, after ChatGPT had refused to help me created an image for this graphic parable, I asked it a safer question.

What does the name Lazarus mean?

This time I got an answer: It means "God has helped" or "God is my help."

What a beautiful name and what a beautiful truth. God is indeed our ever-present help and strength.

One of the ways God helps us is by telling us the truth. Even when it's a hard truth.

And so, what is the truth that we need to hear today?

To those on the bottom, those outside the gates of wealth and power and status, those who have grown all too familiar with being ignored, mistreated, neglected, ridiculed, to those whose names too often go unspoken...

Jesus calls you by name and says, “You belong to me, you matter, there is a great reversal coming when all will see what truly matters, where values will be upended. Where you will receive comfort, honour, and peace.

To those on top, those who are attending in the wrong directions, who are failing to share the good things that they have, those who are living too much for themselves and not enough for their neighbours in need...

Jesus calls you by name and says, “Good things are for sharing. Don’t ignore the precious human beings that cross your path, don’t assign value in the same way that the world does. You cannot serve both God and money. You must choose.”

To those who are trying to follow Jesus on the narrow path, those who get some things right and some things wrong, who have the occasional victory but still fail far more than they’d like, those who want to love as Jesus did but struggle to do so as consistently as they should...

Jesus calls each one of us by name. The one who actually *did* rise from the dead.

I’m fascinated that Jesus told a story where Abraham said that even someone coming back from the dead wouldn’t convince a lover of money to change their lives.

He’s clearly pointing to a continuity that exists from Moses down to him. He wasn’t delivering new information in telling the Pharisees to consider the poor. Love of neighbour is a command that goes back to the beginning of the story. *You should know this*, Jesus says.

But the One telling this story surely also knew that he himself would be the one who came back from the dead.

And that his resurrection would indeed convince people to reconsider everything they thought they knew about God, about the world, about themselves, about what love looks like and how it ought to be expressed.



When the teller of this parable does come back from the dead, what does he say? He says, "Peace be with you. Do not be afraid."

He forgives the one who denied him. He speaks words of comfort to those who deserted him. He gathers up his ragged followers who had failed more often than they had succeeded and who at the very least had not distinguished themselves well in the hour of his greatest need, and he turns them loose to go and change the world with the message of a love like no other.

And this is what he does for us, too.

May we have ears to hear, eyes to see, and feet to follow.

Amen.

