

A book with a very enticing and scenic cover caught my eye from the free-books bin at the used-book store, and although it looked new, I decided to leave it there. I didn’t add *Hiking Trails of New Zealand* to my library. I don’t need to know the geography or have a map of hiking trails since I don’t anticipate ever going anywhere near there, or getting lost and needing directions in New Zealand. It is on that same basis that I don’t think about hell very often. I’m not going to be there, and so it is mostly irrelevant to me. I have little interest in the temperature or furnishings of hell. But I am very interested in the implications of God’s grace, in how to live out the Lord’s blessings faithfully, and in growing deeper & more obedient in my walk of faith. And I believe that Jesus had a much larger purpose in mind than providing a systematic theology about getting into heaven, or instructing us on the details of hell and damnation when he told this parable about the rich man and Lazarus. There are a number of preachers who read this parable, primarily as a stark condemnation against wealth and riches and as evidence of God’s bias and preference for the poor. But I am pretty sure that Jesus intended much more than just a warning against wealth, or that he intended to use the threat of hell and damnation to intimidate or scare or even motivate his listeners into doing forced acts of charity and generosity.

Our Christian faith begins with the gift of God’s gracious love, which if we allow it, gradually transforms us from within, which is then expressed by the grace we live daily toward our neighbors out in the world. But to make charity and giving our primary focus, rather than cultivating a grateful and generous heart is to reverse cause and effect, treating the effect as if it were the cause. I once had a friend who for many months couldn’t shake his cough, and who felt lousy and weak with an endless cold or flu symptoms. His doctor kept trying all sorts of medicines and remedies, but none of that seemed to help him get well or feel any better. So finally he had a full physical with x-rays, MRI and such. They discovered that he had terminal lung cancer that had spread, and just two months later I was a pall bearer at his funeral. His doctor, focused on the effect, had been treating the symptoms, rather than the cause, the disease, the cancer. In a similar way, if we read this parable as no more than a call to feed and care for the hungry and poor, then we are reversing cause and effect, treating the symptom, but ignoring the real concern. This parable is about grace and faith, & our relationship with God. The good deeds of our compassion and generosity, all derive from the depth of our faith commitment and learning to perceive this world from God’s perspective of grace and love... i.e. to notice others as our neighbors, to see as God sees them. To get at the heart of this parable, we need to understand that Jesus told this parable while arguing with the Pharisees, who Jesus condemned as those who loved wealth more than God, and who judged other people according to their success... as Jesus explained,

Luke 16:13b-15

You cannot serve God and wealth. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him. So he said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others; but God knows your hearts; for what is prized by human beings is an abomination in the sight of God.

And so in this parable Jesus is addressing their selfish greed and their misunderstandings about God and God’s blessings, by painting some very obvious and extreme contrasts. It begins, vs. 19 *There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.* This begins the description of an un-named rich man, and paints a picture of the most extreme and decedent wealth, the absolute finest clothes money could buy, and a banquet feast for every single day. It is an unmistakable scene or caricature of 1st century extreme luxury living in every possible way. When the Pharisees heard this, it would impress them as describing a good man who was blessed and clearly favored by God, for why else would his life be going so well & pleasantly? Why else would this man have all that he could desire? In common with their culture, the Pharisees assumed and taught, that you could just look at someone’s situation in life and you would know whether or not God was rewarding them. In contrast the description of Lazarus is terrible in the extreme, and the Pharisees would assume and identify by his suffering that Lazarus was someone who had been cursed by God. The rich man is covered with costly purple and fine

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linen, and Lazarus is covered with filth, sores and scabs. The rich man celebrates with feasts of finest cuisine each day, and Lazarus suffers and starves at his doorstep each day. Literal Greek: Lazarus is thrown down at the rich man's gate, too sick & weak to even keep stray dogs from licking his wounds. We know the parable and we know about the great reversal when both men die,

Luke 16:22

The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried... tormented in Hades...

That satisfies our sense of God's righteous justice and balance, but to the thinking and assumptions of the Pharisees concerning God's blessings and the ways of wealth, this absolute reversal of their positions in death would come as a total and surprising shock... for how could the one blessed by God with great wealth end up in hell, while a mere beggar, a cursed insignificant nobody ends up being the one rewarded in paradise? This parable was intended to address the skewed & self-serving way that the Pharisees defined God's blessings in terms of wealth- - and that brings us to the essence and point of this parable. Through his storytelling, twice Jesus shows how this rich man misperceives Lazarus, - tells us twice just to make sure we get it.

Luke 16:24

He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue;

Luke 16:27

He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house

Obviously this rich man recognizes Lazarus, even knows his name, and the fact that he wants Abraham to send him on his errands -- he sees him as someone to command, to meet his needs, and even suffering in hell, he still doesn't get it. The rich man asks for mercy and relief, but not for forgiveness. He still has no capacity of seeing beyond himself & his desires. He does not see or recognize in Lazarus, a human being, a real person worthy of simple dignity and respect. As a part of my seminary training for pastoral ministry, I served as a chaplain in the psych ward at a VA hospital. A homeless, mentally-ill, drug-addict, Viet Nam veteran with AIDS, asked to speak with a chaplain, and so I was sent to see him. Back then not much was known about AIDS or how someone even got AIDS. It was a terrifying and incurable disease, always terminal with no real treatment yet, and a horrible way to die. I was pretty frightened and uncomfortable sitting with him, and I am embarrassed to remember how I kept a fearful distance, and to my shame I really wasn't much a chaplain that day. When my supervisor reviewed my report, he got after me for having such a cold - clinical attitude- pointing out that I mostly saw him as his disease, and not the man himself, as a beloved child of God- - as someone worthy deserving to be treated with respect & dignity. I really wasn't there with him, not with empathy and compassion, and I missed that opportunity to serve and care for him, because I wouldn't see him from God's prospective of grace.

Now my reaction to the man was the easy and natural thing to do, and that is exactly the rich man's attitude toward Lazarus, neglecting to see him as neighbor, loved & precious to God. That same point is also powerfully illustrated a bit further by the parable Jesus tells in Matthew 25.

Mathew 25:34-36

Then the king will say to those at his right hand, 'Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.'

Obviously, they had not left their 'Lazarus' suffering, starving, and dying at their doorstep, but also, they could not recall when they had cared for the Lord.

Mathew 25:40

And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

This is the critical piece and the lesson of both parables. This is the key that unlocks the truth Jesus wants us to live: that even those we might suppose don't matter, actually, they do. There is nothing in the text that suggests, that in life, the rich man did anything particularly evil to Lazarus, he just choose to ignore the starving man outside his gate. Perhaps his wealth blinded him - maybe it distorted his vision, and Lazarus and his great need, just didn't matter to him. His self-indulgence had cut him off from both God and humanity, and his wealth insulated him from noticing the needs around him. Jesus is describing the symptom of a fatal disease, that made the rich man numb, as with a cold and selfish heart, unaffected by God's grace, he chose not to have compassion. So why do you suppose, God put so much emphasis on the just and compassionate treatment of the poor and needy? Because, that best reflects the true condition of our hearts – it demonstrates our response to God's graciousness toward us, and asks if we will treat others, as God has treated us. Compassion for the poor and needy is central to our faith, for a cold-hardened-heart cannot be a faithful-grateful-heart. Now certainly it is possible for someone who rejects God to be kind, compassionate, moral, merciful and generous... but it is not possible to know and truly walk with God, to obey God, and have no conscience or concern or mercy toward our needy neighbor and see them as God's beloved. We aren't saved by our good works, but the grace we receive is reflected by the grace we extend... for if our faith is authentic and alive, then there will necessarily be some fruit, something real, for the grace of God has to affect the lives it touches.

And far more than just giving, and caring and feeding the poor, do we see them as the beloved children of God?, do we see Jesus, the image of God present in other people? When Jesus teaches with a parable, the listener is drawn to identify with a character and see themselves in the story. Although most of us are comparatively well-off, we are not the rich man, or Lazarus of the parable. We're the five brothers still living the rich man wants to warn. For each of us, God has placed "a Lazarus" outside our gate, and there is something God has called and equipped us to do. God has entrusted gifts and blessings to us, God has placed resources, skills and time under our control. God has in some way equipped us all, so that we can serve; and the question is this: how will each of us respond? The crucial question is, will we heed Moses and the prophets, and will we be convinced by someone who was raised from the dead? Our lifestyle choices and compassion do connect with our faith. So what do my life-choices reveal about my faith, and about the nature of my spiritual walk with God? And here is the tricky part, our call is not simply to throw food toward the hungry and money at the poor, but rather, it's a heart transformed by grace, and gratitude toward God, that will surely proclaim God's love through compassion. The question today is fairly and frighteningly simple... who is our Lazarus? and who do we see but not notice? Jesus said,

Matthew 25:40

'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'