

Bible Study Guide

PASTORATE

October 2, 2013

Lectionary Readings

Psalm 146; Amos 6:1–7; 1 Timothy 6:11–19; **Luke 16:19–31**

Context

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus merely begins and ends. There is no opening verse that sets the scene or even explicitly states that Jesus is speaking (though it is implied by verse 15). There is no application or explanation at the end. There is no transition from the previous or to the following context. It stands alone, lending weight to its more universal application. The subject matter of much of the earlier context pertains to wealth, so it makes sense for Luke to insert this parable here.

Some earlier portions of Luke shed light on this passage. As the parable describes a reversal in fortunes between the rich and the poor, so does Mary's song of praise when she says, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and set the rich away empty" (1:52–53). Also, the reference in the parable to Abraham's bosom likely suggests the final banquet, with Lazarus sitting next to Abraham, which is reminiscent of Luke 13:28–29: "There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God."

Luke 16:19–31

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 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; for I am in agony in these flames.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' ²⁷ He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹ Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' ³⁰ 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 listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Commentary

The parable tells of a rich man who lives luxuriously on one side of a city's gate while Lazarus sits on the other side in misery. The gate provides an opportunity for the rich man to help Lazarus, but instead he doesn't even notice him. Both men die and discover that their fortunes are reversed in the afterlife. Instead of a gate between them, now there is a chasm neither can cross. The rich man sees Lazarus next to Abraham, possibly feasting at the final banquet, as he himself has been thrown out. Now in misery, he cries to Abraham for help, calling him "father." Abraham calls him "child," but is rather dismissive, even refusing to send a warning to the rich man's five brothers. The parable is left open-ended. Will the five brothers repent, that is, by implication, turn from their neglect of the poor? The question is left hanging for the readers to ponder for themselves.

It is easy to miss the main point of this parable by focusing on questions about life after death. However, the point of the parable is not to give a literal description of how judgment will take place. The parable is a warning to the wealthy for their neglect of the poor, and a reminder that people will be judged for how they live in the present. The parable attacks a particular kind of wealth—one that fails to see poverty and suffering due to the notion that possessions are only for one's own use, without responsibility to God and neighbor.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some things that stand out to you in this passage?
2. How do we look the other way when it comes to the poor living in Jackson?
3. How does our view of money and work influence how we perceive the poor?
4. What are some assumptions about the poor that keep us from getting involved in their lives?
5. How do you feel about the notion that you will be judged according to how you treat the poor (see also Matthew 25:31–45)?
6. Though the parable does not address how the wealthy might get involved with the poor, what do you think are some beneficial ways to do so both individually and collectively?
7. How do we hurt the poor in our well-intentioned attempts to help them?
8. How does this passage encourage you and your faith?

Collect for the Poor and the Neglected

Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen.*