

Are We Listening?

A Sermon Preached by Anne Keener
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee
September 28, 2025
16th Sunday after Pentecost
Luke 16:19-31



There was a rich man... Are you having a déjà vu moment? Yes, this is also how the scripture passage began last week, but they are certainly different parables. I admit to initially giving thanks that Eddie had the challenge of last week's parable of the dishonest manager and being grateful to preach on this more straightforward parable of the rich man and Lazarus. But you know what they say... Careful what you wish for. This may be a more straightforward message but that doesn't make it any less challenging. The challenge of this parable isn't that the message is confusing, but that the message is crystal clear.

Jesus uses stories to help people learn about God. Parables invite us to imagine the scene and sometimes even picture ourselves in it. Did you find yourself trying to picture the parable scene in your mind? I struggled with how to imagine the proximity of Lazarus to the rich man. We know he lay at the gate, but how big was the gate? How close did the rich man come to him every time he left his house or came back home? Did he have to step over Lazarus or was it a large gate in a busy area where people were constantly coming and going?

The first part of the parable makes it sound like the rich man doesn't even notice Lazarus much less know his name. It isn't until after both men die, with Lazarus being carried away by the angels to Abraham and the rich man having a proper burial, that we hear the rich man reference Lazarus by name while begging Abraham to make Lazarus help him.

Did you notice that the poor man is named, while the rich man is nameless? Regardless of which name is given, simply giving the poor man a name while leaving the rich man unnamed is significant, and the significance only grows when you realize Lazarus is the only human character in any gospel parable to be given a name. Then when you learn Lazarus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Eliezer meaning God helps, we clearly see that Jesus is emphasizing God's love and care of Lazarus.

Even though the nameless one receives most of the attention and speaking parts in this parable, the one who holds more importance for Jesus is the named one. The one who after being overlooked by society in life, is carried away by angels in death. Once again, Jesus is turning things upside down.

We could easily rename this the parable of wealth and suffering. The contrast of wealth and suffering is all too real in today's culture, but it was maybe even more so in Jesus' day. In the ancient world, it was understood that wealth was a clear sign of God's favor, and wealth equated to virtue. So people assumed that those with money had high moral standards hence they were given all the power. Society actually depended on those with money since it was part of the role of the wealthy in the ancient world to provide alms for the poor in the community and certainly for those who were right outside their gate.

The power in the ancient world was clearly in the hands of the wealthy. And here Jesus comes telling a parable about an unnamed rich man and a named poor man, Lazarus, whose belly was empty, and health was compromised. A parable that in true Jesus fashion, turns things upside down with a complete power shift.

Lazarus who had no power and literally no voice in this parable is now with Abraham in death, and the nameless, rich man, who dressed in expensive clothes and feasted at every meal, is now in torment across a great chasm from Abraham and well aware of all he no longer has. In life, only a gate separated the rich man and Lazarus, and now there is a great chasm between them, with the poor man nestled at the side of Father Abraham clearly receiving God's favor.

This radical reversal should remind us of the Sermon on the Plain back in chapter 6 where Jesus looked at his disciples and said,

“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

“Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you will be filled.

“But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.

“Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry.

Jesus is teaching and preaching about an upside-down kingdom. His message caused people to bristle and push back in the first century, and his message continues to have those same reactions here in the twenty-first century.

Even with the great chasm, the rich man still feels entitled enough to beg Abraham to make Lazarus help him. After being denied his request and finally realizing the chasm is too big for anyone to help him, he has compassion for the first time in the parable even though it again involves using Lazarus, whom he didn't help or acknowledge in life, to get what he wants. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn of his siblings who are still alive, so they do not end up in this place of torment.

Abraham reminds him that his siblings have Moses and the prophets just like he did, and like all Jewish people they should listen to them, but the rich man still persists. “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” Jesus uses Abraham to foreshadow what is to come when he replies, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

Did anyone else feel a punch in the gut when hearing that last verse? We have Moses and the prophets, and the resurrected Jesus, yet how often do we fail to see the need around us or choose to ignore it. We avoid eye contact with the person selling a newspaper at the stoplight by focusing on the radio. We pretend that there aren't an estimated 1,500 unhoused people in Williamson County, the richest county in our state and one of the richest in our nation. We try to ignore the hunger epidemic in our country and our world, but statistics show, 13.5% of U.S. households (18 million people) were food insecure in 2023, and in that same year, 1 in 11 people faced hunger worldwide while 1 in 5 faced hunger in Africa.

The rich man didn't end up across the great chasm because he was rich. He ended up there because he didn't use his wealth to care for his neighbors and participate in God's work in the world.

The rich man finally realized it was too late for him, but there was time for his siblings to repent and listen to Moses and the prophets. Friends, we are the rich man's siblings, and there is time for us to listen to Moses, the prophets, and Jesus.

It isn't too late for us to open our ears and eyes and hearts and minds and pay attention to the needs around us. It isn't too late to live a life that participates in human flourishing. It isn't too late to help food and money find its way into the hands of those experiencing crushing poverty.

It can be overwhelming when we think about helping everyone in need, and it isn't realistic. We can't help every person in need, but we can help the one at our gate.

This congregation has a history and a desire to help those at our gate who are in need. Just yesterday we joined others in our community to bag 40,000 pounds of sweet potatoes helping food get onto the tables of those in our community who are hungry and in need. Next week, we will commission a mission team that will travel to the South Cumberland Plateau to serve alongside our siblings in Christ through Mountain T.O.P. to help meet the physical, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of those living less than 2 hours to our southeast.

God is at work through countless mission partners in our community. Are we listening to where God is calling us to participate?

Just this past week, our Mission Committee chairs toured the Williamson County Homeless Alliance and learned more about how we can partner with them beyond providing space for the unhoused to stay overnight during the winter months. This is just one opportunity of many for us to recognize our neighbors who sit outside our gate eagerly waiting for food and shelter and love. Where do you see Lazarus?

Abraham's message is directed to us, the rich man's siblings in Christ. We have Moses, the prophets, and the whole biblical canon including the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, yet we also fail to see Lazarus at our gate, fail to share our wealth to feed the hungry, fail to see the needs of our neighbors that surround us.

The challenge of this parable is that Jesus' message is crystal clear. The questions remain, "Are we listening? and How are we responding?"

These questions take me back to words Jesus spoke earlier in Luke's gospel, chapter 12, "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required, and from the one to whom much has been entrusted, even more will be demanded."

May we open our ears to listen to Moses, the prophets, and Jesus. May we open our eyes to see the needs at our gate. May we, to whom much has been given, open our hearts and pay attention to where God is leading us to generously respond to God's grace with gratitude.

May it be so. Amen.