

June 24, 2018

Lesson 4: Reaping God's Justice

Scripture: Luke 16: 19-31

Context:

Today's focus on justice jumps to the Gospel of Luke, the gospel known for emphasizing Jesus's ministry for all people. Today's Gospel lesson comes one of the many parables Jesus used to convey his message about money. In the passages before chapter sixteen, Jesus is on a roll teaching about being lost and finding life in God. In one of his parables he closes with the statement that no one can serve two masters; wealth and God. They are two separate masters and one can lead you down a path that separates you from God and from others.

Some of the Pharisees, "lovers of money," hear about Jesus' teachings and scoff at him. They ridicule him for daring to talk about money. Jesus in turn tells them about true discipleship and following the law to get ahead. He then moves to a parable to get his point across.

When reading this text, one might wonder who are these people. Are they godless materialists with a religious façade? According to scholars, these Pharisees possess a theology in which God and mammon are joined together.¹ Jesus has separated these two and it causes problems. If one reads other scriptural passages, particularly in the Old Testament, there is a focus on following God and prosperity being the end result. Through Deuteronomy twenty-eight, obeying God leads to blessings through military victories, the marketplace, the fields, and the home.² We know it today as prosperity theology, the idea that if you believe and obey God, you will be blessed economically. Certain groups read these verses with the steadfast belief that the wealth was given to them as a form of blessing.

Jesus wants to make the point to them that they have misinterpreted scripture. They have taken the law and abused it to benefit themselves and the world they have created. Their misreading of the scriptures leads to a gross understanding of what it means to obey God and what one is to do with wealth.

Jesus brings up the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Scholars believe that this story was found in many ancient cultures with different individuals, but the same moral point being made.³ In each case, there is someone who is clearly wealthy. In this story it is a rich man. He clothes himself in fine clothes and eats at a fine table. At the gate where he lives is a poor man named Lazarus who is covered with sores, the only consolation being the dogs that lick his wounds.

The tables turn and the poor man dies. He is carried by angels to Abraham's side. The rich man dies and finds himself being tormented in Sheol, the place of the dead in

¹ Fred Craddock, "Luke," *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, (John Knox Press; Louisville, KY 1990), 192.

² *Ibid.*, 192.

³ *Ibid.*, 195.

ancient Judaism. However, he catches a glimpse of Abraham and Lazarus and cries out for aid. Yet there is no crossing. When the rich man begs for Lazarus to go and warn his brothers, Abraham reminds him that they have the words of Moses and the Prophets as sufficient. That is the end of the story. Jesus has made the point that you cannot follow God and follow mammon. If you do, you will feel the results eternally.

Application:

Reading this parable would make people say that they want to be in the place of Lazarus. That seems to be the place to be. Yet for most twenty-first century Americans, that is far from the truth. We, as a whole in the United States, lead lives that are comfortable. We have our needs met as well as most of our wants.

As I read this story, I cannot help but think about how some of the Pharisees were uncomfortable with the fact that Jesus talked about money as part of obeying God and understanding religious instruction. Recently, a clergy colleague told me at a situation at their church where they began to talk about themes for sermons and planning curriculum for the upcoming year. They were interrupted by someone in the planning committee to say that they needed to avoid the word “stewardship,” in any of the series because it would offend people. In fact, talking about money just makes people upset, so why should we do it at all? Several committee members agreed while others looked at the floor as they felt differently. My colleague said the tension was hard not to notice.

I cannot help but think that if Jesus had showed up at the meeting that perhaps this parable would have found its use. The fact of the matter is that many people in our churches are financially sound. You can discover it by the statistician’s report every year with the amount of money we bring in despite decrease in membership and worship attendance. I hear it when people discuss how belonging to a country club helps you “get to know more people.” You can see it our parking lots in both rural and urban churches. You can see it especially via Instagram and Facebook where second homes are now an essential to establishing one’s family.

None of those are bad things. Having a good car is important. Networking is important. I even think that a second home for rest and relaxation can be good for a family and their friends. But are you giving your percentage to the church? Are you finding causes that do not benefit you directly? If not, then you have put your hope and salvation not in Christ, but in mammon. Keeping up with the Jones’s is not a biblical command and was not a sentiment that Jesus would have shared. Jesus spent more time talking about money and the love of money more than he ever spent talking about marriage, sex, or family values. Money was at the top of Jesus’s teaching and rarely did it give the people the warm fuzzies.

No one ever said that being a disciple of Jesus Christ would be easy and paved with everything that is fun and good. Discipleship sometimes demands that you choose who you serve. For us today, I think we need to see ourselves as the rich man. Who are we seeing at the entrance, yet ignoring? Where is our money going and if someone were to look at our checking account, would they see that the place that venerates Christ as part of that package? Those are all fair questions to ask and they are the ones we should be discussing as we seek to reap God’s justice in our lives.

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