

The Man Who Didn't Want to Share • Luke 16:19-31

One of the largest and most opulent palaces in the world is in Bucharest, Romania. It has impressive gardens, immense banquet halls and ballrooms with huge chandeliers and expensive carpets. Constructed in the 1980s it consumed a significant percentage of the gross domestic product of the entire country of Romania, one of the poorer countries of the world. Thousands of people were conscripted to work on that palace. It was built to be the private residence of communist dictator Nicolae Ceausescu. In order to secure the land for the palace, many homes and businesses were confiscated and demolished. Still, across the new plaza from the palace were the bleak houses of the poor people of Bucharest, so the dictator had facades of attractive buildings constructed (no actual buildings; just facades) to hide the sights of poverty.

It can be unpleasant to see the suffering of others. When we are healthy we prefer not to be around those who are sick. When we are rich we choose to avoid those who are poor. When we are young we may avoid those who are very old. When we are comfortable we don't like to be with people who are in pain.

Jesus told a story that was pointed, powerful and uncomfortable. It is a parable, not history. In other words, Jesus made up the story in order to communicate important truths. This particular parable is unlike all the other parables Jesus taught because it is the only parable that uses a person's name. Somehow it makes the plight of the poor sick man more personal because Jesus calls him Lazarus. The parable is found in Luke 16:19-31:

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury everyday. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the

tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

“ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Jesus told this story as if he expected it to become a stage play with two scenes. Scene 1 is now, in and around the home of a rich man. Scene 2 is some time later on both sides of the dividing line between heaven and hell.

Jesus says, *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.”* His name is not given. That is a surprise all by itself because usually we know the names of those who are rich but not the names of the poor. (Who are the richest people in America? Who are the poorest people in America?) In Jesus' story the poor man is known by name and the rich man is known by wealth. It is an interesting contrast.

This rich man wore very expensive clothes. Purple and fine linen were so costly it would have taken a year or more of the average worker's wages to buy just one outfit. He didn't dress just for modesty or for comfort. He deliberately dressed to look rich. His wardrobe fit today's description of “conspicuous consumption”.

He *“lived in luxury every day”* more literally means that he “feasted daily”. Imagine a gourmet smorgasbord with the most exotic food available. This was his daily routine. Simply stated, this man lived at

The rich man did nothing. His sin was that he didn't care.

the top end of the socio-economic ladder. He was very wealthy and he lived the lifestyle of the rich and famous.

Jesus does not criticize his wealth. In fact, Jesus does not condemn his lifestyle. He could have. Some people would say Jesus should have criticized him. But that wasn't the point Jesus was seeking to make. The point he was seeking to make had to do with the rich man's relationship to Lazarus. Luke 16:20-21 tells us, *"At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores."*

There is no explanation given of why one man was so rich and comfortable while the other man was so poor and miserable. The reason didn't seem to matter to Jesus. It's just the way things were. We often try to explain that it's because one worked hard and the other didn't work at all or one inherited money and one was born to poverty. But Jesus doesn't say why. He is more concerned about what we do than how it happened.

"Lazarus" is actually the Latin form of the Hebrew name "Eleazer" which means "God is my help". Probably there were many days when he didn't think God was all that helpful! He was sick and covered with sores. Imagine having a skin disease all over you. The disease left Lazarus too weak to keep away the stray dogs that insisted on licking his skin.

Homeless, hungry and helpless Lazarus longed for the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. In those days they didn't eat with knives and forks as we do today; they ate with their fingers. (Actually, in Bangladesh and other parts of the world people still eat with their hands today!) The very rich used pieces of bread to wipe their hands during and after eating and then threw the bread away. These were the scraps Lazarus hoped to retrieve and eat.

It is a portrait of extremes—the richest and the poorest; the heights of luxury and the depths of misery.

The sin of the rich man was not that he was rich. It was not that he withheld food from the poor. He didn't chase him away from his gate. He didn't make his life more miserable. He didn't make Lazarus poor or sick in the first place. The rich man did nothing wrong. That's the whole point. The rich man did nothing. His sin was that he didn't care.

If the rich man were here today he probably would not know any poor people. He might observe that the houses and apartments of the poor all seem to have television antennas and color TVs so they must be

doing fine. He would not be concerned that they have poor diets, no health insurance and cannot get jobs paying a fair wage. He wouldn't care that groceries are more expensive in the poorest parts of town or that public transportation doesn't run to suburban jobs or that schools for poor children don't have enough money. He wouldn't be against the poor; he just wouldn't think about it. He wouldn't notice. He wouldn't care. He would do nothing.

Jesus' second scene is later. Both men are dead—death comes equally to the poor and the rich. Sooner or later we all die. When the Bible was written the word "Hades" was used. Only later did translators of the Bible substitute the word "hell". Hades referred to the place of the dead; the grave; death. Death is divided into two parts. For the unrighteous it is a place of torment; for the righteous it is a place of pleasure.

After death the roles are reversed. The rich man who lived in luxury is now in misery. He is poor and pathetic. He is tormented and in constant misery. He yearns for a drop of water from Lazarus' finger to cool his tongue and ease his pain, even if it is only for a second or two. He sees everything differently now. Now he knows Lazarus by name. Now he wants to have a connection with the man he barely noticed when he was alive—so he calls out to Lazarus.

Lazarus does not answer him. Instead, Abraham, the father of the Jewish people, speaks and explains that now it is too late. Lazarus can't help him. Their destinies after death were fixed before they died. It is too late.

The once rich man makes a second request, not for himself but for his five brothers still living in their father's home: *"Send Lazarus to my father's house. Let him warn them."* But Abraham explains that they have been warned in the Bible but they would not listen. If Lazarus could be sent back they would not listen to him, either.

In sharpest contrast, Lazarus who once was poor now lives in luxury. He has become far better off. He wouldn't want to go back. He is with Abraham, the father of the faith. It seems he can't hear the other man's words; he doesn't know what happened to his once rich neighbor. He was sick but now he is well. He was poor but now he is rich. He once had only dogs for friends; now he is the friend of Abraham. Jesus tells us in Luke 16:22-31:

"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his

side. So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.'

"But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross from there to us.'

"He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'

"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

"No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

"He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

When I read this parable, I am the rich man. I have so much, and it is so easy for me to ignore those who have so little. There are lessons here for me to learn; perhaps they are lessons for you, too. Jesus' parable is so clear that the lessons are obvious, needing little or no explanation:

Lesson #1 is to have personal concern for others who are poor, sick, miserable and needy.

Lesson #2 is that today connects to eternity. Our eternal destiny on the other side of death depends on the choices we make in this life.

Lesson #3 is that we already have adequate warning of what to expect. God has already told us in the Bible everything we need to know about how to live today and prepare for eternity.

Lesson #4 is to love your neighbor. Know his name. See her need. Help them out.

I love to end a lesson with a story that illustrates a real life example of what Jesus teaches. I have one for you this time, but let me tell it to you in the words of the person who lived it:

I have so much, and it is so easy for me to ignore those who have so little.

I was at work when I received a phone call. I did not recognize the voice; I had never met this person before. She said she had been referred to me and asked if I would be willing to meet with her. She said she needed money and had some family jewelry to sell. She wondered if I would be interested in purchasing it.

Several years ago I purchased my business from a gentleman for whom I had worked twenty years. When I bought the business I told the Lord I was very thankful for the privilege of owning it and that I really wanted to serve him. I asked God to use me in this business. So here I was picking up the phone that morning listening to a very timid small voice.

I have learned that you don't settle anything on the phone so I asked if she could come to my shop. I would be happy to see what she had and we could visit.

She came the next day precisely at the appointed time. We introduced ourselves; I will call her Sarah. She quietly laid out her family jewelry for me to view and hopefully to purchase.

Sarah is Asian. She grew up on a far eastern island with her family and came to the United States to get her Ph.D. When she arrived here she discovered there was a problem. Somehow a government mistake involving her visa or passport locked up the money she needed for her graduate courses. Government officials assured her that this would be straightened out within two months. However, if

she didn't sign up for her classes by the end of the week she would miss registration and the courses would not be offered again for another year. This would delay her education as well as her stay in the United States. Sarah was asking me to buy her family jewelry to pay for her classes.

I looked at her jewelry. I looked at her and I gulped. Then I said, "May I ask you a few personal questions?" She said yes. I asked her where her parents are and she said they are back home. I asked where her fiancé is because her engagement ring was in the collection of jewelry to sell. She told me he is back home, too. I asked if no one is here to

help her. “I am all alone,” she said.

My desire was not to own her jewelry. They were beautiful but they needed to stay with her. I chose not to purchase her jewelry but I didn’t want to hurt her feelings. I knew I couldn’t just send her away so I said, “How about if I simply give you the money and you go to school, take your classes and get your Ph.D.? If you are able to pay me back, that’s great. If not, then go back home and make your life count.”

She looked stunned. I repeated my offer and her mouth fell open and then she started to cry—and I did, too. She said, “Why would you do this for me?”

I told her there are two reasons. The first reason is that when I was in the process of buying my business a man came to me and said, “I believe in you. I will give you ten thousand dollars as seed money. Go to a bank and get financing and buy this business. I don’t care if you ever pay me back, but if you can that would be great.” I was so humbled that someone would believe in me that I told the Lord if I could ever help somebody in a similar way I would be happy to do it.

The second reason, I told her, is this: “You think this is a big gift, but the biggest gift ever was when God gave his only Son Jesus to die on the cross for my sins, for your sins and for the world’s. This gift is nothing in comparison to that.”

I wrote a check from my company checkbook, addressed it to the school and wished her the best. I told my accountant; everything was handled correctly.

Five months later she did pay me back. She came in with a beautiful silk scarf as a thank you gift from her parents and we have corresponded since. My hope is that Sarah’s family will come and visit and stay with me in the future.

But this story is not about me and it is really not about money. This story is about the joy that comes from responding to the nudges of the Holy Spirit to tell someone about Jesus. Joy is sharing what we have with people in need. Joy is seeing answers to prayer. This is about God making his promise true that we really cannot out-give the Lord. The greatest joy to me has been this opportunity that God gave me in sharing who Jesus is and what he did for me.

Faith Matters® is the Broadcast Ministry of
Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
©Leith Anderson