

**The Focus of Our Faith: Ministry to Others**  
**Luke 16:19-31**  
**May 3, 2020**

Introduction: Fort Louisburg, Nova Scotia

- a) This fortification served as military headquarters for the French empire in North America. When it was built, it was the largest building in the Western Hemisphere located at one of the best natural harbors anywhere in the world. So much money was spent on the construction of this huge building that King Louis joked that he should be able to see it from his palace at Versailles. There was a very narrow entrance to the deep harbor that could be easily defended with cannons. Fort Louisburg was perfectly protected from British naval power. They thought they were secure forever.
  
- b) Having failed previously to conquer the fort with their powerful navy, in 1758 the British made the decision to march their troops overland and gain control of the mountains at the backside of the fort where it was very poorly defended. Controlling the mountaintop, the British began lobbing cannonballs down on the fort and forced its very quick surrender. Following the loss of Fort Louisburg, the French gave up most of their power in North America including Canada and today most of the people in North America speak English and not French. The French thought they had an impenetrable fortress, but it fell very quickly with catastrophic results for their empire.
  
- c) This is akin to our spiritual life. We think we have structured our religious life in a perfect fashion. We believe the right things about Jesus, Scripture, the church, and the rule of God. We have professed our faith openly. We attend church with regularity. We pray. We even attend Sunday school at River Road. We are decent people, respectable and responsible members of society. Surely, we have done all that is necessary for the defense of our souls. Today's parable tells about a man who felt the same way and found himself in real trouble.

## 2) Background of Luke 16:19-31

- a) A debate between the Pharisees and the Sadducees
  - i) The Pharisees were respected religious leaders of the synagogue who attempted to apply the teachings of Scripture to the issues of everyday life. When the parable makes a reference to the Law of Moses, that would appeal strongly to the Pharisees. They believed in heaven and an afterlife.
  - ii) The Sadducees were respected religious leaders associated with wealth, power, and the Temple in Jerusalem. The rich man in this story would be a typical picture of a Sadducee. The Sadducees did not believe in an afterlife. Some have suggested that's how they got their name. They did not believe in heaven, so they were "sad you see."
- b) This parable is one of the best pieces of writing in the entire New Testament. It is written in a very fine Greek style with a very rich vocabulary. This story had been around for a very long time. We find earlier versions of the story in both Egyptian and Jewish traditions. Jesus undoubtedly drew on these earlier versions, but he re-fashioned this old folktale by adding a new beginning and a new ending that gave it an entirely new meaning.

## 3) Exposition of the Text

- a) Verse 19: "The rich man dressed in purple and fine linen." In the 1<sup>st</sup> century purple was often referred to as the color of royalty because it was such an expensive dye. You may remember that Lydia, in the book of Philippians, was a woman of wealth who was a merchant dealing with purple dye. The reference to "fine linen" is, in fact, speaking of the undergarments that would have been worn by the rich man. So, he is pictured as one who wore regal garments on the outside as well as luxurious underwear on the inside.

- b) Verse 20: Lazarus is the only character in all the parables of Jesus who is given a name. That name means “God is my only help.” That is certainly the case in this story. We are also told that Lazarus body was “full of sores,” probably a leper who was left at the door of the rich man hoping to receive some help.
- c) Verse 21: It says that Lazarus “fed on the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table.” In 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine you used your hands instead of a fork as you ate your meal and in the wealthy homes you would not use cloth napkins after eating a meal. Rather, you would take crusty bread and rub it between your hands to absorb the grease and then drop it on the floor to be swept up later. The only thing Lazarus was getting to eat were the thrown-out napkins from the rich man’s floor. And then it says that the dogs came and licked his sores. You might have a young puppy as a pet in a Palestinian home, but adult dogs were never kept as pets. The dogs described here were vicious and savage animals, tearing at the rotting flesh of poor Lazarus.
- d) Verse 22: This marks the end of act one. The curtain comes down and both characters are dead.
- e) Verse 23: Now the full contrast is apparent with Lazarus in paradise cradled in the arms of Abraham and the rich man in Hades.
- f) Verse 24: This is the clue to the entire parable as the rich man calls out to “Father Abraham.” A convert to the faith could not say “Father Abraham.” One who had been disciplined by the synagogue could not say “Father Abraham.” One who did not obey all the temple rituals could not say that. The rich man saw himself as righteous and upright; he thought everything was just fine with his spiritual life – talk about a slow learner. He pleads for Abraham to send Lazarus with a very small drink of water. He simply wants Lazarus to cool his tongue. What a reversal!
- g) Verse 25: “Your good things.” What a summation of a person’s life! In your lifetime, you had some good things.

- h) Verse 28: The rich man now pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his 5 brothers.
- i) Verse 29: Abraham responds, "They have Moses, the prophets, and Scripture. Some would not believe even if one were to be raised from the dead." This is a most ironic ending of any parable told by Christ.

#### 4) Application to Our Lives

- a) Crucial issue: what was the sin of the rich man?
  - i) Not a monster of humanity, he wasn't abusing Lazarus.
  - ii) Not just his wealth, Abraham was also wealthy.
  - iii) Not that he didn't work or partied all the time. Jesus has a more serious point to make than that.
  - iv) The story clearly implies the sin of the rich man had something to do with Lazarus. The rich man's problem: he accepted Lazarus as simply part of the landscape, just a permanent part of his everyday life about whom he never felt any responsibility. He never understood the relationship between his religious profession and his day-to-day life. Christian discipleship is more than what we say. It is also more than what we sing. Discipleship is more than what we pray and more than what we give. Christian discipleship is how we live from day to day. Our faithfulness is seen in how we give ourselves in ministry to those in need.
- b) In one of the songs from the musical, *Le Miz*, there is a beautiful line saying, "To love another person is to see the face of God." Our care for others has very much to do with our relationship to God. That is the lesson of Matthew 25 where the verdict of Judgment Day is based on a person's responsiveness to people in need: the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, and the prisoner.
- c) In our pastor's splendid (and short) sermon last Sunday, he focused on the post-resurrection story found in Luke 24:13-35 concerning 2 disciples on the road to Emmaus. Jesus joined them, walked with them, and had a conversation with them, yet for a long time they failed to recognize that it was the resurrected Lord. Daniel said that in all the times he had looked

at this passage he could never understand how the disciples could miss recognizing Jesus. Then our pastor commented that the same thing happens to us in our everyday life. There is Jesus right in front of us and we ignore his presence. That has happened even as we endure this pandemic.

#### 5) Who Are We in This Story?

- a) At times, we are Lazarus in need. But usually we play the role of the 5 brothers. We have the witness of Scripture, we have the testimony of the resurrected Lord, and we have a needy person sitting at our doorstep. Yet we find ourselves professing a faith that doesn't always express itself in acts of mercy.
- b) There is a Lazarus on our doorstep: a family member, a neighbor, a church member, a fellow worker, someone we can reach more effectively than anyone else in all God's creation. It could be a nurse, a 1<sup>st</sup> responder, or a worker at our grocery store or drugstore. There are persons all around us right now in need of our care, our appreciation, and our comfort. Now what will we do?
- c) Questions for discussion: who is the Lazarus sitting on the doorstep of our home? Who is the Lazarus sitting on the doorstep of our church? Who is the Lazarus sitting on the doorstep of our city? Who is the Lazarus sitting on the doorstep of our nation? Now, how can our faithfulness be expressed as we care for the Lazarus on our doorstep?