



Central Peninsula Church

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Luke 16:14-31
Mark Mitchell
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The Danger of Wrong Assumptions

SERIES: *A Savior for All People*

Have you ever noticed how important assumptions are in how we think and the way we live? Today is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday and we see how important assumptions are in determining what we think about abortion. If we assume that a fetus is not a human being, it's not that big of a step to believe that a woman should have a choice about removing it. But if we assume that life begins at conception, we're not going to want to give ourselves or anyone else that option.

Another area where we see the power of assumptions is in the area of money. There are those who make the assumption that money and possessions are bad things, so they either try to avoid it or they feel guilty about it or they judge others who have a lot of it. Usually, this has a spiritual component to it. Doesn't the Bible say that money is the root of all evil? Actually, it doesn't say that. It says *the love of money* is the root of all evil. Money isn't the problem; loving it is the problem.

But there are also those who make the opposite assumption that money and wealth are somehow a sign of God's blessing and favor. The assumption is that God will bless the faithful with riches, while punishing those who are disobedient with poverty. That assumption impacts the way we view and respond to those in need. Why should I help someone in need? I would just be getting in the way of God's judgment!

Jesus confronts the assumptions of the Pharisees.

A. About the law and the prophets: In Luke 16 Jesus confronts some of these assumptions about money and possessions. Remember, Jesus had been teaching about money. He said that you can't serve both God and money. As a result of this teaching, Luke says in v. 14 that **"the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were scoffing at him."** Why were they scoffing? The Pharisees had assumptions about wealth that were based on a selective reading of the OT scripture. They read passages like Deut. 28:1-6.

"Now it shall be, if you diligently obey the LORD your God, being careful to do all His commandments which I command you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth. All these blessings will come upon you and overtake you if you obey the LORD your God: Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the country.

Blessed shall be the offspring of your body and the produce of your ground and the offspring of your beasts, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock. Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out."

So you can understand how the Pharisees could think that the accumulation of wealth was a sign of God's blessing; blessing that they believed would continue in the hereafter. Of course, they would have never admitted to being *lovers of money*, but they were. They just justified it with a spiritual coating and a few bible verses. Jesus deals with this in v. 15. **"And He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.'"**

Jesus says that no matter how hard we try to mask our love of money, God sees our hearts. We can try to justify our materialism in all kinds of ways. People may highly esteem us for our hard work. They may see our names up on a plaque at the YMCA for making a big contribution. But God sees through it and what might look good to people very well could be something God detests.

Now the Pharisees might have accused Jesus of contradicting what they called "the law and the prophets." I mean, what about Deut. 28? So Jesus deals with that next. **"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since that time the gospel of the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail"** (vv. 16-17). He says that, yes, a new era has come, starting with John the Baptist. While the Pharisees kept people out, now people are hearing the good news of the kingdom and storming in. But, despite the fact that a new era has come, what's written in the law and the prophets still holds true. Jesus didn't come to throw out the law and the prophets, but to fulfill it.

It was the Pharisees who misused the law and the prophets to justify their own sinful behavior. He gives an example in v. 18. **"Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries one who is divorced from a husband commits adultery."** Here is the example of marriage and divorce. The law made certain provisions for divorce. The

Pharisees interpreted the law to say that a man could divorce his wife for practically any reason at all—if he didn't like the way she looked one morning or if she burned his food at dinner. Jesus says to do that and marry another is adultery. Jesus is using this as an example of how these guys misuse scripture to justify their own selfish behavior. He doesn't go into specifics. In other passages, he says more about this and gives some instances where divorce is permissible, but the bottom line is that God instituted marriage as a permanent one flesh bond.

But Jesus is really just trying to get at the basis for some of their false assumptions. What about you? What are your assumptions based on? Most of us know enough to say, "Well, the Bible, of course." But do you really understand the Bible? Do you read it and study it? It's not enough to just have a few verses memorized. Take the whole issue of war. That's a hot topic today. Some of you support the war in Iraq and some of you don't, but why? Maybe you have some verses to support your position, but maybe the other side does too. What does the Bible really say about war? Is there such a thing as a just war? When is a war just and when is it unjust? Or what about homosexuality? We don't agree that that's an acceptable lifestyle. But why? You say, "Well, homosexuality is condemned in Leviticus." But so is eating shellfish! And so is cooking a young goat in its mother's milk. It's not always enough just to quote a verse out of its context. Can I encourage you to grow up in your understanding of God's word. Heb. 5:12 says, **"In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!"**

Now remember that this whole discussion arose because of how the Pharisees viewed wealth and the assumptions they made based on their reading of the law. With that in mind, Jesus goes on to tell a story that would challenge those assumptions.

B. About the fate of the rich and the poor:

The main characters are introduced in vv. 19-21.

"Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores."

Jesus draws a vivid contrast between these two men. The rich man is a man that the Pharisees would have thought was blessed of God for his righteous life, but like them he was a lover of money. His wealth is described in extreme terms. He was a

power dresser. He drove the most impressive chariots, hobnobbed with the rich and famous, ate at the best restaurants. There were many things in this man's life that kept him, at least on the surface, a happy and well-contented man. He was a man who appeared to have his act together.

That is all that's said about him. This man is defined by his wealth. He's characterized by the externals of life. Nothing is said about his character or his soul. He's not even given a name! He probably never thought about death because it would mean saying good-bye to everything that sustained his life. And though he was probably a respected member of the synagogue, he had relegated God to the outer fringe of his life. He may have given large sums to charity, but he likely justified not helping this poor beggar at his gate because he figured he was getting what he deserved.

In contrast to the rich man, the poor man is described in terms of the most extreme poverty. Seeing that someone had to carry him and lay him down at the gate, he was probably lame. He was ridden with sores and thus considered spiritually unclean. He was also hungry. These crumbs he longed for were most likely the pieces of bread that were used to sop up the rich man's table and were later thrown out. The picture is one of total degradation. These dogs were rat-like scavengers who licked his oozing sores and, as they did, the sting would have been excruciating. In describing the poor man, Jesus isn't afraid to be graphic and even grotesque. Poverty is gross. Jesus wants us to look and he wants us to feel how repulsive it really is.

But, there is one last significant thing to notice about this man. Unlike the rich man, he's given a name. He's the only character in any of the parables who is given a name. And this is important because it indicates to us that there is more to this man than his poverty. His name, "Lazarus," means, "God is my helper." This is an indication of the kind of man he was; he was a man who was accustomed to look to God for help! You might say he was one of those who was storming into the kingdom. This was a saint in disguise! Do you ever wonder if some of God's choicest saints might be lying at the corner of Sutter and Market with a cardboard sign that says, *"Hungry and Homeless. Will Work."* Have we forgotten that these people have names? They're not just "the homeless;" they're John and Alice and Fred.

And that's pretty much how things went for these two men. Jesus doesn't say that the rich man lost his fortune when the stock market crashed. Nor does he say that the poor man hit the lottery. We're to surmise that things continued this way until their death. But, after their death, there was a reversal.

"Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. In Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham

far away and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us'" (vv. 22–26).

Notice that Lazarus, being poor, had no burial. His body was probably thrown out on the dump outside the city walls. Yet he had a spiritual funeral procession led by the angels of God right to Abraham's bosom. This is a Jewish way of saying that he went to heaven. The rich man, on the other hand, had a magnificent funeral on earth, but he went to Hades, or Hell, where he lived in a state of torment. Now HE is the beggar while Lazarus feasts. Don't forget, this would have shocked the Pharisees. Based on their assumptions, they thought the exact opposite would happen.

We have to be careful with what we do with this story. Jesus is not teaching that rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. He can't be because Abraham, who is in heaven, was extremely rich! The principle that determines where these men spend eternity is quite different. The rich man had made a choice; he had chosen to live for the things of this world. *He had ignored the warnings of the Word of God in this life so he was cut off from the blessings of the God of the Word in the next.*

Go back to Deuteronomy. Look at Deut. 15:7–8. **"If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks."** And listen to the prophet Isaiah. **"Is this not the fast which I choose, to loosen the bonds of wickedness, to undo the bands of the yoke, and to let the oppressed go free and break every yoke? Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into the house; when you see the naked, to cover him; and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?"** (Isa. 58:6–7).

But this man lived a selfish and heartless life. He showed he wasn't a man of faith by his actions. He failed to accumulate treasure in heaven by using what he had been given on earth to bless those in need. For many, like the rich man, eternity will constitute a radical reversal of fortune. It's possible for a man to gain the world yet lose his soul! God's judgments and values are so radically different than ours, so we can expect eternity to turn everything we see here upside down.

We also have to be careful of taking the details of

this parable too literally. When we die, do we actually go and rest on Abraham's literal bosom? Will those in hell actually be able to see and communicate with those who are in heaven, and vice versa? I don't think so. If that were true, according to v. 26, some people who are in heaven will want to cross over to hell! But these are just symbols of what these two places will be like.

We CAN say from this that while heaven is a place of comfort and refreshment, hell is a place of frustration and agony. Abraham speaks of Lazarus being comforted. The water is a picture of refreshment. But, words like "torment" and "agony" characterize hell. These flames picture psychological torment. Notice that the rich man is fully conscious in hell; all of his senses are working; he even has memory. There will be the feeling of regret over the failure to account for God while on earth. Thomas Hobbes said that hell is truth seen too late. And perhaps even worse there will be the inability to do anything about it because both heaven and hell are fixed states. This is what the great chasm represents. There will be no second chances; no opportunities to change places after we have suffered our due. Though God's mercy is boundless, it's not offered indefinitely. There's a time when it will be too late to change.

C. About the need for a sign: But the story doesn't end there. It continues with a conversation between the rich man and Abraham about those for whom it is NOT too late. After his request for water is turned down, the rich man makes another request.

"And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house--for I have five brothers--in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead'" (vv. 27–31).

Don't you love this guy? He's still trying to call the shots! He's still treating Lazarus like his errand boy! He wants Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers. What would he warn them about? We know from v. 30 that he wants them to repent, but about what? About their assumptions! Like their brother, they believed their wealth meant they got a free pass, and that you could selfishly hoard your resources and ignore those in need and get away with it. But Abraham refuses to warn them. Why? Not because God doesn't want them to believe, but because it won't work.

The rich man's strategy is one that is often

heard today: "If God would only give me a visible sign, then I would believe. If I saw a real miracle, then I would believe." These are people that can't understand why God, if he loves man so much and wants him to believe, doesn't simply show him some supernatural evidence of his power and reality. It makes sense.

But Abraham's words are telling. Twice he says the same thing, "They have Moses and the prophets. If they won't believe them then they won't believe a miracle." They have all the evidence they need, just like the rich man did. They have Moses and the prophets. They have the Word of God. If they won't believe that, they won't believe even if someone is raised from the dead! It's true. There were many who watched Jesus perform miracles, and yet still wouldn't believe. Some had even seen him raise another man from the dead. Ironically, his name was Lazarus too. But they still wouldn't believe.

Those who require a sign in order to believe give testimony to their own hardness of heart. That's why Jesus said, "*A evil an adulterous generation craves for a sign.*" The fact that we ask for it in the first place shows that our hearts are hardened to the Word. That's why the rich man is in hell, not because he was rich, but because, unlike Lazarus, he had ignored the plain testimony of the Word of God. As we've seen, the law and the prophets say a lot about helping the poor and building up treasure in heaven. It's right there in the law and the prophets. *Those who ignore the warnings of Word of God in this life will be cut off from the blessings of God of the Word in the next life.*

CONCLUSION

Each and every one of us is among those five brothers of the rich man. This story is a warning to those of us who are still alive, for whom it's NOT too late. It's a warning to those of us who are rich, which by the world's standards probably includes all of us.

But like the five brothers, we can't expect a miraculous sign from heaven. We have the word of God which tell us to prepare for the life to come by trusting Christ and using God's gifts to help those in need.

You know, every one of us has a Lazarus in our lives. Do we see him? Do we move towards him in compassion? Do we offer him a cup of cold water in the name of Jesus? 1 John 3:17 says, "**If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?**" We say we're pro-life, but are we really?

Like the five brothers, there is no chasm dividing us from crossing over. As long as we're alive, it's not too late for us. We can choose to repent today. We can choose to turn our lives over to him and begin storing up treasures in heaven by releasing our resources in service to others.

The question is, what will we do with the freedom God gives us now to listen to the Word? Don't build your life on bad assumptions. The time to act is now! *Those who ignore the warnings of Word of God in this life will be cut off from the blessings of the God of the Word in the next life.*