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Speaker: Paul McIlwraith, Teaching Pastor
Scripture: Luke 16:19-31

How many of you were around London thirty-five years ago, in the mid 1980's? If so, this story may sound familiar. In the mid 1980's in London, there was a well-known and successful business man. He owned a series of very profitable nursing homes and appeared to have the ideal life. By all appearances he was a loving husband, a devoted father, a regular church attender and he supported various church and community causes with his finances.

Perhaps that is why the events of July 5, 1984 came as such a shock for many in London. The wife of this successful businessman was found dead along a highway close to London. She had been shot three times. As the investigation unfolded, it was discovered that Helmut Buxbaum had taken a \$1 Million Life Insurance policy out on his wife, Hanna just days before the shooting. He was arrested and tried for her murder. It was at the trial that details of Buxbaum's unsavory secret life were revealed.

The outer appearance of a religious family man hid a darker side. His wealth helped sustain a drug addiction, prostitutes, strip clubs and associations with a criminal element that eventually put him in contact with a hit man who he hired to kill his wife for \$10 000. In 1986, Buxbaum was convicted of Hanna's murder and sentenced to 25 years in prison without parole. In the process, a family and community were left to pick up the pieces. If you were around London at this time, you know that this story made the headlines every day for months.

It is interesting in the bible, Jesus tells a story about another rich man who seems to be so caught up and ensnared by his wealth that he has a similar disregard for the lives around him.

It is the story, or more precisely, a parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, found in Luke 16 of the bible.

As you know, we are in the midst of a message series on the Parables of Jesus entitled, "What's the Big Idea?" A parable as we have discovered, is a literary technique Jesus often used in the gospels to explain spiritual truths. In the Greek, parable literally means, "to set beside" similar to the English word, comparison. In this text that is what Jesus does, he sets two men beside one another and compares them to get to the heart of the issue.

It is noteworthy that the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus follows a parable about a shrewd manager and then a short section on how to deal with money and possessions which concludes with clear cut statement from Jesus in,

Luke 16:13

"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money."

Let me read the whole parable for you first and then we can break it down a bit. Listen as I read and see what words or ideas stand out for you.

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ Jesus said, "There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived each day in luxury. ²⁰ At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. ²¹ As Lazarus lay there longing for scraps from the rich man's table, the dogs would come and lick his open sores.

²² *“Finally, the poor man died and was carried by the angels to sit beside Abraham at the heavenly banquet.*

The rich man also died and was buried,²³ and he went to the place of the dead. There, in torment, he saw Abraham in the far distance with Lazarus at his side.

²⁴ *“The rich man shouted, ‘Father Abraham, have some pity! Send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. I am in anguish in these flames.’*

²⁵ *“But Abraham said to him, ‘Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted, and Lazarus had nothing. So now he is here being comforted, and you are in anguish.²⁶ And besides, there is a great chasm separating us. No one can cross over to you from here, and no one can cross over to us from there.’*

²⁷ *“Then the rich man said, ‘Please, Father Abraham, at least send him to my father’s home.²⁸ For I have five brothers, and I want him to warn them so they don’t end up in this place of torment.’*

²⁹ *“But Abraham said, ‘Moses and the prophets have warned them. Your brothers can read what they wrote.’*

³⁰ *“The rich man replied, ‘No, Father Abraham! But if someone is sent to them from the dead, then they will repent of their sins and turn to God.’*

³¹ *“But Abraham said, ‘If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they won’t be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’”*

What was it that caught your attention?

In the Parable, Jesus introduces two characters initially and he is intentional to describe them to illustrate their extremes.

Luke 16:19

Jesus said, “There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived each day in luxury.

On one hand, there was a man who lived in luxury which means in this day, he had a large home and

enjoyed the best food and drink each day. He had all the toys. The SUV’s, the boats, the motorcycles, swimming pool and spa. (or their equivalent in this culture) Notice Jesus is careful to mention that this man was clothed in purple. Purple was the colour of royalty in this day and any clothing dyed this colour was very rare and expensive because of the process of obtaining the best dye from marine snails. And linen was available only to the wealthiest people. This man would have been clad in the finest threads, the Giorgio Armani of his day. He seemed to have it all. He lacked nothing in terms of material possessions.

Set beside this rich man for comparison sake by Jesus, is Lazarus. By the way, this is the only parable where a central character is named.

Lazarus is the Greek equivalent of the Old Testament name Eleazar, (the name of Abraham’s faithful servant in Genesis 24:34). The name means *God helps*. Look at how Jesus depicts Lazarus in this story,

Luke 16:20-21

At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores.²¹ As Lazarus lay there longing for scraps from the rich man’s table, the dogs would come and lick his open sores.

The fact that Lazarus lay at the rich man’s gate may indicate that he was incapacitated or limited in his mobility. He perhaps depended on others to get around. To make matters worse, he was covered in open sores, further reinforcing his sickly condition. Dogs would come and lick his wounds. Now it is important to understand in Jesus’ day in this culture, they did not keep dogs as pets like we do today. Allowing them to sit in our favourite chair or sleep on our beds. No, these would have been scavenger dogs that roamed the villages looking for food. They were licking and harassing Lazarus much like mosquitoes in the summer can pester us. This only added to Lazarus’ torment.

He laid there at the gate of the rich man every day. The gate represents that there is some sort of barrier separating the Rich man and Lazarus. All he longed for was just the scraps, the extras from the rich man’s table. Nothing more. Just scraps.

In this day, it was the norm at the table of the rich, as they had food to spare, for them to wipe their hands with pieces of bread and then toss the bread under the table. These were the discarded scraps that Lazarus longed for. The fact is that many in Jesus' audience on this day would have related more to the plight of Lazarus than the rich man. Most in this culture were closer to being poor than rich.

I wonder, if Jesus were to tell this story in our world today, who would be the rich man and who would be Lazarus?

Would the rich man be depicted as the corporate CEO making multimillion dollar bonuses and payouts? What about the sports stars signing nine figure salary contracts? Or the musicians, TV or movie stars earning millions per concert, episode or movie?

Last month, Forbes came out with its annual list of the 400 richest Americans and this year for the first time in 24 years, Bill Gates of Microsoft did not top the list. Do you know surpassed Gates? It was Jeff Bezos, the founder of Amazon.com. The company many of you will order your Christmas gifts from on line this year!

Bezos is also the first person with a personal fortune of more than \$100 billion. Today, he is worth \$160 billion, mostly thanks to an astonishing one-year gain of \$78.5 billion last year. You thought you had a pretty good year? How about \$78.5 Billion? Now that is a good year. These are the rich.

Who are the Lazarus' amongst us today in our culture? The poor and destitute? The guy standing on the corner of Richmond and Oxford begging for money? The homeless or the addicted. Those who are mentally ill or without a job? What if we were to think more broadly, beyond just our North American culture? Who is the rich man in the world today? What if I told you it is you? It's us.

Did you know that if you make over \$42 000 a year, you are in the top 1% of the rich in the world? Considering that the average annual income of those working in London is \$47 000, from a global perspective we are all rich. Who is Lazarus from a global perspective? The five poorest countries in the world are all in Africa where the people make less than \$500 per year. Add to that diseases such as HIV AIDS, Malaria, Tuberculosis and malnutrition

and life is pretty bleak for these people. Hopeless. There are a lot of people who are Lazarus in our world.

The rich and the poor. What are our feelings towards the rich in our society? Jealousy? Envy? Pity? Respect? Do we strive to be like them? What about those who are poor? Do we feel sorry for them? Do we think they could work harder or get a job? Do you know that the majority of the audience before Jesus as he told this story would have been steeped in the belief that riches were seen as a blessing for a life of obedience and faithfulness to God? If you were rich, God's favour was upon you. If you were poor or suffering, people generally looked upon you with contempt. God was obviously punishing you for some sort of sin or some bad choice you have made in your life.

On the surface, as Jesus describes these two men, it is the rich man who would appear to have lived the more noble life and Lazarus' life was the more corrupt. These are the extremes that Jesus is setting up here. Are you following me? Look as he continues the story. Both men die and a new character is introduced, Abraham. Now Abraham serves as the "God" figure in this parable. The mention of his name would have connected the listeners with one of the Patriarchs of their faith. Do you remember Abraham? Mentioned way back in the first book of the bible, Genesis.

God told Abraham that he would make him a great nation and through him all the other nations of the world would be blessed. Abraham was the Father of Israel and in this parable he speaks for God.

Look as the text continues in,

Luke 16:22-24

"Finally, the poor man died and was carried by the angels to sit beside Abraham at the heavenly banquet. The rich man also died and was buried, and he went to the place of the dead.

I don't think we can truly understand how shocking this statement would have been to the people gathered around Jesus. Up to this point, he was telling a pretty normal story about two men who grew up on opposite sides of the track. One very rich and one very poor. They got that. It was a reality in their world. They are tracking with him. *Go on Jesus, we are with you.*

But then he goes and flips it upside down. He adds a twist to the story that would have been completely beyond what they would expect or understand. We are beginning to see that that is what Jesus does in many of his parables. He turns the expectations upside down.

The beggar, Lazarus dies and is “carried” by the side of Abraham and the rich man dies and is buried. He is in the place of death or Hades and he is now in torment. There is a reversal of fortunes of these two men, after they die. Did you notice it? Now to understand how shocking this turn of events must have been to Jesus’ audience, think of it like this in our world today. If you are a student here, imagine if you applied for university or college or some special program and you have all A’s on your transcript but when the acceptance letters get sent out, you are rejected and your friend who has D’s is accepted. That’s shocking, not the norm in our society.

Or, maybe you are one of those law abiding citizens who, if the speed limits says 60km/h, you keep it a 60. When you come to a stop sign, you stop. Completely. No rolling. You follow the rules of the road right to the letter but one day, the police pull you over and give you a ticket, as a car speeds by you going 30km over the limit. Shocking. It’s unexpected.

For the people gathered around Jesus as he told this parable, they would have expected that when the rich man dies, he would get the heavenly banquet with Abraham.

Lazarus? He would be the one destined for the place of the dead, forever be in torment. But Jesus flips these expectations upside down. He is up to something here. Getting to a deeper spirit truth in the Kingdom of God. In eternity, Lazarus has the riches and the rich man is a poor beggar.

To help understand this reversal it is important to revisit the biblical understanding of stewardship. A basic biblical truth is that God created everything. We see this in,

Genesis 1:1
In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

So it would only make sense that if God created everything than everything belongs to Him. Agreed?

James 1:17
every good and perfect gift comes from God.

Anything that we, humanity possess is simply on loan from God. To enjoy yes, but also to handle in a way that is open and generous with others especially those in need. The bible is full of verses about how we are to care for the poor, the needy, the widows and the orphans.

James 2:14-16
4 What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don’t show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing,¹⁶ and you say, “Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well”—but then you don’t give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?

Deuteronomy 15:11
There will always be some in the land who are poor. That is why I am commanding you to share freely with the poor and with other Israelites in need.

In Jesus’ day, there were also many Jewish Laws on the books for how people were to give to the poor. Have you heard of alms? It is mentioned many times in the bible. The act of alms was to give money or goods to those in need as a gesture of charity. Alms comes from the Greek word that means, *pity or mercy*. In the original sense, when you gave alms, money or goods to someone in need, you were dispensing mercy on that person.

In this story Jesus tells, it appears that the rich man had no mercy. When he was alive, he was one of the few people in a position to help Lazarus in his despair but he doesn’t use what is at his disposal to help in any way. In fact, he does the opposite, the reverse. The rich man ignores him.

Every day, Lazarus’s friends would lay him outside the gate of the home of the one man in town who could possibly alleviate his suffering. The rich man must have been aware of Lazarus. He was staring him right in the face each day as he came and went

from his home. As a Jewish man, he would have been aware of the teachings of Moses and the prophets and the major biblical theme of giving generously to those in need. The listeners of this story would have at least expected the rich man to give something to ease Lazarus' burdens.

Yet, day in and day out, he does nothing to lift a finger to help. Even those mangy scavenging dogs do more to help Lazarus than the rich man, by licking his sores. Apparently there is some medicinal value in a dog lick. The rich man doesn't help because he is too obsessed with himself. He cared for no one but himself. Dressing himself in purple everyday insinuates that he intentionally wanted everyone to know he was rich. Outfitted in the finest duds and bling so that people noticed him. *Look at me world!* The fact that he feasted daily meant that his servants were probably never given a break. They were never given a day off. They were never given a Sabbath and that would have violated the laws of God. The rich man's own personal life style was more important to him than the law of God. He was too wrapped up in the trappings of the good life that he forgot the author of life and the lives of the people around him. Everything looked good on the outside but his heart was far from the things of God.

1 John 3:17

If someone has enough money to live well and sees a brother or sister in need but shows no compassion—how can God's love be in that person?

In his earthly life, the rich man had it all and Lazarus is tormented but in death it all gets turned upside down. Lazarus is in luxury at Abraham's side and the rich man is now the one tormented.

Luke 16:23-24

There, in torment, he saw Abraham in the far distance with Lazarus at his side. "The rich man shouted, 'Father Abraham, have some pity! Send Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. I am in anguish in these flames.'

You know, the central theme of this parable is not to tell us what heaven and hell will be like, although the picture Jesus paints here is definitely ominous with words like anguish and flames.

But, don't you find the rich man's words here rather ironic? He is in a pretty dire situation and his focus is on? Himself! In death, nothing has changed for this man. I would like to think that if I was ever to find myself in the very unfortunate position of having the flames of hell lap at the soles of my feet, that I would very quickly acknowledge the error of my ways and grow a contrite heart, quickly!

Abraham, what have I done?! What a jerk I have been. I am sorry. Forgive me. What can I do to make amends? Tell me, I'll do anything.

Not this guy! No, he has the gall to ask Abraham to show him some pity. *Show me some mercy!* He wants alms. Even though he didn't demonstrate one iota of compassion to Lazarus in his lifetime, when the roles are reversed, he is calling for pity. And isn't it interesting that the rich man knows Lazarus in the afterlife. He recognizes him. That face was etched in his memory. It's the one he ignored for years at his gate!

When the rich man realizes that this man is now being honoured by Abraham as he languishes in Hades, you would think that he would apologize to Lazarus and ask for forgiveness for his behaviour towards him. But instead, true to form, he only thinks about himself. He doesn't address Lazarus at all and instead begs for mercy from Abraham. He has now become the beggar.

Although he offered nothing to alleviate Lazarus' discomfort on earth, he now demands services from this same man. He is still treating Lazarus like some sort of inferior, like his slave. *Tell Lazarus to get over here and dip his finger in the water to cool my tongue*, even though he didn't once lift a finger to help Lazarus when he was in misery.

Do you know people like this? We have a name for that type of behaviour in our world today. It is called,

Entitlement. *the belief that one is inherently deserving of privileges or special treatment.*

Do you know someone who is entitled? Some of you in the retail business are nodding your heads. Every day, you deal with people that feel entitled. Anyone in here in the restaurant business? Anyone been a waiter or waitress? Do you know what a "hack" is?

The ‘hack’ is when a customer at a restaurant lays out the tip money in coins or bills, on a table at the beginning of the meal. They then precede to take away parts of the money for everything they perceived that the waitress/waiter does wrong. What is left at the end of the meal, is the wait staff’s tip. That is not just entitlement that is wrong on all sorts of levels. Do you see that? Manipulation, using money to control others.

That continues to be the mindset of this rich man even in death. *Tell Lazarus to come and do this for me. I am entitled!* Look back at the text.

Luke 16:25-26

“But Abraham said to him, ‘Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted, and Lazarus had nothing. So now he is here being comforted, and you are in anguish.’²⁶ And besides, there is a great chasm separating us. No one can cross over to you from here, and no one can cross over to us from there.’

Remember, in this story Jesus is using Abraham as the “God” figure, he speaks for God as he reminds the rich man of all the good things he had on earth while Lazarus had suffered. Now in eternity, Lazarus is comforted and the rich man is suffering. There is no going back. There is a chasm separating them. A barrier... like a gate. Just as the gate that served as a barrier between Lazarus and the rich man in their earthly life, this chasm now separates them in the afterlife but now the rich man is on the wrong side! The rich man’s actions on earth have sealed an eternal consequence where there is no relief. Ironic, isn’t it? This is the thing that may be the most perplexing of this whole parable. It almost seems like the rich man is condemned to Hades because he is wealthy, doesn’t it? Lazarus almost seems like he is rewarded for enduring an earthy life of misery.

Did you notice that there is no overt mention of faith in this story? Or the role it plays in going to heaven. There is no mention of confessing your sins, turning to Jesus and accepting him as your personal Saviour. That is until the rich man pleads with Abraham.

Luke 16:27-30

*‘Please, Father Abraham, at least send him to my father’s home.’²⁸ For I have five brothers, and I want him to warn them so they don’t end up in this place of torment.’²⁹ “But Abraham said, ‘Moses and the prophets have warned them. Your brothers can read what they wrote.’³⁰ “The rich man replied, ‘No, Father Abraham! But if someone is sent to them from the dead, then they will **repent** of their sins and turn to God.’*

The use of this word “repent” is the key here. It indicates that the rich man never lived a life of faith and obedience to God during his time on earth and by inference Lazarus did and that is the reason each have ended up where they did when they died.

On earth, the rich man was self-indulgent, flaunted his wealth and he lived in extravagance. He feasted with his friends and ignored the teachings of Moses and the Prophets and each day would pass by the gate of his home and consequently ignore the plight of the sick and poor sitting right there at his doorstep. God gave good things to the rich man. Let me be clear on this. Being rich is not a sin. If you are here today and you make a good living and have acquire some wealth that is not a sin. The rich man’s problem is not that he is rich. It is that he failed to follow God’s commands to be generous with what he had, (every good and perfect gift is from God). He failed to share what he had been given by God with those in greatest need in his culture. He saw the needs of those around him with his eyes but it failed to register with his heart and that just added more fuel to the fire of apathy in his soul that put his own wants and desires above his care or concern of others. That is why Abraham responds to rich man’s plea to send someone from the dead to convince his brothers to repent with.

Luke 16:31

‘If they won’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they won’t be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’”

If they have hardened hearts, they won’t listen to anyone, even if that person were to come back from the grave. Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He is foreshadowing his own death and the lack of response that even his resurrection will get from

those who just don't care. They have lost their way and it tends to play out most significantly in the way they handle their material resources and their lack of empathy for those in need. Has that been your experience?

It is not impossible to be rich and be a Christian, otherwise all of the North American Middle Class Churches would be eliminated. What scripture does teach is that it is impossible to be rich and a Christian and not be generous and willing to share what you have with those in need. Christianity and Generosity should go hand in hand. If you have an authentic faith in Jesus and have some means, you cannot help but share with those around you. In fact, you will look for opportunities to give. You won't be able to give enough and you won't resent it when asked to give to a worthy cause. I know that describes many of you in this room.

This parable that Jesus tells to those gathered around him on this day was an illustration of exactly what he was doing right in their midst. He was welcoming the poor. He was caring for the destitute. He was providing for the needy. This parable also served as a warning to those who were wealthy, particularly the Pharisees not to neglect the poor around them because this one can have major eternal consequences.

So what's the Big Idea here? Maybe it is the fact that God identifies with the poor in our world and any Gospel that is not good news to the poor is not the gospel of Jesus Christ.

For some of you, that is what you need to hear. You may be sitting here and you may feel poor. Or maybe you are not poor financially but you are lonely, depressed, dealing with mental illness or an addiction. You are poor in spirit. God identifies with you and his good news is for you and he has given you the church as a community of love and support and comfort.

Matthew 5:3

God blesses those who are poor and realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs.

God has given the poor of this world, His church and His people.

For those of you who are rich, and there are many of you here. I just want you to know; Lazarus is still at the gate. We cannot follow a gospel with an evangelistic emphasis and have no concern for those who are poor. This parable does not attack all wealth, just the kind of wealth that is blind to poverty and suffering. It attacks the idea that money and possessions are for our own use without responsibility to God and other people.

Do you know that at one time Helmut Buxbaum had millions of dollars, a successful business, a beautiful family and a wonderful home? He seemingly had it all by our world standards. But, he died in prison at the age of 68, alone and with nothing. Most of his adult life was a relentless pursuit of money and material possessions and in the end, he was left in a cold, dark cell with nothing.

God provides all things and everything belongs to God and we, as his creation, are stewards not owners of these material things.

This parable reminds us that there is no formula of blessing. To have material things does not equal God's special favour on your life and to be poor does not mean that God has vacated your life. But what we do with what God has given us is the truest test of Christian discipleship. God gave good things to the rich man. His downfall was that he did not pass any of it along to those in need around him, specifically Lazarus. It brings to mind the words of Jesus that we heard at the start of this message.

Luke 16:13

"No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other; you will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money."

Two months ago when we set the preaching topic schedule and I slotted in that I would preached this parable on this date, I didn't know that it was also the weekend we launched our annual "Dare to Give" campaign. But God knew. I think this is a good challenge for all of us. Lazarus is still at the gate. There are those who are poor in our community and in our world. The poor will always be with us. How we respond matters and it is a witness of our Christian faith. So how will we respond? Will we avert our eyes and turn the other

way or will we be open handed and generous to those in need?

I would like to try something to kind of launch our Dare to Give Campaign. I did this about five years ago as well. As a way of responding to this message and as a symbolic gesture that we are to hold everything loosely, can I ask you to reach into your pocket or handbag and take any loose change you may have.

Don't worry about the bills, you are going to save them for actually purchasing the kit for Mission Services. I am just interested in the change. Take it in your hand. I know maybe it represents a Tim's coffee on the way home.

Will you surrender that change and as a gesture of faith, and come and place it on the altar as we sing our closing song? It is a way to respond to God and acknowledge that all that you have is a gift from God and we are to hold it loosely and use it to help those in need. Will you gather up your change and be prepared to release it as we pray?

Points to Ponder

What's the Big Idea?

Luke 16:19-31 ~ The Rich Man and Lazarus

With a friend, your family or in your small group, discuss the following questions.

1. "No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and be enslaved to money" (Luke 16:13). Share some of your thoughts about these words from Jesus. Where does the tension come in our society of trying to serve God and money?
2. Who are the rich and who are the poor in our culture today? Talk about some examples of people you encounter who are rich and poor. How do you engage with them?
3. If you have had the opportunity to travel globally, share some examples of those you have encountered who were rich and those who were poor. What did you learn from those experiences?
4. What does it mean to be entitled? Where do you see examples of entitlement in our society?
5. *It is impossible to be rich and a Christian without also being generous and willing to share with those in need.* Discuss this statement and the challenges and tensions it can bring.

Prayer and Action Item

Pray for one another out of the key points that were discussed. Pray specifically for God to challenge you in areas where you are hoarding the things He has given you and not being generous and open handed to those in need.