

What Was the Sin of the Rich Man?

Fuel Your Faith 15

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Over the course of this week, we have focused on the need to demonstrate mercy. It is one of the deepest expressions of true love. And yet, it can be very easy to shut down. The greatest impediment to demonstrating mercy is arrogance and pride ... which we all must deal with as we struggle with the human condition.

Today on Fuel Your Faith, we'll examine a familiar passage that we may have only read to learn about the destiny of the dead who await judgment. If you're like me, [Luke 16.19-31](#) has often been presented with diagrams and charts outlining the eternal destinations of the righteous and unrighteous ... and while there may be some clues presented about that in this text, as we'll learn today ... that is not the point of Jesus' teaching. In fact, we may have missed the most important thing that Jesus wants us to put into our life ... and that is a merciful heart that has regard for other people ... even people who are undesirable and outcast.

In [Luke 16](#) Jesus speaks pointedly to and about the religious establishment of his time. They were smug and proud. Arrogant and haughty. Aloof and careless. Cold and calculating. Anything but what God desired from those who were supposed to represent Him. In the chapter Jesus presents them as dishonest managers. They had not been faithful to what they had been entrusted. They might have gotten into religious service in order to serve God, but all of that had morphed into serving themselves in getting rich off their position and mistreating others. Wealth had become their God.

To this Jesus says in [Luke 16.13](#): "No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."

When the Pharisees heard this, they ridiculed Jesus. In human terms they had arrived. They held exalted positions. They courted favor with all the people who moved and shaped society. Without mercy, they held people accountable to the laws they created, all the while ignoring them themselves. From human eyes, they would have been admired. From human eyes it would have appeared that God was greatly blessing them. Jesus says they were revolting. An abomination.

And that is what Jesus is saying in [Luke 16.15](#). They were idolators, worshipping wealth, themselves (they had become a law unto themselves), and fornication as they had loosened the rules on divorce for themselves and were running roughshod over the wives of their youth. Their total selfishness had totally vanquished any room in their hearts for mercy in the way they treated those of lower status.

Next in the text comes the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Now, at least in my experience,

we may have failed to make the connection of the preceding context with this parable. There really are no boundaries between what is said in [Luke 16.13-18](#) and the ensuing parable. Since that is the case, we should always consider what is said about the rich man and Lazarus in connection with what Jesus has just said concerning smug selfishness and the lack of care for other people.

Jesus sets up the story by detailing the ultimate contrast. We see the disparity described in the very basics of life: clothing, food, and shelter. As you read about the “rich man,” picture the Pharisees as they are standing there listening to Jesus. Clothing was a symbol of status, with purple and white clothing being the sign of highest opulence. Jesus doesn’t even mention Lazarus’ clothes. Instead, Jesus says he is covered with sores. In other words, he’s unclean. Some might have interpreted Lazarus’ condition as his being under divine punishment.

Jesus also describes the contrast in relation to food. It is like the rich man feasted at a banquet every single day, while Lazarus longed to eat the scraps, reserved for the dogs, that fell from the rich man’s table. And the dogs mentioned here ... don’t think about your lovable little pet, think about packs of ravenous dogs who roamed the town scavenging for food. When he was lying the gate, the dogs would not have come to lick him with tails wagging and warm loving eyes ... they would have tormented and abused him more. Note how Lazarus has no home, he’s been thrown down at the rich man’s gate, while the rich man lives in opulence.

Next, both men die.... Lazarus being carried by the angels into a blissful state, accompanied by Abraham ... and the rich man goes to torment and agony. What caused the rich man to go there? V. 24 reveals the bottom line. His haughty and merciless spirit. Note how he still believes Abraham is his father ... and Lazarus, who he knows by name but has never helped, commands Abraham for Lazarus to be an errand-boy and fetch him some water. Even here ... even in torment ... his unrepentant heart was still on display. And it presents the greatest irony. The one who is now requesting mercy at the hands of Lazarus seems to have never seen the need to be merciful in caring for a poor man like Lazarus.

The main point of the story of the rich man and Lazarus is not to describe where the dead are. The main point of the story is that we listen and learn. “For judgment is without mercy to the one who has not shown mercy,” [James 2.13](#). “Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy,” [Matthew 5.7](#).

We may compliment ourselves on our adherence to doctrine ... precision obedience ... attendance at every church service and bible study ... and feel pretty smug about our life, the good decisions we’ve made, and interpret all of our wealth, comfort, and prosperity as a blessing from God ... while simultaneously looking down our nose at those who have made bad decisions, don’t look as good as we do, aren’t as educated as we are, and superficially voice pity as they struggle in their circumstances. We need to heed the warning ... that there may have been times we haven’t been too different from those Pharisees of Jesus’ day.

The warning here is stark. True Christianity in action moves with the proper view of others ...

seeing their needs ... and helping where we can. May we all become more conscious of the importance of treating other people the way Jesus does.

True love always moves with mercy.

Thank you for listening to Fuel Your Faith. Join us again next week as we begin to talk about loving others through the storm.