

## Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

October 20, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church  
Farmington, New Mexico

**Luke 16:19-31** “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. **20** At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores **21** and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. **22** “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. **23** In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. **24** 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.’ **25** “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. **26** And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ **27** “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, **28** for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ **29** “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ **30** “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ **31** “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.’”

### “All There Is to Life”

“Time’s up! Put your pencils down.” Everyone in the room let out a big sigh, put their pencils on their desks and passed their answer sheets toward the front of the room. But as soon as the papers are out of their hands, they start to play a very unproductive game. ‘If only I had more time, I would have gotten a better score. If only I had studied harder, I would have been more confident with my answers and not wasted so much time on those few tricky ones. If only I had paid attention a little better when the instructor was speaking, I wouldn’t have gone back over the entire book wasting my time on questions that weren’t going to be on the test.’ Of course, not everyone is engaged in a silent game of woulda, coulda, shoulda. A few just get up and walk out of the room completely at ease. Maybe they didn’t get a perfect score, but they did their best. Maybe they didn’t do everything correctly, but they did enough to get a good score and pass the test. There is no more second-guessing. When the time is up, that’s all there is.

In Luke chapter sixteen, Jesus gives us a picture of what happens when the time is up. But it’s not about a spelling test or ACT or job application. It’s about life. Jesus uses the attitudes of the rich man and poor Lazarus to highlight two basic approaches to life. When life is all over, Jesus doesn’t want you to make excuses or wonder what could have been if only. Jesus wants you to be safely at his side in your heavenly home. Jesus wants you to have be

completely confident and completely at ease when life is over, because you know what life is all about.

In this parable there are two main characters. We never discover the name of the rich man who dresses luxuriously and lives to enjoy all the best things in life. But we do learn the identity of Lazarus, the beggar who has no means of providing for himself, who has to depend on the benevolence of others, who passes his miserable days without being noticed by the rich man, who has street dogs as his only friends. Since Jesus breaks the normal rules for parables by not telling us it is a parable, we will break the rules and give the parable two main lessons. The entire history between the rich man and poor Lazarus is only the back drop Jesus uses to teach us to focus on God's Word throughout our lives. And with a focus on God's message for our lives, we will then focus on the people in our lives. Jesus is teaching that's what life is all about.

The entire history between the rich man and poor Lazarus is only the back drop Jesus uses to teach us to focus on God's Word throughout our lives. And with a focus on God's message for our lives, we will then focus on the people in our lives. Jesus is teaching that's what life is all about. Abraham lets us know why the rich man ended up where he did. It's all about how he lived his life. His life had no room for God's message to him. God's Word had no place in his life. The most recent poll conducted the Pew Research Center showed that 58% percent of American adults believe in hell. And that number has been declining. You will encounter people who say they would believe in heaven and hell if only there was more proof for their existence. If only God could show himself in an unmistakable, undeniable way, they would make room for him in their lives.

It's a flaw seen most obviously in atheists and unbelievers. How do I feel about what's going on in the news? How does this affect me? Biologists might explain it as a survival instinct hardwired into our DNA. Christians can put our fingers on something more basic. Ever since Adam and Eve we all ask what can I get out of life? Why should I deny myself what is forbidden? How will it make my life better or worse? It's a disease that infects every person's heart. It's so easy to focus on ourselves so much that we fail to see God at work in his way through his means in our lives. And this disease, as the rich man shows, is terminal.

If the problem is selfishness, if selfishness causes all of us to think of ourselves first and see everything in life through the lens of how it affects me, then what's the solution? The heart of the solution is having what Father Abraham and poor Lazarus had. Lazarus wasn't secure at the side of Abraham in heaven because he had nothing throughout his life. He was rich because his life was filled with God's goodness revealed by Moses and the Prophets. His fate was secure in the confidence that biggest concerns for life have been taken care of by the one promised in Moses and the Prophets. Having faith in God's promises allowed Lazarus to be carried to Abraham's bosom. Possessing his Savior while he had nothing else in life meant angels carried Lazarus home to his heavenly Father.

Jesus told this parable to a mixed crowd. Disciples and Pharisees. Poor fishermen who had left what little they had in life to follow Jesus. And those who sneered at Jesus from their elevated positions that enabled lavish lifestyles. But Jesus told this parable so everyone who

hears his words would evaluate the trajectory of their own lives. Out of concern for those who are on a path toward hell, Jesus wants this to be a wake up call. For those confident in the righteousness they have through faith in Jesus, he wants believers to perform a thorough check up of their lives. Is what we say important to us actually important to us in practice? Is the main point of our lives really taking a front row seat in our every day existence?

Here's what I mean. If Moses and the Prophets are sufficient testimony to reach the five unconverted brothers of the rich man, won't they work for our witness? What I mean is this. So often I find myself dismissing opportunities to share my faith because I don't feel knowledgeable enough, experienced enough, prepared enough. I tell myself I would do more if I had some special powers. If only I could perform miracles. If only I could grab people's attention and then hold it with my great gifts of public speaking and persuasion. But all of my excuses are just that. Excuses. And Abraham brushes them all aside in his conversation with the rich man in hell.

So the solution Abraham provides is to focus more on what God's Word says to me than what excuses are percolating up from my own heart. Conscious efforts to see God's marvelous plan of salvation woven throughout Scripture will give certainty about what life is all about. Deliberate attention to what God says in his Word gives greater confidence to use and share that life-giving message. And it has another effect. Seeing life come into focus through Scripture gives a focus on the people around us.

What we could all use is an epidemic of empathy in our society. Empathy isn't sympathy, the ability to suffer with someone. Empathy means taking the effort to understand someone and share their feelings. You can see how useful empathy might be in your daily life. When someone is rude to you in traffic, instead of reacting the same way, you might wonder if they had a rough night and are running late for work. When you are standing in a long line at Safeway with a bunch of grumpy shoppers, you might sense a mom who has been battling toddlers all morning. That uncooperative clerk behind the counter at the MVD might have just received bad news about her mother going into hospice care. But there is more to empathy for Christians than just the ability to not be rude or impatient.

Kindness and empathy are absolutely essential for helping others see all there is to life. You likely have a beggar Lazarus in your life. And you probably have someone who shares a lot in common with the rich man. Seeing those people is the first step. Noticing what they are all about and what they still need takes a little more effort. Reaching out to share the heart of your Savior is your ultimate goal.

A few years ago I heard a Christian podcaster remark how he wished churches were more like AA meetings. I thought that was odd. But he explained. When you come to an AA meeting, no one asks you where you've been. No one asks you how long it's been since you last bothered to show up. No one makes you feel ashamed that you haven't been there lately. They are just genuinely glad you are there. They know that is exactly the place where you need to be. And they want to be there for you.

Next Sunday we are having our Welcome Home Sunday. We are working hard to get 100% of our members in church for worship. Some have been gone for a few weeks. Some for a few years. Some just got out of the habit of getting up and driving to church on Sunday mornings. Some had major life events that they are still struggling to get over. Whatever reasons have kept them away, we know the reasons why we are here. And we know what we want to share with everyone who walks through that door. This is the place where we receive God's pardon and forgiveness. This is where we get the message of who we are in Jesus Christ. This is where we get the Scripture that fills us with confidence to carry out our Christian identity. This is where we gather with other sinners made saints by the blood of Jesus to find encouragement and strength for our daily faith battles.

Voltaire was well known as the French infidel who cursed Christ and vowed that he would single-handedly destroy Christianity in 20 years. He compared himself, one man, to the 12 apostles who had erected Christianity. A Christian physician who attended Voltaire during his last illness gave a testimony about his departure. The physician said, "When I compare the death of a righteous man, which is like the close of a beautiful day, with that of Voltaire, I see the difference between bright, serene weather and a black thunderstorm. . . . I cannot think of it without shuddering. As soon as he saw that all the means he had employed to increase his strength had had just the opposite effect, death was constantly before his eyes. From this moment, madness took possession of his soul. He expired under the torments of the furies."<sup>1</sup>

Compare Voltaire to a well-known philosopher from the 20th century. Anthony Flew was an indisputably intelligent man. He was also a die hard atheist. Throughout his career in philosophy and academics, he "criticised the idea of life after death, the free will defence to the problem of evil, and the meaningfulness of the concept of God. In 2003 he was one of the signatories of the Humanist Manifesto III."<sup>2</sup> In 2004, however, he had a change of heart. As a member of the analytic and evidentialist schools of philosophy, he had always vowed his beliefs would follow the evidence. He eventually came to believe in the existence of God. Whether he believed in the God of the Bible and trusted in Jesus as his Savior is a matter of speculation. But we can point to Anthony Flew as an example of someone who learned there was more to life. The critics and skeptics in your life are probably less hostile than Flew was in his atheist days. But they need the same persistence. They need people who have empathy. People who care enough about them to not give up on them. Moses and the Prophets point to Jesus. And Jesus is all there is to life.

Jesus who made God's Word and God's will his top priority in life. Jesus who had a heart for all people, rich men and poor beggars alike. Jesus wants to spare all people from the terrible torments of a life apart from him. Jesus lived his life experiencing excruciating pain and unfathomable suffering so sinners will never have to face the fires of hell. Jesus died his death so no one should ever have to fear death. Jesus rose in victory over the grave so no one will ever have to wonder about their fate when they die. Jesus tells this parable to touch

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<sup>1</sup> John W. Lawrence, *The Seven Laws of the Harvest*. Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996, pp 55–56.

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antony\\_Flew](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Antony_Flew)

your heart and mine so we take Scripture to heart and then find a heart for all people. So we will be able to rest on Abraham's bosom and not have to look far away, but look right next to you to stare into the eyes of your loved one. And there you and all believers will finally understand in an ultimate way once we arrive there that heaven is all there is to life. Amen.