

The Rich Man's Demand

A Sermon by Rich Holmes on Luke 16: 19-31

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Jesus tells us a story about a rich man. We aren't told his name. We aren't told how rich he is. We are told he is rich enough to feast each night on delicious food and that he wears fine linen and purple, and so maybe we should imagine him living in a mansion in Beverly Hills or the Hamptons with a butler, a maid and a gardener. But as we consider the clothes that most people in the world wear and the food that most of the world eats, maybe he was only as rich as any of us, we don't know.

Jesus tells us a story about a rich man but in this story there is also a poor man. But he is more than poor, he is hungry. He is so hungry in fact, that we are told that he would long to feed himself with what falls from the rich man's table and he stays outside the rich man's gate every day. Unlike the rich man, we are told the poor man's name; his name is Lazarus. And we are also told that he is sick. His body is covered with sores and the dogs come and lick his sores. And one day, one day the poor man dies. Maybe he starves to death. Maybe he freezes to death one cold winter night. Maybe whatever caused his body to be covered with sores was a disease that eventually killed him. We aren't told why he dies or even how old he is when he dies. We are just told that like everyone else, one day he takes his last breath. And one day, the rich man also takes his last breath. Again, we aren't told how he dies or how old he is when he dies, we are just told that he dies. What we are told, though, is where they both go when they die. The poor man Lazarus goes to heaven and the rich man goes to hell. And we are told that while his soul is being tormented in hell, the rich man looks up to heaven and far, far away he can dimly see Abraham with Lazarus by his side. And so he calls out to Abraham and he says,

“Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.”

But Abraham answers, “I’m sorry, my child. I’m sorry, but you see, in your lifetime, my child, you had good things and this poor man Lazarus had evil things. But now, now that we are in the afterlife, he is comforted and you are in agony. Besides all this there is a great chasm between you and me and there is no way for us to get there from here even if you think Lazarus should come and comfort you.”

But the rich man is not yet done. He has another idea. He says, “Then father Abraham, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father’s house because there I have five brothers and they need to be warned so that they don’t also come to this place of fire and torture.”

“Can your five brothers read? They should pick up a bible and read about Moses and the prophets.”

“Well of course they can read, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, then they will repent.”

But Abraham says, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, then neither will they listen even if someone rises from the dead.”

What is this story about? Maybe some of you have never heard this story before and maybe others have heard this story all your life but you still don’t know what it’s about. Why is this a story that Jesus tells? If you think to yourself that in his three year ministry with his disciples surely Jesus must have told many stories, many stories that never made it into the gospels, why did this one make the cut? Maybe you think this is a story which tells us it is wrong to be rich. It is a story which tells us, you might say, that if you are rich you are going to hell and

if you are poor you are going to heaven. That may be, and I personally know a lot of people who would say that. But I don't think that's true. If that is true, then we are all in a lot of trouble, because by the world's standards it isn't just people like Bill Gates and Warren Buffet who are rich, it is all of us. By the world's standards if you have enough money to afford a car that is safe and reliable and house that isn't infested with rats and three meals a day to feed yourself, you are very, very rich. So if it is true that the rich of this world are condemned, we're all in a lot of trouble. But I don't think that's true.

One time somebody told me they thought this story was about was not about the rich man at all. It was about the poor man Lazarus. But, I don't think that's true either. Lazarus plays a part in the story of course, but only a minor part. The only dialogue in the story after all is between Abraham and the rich man. Lazarus never says a word. So, I don't think this story is all about Lazarus.

Finally, I heard it said another time, this is a story about the rich man, but it isn't a story about a man who was punished because he was rich, it is a story about a man who was punished because he failed to have pity on someone who was poor. He failed to do anything for Lazarus and that was why he was punished. I think we're getting warmer and I won't deny that this could be why this rich man was punished. After all, we sin not just in the things we do but even in the things we fail to do, but still, I don't really think this is what this story is about either.

In my humble opinion, the key to what I think this story is about is found in these few words. "If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, then neither will they listen, even if someone should rise from the dead."

You see, this story at least in my mind is not about the sin of having money. Rather it is about how those with money tend to look at God, it is about their usual attitude toward God. You see, we who have disposable incomes tend to see God differently than people who are poor. Because you see, we who have disposable incomes are used to ordering people around. We are accustomed to it. We go to dinner and we are able to order the food we want prepared the way we want. "Make it hotter, make it saltier, make it spicier." We can order something online whether it's books, clothes or fine china and we can make it come whenever we want it. We can make it come the next day if we have the money, or we can even say we don't want it until three weeks from now. When you have the money and you are willing to pay you can have things however you want it. There are of course a few things money can't buy, it can't buy love. It can't buy happiness. It can't buy inner peace. But isn't it interesting that the things money can't buy are things you can count on one hand. Pretty much everything else are things that money can buy. And you know what, if you think that money will not buy most anything think about the expression that I never questioned as true when I was younger. And that's the expression "We're all out of that." Think about that for a moment. I was recently somewhere where I was ordering a sundae and I was told they couldn't make a sundae because they were all out of whipped cream. I could have a sundae without whipped cream, but you know I wasn't going to do that. The whipped cream for me was the whole point of ordering the sundae. In fact, if it were socially acceptable and wouldn't cause people to stare at me I would have just ordered a bowl of straight whipped cream. But what does that mean, "We're all out of whipped cream?" Does that mean the entire supply of whipped cream in Northeast Ohio has somehow disappeared? No, that's not what it means. What it means is that for the amount of money they

think I am willing to pay, no one is willing to get into their car and drive three blocks to the nearest grocery store and pick up a can of whipped cream. But I also promise you that whenever you are told that we're all out of that, there is some amount of money you can pay, I don't know how much it is, but there is some amount of money you can pay which will make that item magically reappear again. If you have enough money, there is not much in this world that you cannot have.

But the poor of this world know what it is like not to be able to have everything the way they want it. They are used to not being able to wave a credit card in the air and order people around. The clothes they wear are clothes that other people give away. They don't get to pick whether they wear this fabric or this color, or what looks right when they turn at different angles in front of a full length mirror in the dressing room. They get to wear whatever will go on their body. They line up at a soup kitchen and they don't get to decide whether they like chicken soup or chili or spaghetti or macaroni and cheese. They eat whatever is prepared for them. And they don't get to decide whether they get to have it faster or slower. They wait their turn in line and when they're finished, they have to move out because somebody else who's hungry is waiting in line. That is what it's like to be poor. When you are poor you don't get to order people around. You don't have the money to order people around. You don't get to have it your way.

Well, the rich man of this story was used to ordering people around all his life and having things just the way he wants them his whole life, and so when he is being tormented in hell, what he does not seem to understand is that it doesn't work that way anymore. And so he looks up to Abraham and says "Send Lazarus down to cool my tongue, because I am in agony.

You know, I have money, I can get this poor beggar to do whatever I want. Tell him that this is what I want.” And he says the same thing about his five brothers. “Send Lazarus to them, for if someone goes to them from the dead that will convince them to do all the things they need to do not to come here.” This rich man thinks he and his brothers can still order Lazarus around. They think they can order God around!

About three years ago, I taught a series of Sunday school classes on faith and science. And in that series, I talked at length about doubts that some people have about some of the stories of the bible. And I want to tell you plainly that in my mind, there is nothing wrong with having doubts about various things in the bible. In fact, I hope this is a church where people feel they can talk openly about their doubts. But sometimes I hear people say that if God was real they wouldn't have any doubts. The philosopher Bertrand Russell once said that. He was an atheist and someone once asked him what he would say when if he died and met God and God asked him why he didn't believe. He said “I'd say you didn't give us enough evidence.” Philosophers and theologians call this the *hiddenness* of God: “God should stop hiding. God should come out in the open and make things more clear for me.” And when I hear people say that, what I want to say is “What a rich person thing to say! What a middle class person thing to say!” Because as I've told you, by the world's standards we middle class people are rich too. When I hear that I want to say you rich person, you middle class person, “Who are you to give God orders and tell God to make things more plain to you? Who do you think you are?”

I suspect that there are a lot of middle class and rich people in this world who think it is also the job of the church to make everything about God plain to them at the very moment they demand it. “If you want me to love my neighbor and do justice and love mercy and

compassion, first prove to me that that's what God wants me to do. First prove to me that the God who demands that from me is real." But why? Now don't get me wrong, I think having clarity about God's will and God's purposes for you is a wonderful thing to have. And in the times when I am lost and confused, I have envied people who have that. And I pray to God that there would never be a time in your life when everything was not crystal clear for you. But don't think for a moment that God owes that to us. And don't think for a moment that if God hasn't made everything crystal clear for us, God can't possibly be real.

You see, the poor of this world understand that they can't order God around because they are used to not being able to order people around and not being able to get whatever they want. And so they understand that they cannot demand from God whatever they want. They understand that some things with God are a mystery and that God makes things plain in his own time, and on his schedule not our schedule. And do you think that shakes their faith? If you think it does go visit a congregation sometime in the third world, or in the ghetto in this country and see if their faith is shaken. They understand. They are used to not getting things their way all the time.

Often in the church we think and talk about what we can do for the poor and what we can do for those without. Just a couple of weeks ago I was having a conversation with someone who said I have this great idea for what we can do for those who are going without. That's wonderful. That's what we should be doing. But to me one of the great ironies of the gospel, is that the poor of this world can also do a lot for us. They have quite a lot to teach us about faith. And maybe that's a greater gift than anything we can give to them.