

"The Generosity Gospel"

Luke 16:19-31

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

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This morning our attention is drawn to one of the most disturbing parables Jesus told. If for any reason you thought you could tame the gospel, this parable should dispel that myth.

In this parable, Jesus returns to two of his favorite subjects, wealth and power. Two-thirds of Jesus' teachings focused upon these topics.

It became clear early in Jesus' public ministry the way people handled money and authority was of great importance to him. He knew both could be used to do great works, and both could be used to do great harm.

Listen as I tell this dramatic story.

A poor, sick beggar by the name of Lazarus sat outside a rich man's house each day, hoping to be noticed so he could receive some assistance. It's not like this beggar was asking for much from his neighbor, although it was obvious by the clothes the rich man wore, the food he ate and the palatial house he lived in that he was a man of great wealth and could have afforded to help Lazarus with more than the basic necessities of life. It appears Lazarus would have been content if a servant had merely brought him scraps from the rich man's table and some bandages to cover his open sores.

Sadly, this never happened. As a result, he grew so weak he was unable to keep the dogs from licking his wounds, which had to be humiliating and painful.

Eventually, both men died, and this is where the story takes an unusual turn. The destitute beggar, Lazarus, was escorted to the bosom of Abraham, where it appeared he was the honored guest at a banquet. On the other hand, the rich man ended up suffering in Hades, the folkloric dwelling place of the dead.

Obviously, the advantages of the wealthy did not follow the rich man into eternity. As a matter of fact, there was a complete reversal of fortunes for both men after they died.

In his anguish, the rich man cried out to Father Abraham for relief, but his request was denied. To make matters worse, he was told the chasm between him and Lazarus was too deep and wide to be breached. His condition was unalterably final.

Sensing it was too late for him, the rich man pleaded for Father Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, lest they follow him. Again, his request was denied as he was reminded his brothers had the Law of Moses and the prophets, just as he did. If they would listen to them, they would know how to be spared their brother's fate.

Did they listen to the wise counsel of their ancestors who urged them to be their neighbor's keeper, or did they go down the same road as their unfortunate brother? Jesus doesn't tell us. I suppose he intended to let each of us write the ending based upon the path we choose.

What message do you think Jesus wanted to convey that day to those listening to this story? I do not believe his intent was to satisfy their curiosity about life after death.

It appears Jesus told this parable as a way of emphasizing the importance of life before death, especially how each of them lived out their faith each day in relation to those around them. In particular, I believe Jesus wanted those listening to understand the way they handled wealth and power mattered to him and God.

Evidently, Luke felt the same way. Even a casual reading of his gospel reveals he was a special friend to the poor, the outcast and the marginalized. The heroes of his gospel were the Samaritans, women, lepers and the poor. Of the four gospel writers, Luke is definitely the champion of the least, the last and the lost.

So, Jesus and Luke felt a heavy burden to inform people the way they handled wealth and power was important to God.

Do you think Jesus and Luke wanted us to know this, too? Without a doubt they did. This is why this story has been passed down to us.

If our stewardship of wealth and power are important to God, then what would God deem unacceptable? This parable could not be clearer about what God is unwilling to accept from us. Ignoring the people around us who are struggling to survive is completely unacceptable to God.

Read the parable carefully. There is no indication the rich man did anything to hurt this beggar. The sin he committed was ignoring him as if he did not exist.

The least the rich man could have done was ask the beggar his name, offer him the scraps off his table and provide bandages for his wounds, but he did none of these things. It appears this rich man had no concern at all for the plight of this feeble beggar.

I'm sure you are familiar with the comic strip, *Garfield*. It was created by Jim Davis in 1978, and chronicles the life of the title character, a cat known as Garfield. The other characters in the strip are Jon Arbuckle, Garfield's owner, and a dog named Odie.

One cold winter night, Garfield looks out the window and sees Odie peering through the window. Garfield thinks to himself, "This is horrible. Here I am in the comfort of a warm house, well fed and taken care of, and there is Odie outside begging to come in from the cold so he can get warm and have something to eat. I can't stand it anymore. I just can't stand it."

So, what does Garfield do? He goes over to the window and closes the curtains!

I get the feeling the rich man in today's text closed the curtains often. I have a hunch many of the religious leaders of Jesus' day did too, especially the scribes and Pharisees.

It seems likely Jesus directed this parable at them. Their hearts had grown callous as their attention shifted from the needs of others to their own desires.

They adopted the values of their culture and became addicted to money and their lavish lifestyles, along with the power and control that often accompany great wealth. They were more drawn to the love of power than the power of love, and as a result they were being pulled farther and farther away from God. This made it easier for them to draw the curtains when necessary so they would not see the hungry, sick and lonely people in their midst.

This was unacceptable to Jesus, as he often told them. **What, then, did Jesus want them to do?**

He wanted them to pull back the curtains to see the people at their gates who desperately needed their help. He wanted them to sit with them, listen to their stories, and help them out of the hell they were living.

For me, one of the most intriguing parts of this parable is the fact Jesus gave the beggar a name. This is the only parable where this occurs.

You would think if Jesus were going to give someone a name in the parable, it would be the rich man. It appears he had a lot of wealth and influence, which no doubt made him a prominent citizen. Surely, his name needed to be mentioned in this story.

Jesus didn't do this, though. The only characters given names are the beggar, Lazarus, and Abraham, the patriarch of their faith. Why did Jesus do this?

Was it Jesus' way of showing the beggar as a real person with needs and feelings common to all people? Did Jesus do this to reveal that Lazarus was as important to God as anyone else in this story, and even if few in that village knew his name, God did? Was it to remind the faith community no one was to be left behind in God's kingdom, and the scribes and Pharisees needed to lead the way by reaching out to those who had been excluded? Perhaps Jesus had all three objectives in mind, which leads me to ask.

What do you think Jesus expects of us? I think he expects us to be our brother's keeper and seize every opportunity to be the presence of Christ where there is misery and pain. At the very least, he expects us to pull back our curtains, to notice those around us who are struggling to survive and to be merciful, compassionate and generous.

This is not easy to do, especially in a secular culture which encourages us to focus on our desires rather than others' needs, and a religious culture which preaches the prosperity gospel over the generosity gospel. Self-denial and sacrifice don't make it into many television sermons I hear.

Why should we be different and care about others? Why should we pull back our curtains?

This is how healthy communities are built. The community which says, "We are with you," as opposed to the community which says, "We are not with you," is the community which reflects the heart and nature of God. It is the essence of our faith as a participant in the kingdom of God, and the core of the gospel Jesus preached and modeled.

Immediately after Hurricane Katrina hit the gulf coast, my former church teamed up with the members of Lemoyne Boulevard Baptist Church in Biloxi, Mississippi to address the overwhelming needs of their church and community. Once a month for forty months, we sent members from our church to help the people in that hard hit region to rebuild their homes and lives.

About a year into this project, the pastor of that church, Bill Renick, came to Atlanta to speak in our worship service. He thanked us for what we were doing and gave us a firsthand account of what life had been like following this natural disaster.

He made one comment that day that almost brought me to my feet. He confessed that before Katrina hit, he and his members had not been that engaged in helping those in their community who were struggling to survive. They passed by many people's homes on their way to church every day without knowing who lived in those homes and what their stories were.

Then he said, "God had to blow the walls of our church away for us to see those who had been there all the time needing something from us." He continued, "Never will we be this insensitive and indifferent again."

The community which says, "We are with you," as opposed to the community which says, "We are not with you," is the community which reflects the heart and nature of God. This is the foundation upon which healthy communities are built.

This spirit of compassion and generosity also brings the best out in us. It makes us better people.

This happened to Leigh Anne Tuohy when Michael Oher suddenly came into her life. Their story is told in that wonderful movie, *The Blind Side*.

This movie depicted the life of Michael Oher, a homeless teenager who, with the help of a caring and courageous woman and her family, became an All American football player and first round draft pick by the Baltimore Ravens in 2009.

One icy winter night, as Michael was walking down the road to the school gym where he slept most of the time, Leigh Anne Tuohy and her husband, Sean, and their children, Jae and Collins, stopped and picked him up. Instead of taking him to the gym, however, Leigh Anne insisted they take him home for the night. This began a special relationship between this wealthy white, Mississippi family and a very gifted, yet poor, oversized and under-educated African-American.

One reason I liked this movie was because it showed the difference one family made in the life of an individual who desperately needed somebody to notice his condition and help him. The Tuohy family could have passed Michael that cold, dark, dreary night as countless others had done. They could have drawn the curtains, but they didn't, and because they refused to ignore Michael, their lives and Michael's were forever changed.

One of my favorite lines in the movie was spoken by Leigh Anne as she was having lunch with her high-society friends when one of them asked, "Leigh Anne, are you trying to change Michael?" Softly, she replied, "No, he's changing me."

That's what compassion and generosity do to us. They melt our hearts and make us more like God.

This parable makes something abundantly clear. A life lived totally for one's self cannot thrive. Generosity does for us what water does for a plant.

There is another reason we need to pull back the curtain and help those sitting at our gates. *The way we handle wealth and power in this world will have a dramatic impact upon us in the world to come.*

As I said earlier, Jesus did not tell this parable to satisfy our curiosity about life after death, but there is no denying the fact each of us will be held accountable for how we used what God gave us while we lived here.

What will it be like to get to the end of life and realize you were not as generous as you could have been? Can you imagine how frustrating, disappointing and empty you will feel when it dawns on you that you could have done so much more to help others?

Don't let that happen to you. Pull back the curtains before it is too late.

Open your eyes. Listen to your heart.

Notice the people along your daily journey who are struggling to survive. Smile. Ask them their name. Listen to their story.

Encourage them. Lift their spirit. Bind their wounds. Share your food. Invite them to your table.

Support our church with your tithes and offerings as we do our best to make hope visible. Volunteer in our medical clinic or clothes closet. Go help our neighbors in Owsley County. Paint a room in a Habitat for Humanity house. Visit a shut-in. Read to a child. Baby-sit for an exhausted mother. Pay someone's utility bill for a month. Write a note to support someone who is facing an intimidating challenge.

When we are our brother's keeper, we are the presence of Christ in a broken and hurting world. When we refuse to leave anyone behind, God cries tears of joy. When we bend down to help someone who has fallen, we find our way forward, and it leads straight to the heart of God.

It has been said no one gets into heaven without a letter of recommendation from the poor. **Who will write your letter?**