

“Turned Inside Out”

Luke 16:19-31

10.17.21

Introduction

Luke chapter 16 is filled with an odd assortment of stories. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus tells a story about a rich man and his shrewd business manager. The manager learns that he is getting ready to be terminated because he isn't doing a very good job handling his master's assets, so he calls each person who owes his master money and tells them to reduce how much they owe on their books.

We have to know a little bit about the background for the story to make sense. In ancient Israel, it was against the law to charge interest on money, so lenders often found a loophole by charging interest on commodities. Although it was technically legal to charge interest on products like wheat and oil, it was considered a shady business practice. It might be the equivalent of when we're driving down the interstate and we see a \$40,000 truck with a tiny sticker that is barely visible that reads "Farm Use Only." It is legal, but we get the feeling that something fishy might be going on.

The story implies that by shaving off the interest, the manager is saving his boss from potential legal trouble, while also indicating that he has dirt on him. Therefore, the manager certainly has the upper hand in the scenario. The story ends leaving us with the impression that the shrewd manager not only gets to keep his job, but now he gets Fridays off and has a bigger office with a view!

As strange as it might seem, Jesus commends the shrewd manager for thinking so quick on his feet. I think we have to wade through a lot of socio-cultural baggage to get to the moral of the story: the disciples are stewards of God, and they should be as creative as the shrewd manager in advancing the kingdom. But no matter how you spin it, most biblical scholars agree that it is one of the most perplexing stories that Jesus tells. Then, beginning in v. 19, Jesus tells quite a different story about another rich man.

Digging Deeper

The second story includes a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. Unlike the first story, the rich man in the parable with Lazarus is not described as shady or underhanded. Instead, he is simply described as wearing purple clothing, which was usually designated for people of great wealth. And he "feasted sumptuously" on a daily basis. I like the Message paraphrase, it says that he "expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption."

In the story, both Lazarus and the rich man die. Lazarus is carried away by angels to Abraham's bosom, and the rich man awakens in Hades and lifts his eyes to torment. So, the question is, why would Jesus use a shady businessman and his shrewd

manager as a positive example, while assigning another rich man to eternal punishment?

After all, the rich man in the second story doesn't sound like a bad guy. He doesn't mock Lazarus. He does not harm him physically or verbally assault him. In fact, if we could have listened to his eulogy, we might imagine someone saying that he was a nice enough guy who simply minded his own business.

The rich man in the second story does not commit what we call "sins of commission." In other words, he is not aggressively or actively cruel towards Lazarus. Rather, he commits "sins of omission." It appears that it is impossible for him to actively do either harm or good to Lazarus because quite frankly he doesn't even know that Lazarus exists.

The rich man was too busy consuming to notice that Lazarus was longing for the crumbs that fell from his plate. Luke really piles on the irony by indicating that the only form of benevolence that came from his estate was when the dogs came by to lick Lazarus' wounds.

St Augustine, a bishop of the Church in the fourth century, defined sin with the phrase, "*Incurvatus in se*," which translates into English roughly as, "Turned in on one's self." In other words, according to St Augustine, the root of all sin is when we become so consumed with ourselves that it becomes impossible for us to see others. It not only causes us to neglect and ignore the needy, but it also causes us to see people as objects to be used rather than loved.

Theological Implications

Growing up in a different tradition, I heard this story from time-to-time as a warning about hell. And while that is not completely out of the picture, I think the reason Jesus tells the story is ultimately to warn us about the way we live our lives here and now.

In the ancient world, it was common to tell stories like this about the reverse of fates. A poor man being rewarded, and a rich man being punished; but I don't think that's what is happening here. Jesus is simply borrowing a popular motif to tell a different kind of story.

Maybe we misunderstand when we think of the rich man as being happy and having a fulfilled life. Perhaps instead we should see him like a bottomless pit—no matter how much he consumed and indulged, he was never able to fill the void in his life.

To be clear, I don't think Jesus is teaching here that poor people go to heaven and rich people go to hell. Instead, I think Jesus is touching upon trajectory. Perhaps hell isn't the torment often portrayed in Dante's *Inferno*—maybe it is God allowing us to persist in the misery of being turned in on ourselves.

This reminds me of C.S. Lewis' description of hell in his book, *The Problem of Pain*. The language he uses is a bit archaic, but I think the essence of what he is trying to say is summed up well in the last sentence. He says,

I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside. I do not mean that the ghosts may not wish to come out of hell, in the vague fashion wherein an envious man 'wishes' to be happy: but they certainly do not will even the first preliminary stages of that self-abandonment through which alone the soul can reach any good. They enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved: just as the blessed, forever submitting to obedience, become through all eternity more and more free.¹

I like Rob Bell's take on it in his book, *Love Wins*. He says,

...note what it is the man wants in hell: he wants Lazarus to get him water. When you get someone water, you're serving them. The rich man wants Lazarus to serve him. In their previous life, the rich man saw himself as better than Lazarus, and now, in hell, the rich man still sees himself as above Lazarus. It's no wonder Abraham says there's a chasm that can't be crossed. The chasm is the rich man's heart! It hasn't changed, even in death and torment and agony. He's still clinging to the old hierarchy. He still thinks he's better.²

I realize this is getting kind of deep, so I want to pause for a moment and ask a practical question. What do we all want? I think the answer is fairly simple: We all want to be happy. Where it gets complicated is trying to figure out what brings us happiness.

There's an old saying that money can't buy happiness. I'm not sure we always believe it, though. It is easy to try to fill the void with stuff and experiences. If we're honest, money can certainly make things easier at times and I think it has the potential of distracting us from the things in life we want to avoid; but it doesn't bring true happiness. In the words of Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than receive"

Application

It turns out that science agrees with Jesus' statement. The National Institute of Neurological Disorders in Bethesda Maryland conducted an experiment by giving participants significant amounts of money to spend. After receiving the money, the volunteers could either spend the money on themselves, or they could give it to charity.

They made their decision while hooked up to a brain machine called functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), which maps activity in the brain. The scientists discovered that when people give their money away to charity, it

¹ Lewis, C.S., *The Problem of Pain*, p. 626.

² Bell, R., *Love Wins*, p. 75.

impacts the brain's reward center, the part of the brain that causes feelings of joy and euphoria. The researchers concluded that acts of financial generosity make a physiological impact on people, resulting in feelings of happiness, well-being, and contentment. And the impact wasn't just short term. The researchers also learned that when people are generous, hormones are released that have a long-term impact on happiness.³

We are wired to believe that we will be happiest when we receive, but Scripture and science tell us that we are most blessed—we are happiest when we turn inside out, away from ourselves, and we are generous with others.

The pandemic has certainly been a challenge and I think we've all coped with it in different ways. There are some of us who live alone and are dealing with isolation and loneliness. Some of you listening today are healthcare workers and teachers, and your job has become exponentially harder in the last 18 months. It is easy to feel despair.

There are times that I have done better than others in terms of mental health. There have been days I have been so tired and discouraged, but I've discovered two ways to pull myself out of it.

The first thing that I do on a daily basis is I intentionally practice gratitude. I spend time in prayer where I don't ask God for anything, but in a quiet space, I verbally name all the reasons I am blessed. This is an old practice that we call "counting our blessings."

The second thing I have worked on is increasing my generosity. One day, I pulled into a drive-thru at a fast-food restaurant. I saw someone from our congregation behind me, and I thought to myself, "I'm going to pay it forward and pay for their food." I don't think this person knew I was in front of them, and I'm not sure if they kept it going or not, but it definitely gave me a boost for a few days. I decided a few other times since then just to bless random people behind me. We're all going through a lot right now and there is so much joy that can be found in knowing that we might be making someone else's load just a little bit lighter.

I've also increased my giving to the church. I honestly can't remember what I put on my pledge card for 2021. All I know is one month I decided to increase my gift and I've kept it the same ever since. It gives me so much joy to know the great things that our church does as the hands and feet of Christ in this community, and it gives me hope to think that if we are all willing to live generously, when we get to the other side of this pandemic, we will be in a place where we can continue to bless the people in our community and around the world. In fact, my plan is to increase my pledge for 2022, and I hope you will, too.

During my research for this sermon, I discovered that the average American Christian gives less than 2% of their income to charities, including their gifts to their places of

³ Thielen, M., *Searching for Happiness*, p. 76.

worship. We live in the most affluent country in the world, yet we are plagued by unhappiness and debt. Maybe the cure is being turned inside out away from ourselves.

We are turned inside out when we turn toward God to express gratitude, and we are turned inside out when we see others and share generously. Here is your challenge this week. First, I want you to take the time to verbally express your gratitude to God for the ways you have been blessed. Count your blessings.

Second, I want you to think about how you are going to grow in your generosity. Are there Lazarus' in your life whom you pass by unknowingly every day? Are there folks around you who are in need and you are unable to offer them love and care because you're turned in on yourself?

How are you going to intentionally grow in your generosity toward the church in 2022? How are you going to use your gifts, time, and resources to bless others? How might you be able to increase your generosity in 2022 that will help our church be a blessing to our community and the world around us?

In the next few months, we will be packing Christmas baskets for folks in our community who are in need. Are there sacrifices that we can make between now and then so that we can help more people? How can we be turned inside out away from ourselves and toward others?

I hope as you intentionally take these steps that you will celebrate your joy with me and others. Send me a text this week and say, "I paid it forward going through the drive-thru," or give me a call and tell me what you decided to do this week to bring someone else joy.

Reference Tools

Bell, Rob. *Love Wins*. 2011. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

Lewis, C.S. *Signature Classics: The Problem of Pain*. 1940. New York: Harper Collins.

Nickle, Keith. *Preaching the Gospel of Luke*. 2000. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Thielen, Martin. *Searching for Happiness*. 2016. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Wright, N.T. *Luke for Everyone*. 2004. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. Can you think of a time when praising God or showing generosity helped lift you out of a slump?

2. What insights, challenges, or questions did this week's message offer in regard to your understanding of the Parable about Lazarus and the rich man?

3. What do you think about St Augustine's definition of sin? ("Turned in on one's self") Do you feel like it accurately captures the root of our brokenness? If so, what does it mean for God to save us from it?

4. Did you take Pastor Jonathan's challenge to express gratitude to God and increase your generosity? If so, share your experience with the group.

5. How do you want to intentionally grow in your generosity in 2022? What sacrifices might you be willing to make to be more generous?

6. How has God blessed you recently?

7. How can we pray for you?