

A Look at the Life to Come

Luke 16:19-31

My dad celebrated his 75th birthday this week. It's a pretty big milestone, wouldn't you agree?

My children are 14 and 15 years old, so my long-range hope is that he'll be around when they have children, which hopefully won't happen for another 10 years or so.

But someday he's going to enter the next life. And someday, so will I. And someday, so will you... and every person you love.

It's one of the few things you can bank on in this life.

We don't like to think about it much because it's sad and mysterious and somewhat spooky. But in this final installment of our series "Created for Significance," I want to give you one final incentive to join the core of this church on the mission we're on by talking to you today about the life to come.

For the past four weeks, we've been walking through a section of Scripture that imprinted this church before we ever opened our doors.

It started for me on a surprise morning in Nov., 1989 when I opened the Bible to Luke 14 and saw what Jesus did that day and heard the story He told.

A month later, I was impacted again by Luke 15, and then a month after that, Luke 16.

So as we finish up this series this morning, I want to show you what I saw 12 years ago, in hopes that it will influence the course of your life as much as it has mine. By the time I finished Luke 16, I felt there was compelling reason for me to invest my life in helping others reach the safe side of eternity. So I want to take the next 1/2 hour to finish this series by walking through the later half of Luke 16 with you.

Okay?

If you're a seeker here today, and you've just come to investigate what God and the afterlife are all about, you've come on a great day. And if you're a believer, and you've wondered what motives God to do what He's done, this is a good day for you too.

So, you got your swimsuit on? Because we're going to dive right in.

With Luke 16, Jesus finishes up what for Him must have been a long day of teaching because it covers three full chapters, which is the same number of chapters taken up by His famous Sermon on the Mount. The three-chapter teaching of the Sermon on the Mount came within weeks of the beginning of His ministry, while the three-chapter teacher here in Luke takes places within weeks of His death and resurrection. We know

from the intensity of the teaching, that what Jesus said that day was very important to Him. Personally, I think the last story in this teaching sequence, the one we're about to walk through, reveals as much about what motivated Jesus as any story He ever told. In Luke 16 He tells the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

It's a short story, told in two brief scenes.

Scene 1 = On earth

Scene 2 = In the afterlife

In scene one, we meet two of the four main characters of the story. We meet ***The Rich Man***, and we meet Lazarus.

We know that the story is primarily about the Rich Man, because Jesus tells us so in the opening verse. He starts by saying, "***There was a rich man...***" – ***Luke 16:19***

Then he tells us how lavishly this rich guy dressed and ate and lived every day.

Unlike the rich man in the last two stories we read about, this rich man is not a hero in the story. Nor is he a nice guy. He's a callused old guy who thinks about very few people besides himself.

We know this because of the way he treats the second character in the story. A guy who is dropped off at his front gate every day named ***Lazarus***. In Hebrew, the name Lazarus means, "he whom God helps."

Lazarus is absolutely dependent upon God, and he knows it. He's in bad physical condition, there are sores all over his legs, so he probably has some sort of disease.

Day after day after day Lazarus is left at the rich guy's front gate, and day after day after day, he's ignored and allowed to suffer without so much as a prayer or a crumb of bread.

In the story, Jesus says, Lazarus was ***...longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.*** – ***Luke 16:21***

Now, when you and I hear those words, we think of a table, probably fashioned out of mahogany or cherrywood, sitting about so high off the ground, maybe with a throw rug under it, surrounded by modern furniture and artwork.

But remember, Jesus is telling this story to first century Palestinians, so the image in His mind and the image in their mind is far different than a 21st century dining room.

When Jesus said those words, everyone in His audience had a picture of a Middle Eastern banquet, with guests and servants, and lookers-on watching and waiting for the after-dinner entertainment.

One traveler, who toured that area of the world before it became commercialized, wrote this description of how evening banquets at rich guys' houses went in 1894. He said,

...entertainment is a public affair. The gateway of the court, and the door... stand open... A long, low table, or more often merely the great wooden dishes, are placed along the center of the room, and low couches on either side, on which the guests, placed in order of their rank, recline, leaning on their left elbow, with their feet turned away from the table.

Servants stand behind the couches ...Behind the servants the loungers of the village crowd in, nor are they thought obtrusive in so doing. (H.B. Tristram, 1894)

Got the picture? This is how Middle Eastern feasts went for centuries. The eaters reclined at a slightly raised table, waited on by servants, and watched by peasants who were allowed into the home to enjoy the entertainment that would come after dinner.

Lazarus, sores and all, is one of those "loungers," in the background. He's called by Jesus, "a beggar," which was a job back then not unlike surfing in our day. (Surfers sit around on boards all day, hoping to catch something. Beggars do the same thing.)

The fact that Jesus gives this beggar a name may or may not be significant. If you study all of Jesus' parables, you'll discover that this is the only one in which he gives a proper name to one of the characters in his story. For this reason, and for the reason that no where does Luke mention that this is a story or a parable, some have concluded that what Jesus is telling here may be an actual story of two real people.

Whatever the case, that's scene one. It ends with Lazarus dying and being carried heaven, and the rich man dying and going to hell.

So scene two is in ***The afterlife***. This is where development of the story takes place, where the two other characters in the story are introduced, and where it becomes clear *why* Jesus told this story.

The third character in the story is introduced at the beginning of the scene. It's Abraham, the spiritual father of the Jewish nation.

The angels deposit poor Lazarus at Abraham's side, literally, right up next to his chest. - And this is a really cool picture. Because what Jesus is describing here is another banquet. Only this is a banquet that Lazarus has been invited to. At this banquet, he's not an on-looker in the background, he's not a servant waiting tables, he's an honored guest, seated right next to Abraham himself.

See, when Jesus says, "***...the angels carried him to Abraham's side,***" – ***Luke 16:22*** What everyone pictured was Abraham reclining at table. And who is Abraham? He's the founder of Judaism, the spiritual head of his clan. If people recline around the

table in order of their rank, where is Abraham reclining? At the head of the table. They don't get more important than he.

And if Lazarus is right next to Abraham, what does it say about how the host of the banquet feels about him? He's about as special as it gets.

Here's a picture to grasp: Jesus is telling the story of a guy who in this life, rarely if ever got treated well. He didn't get breaks, he didn't get opportunities, he didn't get honors or recognition. All throughout his life, he got gutters and sores and front gates to lean on. But in the next life? The seat right between the arms of Abraham. Can I get a wow! For that? (Or a woe! If you're under 30.)

That's the picture of Lazarus' afterlife. – He's at the great banquet beside Father Abraham.

In contrast to that, where does the rich man wind up? **Hell.**

His callused heart and self-sufficiency and unresponsiveness to God get him delivered to the place of his own making and choosing. All of his life he's lived as if he didn't need God. All of his life he's put God at arms-length. In effect, he has said, "I don't want you in my life. I want to be my own lord, my own God."

So in the afterlife, God grants his wish, just like He does with all those who choose to ignore or fend off or push away from His invitations. Friends, hell exists so that people who choose to exclude God from their lives can have what they wish for for all eternity.

And even though God isn't everywhere-obvious in this life, He is everywhere-present and everywhere-discernible. Anyone who looks at the stars or considers what it must have taken to design and engineer a flower has to admit that the creator of this universe is unique and wonderful and full of beauty and ability, or He wouldn't have been able to pull off things like that.

In heaven, He's everywhere present and discernible, and in hell, He is deliberately absent and far-off, in order to respect the choice of those who have chosen against Him. Which is what the rich man has done.

But the rich man never really thought about the consequences of his choice. He never consciously verbalized to himself that pushing God away throughout his life on earth would mean he would spend eternity without Him. So he's surprised when he finds himself in this terrible place. According to Jesus' words, he is in torment, and in agony. – And this is where the point of the story begins to take shape.

Within seconds of entering this godless destination, the rich guy is in agony. And within minutes, he begins a dialogue with Abraham about fixing what's gone wrong.

He sees Abraham up in heaven, so he shouts, ***“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.” – Luke 16:24***

Question: why doesn't he talk directly to Lazarus? Why doesn't he just say, "Lazarus, old buddy, can you help me out?"

Because he still sees himself as superior to Lazarus. He still thinks that social class, social standing has some merit. – Does it? No. But he still thinks of Lazarus as someone to run errands, rather than a person with feelings and hopes and dreams. He thinks of him as a servant or errand boy. See how small his heart is?

And why does he call address Abraham as "Father Abraham?" I don't know for sure, it could be it's just a term of respect, but here's what I think: I think this rich guy never imagined that his afterlife destination was hell.

I think he thought, "I'm a good guy. I'm from an affluent family. I have lots of friends. I don't cheat on my wife or short-change the waiter, or cheat on my income tax. Basically, I'm a good guy. Certainly, I'm a likable guy. Therefore, God's going to let me into heaven."

I think he thought, "And even if my social status and nice-guyness doesn't get me in, I'm a descendant of Abraham, so I'm going to get in based on my lineage, based on who I'm related to."

So he calls out, "FATHER, Abraham.." In other words, "It's me, your descendant. Have mercy on me. I shouldn't be down here. Maybe you can fix this."

And how does Abraham reply?

"I can't. I can't. I wish I could, but I can't. There's a huge, immovable chasm between where I am and where you are. You made some decisions on earth, and those decisions are final now."

This starts the formerly-rich man thinking. It's at this point that the climax of the story takes place.

Remember in "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" what happened to the grinch when he looked at the little girl and finally thought about the value of a person for the first time? Remember how his heart was six sizes too small? His heart starts growing.

Look at this next line from the formerly rich guy: ***“Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” – Luke 16:28***

Question: about how long has this guy been in hell when he says this?

Probably about five minutes, right?

Did you observe what he did about all this?

What's the rich guy asking for in this request?

He's asking for the salvation of those he loves.

Here's what happened to me when I read this story years ago. It occurred to me that five minutes in hell was enough to turn this self-contained, self-sufficient rich guy into an ardent evangelist.

Here's what I observe from this story.

1. According to Jesus, our location in eternity is not based on social standing or lineage. It's based on grace.

Unlike the shrewd manager from last week, who bet everything on the reputation of the master, this rich guy bet everything on himself – his social status, and his ethnic background. And he lost.

What he didn't know was what the Apostle Paul later went around telling everyone who would listen. Wherever he went, Paul would explain that God, through Christ, ***...he saved us, not because of the righteous things we have done, (not because of our social standing, or our heritage) but because of his mercy... having been justified by his grace – Titus 3:5,7***

His grace. His cheerful willingness to grant forgiveness to anyone who is honest enough to admit that they are not God, but that they need God in their lives, that at their core, they are morally flawed and in need of a savior. That was probably a lot easier for Lazarus to do than for the rich guy, because all his life Lazarus had had to depend on others, so he knew what humility was. He wasn't too proud to beg for forgiveness. And God not only granted it, which would be mercy. He gave him far more than just forgiveness. He gave him grace. So instead of just getting into heaven, he gets a seat at the right hand of Abraham. Now that's cool, isn't it?

Instead of getting what he deserves, he gets forgiven. And instead of just getting forgiven, he gets blessed by one of the best seats in the house. Wow!

Can I get a wow! Or a woe!

The second thing I couldn't miss in the story was the permanency of the afterlife. Abraham says, "We can't cross over, you can't cross over, there's a gapping chasm fixed between us and no one can get across.

According to Jesus, ***2. Our location in eternity is permanent.*** Once we've crossed over, it's done. Final, no returns. ***Only the living can ask for grace.***

Which is why prophet after prophet in the OT would say things like,
Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near. – Isaiah 55:6

Why? Because he won't always be near. If you choose to push him away, he will place himself far away from you in eternity.

2 Cor. 6 says,
I tell you, now is the time of God's favor, now is the day of salvation. – 2 Corinthians 6:2

Why? Because when this life passes, we get to live forever with the consequences of our choice.

The third observation I made is one we've already talked about:
3. Five minutes in hell turns a hardened anti-God type person into a raving evangelist.

When I read this story, I had to admit the inescapable truth. Which is that hell is a real place, and real people go there. It is a place of torment and agony. The Bible says elsewhere that it's a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. – You know what gnashing of teeth is?

It's when you go, "eeeehhhh! Uuuuhhh!" It's the sound of deep regret when you say, "Why didn't I listen? Why was I so stubborn? Why did I hold God at arms-length all my life?"

Five minutes into his life in hell, this ardent anti-God guy starts pleading that someone go and share the truth with his brothers, because he wouldn't want anyone he loves to join him there.

And what's Abraham's response to this?

He says, "***They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.***" – ***Luke 16:29***

In other words, they have the teachings from the OT. Moses wrote the first five books of the OT, the prophets wrote the rest. - And the NT hadn't been written yet.)

The formerly-rich guy says, "That's not enough. ***No, father Abraham... but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.***" – ***Luke 16:30***

And Abraham says, "***They will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.***" – ***Luke 16:31***

Remember I said that there are four characters in this story? Here's where the fourth one gets introduced. I think the fourth person in the story is Jesus. He's only a few weeks away from going to the Cross, and He knows it. He knows He's going to rise from the dead and offer salvation to every person who is humble enough and honest enough and courageous enough to trust Him and what He did for them on the Cross.

But He knows that some will reject Him. And I just picture Him as being really sad as He ends the story. Maybe He's weeping. Think about all He's gone through during His long, long teaching session that day.

He's started out at the home of a Pharisee. He heals a guy with dropsy, to the consternation of these hard-hearted people. And then he tells them the story of the Great Banquet, the party in heaven. And He tells them the story of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin and the Lost Sons. And then he turns to His disciples who have been patiently listening from behind Him, and He tells them the story of the shrewd manager who bet everything he had on the reputation of the master. –If you missed some of these sessions, you might want to buy the tape or CD.

He finishes the session telling this story. – A story that focuses not on this life, but on the life to come. A story that reminds us that hell is real, and terrible, and that grace is available to the least attractive of beggars, who will be welcomed into heaven by the likes of Abraham if they'll only accept God's grace.

I think Jesus' teaching is two-pronged in this last story. I think He's telling the Pharisees, "Don't be hard-hearted. Don't think your own merits or your descendancy from Abraham are going to get you in. Trust in Me. I'm going to rise from the dead. Trust me for what I will do for you in substituting my life for yours on the Cross. Trust Me. Trust in grace."

And I think He's saying to the disciples, "And fellahs, you gotta know how important this all is. In a few days, I'm going to give my life as a sin-sacrifice. I'm going to die and I'm going to rise from the dead. Why? Because hell is real, and I want to prevent as many as possible from going there. – But, even if I rise from the dead, some won't believe. They're going to need someone like you to teach them what God says about eternity and how to get there. They're going to need someone like you to give them Moses and the Prophets."

So I started hoping that one day I could be part of a church where Moses and the Prophets and the rest of the Bible could be communicated to people who were far from God, so that as few as possible would experience the anguish of hell.

That's how New Song got born. A little group of us took this, and other teachings seriously enough to say, "We'll serve. We'll pray. We'll invite. We'll try to do things in a way that makes seekers feel welcome and enables them to understand what God is saying to them about Himself and the way to heaven. Because Hell is real, and we want as few people as possible to go there."

So friends, here's my great ask: if you're a seeker today, trust Christ for your salvation, not yourself.

And if you're a believer, join us, join the core. Find a place of service so that we can offer more opportunities for seekers to find Christ.

One week from now, during our 10th Anniversary Celebration, we're going to usher in Verse 2 of our history. My hope is that you will be a founding member of this second verse we're all going to sing together.

As most of you know, leaders around here have been putting lots of thought into what it's going to take for us to reach an expanding percentage of our neighbors during this next verse in our history.

Here's something that I've been thinking about a lot during the five weeks we've been doing this series. I think I've come up with the formula that will enable our church to have optimal impact over the next 10 years.

Let me show you this, and then we'll be done. This is the chiasmic structure of the story:

- A** **Rich man in comfort, no pity on Lazarus (vs 19-20)**
- B** **Lazarus suffers, longs to eat (v. 21)**
- C** **Lazarus dies, heaven (v. 22a)**
- C'** **Rich man dies, hell (v. 22b)**
- B'** **Rich man suffers, longs to drink (vs. 23-24)**
- A'** **Lazarus in comfort, no pity on rich man (vs. 25-26)**

- D** **"Send Lazarus from dead to warn them" (vs. 27-28)**
- E** **"They have Moses and the Prophets" (v. 29)**
- F** **"They need someone from the dead to warn them" (v. 30)**
- E'** **"If they don't listen to Moses and the Prophets" (v. 31a)**
- D'** **"They won't listen to one risen from the dead." (v. 31b)**

The church really only has one goal. That's to help people come to know Christ, and help people grow in Christ. We call that "lifechange." People coming into relationship with Christ, people growing to be more like Christ.

[Lifechange] (Write on whiteboard)

And only have one product to make fruit happen: people.

[People -> Lifechange]

Now, there will be about 1000 of us who will attend a service here at New Song this weekend. If we stood all 1000 of us over in this side of the room, and then invited a half dozen visitors to come and stand in this side of the room, if all of us stood in this side of the room with our mouths closed and our hands at our sides, how likely is it that the half dozen are going to have their lives changed?

Not very likely. Why?

Because there's a missing ingredient.

Anybody know what that is? –[Action]

Here's how the formula actually goes:
[People in action = Lifechange]

Can the thousand of us over on this side of the room do just any kind of action to help change the lives of the half dozen on this side? No.

What kind of actions change lives?

Serving, praying, giving.

When people staff or start a new ministry, like say, our grief and loss group, led by Sandy O'Connell, people are helped through their hurts and enabled to grow.

When people pray, God hears and answers.

And when people give, then resources like lights and air conditioning and tools for doing ministry can be funded, so ministry can take place.

Here's the formula for lifechange:
[People serving + praying + giving = Lifechange]

But I think there's actually one more piece to this. Because what if the 1000 of us are all mean, crotchety people who make people feel bad when we try to serve them because we're just not very godly ourselves?

So only a certain kind of people can influence lifechange.

Call these *Growing people*. People who themselves are experiencing lifechange because they are walking in union with the Lord.

Okay. So I think this is the formula for our success over the next 10 years, and probably forever:

[Growing people] serving + praying + giving = lifechange.

This is what I'm asking you to be, friends. Growing people who serve and pray and give to see lifechange happen in ourselves, in those we invite to join us, and in our surrounding community as we exert a growing influence on it by the sheer power of our service.

Call that, "The Verse 2 Success Formula." Anybody want to sign up for that?

Here are your final assignments for between now and next Sunday:

Final Assignments:

(1) Continue to pray: “Lord, I don’t ask you for much today. I just ask that you give me your heart for lost people.”

(2) Find your place of service at New Song.

(3) Attend the first founders meeting of “Verse 2” (which is our 10th Anniversary Celebration.)

Let’s pray, and then take our offering for the day.)- If you’re a guest, we invite you to be our guest. But maybe today would be the day that some of you move from guest to core.