

Lectionary Gospel Commentaries

By the Rev. Dr. Harry Wendt, Founder of Crossways International

(Sola Publishing, Edited Version © 2023 H. Wendt)



Based on the Lectionary Pericope Covering:

SOLA-LSB (Lutheran Service Book):
RCL (Revised Common Lectionary):

Luke 16:19-31

Year C - Proper 21, Text: Luke 16:19-31

Year C - Proper 21, Text: Luke 16:19-31

No person can serve both God and money. Although money is a necessary commodity, it seeks mastery! We mere mortals are to understand that all things belong to God: the car in the driveway, the house in which we live, the computer we use, etc. We humans are merely users and managers of things that belong to God.

A superficial reading of 16:19–31 can result in the notion that if you are rich in this world, you will go to hell in the next, and if you are poor in this world, you will go to heaven in the next. Not so! Jesus teaches that there is judgment after death, and that our earthly lifestyle is a factor to be considered. But there is much more to the parable's message than this.

In the first part of the parable, the rich man enjoys banquets while Lazarus lives in pain. In the next life, the rich man lives in pain while Lazarus enjoys God's Eternal Banquet. The second half of the parable is a dialog between the rich man and Abraham.

Verse 16:19: This verse introduces us to a self-indulgent rich man. Every day, he dressed in purple robes which were very expensive. He also wore undergarments made from fine linen. His reason for dressing lavishly was to remind others that he was rich. He also feasted sumptuously every day which required his servants to work on the Sabbath! His self-indulgent lifestyle was thus more important than the laws of God!

Verse 16:20: Outside his gate lay a sick, hungry, beggar covered with sores! His Hebrew name, Lazarus, means "the one whom God helps." But, seemingly, God did not help him. Friends carried him to the gate of the rich man's estate each morning, and back to wherever he stayed each night. Although the community cared for him as best it could, the only one who could help him was the rich man, but he did nothing!

Verse 16:21: Lazarus longed to satisfy his hunger with some of the scraps that fell from the rich man's banquet table. Although some of the food was thrown away, it was not shared with Lazarus. Most likely it

was given to the guard dogs. After all, the rich man would have needed guard dogs to protect his many possessions. Without a doubt, the villagers would have embraced the constant hope that the rich man would feel compassion for Lazarus' aid. But he did not!

The gate near which Lazarus lay each day would have been within earshot of the banquet room. Each day a group of overfed people passed Lazarus as they went in and out of the rich man's estate. Although they did not need the food, Lazarus did! And although help for Lazarus was near, it was withheld.

However, village dogs came and licked Lazarus' sores. They showed compassion, even though the rich man did not. They licked the sores as a sign of affection. Scholars now know that saliva contains healing properties. Ancients discovered that if a dog licked wounds, they would heal more rapidly. Remarkably, although these dogs might have attacked strangers, they befriended Lazarus — a person lying in the heat and among the flies on a village street!

In the Middle East still today, dogs are not seen as pets. In early Jewish tradition, they were seen to be almost as unclean as pigs. So, Lazarus lives in quiet, gentle harmony with wild animals!

Verse 16:22: When Lazarus dies, he is carried by the angels to rest in Abraham's bosom. Although he was too poor to pay for a funeral, the angels took care of him. If Lazarus is resting in Abraham's bosom, then Abraham has thrown a party for him! Lazarus is resting on a triclinium, at Abraham's right. He is the guest of honor! (Note the reference in John 13:23 to John reclining in Jesus' bosom!) The rich man also died and was buried. There were people present to attend to his needs.

Verse 16:23: The rich man wakes up in Hades — in torment! When he sees Lazarus reclining as he was, how would he have responded? He himself had enjoyed banquets every day! Now he sees Lazarus sharing in one! The tension between the two continues!

Verse 16:24: When the rich man sees Lazarus, does he ask for forgiveness? No! He does not address Lazarus. Rather, he addresses Abraham. “Father Abraham!” The rich man is playing his genetic card! He has the blood of Abraham in his veins, and Abraham is the patriarch of his clan! And he has been circumcised — which surely would guarantee assistance from Abraham. However, it did not!

Next comes, “have mercy on me!” (See Luke 18:38.) When Lazarus was in pain, the rich man ignored him. Now the rich man is in pain, and something must be done about it — immediately! He offers no apology, but a demand for service from the very man that he had ignored while enjoying great wealth. At the heart of his demand is the thought, “Unlike Lazarus, I am not accustomed to discomfort! Send Lazarus — and be quick about it!”

He does not seem to understand what he had done to Lazarus in the past and what he is demanding of him in the present! He sees Lazarus with his eyes, but not with his heart. He cannot imagine a world in which class distinctions do not apply. He can only think of meeting his own needs, even from someone whom he had injured deeply. Note what the rich man asks for: That Lazarus dip a fingertip in water and then place that fingertip on the rich man’s tongue. After all, he is in agony and in desperate need of relief!

Verse 16:25: In responding, Abraham addresses him kindly as *teknon* (Gk) “my dear son,” (not *uios*), the term the father uses when addressing the older son in the parable of The Two Lost Sons. Abraham does not deny that the (once) rich man is a member of his extended family, although the rich man had insulted both him and his guest! Abraham’s response is as follows:

During your lifetime, you received good things; he, evil things. But now, he is comforted, and you are in agony. You received good things. You did not earn them or deserve them. They were all gifts from a gracious, bountiful God. Lazarus received bad things. He lay outside your gate — in agony. His emotional pain was great. His worst pain was the fact that you ignored him! But now he is comforted, resting in my bosom. I care for him and do not leave him merely in earshot of those enjoying the best and the most!

Verse 16:26: A new and stunning surprise surfaces. There is a “great chasm” between Abraham and

Lazarus on the one side and the rich man on the other! No one, whether those in heaven or those in hell, can cross from one side to the other. Perhaps Lazarus has been suggesting that he is willing to go to the aid of the rich man. He does not gloat over the exchange of circumstances but feels compassion toward the one now having to deal with eternal suffering.

Verses 16:27-28: The rich man begs for Abraham to send “errand boy” Lazarus to inform his five surviving brothers of what lies ahead for them if they do not change their ways prior to death!

Verse 16:29: Abraham responds that they have Moses and the prophets. They should listen to them. If his brothers would listen to them, they would learn what they needed to know! However, are they devoting life to what the rich man devoted his life?

Verse 16:30: The rich man persists with his request. His brothers will listen if someone from the dead visits them. He is contradicting Abraham and trying to correct him. (Note: “No, father Abraham!”) And he is demanding special “messenger service.”

Verse 16:31: Abraham denies his request. If the rich man’s five brothers are not listening to Moses and the prophets, they will not listen to someone who returns from the dead. If the fires of hell did not change the rich man, on what basis is there any hope that a vision or visitation would change his brothers?

The rich man responded to his many so-called possessions with self-indulgence, indifference to the needs of others, arrogance, and class pride. He had a lot of money and managed his affairs his way. However, death is not the end to existence. There is a judgment to come. In hell, the rich man begged to become “the one whom God helps.” But too late! The rich man does not repent even in hell. But then, there is no opportunity for repentance after death. The rich man failed to see that “Now is the acceptable time!”