

Jesus and The Outcasts, Outsiders, Outlaws--The Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in Prayer-Luke 18:9-14

March 12, 2023

During this season of lent, we have been touching on some key stories of Jesus we find in the Gospel of Luke... and these stories have all been in the same vein of the heart of Jesus's ministry... that Jesus reached out and invited and blessed and loved the outcasts, the outsiders, and the outlaws. It wasn't just the people of God that Jesus cared about... it wasn't just the well off or the socially wealthy that he saw with dignity... Those that society neglected back then mattered to God... he valued them... and what we've been unpacking in this series is that the same should be true for us with the people that society neglects today.

In the last two weeks, Pastor Andy talked about how even though the Old and the Young and women weren't valued or held in high regard in Jesus day... and if we're honest sometimes today, too... Jesus flipped the tables on that way of thinking and he treated them with value and dignity and worth.

This is one of the main themes of Luke's gospel... that throughout Jesus's ministry, he lifts up the lowly. When everyone else would rather push them down, he lifts them up. And today, we're going to look at two parables that Jesus told that help us see two other groups of people that Jesus lifted up when the world around him was looking down on them.

Now, you may not really know what a parable is, but you've probably heard a parable before. A parable is just an object lesson. Jesus would take something from everyday life that everyone would understand and be familiar with and he would use it to help them understand a spiritual truth.

The story of the Good Samaritan is a parable. It's not a historical account of a dude walking on a road and getting attacked, it's a made-up story meant to convey a spiritual truth. It's a parable.

Now, in the parables we're looking at today, we'll find that Jesus is contrasting God's way and God's perspective against the world's way. And so when we read these parables, we want to look at the different characters and find ourselves in the story. Who am I most like in this story? And more often than not, we might be a little bit of a few different characters. But which one most represents my attitude... my life... and "what does Jesus want me to know, think, or do."

And so as we look at these two parables and consider how Jesus lifts up the lowly, we're going to ask ourselves those two questions.

Which of the characters am I most like and what does Jesus want me to know, think, or do?

The first parable we're going to look at is the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in **Luke 16:19-31**. Like any writing, understanding the context helps us know what's being communicated. Who was Jesus talking to? What was going on whenever he said what he said.

And right before the parable we get a clue about what Jesus might be trying to say. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus comes in and amongst a time of teaching to his disciples... but at the END of the parable before our parable, we find out some other people have been listening in. Luke 16:14 - *"The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus."*

Now, we have to remember... Pharisees weren't inherently bad. They get a bad rap a lot, but being a Pharisee wasn't sinful. In fact, those who truly followed the ways of the Pharisees were great. They were devoted to God. They went to extreme measures to be faithful to him and live a pious life... a life that honored God.

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But within that desire to do all the right things, it was easy for some of them to turn to self-righteousness. “Look at me. Look at all I’ve done. I’m doing a great job. All these other people should just try harder like me.” It was easy for them to get off focus and start looking down on others instead of looking up in gratitude to God, or like these pharisees, they could be going through the motions of religion, but really just love money. They claimed to trust in God but in reality, they trusted in their money.

And so, we see in the text that Jesus is teaching and these money loving pharisees are standing there, listening to Jesus, and they’re sneering at him... and so Jesus tells another parable... and this is what he says.

*Luke 16:19ff - “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

So, there are two characters in this story. A rich man who is not just rich, but is very very rich. The rich man is living in unbelievable luxury... he’s eating food no one else is eating and wearing clothes no one else is wearing. He has everything he could ever need.

And a poor man who is not just poor but is very very poor. He’s completely helpless... he’s destitute. I mean, Jesus lays it on heavy that this man is not well. Not only is he longing for crumbs and scraps that fall on the ground and get trampled out to the curb on the sandals of the rich man, but he’s sick... he’s covered in sores and he doesn’t even have the energy to fend off the dogs that are licking his wounds. That’s a hard scene to imagine isn’t it?

And one thing to point out about this story is that Lazarus, the poor man, is the only named person in any parable in the Bible. No one else has a name. Other places the people are named by the position or their status... it’s the rich man... it’s the sower, the servant, the son, the manager... but in this parable, he has a name. Why?

Well, one of the things that Jesus’s audience would’ve picked up on that we miss in the translation to English is that Lazarus means “God helped me.” And so even as the Pharisees and the disciples are hearing this story from Jesus, they already know the outcome. The rich man isn’t going to be the one who helps Lazarus. It will be God.

And the text continues –

*22 “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.*

Why was the rich man not with Lazarus after death? What did he do wrong in the parable? He didn’t order that Lazarus be removed from his gate. He didn’t make objections to Lazarus eating the food that fell on the ground. He didn’t kick him or say anything mean to him... why didn’t he go to with Lazarus to be comforted by Abraham? He seemed to have all the blessings from God possible... why didn’t he go to what they viewed as paradise?

And the answer is simple. It wasn’t what the rich man did that was sinful, it’s what he didn’t do. The rich man didn’t do anything. He was so self-absorbed that he could see the suffering of the world and walk right past it on a daily basis and do nothing about it. He was a lover of his money. He loved his status. He loved his wealth. He only loved himself.

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But see the problem is, as we've been learning throughout this study of Luke, selfishness is the antithesis of the heart of Jesus. Jesus cares about those that the world brush aside. And what we see in this parable is that if you've been blessed in this life... and you don't have compassion and do something to love and support the poor and the lowly in the world, the parable seems to indicate you're going to have trouble in the life to come.

We can't be so self-absorbed that we neglect those among us who are most in need.

Some of you are thinking, but I thought we were saved by grace through faith! There's nothing we can do to be made right with God! And you're right, we are saved by grace through faith! But like James says – and like Jesus affirms here - if our faith isn't being lived out through our deeds, we don't have faith at all. Our faith is dead.

And the truth of the matter is almost every single person worshipping here today, when it comes to earthly blessings, we're more like the rich man than we are Lazarus. We have enough. We have plenty. And so, as followers of Jesus we need to be people of compassion. When we see a need, we need to meet it. We need to help the those with less to treat those in need with dignity and worth.

Here at Faith Church, we talk about growing in our faith as deepening and developing our relationship with God the Church and the world. And part of our relationship with the world is blessing. And being a blessing means finding ways to make the world around us better... and in part, that means when we see someone in need... we need to help meet the need. When we see suffering, we help to alleviate it. When we see hurting, we do what we can to bring healing. We don't expect folks to fend for themselves or pull themselves up by the boot

straps. We pour out from the abundance that God has poured into us. We're blessed to be a blessing to others.

In our church, when there's a need, you're on it. I could stand up here for the next hour talking about the hundred thousand dollars plus you've given to Belize or Sierra Leone or Venezuela or Ukraine or Habitat for humanity. And that's on top of the generosity you extend through your regular giving that helps to support ministries in our church like children and youth and missions... but also organizations outside our church like Bridge of Hope, Habitat for Humanity, CentreSafe, Pregnancy Resource Center, the Faith Centre Food Bank, and so much more. Many of you step up to the plate to give through the church and I know that that generosity extends outside of church giving too to treat others with dignity and worth.

Now some of you hear about all this money and you don't feel like you have extra to give. Money is so tight and you've done everything you can to make ends meet and it's still a struggle. And frankly, there's a possibility some of you who are here today are wrestling with permanent housing... maybe you're staying at a friend's house while you're working through what's next for you. Maybe you've gotten an eviction notice.

As you hear this parable and you might feel more connected to Lazarus today... I hope you see that you have dignity and you have value and you have worth in the sight of God... and God will help you. He will lift you up. It may not be in all the ways we hope in this lifetime. But he will lift you up.

But I also want to encourage you... and all of us... that this parable goes beyond money. Sometimes when we see someone who's hurting, a listening ear is what they need. Sometimes they need

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encouragement. Sometimes we have a skill or a gift we can use to offer support and love... even if we don't have any money.

And again, in and through the church I could spend another hour talking about how we serve around 1000 people at our Christmas Dinner and we give out hundreds of backpacks and school supplies at Blessing of the Backpacks...

I think about our tool-box ministry that goes into people's homes to help with general home repairs. Or our prayer quilt ministry that blesses people with blankets when they're in transition.

And the work that's being done is possible because so many of you are blessed like the rich man, but you have the heart of Jesus. You step up to the plate to chip in to be a blessing.

God has blessed you. All of you. And so, when you see the Lazarus in front of you... don't be like the rich man and walk on by ignoring him, be like Jesus... and treat him with dignity.

As I was writing this week, I know right where my mind went next. I immediately thought about what I was always told growing up... "but what if..." What if we help someone and they squander it? What if they don't really need it, they're just scamming us? What if they're going to use it to buy drugs?

And I would encourage you to just trust God's prompting. If you feel compelled to be generous to someone in person, just do it. And let God sort out the rest. I do want to pause and say please don't give to people online you don't know, because those are always scams... but if you feel prompted to give to a person or to an organization you believe in, give.

I remember one time I was driving up to Weis in Bellefonte and I saw a guy standing along the road with a sign. And my gut reaction was compassion. And then the what ifs started to flood in... and I just felt like God said to me – that's not your concern. You just give him the money in your pocket.

And I felt God say, you've been a bonehead plenty of times and squandered the blessings I've given you... but even through those things you squandered, I showed you my grace and love for you... so just trust me here.

When you see the Lazarus in front of you... do something.

The poor, the hurting, the sick, the imprisoned, the naked, the hungry... the pharisees walked by them... but they matter a lot to God... and they should matter a lot to us, too.

There was another group the Pharisees looked down on that Jesus cared a lot about... and just like he did with the money loving pharisees, he addressed these pharisees with a parable, too.

First let's look at the context of the parable. Just before our parable, we hear this -

**Luke 15:1-2** *"Now the tax collectors and sinners were all gathering around to hear Jesus. 2 But the Pharisees and the teachers of the law muttered, 'This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.'"*

While Jesus was teaching, all these tax collectors and sinners started to connect with what he was saying... and they were eager to hear what he had to say so they gathered around... and you can see the Pharisees weren't all that happy about it.

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This time, the Pharisees weren't upset with what Jesus said, they were about who he spends his time with... the lost... those far from God. These Pharisees looked down on those who couldn't just have self-control like them, and they looked down on Jesus, who gave them the time of day. And so, Jesus hears this and he tells a parable to teach something important about God's perspective about the lost. And he tells the parable of the prodigal son.

**Luke 15:11-13** - 11 *Jesus continued: "There was a man who had two sons. 12 The younger one said to his father, 'Father, give me my share of the estate.' So, he divided his property between them.*

*13 "Not long after that, the younger son got together all he had, set off for a distant country and there squandered his wealth in wild living.*

There are two brothers in this story. One is the older brother who hasn't been introduced yet. And he's always been faithful to his father as long as he can remember. He's been there by his father's side since the beginning. He does what needs to be done. He doesn't complain, he doesn't grumble, he doesn't ask for much.

And then there's the younger brother. And he's planning to take a trip to find himself and experience all the world has to offer... he doesn't want to be under his father's rules anymore. And we know he only cares about himself because he asks his father for his inheritance early, which would've been unthinkable at that time. And his dad gives it to him and he goes off and blows all the money on wild living.

the parable continues. **Luke 15:14-16**

*14 After he had spent everything, there was a severe famine in that whole country, and he began to be in need. 15 So he went and hired*

*himself out to a citizen of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed pigs. 16 He longed to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating, but no one gave him anything.*

Very quickly, after living lavishly and going his own way apart from his father, the younger brother hit rock bottom. If you know anything about Jewish life, you know that pigs are considered unclean. Jewish people weren't supposed to touch them. So, his very job is a disgrace. Not only that, when he runs out of money he's so hungry he wants to eat the pigs food. He's hit rock bottom. And he comes to his senses... and Jesus tells the tax collectors and the pharisees that the son decides to run back to his Father's house.

I wonder what that time of teaching would've been like... what would that room have felt like?

The tax collectors and the sinners who are sitting there listening to the teaching, they know what's going on... they know who they are in the story. They're the younger brother... the prodigal. They've been living life their own way, doing their own thing... and I wonder if shame held them back from returning to God? What social price would they have had to pay if they turned back to God? Their old acquaintances might judge them and the religious people might not accept them... and more importantly, would God accept them?

As Jesus is telling this parable, I imagine they're probably really interested in what the Father's going to say when the son shows up on his doorstep ... I can almost imagine them sitting on the edge of their seats, in anticipation of what Jesus might say about their fate. Will the father accept the son?

And here's what they hear.

**Luke 15:20-24**

*20 So he got up and went to his father.*

*“But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*

*21 “The son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’*

*22 “But the father said to his servants, ‘Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. 23 Bring the fattened calf and kill it. Let’s have a feast and celebrate. 24 For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’ So, they began to celebrate.*

So often we read Scripture and we just take it as information, but I wonder if you can imagine what it would be like to be one of those the pharisees have labeled “sinners and tax collectors” who feel rejected and are sitting in that room... and these men and women hear this good news that the father – God – will not only welcome them home, but he’s anxiously awaiting their arrival. And when they return, he’s not going to criticize their past... he’s not going to condemn them... he’s going to wrap his arms around them and welcome them. Do you think there was a dry eye in that room as they hear this good news?

And my friends... there’s two things I hope you hear from this parable. First, some of you are feeling like a prodigal this morning. And if you hear nothing else today I hope you hear that God’s love is for you. He’s waiting for you. And when you return to him there will be a party in heaven for you because God loves you so much.

Secondly, there’s an older brother in the story. He’s the pharisee... And he sees the father’s embrace of the younger son and he’s angry.

**Luke 15:28-32**

*“The older brother became angry and refused to go in. So, his father went out and pleaded with him. 29 But he answered his father, ‘Look! All these years I’ve been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders. Yet you never gave me even a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. 30 But when this son of yours who has squandered your property with prostitutes comes home, you kill the fattened calf for him!’*

*31 “‘My son,’ the father said, ‘you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. 32 But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.’”*

If you’re the one who’s been faithful to God for a long time... don’t be like the older brother and look down on the prodigal... don’t be like the older brother and cast judgment or shame on the younger brother... be like the Father and welcome him home. When you see someone who’s coming back to God, even if they’re tripping along the way, celebrate them. Treat them with dignity and respect. Be their friend and listen to their story and share yours with them. Encourage one another. Build one another up.

We learned in the first parable that God cares about the poor. So, when we see someone in need, do something about it.

And in the story of the prodigal son we learn that God wants the people farthest from him to come home, so we need to make room in

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the church for those who are skeptical of Jesus and don't have it all together.

Cause here's the thing... in light of God's goodness and his grace and his perfection... we're all Lazarus... with no hope... laying at the gate just hoping for crumbs to fall from the table of the king... but do you know what our king did when he saw us there? He came out to the gate and he offered us living water and he was the bread of life for us so that we would never thirst or hunger again.

And in light of God's perfection... his holiness, we're all prodigals... we were all lost... out on our own without any hope of redemption... disgraceful compared to God... and you know what God does for us? He invites us home... and when we arrive, he wraps his arms around us. He invites us in. He throws a party for us.

And if God does all that for us... how can we not treat the poor with dignity and respect? And if God does all that for us... how can we not welcome the prodigal home.

If you're a follower of Jesus... follow Jesus in his care for the poor and his love for the lost. If you find yourself looking down on them, confess that to God and remember your need for his love... his grace... and his provision in your life. And when we think on him, may our hearts be softened and may we, too, lift up the lowly.

And if you're not following Jesus, come on home. The father's standing at the door waiting for you. Eager for your arrival. And life with him is better than life out on our own.

And all God's people said... AMEN.

**Next Steps – March 12, 2023**

Jesus and the Outsiders, Outcasts, and Outlaws – Week 3

**Read the Parable of the Rich Man – Luke 16:16-31**

- What is one thing that sticks out to you about this parable?
- In what ways have you been more like the Rich Man in your life?
- In what ways have you been more like Lazarus?
- What does Jesus want you to think, know, and do based on this parable?
- How might God want you to change your thinking and grow in your willingness to use the blessings he's given you to be a blessing to the people around you?

**Read the Parable of the Lost Son – Luke 15:11-32**

- What is one thing that sticks out to you about this parable?
- In what ways have you been more like the Prodigal Son in your life?
- In what ways have you been more like the older brother?
- What does Jesus want you to think, know, and do based on this parable?
- How might God want you to change your thinking about the "prodigals" and grow in your willingness to make room for them in our church and your life?