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A ROLLER COASTER TOO FAR  
Luke 16:19-31

Have you heard the good economic news out of Washington? The deficit in the federal budget for this year was predicted to be close to a trillion dollars. The new projection is that it will only be about \$800 billion! Isn't that great? I'm so happy. The federal deficit coming into the year was \$16 trillion and our leaders are addressing that problem by adding \$800 billion to that mountain of debt. Do you know how massive a number 800 billion is? A stack of 800 billion dollar bills would be 54,000 miles high! If we were to pay off a debt of \$800 billion at the pace of a million dollars a day it would take nearly 2,200 years to retire it! This is an absurdly large sum of money.

Does anyone really believe this is not a problem and that its effects won't come home to roost at some point? Why are our leaders not doing something about this? We understand that they want to be careful not to damage the already fragile economy. But one big factor is short term thinking. In many cases elected officials don't want to take the unpopular steps that are necessary to bring the deficit under control. So they shut their eyes to the problem. But we all know that short term thinking like that is not solving a problem, it's just delaying it, and in the meantime it just gets worse. That is a recipe for disaster.

My concern here isn't really with politics or economics. It is with the approach of closing ones eyes to a certain disaster that looms in the future, especially if that disaster is avoidable if one will act. Today we are going to look at a potential future cataclysm that makes our national debt appear trivial in comparison. This great looming catastrophe shows up in a parable Jesus told and Luke recounted in Luke 16:19-31. Let's look at this story and see how we can avoid this disaster. By the way, as we look at this little story we will see a small detail that is unique to this parable from Jesus.

TWO GUYS HAD DIFFERENT TEMPORAL SITUATIONS

A key element of the context this story is found in verse 14 where Luke told us that the Pharisees, leaders of the religious establishment of that day, loved money. We also know that they loved position and approval. It was this problem that prompted the story Jesus tells in these verses.

Who does this then not apply to? Who among us doesn't care about things like money, position, pride, status and approval? I don't think of myself as being especially money driven, but I also know I seem to feel happier and more at peace when I pay the bills and still have money in the bank than when I don't know how I am going to get through. I find that I like it a lot more when someone says how much they like our church and are encouraged by what I've said in a sermon than when they say, "As a pastor you're worse than you were as a hockey player" a terrible thing to say about someone. I find that the appeal of the comforts and the approval of the world exert a strong pull on me and everyone else.

This story is about two men. The first guy is very rich. Tradition called him Dives, but that's just the Latin word for "opulent" or "wealth" used in Latin translations of verse 19. For labeling purposes I decided to call him "the Donald," referring to the absurdly rich man in our culture who is known for firing apprentices. I'm not trying to say anything about Donald Trump. I'm just using him as an example because of his conspicuous wealth and high profile. I know nothing of his spiritual state. Jesus gives us some indications of how wealthy the Donald in his story was.

One indication is that he continually wore purple clothes. In that culture wearing purple had a meaning it doesn't have today. Back then purple dye was obtained from snails in a laborious and expensive process. Thus clothes dyed purple were very expensive. Someone who dressed in purple was flaunting his wealth. The Donald was like a guy who always wears William Fioravanti suits that set him back \$10,000 or a woman who will only wear Ferragamo shoes at \$2000 a pop.

We also learn that the Donald wore "fine linen." This is slightly humorous, for the word Luke used here usually referred to underwear. It was a reference to fine Egyptian cotton undergarments. Today Etiquette Clothiers sells luxury boxer shorts made from Sea Island cotton with mother of pearl buttons that you can have for a mere \$60 per pair. Revolution Wear goes them one better. They sell their Frigo No. 1 athletic underwear for \$100 a pair. The Donald always wore underclothes that were in that category. The point is that the Donald had money to spend on luxury items. He lived in luxury and spent his days celebrating resplendently.

The other man in the story could not be more of a contrast. The unique feature of this parable is that Jesus tells us the character's name: Lazarus. This is the only character that is named in all of Jesus' parables. This has led some to think that this is not merely a parable but is based on a true story. I doubt that. If it's not true why would Jesus suddenly name a person in his story? I think it has to do with the

meaning of the name. Lazarus was derived from the Hebrew name Eleazar, which meant “one whom God helps.” It is not apparent from Lazarus’ situation that God was helping him. It’s just the opposite.

Lazarus was a beggar. The grammar of verse 20 suggests that he might have been unable to get around under his own power. He “was laid” at the rich man’s gate. In other words, other people had to put him there because he couldn’t get there on his own. Poor Lazarus was placed at the Donald’s gate so he could beg of the Donald’s rich friends as they came in for the latest big feast. Jesus wants us to think of the poor guy being in terrible health, describing him as being “full of sores.” The stray dogs come along to lick his sores.

This man had nothing. He was sick, impoverished, helpless, and viewed as insignificant and unimportant. He was without any power or influence in this world. The guy you see on the street corner holding a cardboard sign that says, “anything would help” has it better than Lazarus. There was nothing enviable, nothing enjoyable, nothing to be celebrated in Lazarus’ circumstances.

By calling the character “one whom God helps” Jesus told his audience that even though the guy had miserable circumstances he was a man whom God loved, accepted and helped. The theology of the day said a man in his situation surely was forsaken or even cursed by God but Jesus labeled him a person whom God helped.

## TWO GUYS HAD DIFFERENT ETERNAL SITUATIONS

Rich man and poor man in the end face the same fate. They both die. Death has no respect for the rich man’s wealth or status. Immediately their situations went in very different directions. Verse 22 says of Lazarus, “the angels carried him to Abraham’s side.” To be at Abraham’s side was an ancient Jewish expression that referred to a place of acceptance and honor by God. All that had been missing in Lazarus’ life here on earth was given to him. Where on earth he had misery and pain, where he was viewed as of no value or significance at all, he is now comforted, blessed and honored.

The Donald’s earthly circumstances were also totally reversed in the next life. Where Lazarus had been carried by angels to Abraham’s side, the rich man simply “was buried.” Where he had ease, comfort, pleasure, luxury and influence on earth the Donald now found himself with the opposite of all of those. He was literally in hell. Luke says in verse 23 and again in 28 he was in “torment.” The word Luke used originally meant to test or to inspect coins for authenticity. So it had the sense of putting something to a severe test. The *Theological Dictionary of the New*

*Testament* says it acquired “the meaning of the checking of calculations.” So it came to refer to math, which many find to be terrible torture.

As time went on it came to mean to discover the truth by torture. So you can picture all those terrible methods of torture you’ve seen in movies. Unbearable electric shocks, pulling out fingernails and all the rest to inflict unlimited pain in the attempt to get the victim to tell what he knows. That’s the sense of this word. If that’s not enough the Donald says in verse 24, “I am in agony in this fire.” Jesus chose the imagery of the flame because of the intensity of the pain of burns. He went to the extreme to communicate an immeasurable intensity of pain. The man who once had everything now has nothing but loss and excruciating pain.

What is the most terrible pain you’ve ever experienced? I’ve had a few pretty painful injuries. One of the most unpleasant moments in my life came when I was playing softball wearing shorts. This was the last time I ever did that because I ended up falling and sliding on my leg on dirt and it ripped the skin off the leg on one side. It was awfully painful. I eventually went to the medical center. The nurse looked at it and shook her head. She said it looked like raw beefsteak. She said she had to clean it. She poured hydrogen peroxide onto it. I can’t begin to tell you how much that stung. When she was done she said it wasn’t enough. They took me into a room where there was a whirlpool tub. The guy there put hot water in it and then iodine. They fired it up and had me put my leg into it. I had to just grit my teeth. It was like they were torturing me. I said to the physical therapist, “Ok, ok, I’ll tell you whatever you want to know. Just stop.” It got worse. After about 10 minutes he took my leg out of the tub and said, “there are little bits of sand and dirt in the wound and I have to get them out. This is going to hurt some.” He lied. It didn’t hurt some. It was a world of hurt. No, it was a universe of hurt. He took a gauze pad and began scrubbing the raw, wounded flesh. The pain was indescribable. After a minute or two he asked me if I was about to pass out. I groaned, “I wish I could.” What Jesus describes in this passage is that kind of pain, but constant, without end.

Jesus taught that God is going to judge people when this life is over and there will be punishment for some. Some people think all that exists is matter. There is no soul, no spirit, so when we die, that’s the end of the story. Your body rots, your atoms are recycled, game over. Others think there is reincarnation, that if you’re really bad you’ll come back as a sea slug. I wonder what a sea slug has to do to create good karma so it can be promoted. Then there are the universalists who believe everybody will go to the light and live in heaven forever. Jesus claimed in this story that none of those are correct.

Jesus says that there is most definitely life after death. But there is a judgment that is coming. Those who have been approved by God will be welcomed into God's eternal kingdom of light, a place of joy and peace. But those who have lived without regard to God's truth will find themselves in a place of torment. Hebrews 9:27 confirms this. "Man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment." No second chance, no returning to earth to try again in one form or another, no death that ends it all, but a judgment and resulting consequence that will last forever.

That last part is clear in this story. The Donald requests to have Lazarus come and give him some water, a little relief from the pain of his tortured existence, but Abraham tells him this is not possible. There is no crossing from one place to the other in eternity. Understanding that he cannot leave the terrible place he is in, the Donald asks if Lazarus might be sent to warn his 5 brothers of the fate that awaits them. But Abraham tells him that's not possible either, but that it doesn't matter because they've already been given the truth they need. If they refuse to heed it not even a miracle will help them.

That is awfully stark and gloomy. Torment, anguish, hell, flames forever. Doesn't that seem unloving, unduly harsh and extreme? Surely a loving God would never do something like that, would he? Former pastor Rob Bell published a book two years ago titled *Love Wins* in which he made that argument and implied that everyone will be saved from that torturous fate and will, in fact, be in heaven.

Unfortunately his discussion was heavy on shaky definition of some Greek words, misstatements about church history and some questionable to just plain wrong interpretation of some Scripture. In Matthew 13:49-50 Jesus said "this is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Paul wrote in 2 Thessalonians 1:8-9, "He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might." John relayed the same message. In Revelation 20:15 he wrote, "If anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire."

I'm not real fond of this message. But I acknowledge a couple of things. First, God doesn't send people to hell. They choose it, and he lets them have their way because he loves people enough to give them what they choose. Second, God, to be good and just, must deal with evil. He does it in a way that is right. I may not

understand what he does, but I am not the ultimate arbiter of what is just and right. In fact, I have a very distorted sense of it, as does every human. So we must trust God's justice.

If justice is to exist, there must be a way to right all wrongs. In other words, there must be punishment for evil. My mother has recently been through an annoying battle with the company that provides her phone, internet and television service. Their "service" was anything but. It would conk out repeatedly. She kept calling and would spend hours on the phone, but it never got better. They sent her new equipment but it had the same problems. The people she dealt with were always very nice and tried to be helpful, but they could never fix the issues. Finally she had enough. She said she wanted to end her agreement with them so she could go to another company that might provide decent service. They told her she had a two year contract with them and she would have to pay a penalty for early termination of the contract. It was the first time she had heard anything about a two year contract. It made me so mad. She didn't know anything about a two year contract. But more important they hadn't fulfilled the terms of any contract. They said they would provide a service, which they had totally failed to do. To demand that she pay a penalty was not fair or just. I got really peeved about it. The problem is, who can you go to? Who do you appeal to in such a situation? What if there is no one and my elderly mother just got ripped off? Something in me demands justice.

There needs to be a fair resolution to such things. The same is true in all of life. We need there to be justice, we long for wrongs to be righted. But that means there needs to be punishment for wrong. We don't like the torment part of the story, but something inside us finds satisfaction in the idea that the poor man who suffered so terribly finally gets something really good to make up for it, and the Donald, who was so occupied with enjoying the luxury his riches afforded him that he couldn't be bothered with the poor suffering man at his own gate, should experience the pain that he was unwilling to lift even a finger to help alleviate. And that's exactly what God will do, but that means that the very thing we are reading about in this parable must occur.

## IMPLICATIONS

### BE READY FOR THE FUTURE

This was a major emphasis of this parable. The religious elite of his day who opposed Jesus were obsessed with status and wealth. They were focused on success, respect, pride and money. Paul wrote of them in Philippians 3:19, "their god is their stomach" and "their mind is on earthly things." Jesus is telling us to change our focus.

Last week we saw a positive approach to this message. Jesus said “it’s good to prepare for a future that you know is coming. That is wise and prudent.” This week he gave the negative side of this issue. It is foolish beyond description to focus on the stuff of this life and end up where the rich man did in the story.

Cornelius Ryan wrote a classic history book about Operation Market Garden in World War II. The book was titled *A Bridge Too Far*. The operation was an attempt by the allies to use the largest airborne assault in history to capture a series of bridges, the last of which, at Arnhem, was critical, for it crossed the Rhine River into Germany. The title of the book came from a comment by British General Frederick Browning who said before the operation he thought they were going a bridge too far. He was correct, for they failed to capture the last and most important bridge.

Two years ago I went a roller coaster too far. Laurie and I went with our then single children to Disney World. They were experts on all things Disney, so they were our tour guides. They took us on all manner of rides, including many fast ones. One of them was at the Animal Kingdom park. It was called Expedition Everest. They doll it up with a Mt. Everest theme, but it’s a roller coaster. Both of them loved this ride and told us it was way cool. I was game. Here’s a spoiler alert. There was a part of the ride they didn’t tell us about because it’s more fun if it’s a surprise. I’m going to tell you about it, so if you want the surprise some day, don’t listen. The ride goes through lots of fast turns and drops like any roller coaster, but then it comes to a place where there’s no place to go. You’re just going to hit a wall. But it stops, and then it starts going again – backwards, back through all those turns and drops. Wow did it mess up my head. It makes me feel a little dizzy and sick now just thinking about it. I didn’t feel right for a while after that ride. Later in the day the kids said, “Let’s ride Expedition Everest again.” It made me feel like an old fuddy duddy, but I said, “I’m going to sit this one out.”

I knew if I rode that thing again I wouldn’t like the results. That was a roller coaster too far for me. So I made the right decision. If you don’t like what something is going to do to you, don’t do it. In a sense Jesus is saying, “if you focus just on this world you’re not going to like the results. Don’t do it.” If you make all of life about being successful, noticed, approved, patted on the back, rich and comfortable, you’re going to end up where the Donald did and you are not going to like it one bit. It’s going to hurt worse than anything you have ever imagined.

The problem is that if you had told me “you should not ride Expedition Everest because you won’t like the result” I likely would have said, “I’ll try it anyway” because I don’t want my kids to think I’m a fuddy duddy. It was only after I’d experienced it that I said, “Call me an old curmudgeon if you must, but I’m out.” Jesus is trying to give us a picture here so that we can experience a taste of a tragic future and turn from it. Avoid that awful fate by putting your faith in Jesus.

### FAITH IS CENTRAL

There is a message at the end of this story that is hard for us to accept. It is a setup by Jesus for what is going to happen at the end of his life. The Donald asked that Lazarus be sent back to warn his loved ones of what lies ahead and to tell them to make sure they didn’t go on that roller coaster too far. The response is if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.

Jesus’ own resurrection proved it. He rose from the dead, but most of the people who knew Moses and the Prophets, refused to believe. Jesus made a claim here that while faith is always based on evidence, it is ultimately rooted in submission to the truth. Implicit here is the claim that the reason people don’t believe is not that they can’t, but that they won’t.

This is a little hard for us to accept. We are absolutely convinced that if God would just do something visible, dramatic, undeniable, then people would believe. There is a whole movement in the church today that has as one of its main premises that the thing that will convince people to believe is if God will do signs and wonders. So the church has to be full of miracles to convince people to believe.

I wish those people would listen to Jesus. He categorically denied that premise. He says miracles won’t do it. If a person rose from the dead it would not convince people to believe. Biblical history supports this. Remember the Israelis that saw God part the Red Sea, one of the greatest miracles ever to occur? How did they do when it came time to trust God? They failed miserably. Faith always has a reasonable foundation, but in the end it does not require proof. It takes God at his word.

I find this helpful when I encounter books that claim to give us a glimpse of life after death. There are some very popular ones like *Heaven Is Real* and *90 Minutes In Heaven*. They are interesting and encouraging. People find comfort in them because they seem to confirm that there is hope. But in the end they run into a big wall. Hebrews 9:27 says it is destined for humans to die once, then the judgment.



Either that is true or it is not. If it is true, then there is a reason they call the experience a “near death experience.” It was near death, but they didn’t die. If they had died, they wouldn’t be back. So whatever they experienced in that strange near death state, it was not death. Our faith does not rely on such stories. It relies on the Word of God. That is what assures us that there is an eternity that is beautiful awaiting those who believe in Jesus.

### GOD WANTS US TO LOVE

Why did the Donald end up in that awful place? It was because he was so obsessed with his own comfort, wealth, and luxury that he could not be bothered with the awful misery of another human being outside his gate.

Jesus was picturing the religious elite of his day. They were the Donald. They were the ones who loved money, position and pride. They were so full of their own pride that it was important to them to show how much better they were than other people. So for the “sinners” who were drawn to Jesus, the people whose spiritual impoverishment was depicted by the physical impoverishment of Lazarus, they had nothing but disdain and disgust. If they took any note of them at all it was only to condemn them.

The reality of the coming judgment should always draw our attention. We need to be ready for that judgment. I cannot emphasize heavily enough that the way to be ready is to trust in Jesus Christ and what he has done as the sufficient payment for our wrong. We must never fall into the trap of thinking that we must earn our way into heaven by doing good deeds to the Lazaruses of this world. If we do that we are doomed.

Having said that, it is clear that if we truly believe God has saved us, if we truly believe that we are on a layover here on our way to an eternal destination, surely we will not be focused on simply feathering our nest. We will not make the mistake that the Donald made in the story.

But there are so many of the Lazarus variety in this world. There are billions of them. I could give every cent I have to try to help those people and it wouldn’t make a dent. The only thing that would change is that I would become one of them because now I have no money and am in need of someone else’s help. In his book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, Kenneth Bailey, who lived in the Middle East, wrote, “Having faced the beggars’ gauntlet on numerous occasions for decades in the Middle East, I know something of the dynamics of the scene. It is easy to survive by developing compassion fatigue. Beggars are ever present. There

are *so* many of them. One's resources are limited. Finally, one doesn't notice them anymore. Compassion fatigue becomes a way to cope and a strategy for survival."

Even here in wealthy America the beggars abound. Gary and Cathy Martin took Laurie and me to a hockey game at the Staples Center in LA recently. As we were leaving after the game along with 18,000 people a homeless man picked out Gary to ask him for money. Carissa works downtown. Most days she goes for a walk on her break. She gets approached for money every day. There are so many in need we can never help them all. As Bailey said, compassion fatigue can easily set in.

How much I am supposed to give to help others? When am I spending too much on myself? This is where we wish we could live by the law. Wouldn't it be great if God said, "here's the rule, you have to give 10% of your money and time to help others"? That's a measurable standard that I could meet. I could do it, then my conscience would leave me alone and I could enjoy the rest of my time and money. But what if God's standards were more draconian? What if he said instead of 10% it is 25%, or 40% or more? That would be difficult but still I could do it then get on with my life. Living by the Spirit of Christ means there is never a moment when what I have does not belong to him. He wants everything I am and everything I have. It is all to be used at his discretion at all times. So what are we to do? How do we know when we've done enough?

### ***Care***

First we need to just not close our eyes to the needs and hurts of others. Unfortunately wealth has a narcotic effect in two ways. First it dulls our senses. It's like what happens when you've been given pain pills by a doctor. What do they do to you? They make me loopy. They put me into this weird state where I almost feel like things aren't real. You can't react to what's going on around you, and given half a chance you drift off to sleep. The wealth of this world does the same thing to us spiritually. It makes us spiritually loopy. The spiritual realm doesn't seem quite real to us and we aren't able to react to it. The second thing about narcotics is that they are addictive. Once addicted the victim cares more about the drug than anything else. He sacrifices principles, relationships, jobs, even self-respect in the pursuit of his drug. That's exactly what wealth can do to us. Frankly we are all addicted to the stuff of this world. We need to be aware of the narcotic effect of this world's wealth. The more we kick our addiction to this world's wealth the more we will be aware of hurting, needy people. So our response to the problem of the overwhelming needs of this world is to first not close our eyes to it.

***Make a difference for a few.***

In Acts 3 Peter and John were going to the temple when they encountered a crippled man who was begging. Verse 6 tells us that Peter said to him, “Silver and gold I do not have, but what I have I give you. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk.” The man was immediately healed. Was this man the only crippled beggar in Jerusalem? No way. Why did Peter and John heal him and not all the others? They healed the one that they could, the one they encountered. I can’t help all the poor. I can’t solve poverty. God does not ask us to. He asks us to make a difference for someone. Help the ones he puts on our hearts.

Laurie and I once faced a situation through the mistakes of another person that put us in a serious financial crisis. We saw no way out of it. I had been a pastor for about 8 years and we thought would have to end. We were going to have to move and I’d have to find a job somewhere else. We felt like we’d been kicked in the gut. We felt sick and sad. We told no one about the situation. I began looking for options of other work, cheaper places to live, and we prayed. Out of the blue one day some friends, who had no idea what our situation was, handed us an envelope. They said “we feel like God wants us to give you this.” It was a check for precisely the amount of money we needed to solve that crisis. They didn’t change the world. But they changed our world.

***Walk with Jesus***

How did Peter and John know they should help that particular beggar? They had the Spirit of Jesus in them. They followed him. So we must walk with the Spirit of Jesus. I guarantee you, if you ask God to direct you to people he wants you to help and you listen for the leading of his Spirit this week, you will encounter them. You will find them on your heart. Ask God to open your eyes to them, then don’t close them. When he tells you to help, then help! Go ahead, try him and you will see. He will put on your heart people you need to help. It may be someone in this church. It may be someone unexpected that you will encounter this week. It may be someone you hear about that needs your help. Pray and listen, and God will work.