

**“Compassion”**  
Luke 16:19-31  
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How are you expanding your compassion?

We continue our journey through the gospel of Luke with another parable that is unique to Luke's gospel. The overarching theme is expanding our compassionate love. The Good Samaritan reveals we are to love everyone. Mary and Martha reveal how to overcome contempt and sibling rivalries to love our family. The parables of the found sheep and found coin reveal that God will bring everyone home, uniting all in love. The parable of the dishonest manager reveals that we are to have wily love.

Today's parable features Abraham, a rich man and a poor man and the reversal of their fortunes after death. The parable illustrates that (Luke 16:13) “you cannot serve God and wealth.” This parable is not about heaven, hell, or the afterlife; rather, it is an invitation to examine your life and become more compassionate.

**Luke 16:19-31 NRSV “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”**

Context is critical to understanding Luke's parables. The first audience that heard this parable was shocked by the rejection of their false beliefs which were rich indicated you are blessed by God, poor and suffering mean you are sinful, and salvation comes from clean living. The unexpected reversal is the poor man comes to enjoy the good things of life and relationships in contrast to the rich man who is in agony, tormented, and alone. The formula wealth means God has blessed you and the inverse suffering means you are sinful are both flatly rejected. Sadly, there are still some who cling to this old rejected notion that wealth, success, health, and/or a long life have something to do with God's favor as well as the inverse that suffering, failure, and poverty have something to do with God's disfavor. God loves everyone equally. Wealth, health, success has no correlation with one's relationship with God.

Brian Stoffregen writes, “This parable is an attack against the popular belief that wealth was an indication of being blessed by God—of being obedient to God. And that poverty was an indication of punishment from God. Apparently, some took this belief a step further and concluded that they had better not interfere with God's punishment of such evil people—even though the Hebrew Scriptures are clear about helping the needy. The same or similar attitude can be found in some opposition to AIDS care and research or support for planned parenthood. “They made their own bed, let them lie in it,” is a motto for some. Some will go even further and consider the disease or unwanted pregnancies as God's punishment for the individual's sin. This parable is an attack against such attitudes— whether in the first century or twenty first.” This parable denounces the abuse of power and privilege by the wealthy at the expense of the poor and marginalized. Do you have compassion for everyone, or do you limit your compassion for certain people in certain situations? As a

country, do we place limits on compassion, requiring certain people, to meet some sort of criteria to receive support?

The rich man had the means to follow all the food purity, bathing, and clothing laws. The poor man was not able to follow any of them. If you could not follow the religious purity laws, you were considered “unclean” therefore exclude from worship, excluded from fellowship, you were banished. Jesus goes to great lengths to emphasize how “unclean” this man was by religious law. He had unclean sores. He was being licked by unclean animals, dogs. Yet in the end, it is the unclean man who is enjoying good things with Abraham and the clean man is banished. How do we label certain people unclean today? We are to have compassion for all people.

Blessings and salvation do not come from membership in a certain religion. As he was being tormented, the rich man called out to “Father Abraham”. This is a connection to the John the Baptist teaching that claiming Abraham as ancestor, membership in a religion does not provide salvation or blessings. The good news is salvation is a gift freely given by God, because God loves all people.

There are two rich people in the parable Abraham and the Rich man. Abraham was generous with his abundant wealth using his resources to bless all people. The rich man stockpiles his wealth. The rich man was selfish and indifferent to others. He feasted sumptuously every day. He dressed himself in purple and fine linens indicating extravagant and excessive consumption. The rich man was flaunting his status and delighted in self-indulgence, so much so that he built a wall to protect his stuff and keep others out. What the rich man did with his money, colored, shaped, and finally destroyed him. In the end he became an addict unaware of his self-destructive behavior. Wealth tends to lead to isolation from those who are less fortunate, which dulls our compassion for others which hinders our sharing. Possessions have great corrupting temptation. If not careful one can justify all sorts of behavior like building a wall to keep others out or spending money on defense rather than education. We are urged to compassionately share our wealth.

The rich man was arrogant, stubborn, and controlled others. Even after their fortunes were reversed, the rich man still does not really see Lazarus as an equal rather a mere cog to serve his whims. The rich man calls out for Abraham to send Lazarus to comfort him. The rich man still has not grasped the need for compassion and continues to behave as though his former status remains. The rich man asks Lazarus to do for him what he, himself, never did for Lazarus. Again, the rich man demands Abraham send Lazarus this time to his family. He continues to regard Lazarus as an inferior who should do his bidding. The rich man continues his selfish ways. He is not concerned for all people, merely his immediate family. The parable teaches that wealth and status often lead to arrogance which makes it difficult to hear God’s will, to have compassion, so much so that even a person coming to them from the dead will not be heard. It is tempting for the rich and privileged to arrogantly proclaim that they know God’s will for others and use scripture to control others. Often the privileged rich cannot perceive God because of their excessive investment in protecting their own interests. Through it all the rich man retains his class pride, his total self-centeredness and his indifference to any suffering other than his own. The rich man finds himself in torment, because he refuses to share and is arrogant.

In all the parables in Luke only one person has a name, Lazarus, which means God heals and God helps. We are to have more than compassion for everyone. We are to truly, see, know and build a relationship with everyone. Our compassion should move us to get to know others on a first name basis. Compassion is not merely sending money to help someone in need it is building a relationship with others. Compassion is doing Hands-On Mission with people, who we celebrate as our equals. We share some of our financial resources they share their spiritual resources. It is youth pausing to learn the name, stories, and giftedness of their resident before they repair their home. It is writing letters to the child you sponsor through Remember Niger not just merely sending money. Parker Palmer reminds us, “If we want to support each other’s inner lives, we must remember a simple truth: the human soul does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard.” From the beginning, God created us to care for each other. God created us to be in loving relationship with God and all people.

At the time the parable was told, Abraham and the listeners did not know that soon Jesus will begin bridging every chasm. Jesus is forgiveness, healing, and love. Jesus is compassion who truly sees each person. Jesus brings each person home to a festive banquet where all are loved and belong.

The parable has an abrupt stop. Jesus leaves the ending of the story untold. It is up to you, I and everyone to decide if we will respond with compassion.

Our parable today inspired Charles Dickens to write *A Christmas Carol* both invite us to change, to expand our compassion. Each of us at times behaves like the rich man and like Ebenezer Scrooge. These tales seek to uncover our blind spots, so we can see the error of our ways, change and invigorate our compassion.

Barbara Brown Taylor said, "Salvation is not something that happens only at the end of a person's life. Salvation happens every time someone with a key uses it to open a door they could lock instead"

Dorothy Day said, "Let's build a society where it's easier for people to be good to each other."

Peggy Farmer wrote, "If humanity is to usher in a new era of enlightenment, the foundation of that era needs to be unity, oneness and a deep desire for the collective well-being of our entire planet. We no longer can operate in isolation or superiority thinking but must come together as one family with a divine cause to end the suffering of so many and collectively heal this beloved planet. Such "unity thinking" involves setting aside our judgments, separations, threats (real or perceived), fears, hatred, insecurity and "what's in it for me" mentality and truly coming to the table of life as a committed participant. As each of us does this, we create a positive "collective consciousness" that will uplift the world and ourselves. We adopt a new language, the language of unity, rather than the language of separation. We cannot underestimate the power of collective consciousness and joint "will" to transform the world. ... Let us boldly continue this experiment."

World communion Sunday is a celebration of what is coming, a harmonies feast where each person is known, appreciated and celebrated, where everyone is energized by our relationship with all people, where everyone is united in pure compassionate, joyful love. Amen