

Sermon
9/25/22

Don't Miss the Point
Pastor Dan

Some of Jesus' most famous parables appear only in Luke's Gospel. These include our Gospel reading for today as well as the parable of the prodigal son.

Because we hear it so often, we sometimes forget what the word "parable" actually means. The term simply describes a story Jesus tells to illustrate a spiritual or moral lesson. A quick example of this occurs in the parable of the lost coin. Perhaps you recall the story.

According to Luke 15, Jesus draws a crowd of sinners and tax collectors who have come to hear his teaching. A group of Pharisees likewise appear, grumbling about the riffraff Jesus attracts. "This fellow welcomes sinners," they say disparagingly, "and [he] eats with them" (Luke 15:2).

As always, Jesus ignores their grumbling and turns to address the audience. "What woman," he asks, "having ten silver coins but missing one does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it" (Luke 15:8)? Assuming she does, Jesus continues, she will call her neighbors and friends to join her in celebration.

Notice what happens next.

Jesus concludes the parable by explicitly stating the story's lesson. That's what makes it a parable. A lesson comes at the end. Just like the woman who found her lost coin and rejoiced, Jesus tells his audience, so is there "joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:20).

It's a powerful teaching-strategy. In response, Luke tells us that a wave of silence swept over those listening as they pondered the depth of Jesus' teaching.

Suddenly, however, one of the Pharisees standing beneath a fig tree at the rear of the group cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled, "Sure, rabbi, but did this story really happen?"

The King James Version of the Bible captures Jesus' response perfectly: "And the Lord, looking up to heaven, rolled his eyes, saying, 'Forgive him, Father, for he knoweth not how stupid the question is he asks.'"

Our Pharisee, in short, missed the point. Jesus was not offering a history lesson. He was using a fictional story to convey a spiritual truth.

The Fictional Pharisee

Okay, I confess. I wrote the second half of the account you just heard to illustrate how easily people misinterpret Jesus' teachings. They ignore the vehicle Jesus uses to deliver the truth.

Consider another example, this time from a story that actually occurs in the Bible.

Do you remember the story of Nicodemus' encounter with Jesus according to the Gospel of John? When the two first meet, Jesus tells him that "no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above." Nicodemus pushes back by assuming Jesus meant what he said *literally*. "How can anyone be born after having grown old?" he asks. "Can one enter a second time into the mother's womb and be born?" (John 3:4).

The absurdity is obvious. Jesus was speaking symbolically, yet Nicodemus was so clueless that he took him literally. He completely *missed the point* of Jesus' teaching, just like our fictional Pharisee in the parable of the lost coin.

Conduct a Google-search regarding the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, our Gospel reading this morning, and you will quickly discover a host of interpreters who, in the spirit of Nicodemus, *continue* to miss the point even today.

A Radical Reversal

Before we get to the misinterpretation I have in mind, a quick summary of the parable is in order. Jesus begins the story by introducing its two primary characters. The first is a wealthy man named "Dives," which simply means "rich" in Latin. He feasts every day and wears clothing made of purple linen.

These are significant details: the color purple symbolized pure extravagance in the ancient world due to the cost of producing it. The fact that the rich man sets a "very fine gourmet table, not once a week but every day" likewise discloses his wealth. He had it made.

Lazarus, our second character, resides on the opposite end of the economic spectrum. He is the only character in any of Jesus' parables to have a proper name. This name, moreover, has special significance. It means "God is my helper," which tells us that Lazarus is a righteous man. God is on his side. He suffers even though he never did anything wrong.

The parable paints a grim picture of Lazarus' circumstances. Every day he lies at the gate of the rich man, longing for breadcrumbs. This may strike you as odd until you discover why. "In those days they did not use knives or forks or napkins; they would eat with their hands, wiping them on crusts of bread which were thrown out afterward. This was what the poor man, Lazarus, was waiting for – crusts of bread that had been thrown out after the feast" (Stedman, *Authentic Christianity*, accessed 9/21/22).

A reversal occurs when the two men die. Dives descends to Hades, the Greek name for hell, where he wallows in perpetual torment. Lazarus, on the other hand, ascends with the help of angels to be with Abraham, the grand patriarch of the Jewish people.

Soon enough, Jesus continues, the rich man looks up and sees Lazarus and Abraham from a distance. He pleads to Abraham for mercy. Unfortunately, he has none to give. "Child," he says, "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 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" (Luke 16:25-26).

The message echoes a dominant theme in Luke's Gospel: the emerging reign of God will bring with it a *radical reversal* of social, economic, and political realities as they presently exist. The hungry will be filled. Those who weep will laugh, and the poor will inherit the kingdom.

This is good news for the people Lazarus represents, the destitute, the men, women, and children who live on the margins of society.

"But woe to you who are rich," Jesus says by contrast, "for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you will be hungry. Woe to you who are laughing now, for you will mourn and weep" (Luke 6:24-25).

This is not good news for millions of Americans, including you and me. We belong to the economic class Jesus condemns. Our bellies are full. We live in comfortable homes. No wonder so many interpretations I read online of the Lazarus parable sidestep Jesus' teaching.

It's almost like they *deliberately* miss the point because, as Jack Nicholson once said, "They can't handle the truth!"

Let's see how.

A Roadmap of the Afterlife

People "miss the point" of the Lazarus parable when they read it primarily as a description of what will happen to us after we die instead of a corrective to the way we order society in this life, in the here and now.

"Got Questions," arguably the most popular source of (mis)information about the Bible on the internet, offers a perfect example. It reduces the parable to a roadmap of heaven and hell, one that supports the belief that "both are real, literal places."

According to Got Questions, the parable has something else to teach us as well: "once we cross the eternal horizon, that's it. There are no more chances. The transition to our eternal state takes place the moment we die. When believers die, they are immediately in the conscious fellowship and joys of heaven. When unbelievers die, they are just as immediately in the conscious pain, suffering, and torment of hell" (*Got Questions*, accessed 9/21/22).

True, the writers at *Got Questions* insert a paragraph about how Christians must not be indifferent to the plight of the poor like the rich man was. Nevertheless, they conclude,

“the greatest lesson to learn from this story . . . is that when death comes knocking on our door there is only one thing that matters: *our relationship with Jesus Christ*” (*ibid.*)

Of course, the parable never says anything about Jesus. It focuses, rather, on the emerging upside-down kingdom that Jesus by the power of God has begun inaugurating!

Why are people so reluctant to apply Jesus’ teachings to this world rather than the next? Is it because of what it will cost us?

For those I accuse of missing the point by reading the parable of Lazarus as a roadmap of the afterlife, the only textual basis they have to justify their reading is the name of Lazarus. Remember that it’s a proper name. “This must mean he really existed,” they say, forgetting that even Lazarus as a name has *symbolic meaning*.

What, in short, are people trying to avoid? Lois Malcolm of Luther Seminary has an answer.

A Gospel for *This* Life

Imagine if the world could experience in full the good news of what God has begun in Jesus Christ. The poor would be fed. The naked would be clothed. The sick would be healed, and the oppressed would be free.

What I have just described refers to the kingdom in its totality, at least according to Luke. According to Malcolm, “Luke, in particular, stress the way the status of the rich and the poor is reversed in the kingdom of God. When Jesus is conceived in Mary’s womb, she exults that the hungry have been filled and the rich sent away empty (1:46-55; cf. 1 Sam. 2:1-10). In the Sermon on the Plain, [which symbolizes the leveling of society the kingdom will bring about], Jesus tells the poor that God favors them and that the kingdom of God belongs to them, but he warns the rich of what is to come since they have already received their consolation in this life” (6:20-25; *Working Preacher*, accessed 9/21/22).

And there is more. Much more.

Remember how Jesus begins his public ministry in Luke. He declares that the Spirit of the Lord has chosen him “to bring good news to the poor” (Luke 4:18). Christ calls us, in turn, not simply to read today’s parable as an account of the afterlife. Instead, the parable calls us to participate in the great reversal of God’s upside-down kingdom here and now.

Otherwise, we miss the point.

We see the same thing in the prophets. They “foretold” the future not so that people could speculate about what would happen. That would be missing the point. Instead, they foretold the future to change the present.

Jesus does the same in today’s parable.

Good News for the Rich

For those of us who have full bellies and comfortable homes, today's parable may sound like bad news, but I see it as an opportunity to participate in the ever-emerging upside-down kingdom of God.

But how do we do that, and how can our participation in the ever-emerging upside-down kingdom be good news for us too?

One answer comes to us in the person of Zaccheus, the tax collector Jesus converts near the end of Luke's Gospel. "After he encounters Jesus," Malcolm writes, "Zaccheus gives half of his possessions to the poor and repays anyone he has defrauded four times as much" (19:1-10). In so doing, we see a glimmer of the kingdom Jesus has inaugurated.

It happens again in The Book of Acts, which Luke also wrote. There, new converts would "sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need" (2:45; 4:32-34).

In all of these instances, the Spirit called the earliest Christians – just as it calls us today – to live a life of generosity, or as I have said in the past, to live, give, and be grateful. Indeed, Paul calls such generosity the fruit of the Spirit (see Galatians 5:22). It frees us from the love of money, which our second reading famously describes as "the root of all kinds of evil" (1 Timothy 6:10). It helps in tiny ways bring about the kingdom, and as I continue to learn from some of you as well as my own experience, it feels good.

Let us, therefore, be rich toward God by caring for our neighbors, by continuing to give to those who are less fortunate than we are, to support charities that do such work, and to support the church particularly when it does likewise.

This is how, I believe, we "get the point" of Jesus' teachings.

In His name.

Amen.