

## Closing Windows

*Luke 16:19–31*

“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.’ ”

A report came out this week saying that the chasm between the “haves” and the “have nots” is the widest it has been in fifty years. The age-old gap between the rich and poor is as present today as it is in the parable. We know the story. There is a rich man who lives a life of luxury. On the opposite side of the fence there is a poor beggar named Lazarus whose body is covered with sores, who begs for scraps from the rich man’s table. Both die and their eternal situations are flipped. The poor beggar now rests in Abraham’s bosom, but the rich man is condemned. The rich man wants Abraham to send Lazarus to provide him some relief and to warn his friends. But Abraham says, “Even if we wanted to get to you, we couldn’t for the chasm is too great. I’m sorry, but it’s too late. You made your bed, now you sleep in it.” What exactly does Jesus want us to get out of the parable?

At first glance, when we read the parable on the surface, part of me has to admit it is a gratifying story. God is not neutral, but consistently stands on the side of the poor. The wealthy—those who neglect the Lazarus’ in our world—will one day reap what they sow. *Hallelujah, Amen!* It’s gratifying to know that the one percent who play monopoly with human lives will one day be brought to justice. When leaders who squat on their golden thrones get flushed part of me says, “Hallelujah! Amen!”

As a matter of fact, in Luke's gospel there is a sense that whenever he talks about rich people you can hear him booing in the background. The gospel begins with the angel Gabriel visiting Mary. As a response she sings, "My soul magnifies the Lord...God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly. The hungry God has filled with good things, and the rich [boo], God has sent away." It is a political protest song saying the rich [boo] will get what is coming to them. *Hallelujah! Amen!* Then Jesus preaches a sermon on the plains, "Blessed are the poor for yours is the kingdom of God. But woe to the rich [boo] for you have received your consolation." Just before Jesus tells this parable he has an argument with the local clergy telling them "You think you can serve two gods, God and money, but you can't! They are rival gods and both are competing for your soul." And we get the sense that this parable is about a rich man who made the wrong decision. And now he is paying the price in the afterlife. I have to confess, part of me feels gratified by the story.

Except, if that is the main message Jesus wants us to get out of the parable is that the rich will get what is coming to them, then there are a couple of issues for folks like us. One is the chilling reality that if I take an astronaut's perspective of the rest of the world, I sit close to the top of the pyramid. Of course, I don't consider myself a rich man. Every week my job is to tell you what I think, and I'm paid accordingly! But if I zoom out and look at my life on the story's terms, the truth is I have a closet full of clothing and can eat whatever I want, whenever I want too.

The second thing that brings me to pause is that our ultimate understanding of the gospel which says it is never too late. God is like a prodigal parent who is always waiting for us with open arms. God's mercy is everlasting to everlasting. I remember Carlton Eversley telling a story about a family he was consoling after their child died. They were afraid the child didn't accept Jesus in time. "What we do not know," Carlton said, "is that the child up until the last nanosecond could have run into God's arms, and even in death the mystery of love proclaims that it is still not too late." God's compassion, we say, is everlasting to everlasting. If Jesus wants us to walk away from the parable warning those of us on top of the pyramid that one day our eternal roles will be flipped, what does that say about our understanding of the gospel? What does it say about God's grace?

So I think we have to keep digging deeper. Perhaps Jesus is trying to tell us that there are kingdom windows that God is opening right now in front of our eyes. Opportunities to participate in the blessing of what God is doing amongst us today. Sometimes we see it, other times we do not. And the reality is that the window does not remain open forever, eventually it closes.

Listen to a parent speak regretfully about how they were at too many meetings or traveled too often for a job while missing their children's events. "How I wish I could've seen Tommy win the award, or watch Lenora beat her best time. How I wish I would've tucked them in every single night, but they are all grown now. They don't need to be tucked in anymore. The window has closed and now it's too late." Or perhaps we have seen protest signs in the paper at rallies for climate change with hourglass symbols on them. The hourglass has flipped and unless we radically change our ways, the window will be closing and soon it will run out of sand. We will

have missed the window of opportunity to participate in God's redeeming actions. And it is here, I believe, where the trap door of the parable unlatches, and we fall through to a deeper level.

You see, when Jesus was a child the rabbis would tell a lot of parables about God providing windows of blessing through a fictitious character named Eleazar of Damascus. Who is Eleazar of Damascus? Eleazar of Damascus was Abraham's right hand servant—mentioned once in our bibles in the book of Genesis. The rabbis taught that whenever God would want to bless someone, God would have Abraham send his servant, Eleazar of Damascus to do so. And so the rabbis made up stories about sightings where Eleazar of Damascus would come to them, always incognito. Some days disguised as a farmer, or a seamstress, or the guest sitting next to you in the pew at church. The rabbis would say that we have to keep our eyes open if we are going to catch the blessing of Eleazar of Damascus. I mention this because if we were to translate Eleazar's Hebrew name into Greek it would be the name Lazarus.

God's blessing coming in the disguise of a beggar. And so, when the rich man points up to heaven and tells Abraham to send his servant Lazarus to get him water or warn his friends, he is asking for a blessing. But the irony is that every day the rich man saw Lazarus sitting outside his own gate, and he missed the blessing. It turns out the rich man needed Lazarus far more than Lazarus needed the rich man and tragically, the window closed, and he missed it.

Why did he miss it? Perhaps because he was too busy to pay attention, or too desensitized because of his privilege. Maybe wealth made him blind to the possibility that God might have a blessing for him through the face of an immigrant, or a child, or a beggar with sores.

A minister friend of mine was stuck at a stoplight one afternoon when she saw a beggar who held a cardboard sign with scripture verses on it. She looked over in his direction. And before she could get out a word, the beggar turned to her and said, "If you care for the poor among you, you will be blessed by the covenant of Abraham." She said after he said these words, there was something deep inside of her telling her there was nothing more important in that moment than to offer the man whatever she had. So she took a jar filled with spare change that she kept in her car, and emptied it all into his hands.

We pass by God's blessings every single day. But we must be careful, for these windows aren't open forever. Eventually, they close. So don't miss it. Please, don't miss it.