

# Main Street UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



**Luke 16:13-18, 19-31**  
**“There Is No *Sweet Jesus*, My Friend”**

July 27, 2014  
(7<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

**LUKE 16:13, 14-18, 19-31**  
**"THIS IS NO SWEET JESUS, MY FRIEND"**

		<b>B'1) v.13 Mammon And God (Use Of Money Reveals Ultimate Loyalty/ Trust) (6:2).</b>		
		<i>//Mt. 6:24, Use Money/Stuff, But Don't Serve/Worship It As God</i>		
13	a	No one can serve two masters.	Two Masters Not Possible For Slaves	
	b	Either the one he hates	Hates	
	c	and the other he loves,	Loves	Love God
	c'	or the one he is devoted to	Devoted	
	b'	and the other he despises.	Despises	
	a'	<u>You</u> cannot serve God and MAMMON.	God And Mammon (Idolatrous Power) To Cling To Possessions Is To Isolate From God, Now And Later	

**B'. 16:14-18 JESUS EXPOSES HIS ADVERSARIES ON TWO COUNTS.**

*After Honor (14:7-14), Exclusivity (15:1-2), Mammon (16:13)*

**1) v.14 Pharisees' Love Of Money, Reveals Heart.** Pharisees Assume Wealth Indicates God's Blessing,

Also Believed Tragedy Is A Sign Of God's Displeasure

14	The Pharisees, who were <i>lovers of money</i> , heard all this, and <i>scoffed</i> at him (his words above in v. 13).	Polemical Term, 1 Tim. 6:10, Worship Mammon, Test. Jud. 18:2-6, 19:1 <i>Love Money = Stingy When It Comes To Poor (4 Macc. 2:8-9)</i> 23:35 On Cross, "You cannot serve God and Mammon." //18:24-26 <i>Lit. turn up their noses at him, Ridicule Jesus' Last Words</i>
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**2) v.15 Jesus Exposes Their Perverse Values And Scoffs At Them.** Seek Money/Honor

No Pretense Before God, Outer Appearances Of Righteousness Are Deceiving

15	But he said to them, a "You are 'those who justify yourselves b <u>before men,</u> ' c but <b>God</b> knows your hearts, b' For what is exalted <u>among men</u> a' is an abomination in the sight of God."	<i>//11:37-44, 7:30, Self-Sufficient, Independent</i> Justify Yourselves Before Men God Knows Heart Among Men Abomination (Greed, Lust, Idolatry) vv.19-31 Reversal, Wealth Is Ambiguous Sign, Only Knowledge Of Heart Counts To Say This Publically Was To Shame/Discredit Them
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**2') vv.16-17 The New Situation Of The Inbreaking Kingdom.** New Option, Universal Access

Time Of Promises, Now A *New Thing* = Kingdom Life In Jesus, Acts 13:28-39

16	a "The law the prophets were b until John; c since then the good news of the kingdom of <b>God</b> is preached, c' and <i>everyone</i> is urgently invited to enter.	Law John Kingdom of God All Invited/Pressed John's Preaching Law v.31, Mt. 5:18, No Laxity Sec. Dt. 15, Ruth 2 On Care Of The Poor In The Law Permanent Binding Union; The Kingdom Does Not Do Away With Moral Law Men Could Easily Toss Wives Away To Remarry
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**1') v.18 Pharisees' Serial Divorce/ Remarriage, Reveals Heart (Jewish Male Perspective Only).**

v. Pharisees Again! Demonstration Of Law's Permanence

18	"Every one who divorces his wife and marries another/ commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.	<i>// Mt. 19:9, Indictment No. 2, Illustration of v.17b</i> Abomination, Technically Exiting A Marriage To Remarry Adultery Is A Double, Mixed Bond, A Divided Loyalty Ex. 20:14, Not Free From Moral Restraints, Entering A Marriage In Jewish tradition idolatry/love of money/divorce are often joined under <i>abomination</i> (v.15). To Sunder The Kingdom From Law/Prophets Has Disastrous Effects, The Kingdom Takes Up/Preserves The Law How A Greedy, Lustful, Self-Righteous, Resistant-to-grace Life Ends = vv.19-31 Jesus Appeals Both To Love Of God And Fear Of Punishment As Motives Goal = Love God, Show Evidences: Generous With Money, Honest In Heart, Faithful In Marriage, Open To Misery Of Others
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**A' vv.19-31 PARABLE OF LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN'S BROTHERS.** \_\_\_\_\_ **Makes Us Squirm**  
vv.19-26 ILLUSTRATES vv.14-15

**1) vv.19-23 THE GREAT DIVIDE: THIS LIFE & THE NEXT.** \_\_\_\_\_ **Tableau, Luke Only // 6:20, 24**  
**Four Three-Line Stanzas, Chiasm = a-b // b'-a'**

**This Life: A Great Divide.** \_\_\_\_\_ **Ancient Genre: Reversal Stories Common In That Day, 6:20, 24**

19 a There was a rich man, **Dives (Lt. rich man), //v.14a, Prosperous: Apparently Blessed By God**  
who was clothed in purple and fine linen, **Royal? Well-Clothed: Opulent Egyptian Linen Underwear**  
and who feasted sumptuously every day. **Misses Counsel Of 14:13-14, Way Overdone! Fat and Happy: Excess**

20 b And at his gate lay (was thrown) a poor man named Lazarus (*God helps*), full of sores, **Cursed By God?**  
who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; **1 Jn. 3:17, Hungry: Never Speaks**  
moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. **Scavenger Licked By Scavengers! 1 Kgs. 14:11, Unclean**  
**Lam. 4:5, Bubble Of Self-Indulgence, Lazarus Invisible**

**The Next Life: A Great Reversal & A Great Divide.** \_\_\_\_\_ **Folklore Motifs: descent, reversal, rich punished**

22 b' The poor man died **Death Strikes Both Men, In A Crisis The Rich Man Took No Action**  
and was carried by the angels **No Mention Of Burial Rites/Honor Issue, Garbage Pile: Carrion**  
to Abraham's bosom. **6:20 Blessing, Euphemism For Heaven, Luke 1:73**

a' The rich man also died **All Die: Two Different Fates**  
and was buried. **Passive Voice = By Others**

23 And in Hades, **being in torment**, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off and Lazarus in his bosom. **10:15**  
**So, Wealth Is Not Necessarily A Sign Of Righteousness, Nor Poverty Of Evil**

**2) vv.24-26 THE GREAT DIVIDE & REVERSAL EXPLAINED.**

**Chiasm = a-b'a'**

**a) v.24 Send Lazarus To Cross The Chasm.** \_\_\_\_\_ **Rich Man Shut Himself Off, Now Permanent**

24 And he called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, **3:8-14, A Jew, Showed No Mercy In Life**  
and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; **Send Lazarus On An Errand**  
for I am in anguish this flame." **3:17, God Opposes The Self-Exalted, Self-Sufficient**  
**Experiences Pain Of Lazarus, Only Worse**

**b) v.25 The Great Reversal: God's Justice In The Next Life.**

25 But Abraham said, **Outside/Inside Reversal**  
a "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received good things, **Child Is No Guarantee, 1:53**  
b and Lazarus in like manner evil things; **//4 Ezra 7:36**  
b' but now he is comforted here,  
a' and you are **in anguish**." **Proud = An Abomination To God, Victim Of This Own Choices**  
**1 Enoch 96:5-6, Salvation Lay Just Outside His Gate!**

**a') v.26 No Crossing The Chasm Fixed By God.** \_\_\_\_\_ **Chasm Endures, Too Late To Repent**

26 And besides all this, between *us* and *you* a great chasm has *been* fixed (passive = by God), **Opposition**  
in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able,  
and none may cross from there to us." **Like The Gate During His Life**

**Gap Bridgeable Now, Not Then; On The Divide, See Enoch 102-103**

**1') vv.27-31 THE GREAT DIVIDE: LOOKING BACK TO THIS LIFE AND SCRIPTURE.**

**Rich Man Now The Beggar, vv.27-31 ILLUSTRATES vv.16-18**

**Miracle And Scripture: Part I.** \_\_\_\_\_ **An Evangelist In Hell, No To His Requests**

27 a And he said, "Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, **a-b // a'-b' Stairstep**  
28 for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, **Still Only Concerned About His Equals, His Club**  
lest they also come to **this place of torment**. **Still Sees Lazarus As His Lackey, Inferior Servant**

29 b But Abraham said, **"No mo errands, rich man!" Torment = Absent From Good Forever**  
"They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." **Excuse = "Had only someone warned me! If I'd only seen a miracle."**  
**v.17, Dt. 15:7, 30:11-14, Scripture =God's Voice**  
**Is. 58:6-7, Ezek. 16:49, Not Take No For An Answer (v.30)**

**Miracle And Scripture: Part II.** \_\_\_\_\_ **Dt. 10:8, 24:19-21, 27:19, Ps. 94:6, Is. 1:7, Jer. 22:3, Zech 7:10**

30 a' And he said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." **Special Privilege**  
**Did His Brothers Repent? Insights On Conversion Resistance**  
31 b' He said to him, **Kingdom Open To All, Laws On The Poor Still In Force**  
"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, **Synagogue Copy, Scripture's Warning Are Sufficient**  
neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead." **No Right To Demand A Miracle**

### A Brief Treatment Of Luke 16:14-31

This text is the second half of a large unit (16:1-31) with a concentric structure (A. vv. 1-8, B. vv.9-13 // B' vv.14-18, A' vv.19-31). It opens and closes with parables about a *rich man* (A//A'). The first central unit (B) is a three stanza treatment of mammon and death (v.9), mammon and truth (vv.10-12), mammon and love (v.13). The second (B' vv.14-18) is a controversy in which Jesus exposes the Pharisees love of money (mammon) and serial monogamy (lust). The link between B/B' is the challenge, "No one can serve two masters.... You cannot serve God and mammon," to which the Pharisees respond with scoffing (1. v.14), which leads to Jesus' corrective teaching on God's knowledge of the heart (2. v.15), the new reality of the kingdom as regards the law (2' vv.16-17), and a charge against serial monogamy as lust (1' v.18). The topics of greed (v.14), immorality (v.18), and idolatry (v.13) were associated in Jewish moral discourse (e.g. *Test. Judah* 18:2-19:1). The God who knows the heart invites all into a new relationship where we learn to trust God with security needs (money) and our desire for human love (sex) in ways that are good for us and others, thus fulfilling the law (v.17). Greed is resisted through the discipline of generosity, lust through fidelity, and idolatry through worship. We fulfill God's good demands in a secure relationship with Jesus. Do we believe this can happen? The subsequent parable of the rich man and Lazarus demonstrates the blinding power of a self-indulgent lifestyle, how it chokes off compassion. To use money only for the self and its distorted desires is hellish, now and later. Repent before it's too late!

Jesus' poem ends with a forced choice of loyalty and love in v.13: God or money? The response of the Pharisees, who assumed wealth is an unambiguous sign of God's approval, is to mock Jesus (v.14), an activity repeated at the cross (23:35). Their reaction is his occasion for further teaching. That he does not abandon his opponents but teaches them is a form of love. They too are invited to have hearts laid bare and enter the new world of the kingdom. His first reply (v.15) has a 5:1 concentric form (a-b-c-b'-a') with *God knows your hearts* at the center. They play to the wrong audience (*before men... among men*), and what they value is hated by God. Jesus mocks them and their form of Judaism. His second reply (2' vv.16-17) has a 6:2 concentric form (a-b-c//c'-b'-a') with the kingdom and its entry at the center (c//c') and references to John (b//b') and the enduring law (a//a') in the frames. Jesus is a doorway into the life of God where the human heart is changed and God's will fulfilled. His final challenge (1' v.18) shows their use of multiple wives (lust) parallels their love of money. This verse does not technically forbid divorce but remarriage afterwards. Jesus is opposed to men trading in wives to satisfy lust; it's adultery.

The parable (A. vv.19-31) is an imaginative warning about a life of self-indulgence that ignores the call of compassion at the doorstep. The literary device of a trip to the underworld and the imagery of Hades (i.e. abode of the dead) draws from a pool of stock imagery (e.g. *1 Enoch* 22, *Myth of Orpheus*, *Gallus* and *Catapulus*) and is not a literal description of the details of hell. The point of Jesus' story is that the rich man did not fulfill the Scriptural call (Dt. 15:7-11) not to harden his heart to the poor, and when he died thinking he was blessed, his status was reversed. The surface structure is a 3:1 chiasm (1-2-1') with an explanation of reversal (v.25) at the center. The first section presents a tableau (vv.19-20) which is reversed at death (vv.22-23). The wretched Lazarus (presumably unclean and under God's curse) now leans on Abraham's chest, while the nameless rich man is in torment. The historical gulf between the rich man's table and Lazarus misery at the gate is now fixed. At death our fate is sealed. Lazarus is not a *step-and-fetch it*, either for a cool drink (v.24) or an evangelistic mission to family (vv.27-28). "Go to synagogue," said Abraham, "hear God's Word as the scrolls are read." Miracles are not on demand for busy elites who claim to need more evidence. All we need is in the book and sitting at our doorstep.

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## THIS IS NO *SWEET JESUS*, MY FRIEND

*“For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”*

An invitation to counter-cultural faith.

L U K E 1 6 : 1 5 b

A man once asked the Lord about heaven and hell. “I will show you hell,” said the Lord, and they went into a room with a large pot of stew in the middle. It smelled delicious, but round the pot sat desperate people, starving, emaciated. All were holding spoons with extra-long handles which reached into the pot, but because the handle was longer than their arms, they couldn’t get the stew to their mouths. Their suffering was terrible.

“Now I will show you heaven.” Here was the same pot of stew, the same long-handled spoons, but here the residents were well-nourished, talking and happy. The man looked bewildered. “It’s simple,” said the Lord. “Here they feed each other.”<sup>1</sup>

Jesus spoke much about hell, always in vivid and terrifying images that serve as warnings to avoid it. For all the sophisticated arguments of theologians to banish this doctrine or soften its impact, it stands as part of the apostolic faith we inherited from the early church.<sup>2</sup> The official teaching of the United Methodist Church includes a statement on eternal judgment. Modern neglect does not cancel the ancient truths of classic faith. It’s neglected by liberals who can’t stomach it; it’s ignored by

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<sup>1</sup> Edited, B. Cavanaugh, *The Sower’s Seeds* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1990), 33-34.

<sup>2</sup> For a philosophical, theological defense of hell, see Jerry Walls, *Hell: The Logic of Damnation* (Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame Press, 1992). For an exegetical, theological approach, see Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News* (Wheaton, ILL: Victor, 1992). John Wesley’s Sermon 112, “The Rich Man And Lazarus” is found at <http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/the-sermons-of-john-wesley-1872-edition/sermon-112-the-rich-man-and-lazarus>. See also Sermon 73, “On Hell” at the same sight. For a systematic review of all that Wesley taught on hell, see Thomas Oden, *John Wesley’s Teaching, Volume 2: Christ and Salvation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 298-302.

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**Luke 16:14-31 . . . . . 6**

populists who want to remain psychologically positive to please the masses, but do not say it's not there in the deposit because it is.

It's only two sentences, and the language is simple enough. The first sentence describes our current situation and begins as a formal confession of the church, "*We believe* all men (and women) stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and at the last day." Our evaluation from above is constant, as is divine grace and help; every day matters because every day is a day closer to your death. The second sentence describes a divided future and begins with the same formula, "*We believe* in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal and *the wicked to endless condemnation*."<sup>3</sup> One life and one of two destinies. As a church we officially reject universalism, the teaching that in the end all will turn to God. Our life, what we believe and how we live it, has moral weight and eternal consequences precisely because we are made in God's image, and God is committed to restoring his image in all who will cooperate, which is why there's a cosmic garbage dump and scrap pile for those who steadfastly resist the pull of divine love. Life is a serious business that ends in death and judgment. You want your life to be always pointed towards Jesus Christ and to believe in him in order to follow him into a new way of being human. And then, at death- however it comes- your probationary period is over and your destiny fixed, which is what the loaded phrase *now and at the last day* means. Every person you pass has one of two destinies. They are either pointed towards Jesus or away from him.<sup>4</sup> If we see that, we will find creative ways to invite others to consider the path of Jesus. If we do not, there will be little passion in the church for sharing this faith and much concern about institutional survival. One life and two possible destinies: one glorious in which we will be perfectly restored in resurrection bodies, one disastrous in which some will be forever distorted apart from anything that is good and holy and lovely as described in the church's loaded phrase *endless condemnation*, the details of which we do not know. So says Jesus; so says a faithful church. It's not a joke; the stakes are high, and your response is your destiny.

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<sup>3</sup> "The U.M. Confession of Faith, Article XII: The Judgment and The Future" State," (*The United Methodist Book of Discipline 2012*, 67). This is one of the places where the infusion of EUB doctrine at our 1968 merger strengthened our earlier *Articles of Religion* which did not contain such an explicit statement.

<sup>4</sup> On the imagery of bounded and centered sets as metaphors for conversion, see Michael Yoder, et. al., "Understanding Christian Identity In Terms Of Bounded And Centered Set Theory In The Writings Of Paul G. Hiebert," *TRINJ 30NS* (2009), 177-188.

Hell is a distasteful doctrine in an age of hyper-tolerance. It’s neglected and soft-pedaled because it has- at times I admit- been misused by preachers and parents alike issuing personal threats. But it’s part of our faith, and if we do not teach it, we deprive people of a valuable moral and spiritual resource in the battle against sin and evil. The English preacher J.C Ryle made this comparison:

“The watchman who keeps silent when there is a fire is guilty of gross neglect. The doctor who tells us we are getting well when we are dying is a false friend, and the minister who keeps back hell from his people is neither a faithful nor a charitable man.”<sup>5</sup>

If Jesus Christ did not deliver divine revelation on this issue, where else he can be trusted? The most-quoted verse from the New Testament contains a clear reference to this alternative destiny, “For God so loved he world that he gave his only-begotten Son, that whosoever believes in him *should not perish* but have everlasting life.”<sup>6</sup> The love of God the Father, the sending of God the Son and his death on the cross, and the reality of eternal life are all set in hopeful opposition to one terrible alternative, which is *to perish*.

**TURNING TO THE TEXT**

**The Confrontive Jesus (vv. 14-18)**

“You cannot serve God and Money.” So said Jesus. A man or woman can only have one God with a *Capital G*, only one ultimate concern, and *Money* or *Mammon* has rival spiritual power because of all it promises. For this saying Jesus was mocked by a band of Jewish religious leaders, the Pharisees, who believed- with many others in their day- that wealth was an unambiguous sign of divine approval and that poverty-likewise- a sign of divine displeasure. Life was a morality play, and it was an easy way to keep score between the good guys and the bad guys. Verse 14, “The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and *turned up their noses* at him.”<sup>7</sup> It was the lovers of money versus one who loved them.

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<sup>5</sup> Michael Green, *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1990), 185.

<sup>6</sup> John 3:16.

<sup>7</sup> A literal reading of the Greek word *exemuktepizon*.

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What must it have been like to see people through the eyes of Jesus, perfect love and perfect understanding? A Cat-scan of the soul with every glance. The Jim Carey movie *Liar, Liar* turns this theme into a comedy, but with Jesus it was no laughing matter. The Pharisees publicly mocked him, and he spoke to them the unvarnished truth in reply. It was a power encounter, one vision of life against another, one spiritual force against another. The Pharisees were playing to the wrong audience; God knew it and hated it. They were confident prosperity was a sign of divine approval; Jesus did not hold back his challenge, “You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”

Biblically speaking, *abomination* is a strong word. It means unholy, ungodly, worthy of destruction, polluted, evil, idolatrous, impure, devilish, all things hated by God. There was not a stronger word for Jesus to use in his condemnation. He claimed to have the mind of God on the matter, and it was the equivalent of warning the Pharisees that they were headed for hell. The emotion behind his words was anger at the delusion of sin and at the pride of these men. They truly believed what they believed, but they were dead wrong. Sincerity for all its worth is no guarantee of truth. If it’s popular and the way the world is tending, beware. How else could it be in a world that builds its security around independence from God? We honor the famous; God honors the faithful. We defer to the rich; God delights in the righteous. We praise intelligence; God honors obedience. We aim at power; God calls for purity. We aim at being served; God calls us to the lowly life of service and simplicity of lifestyle. Gospel values will put you at cross-purposes with the world, particularly in the value we North Americans give to beauty, outward appearances, education, wealth, power, pleasure rights, control, predictability and entertainment.

The hope of the Pharisees was not to continue in their mockery of Jesus but to be shaken loose from their mental bondage by his hard challenge. This is no *sweet Jesus*. *Sweet Jesus* is a sappy, sentimental distortion of the biblical portrait. This is a Jesus who gets in your face and challenges your most cherished suppositions about how life works and who has God’s approval. A Jesus who loves enough to say, “Wake up! You’ve believed a lie and are headed away from God! What you value is an abomination in the sight of God.” Traditional religion always tends towards comfort and to painting its own values with the hues of heaven. The Pharisees would have made good cocktail party clergymen because they shared the value that earthly wealth was simply God’s blessing on the righteous. Unless you’ve been stopped dead in your tracks and left profoundly disturbed, you may not have met the biblical Jesus. Sweet Jesus will pat you on the head; biblical Jesus will publicly ridicule some of the

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things you most hold dear. Sweet Jesus will coddle you; biblical Jesus will expose you. To do business with the real Jesus is, initially at least, highly humiliating.

Because Jesus urgently invited *everyone* to enter the reign of God’s love and power without regard to their moral qualifications, he was accused of lowering the standards. So behind verse 16, if we put the emphasis on the word *everyone*, we can hear the echo of a criticism of Jesus, “The law and the prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and *everyone* is urgently invited to enter.” Sounds on the surface like a lowering of standards, as if biblical revelation- the law and the prophets with their demands for an ethical lifestyle- are now put aside. Not so; verse 17 corrects that misunderstanding, “But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away, for one dot of the law to become void.” In John the Baptist as the preview followed by Jesus as the main attraction, something fresh is available from God; people can come under God’s benevolent rule directly through Jesus Christ without any prior qualifications- moral, ritual or legal. Want to come in? You’re welcome. But the intention of this wonderful availability is not to deny the righteous demand of God expressed in the law and the prophets but to fulfill them in a new relationship. If you enter God’s kingdom through Jesus, you will be born anew and given a new heart to obey what God requires. First a new relationship, then a new obedience. First grace, then the works that flow from grace. You will never be good enough to come in on your own; come in anyway. Trust Jesus Christ to do in you what you cannot do for yourself. The Pharisees lifted themselves up by keeping others who would not meet their religious standards out; Jesus drew the circle large and gave people a new desire to walk with God in obedience. Jesus’ values are different from the Pharisees; he thinks differently than they do about money, about religion, and also about marriage and sexuality.

Some commentators say that verse 18 is misplaced; that it sticks out like a sore thumb and is unrelated to its context which is about the misuse of wealth. It is the most absolute form of the divorce saying in the New Testament; there are no exceptions for adultery or abandonment as in Matthew and Paul. “Every one who divorces his wife and marries another, commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.” And, technically speaking, it does not speak to divorce so much a serial remarriage.

About this difficult verse I make the following comments. First, within the kingdom and among those who live under God’s reign in Jesus Christ, divorce is unthinkable. For a divorce to happen, it means one or both parties have moved out from under the reign of God into an independent course of life. Someone has

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hardened their heart against God and their mate. My guess is that over half of divorces among Christians could be stopped and marriages healed through early intervention, but most wait too late to seek help and rush to lawyers too quickly.

Secondly, this saying is not aimed at women, who in first century Judaism did not have the same right of divorce, but only at men- and a particular group at that, the Pharisees. Jesus earlier unmasked their worship of money; he now unmasks their lust in throwing away one wife to marry another and another, which the law allowed. Jesus is against deliberate serial monogamy, against marrying one person after another as if you were trading cars for a better model. Women are not to be treated like that. They were lovers of money in order to be lovers of pleasure, and the sign of that was thinking of one woman after another as a lust object which you use in marriage and then toss in divorce.

Thirdly, that Jesus had a very high view of marriage and of the creation bond formed between a man or woman, a bond that could not finally be undone by a legal action. When a man and woman come together, in or outside marriage, a bond is created, that will be either eternally enjoyed or eternally endured. To *adulterate* something is to mix it with something else so that it is divided and lacking in integrity. Divorce cancels the legal arrangements; it does not undo the bond which carries over and adulterates the next bond so that people become cross-bonded, linked intimately at a deep level with more than one person. The standards of the kingdom of God are not lower than the law and the prophets but so-much higher. We must rebuild a pro-marriage culture in our churches; we must challenge easy divorces; we must help hurting people stop the conspiracy of silence about marriage and draw on the resources of the church to keep and enjoy keeping their marriage vows. We are to do all in our power to uphold a high and holy vision of marriage in a broken world.

Now if you are divorced and remarried, it's a mistake for you to take this verse as a wholesale condemnation of your life. Divorce, tragic as it is, is not the unforgivable sin. Some are even sadly necessary because one of the partners has become hard-hearted, violent or given themselves over to some addiction or repeated infidelity. *Everyone* is urgently invited into God's kingdom in Jesus, but once inside, the standards are high because we are eager to fulfill the will of God. If you are a first century Jewish Pharisee, and I don't see any of them here today, then you can apply verse 18 directly to your situation. The rest of us will just have to overhear Jesus' condemnation of this historical group and ask for wisdom to apply his words to our situation twenty centuries later. One thing stands clear; it is an abomination for men and women who claim to know God to treat each other like cars lots where

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a trade is always available for any with a wandering eye. The love of money and lust are often twins. This is why fasting is often a key to reigning in other out-of-control desires. If you reign in your belly by enduring the hunger and turning to God in prayer, you will find the self-control and humility you learn has spill-over effects in other areas. That is not just a religious theory; it's my testimony. Regular fasting is one of the disciplines that keeps me open to the comprehensive healing effects of God's grace which I continue to need.

The Pharisees were not just wrong about money. They were also wrong about how people related to God and also about marriage and sexuality. Money, religion, and pleasure: the big three, and the Pharisees were headed in the wrong direction on them all; they were sliding downhill towards the unpleasant end of abomination. The *wrath* of Jesus is that he confronted them; the *love* of the Jesus is that he warned them; the *grace* of Jesus is that he instructed them in the truth so that they might be converted and find a new destiny. He didn't want them to go to hell or he would not have bothered to respond. They mocked him; he taught them; he loved his enemies because he saw their hellish future as if it were a feature film. He diagnosed their cancer and applied the chemotherapy of divinely revealed truth. Remember, "what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God." We need to be highly skeptical of the world's agenda for our lives. If it's universally popular, be wary! But Jesus did not stop with a devastating diagnosis of their greed and lust, he went on to engage their imaginations in a vivid tale, including an underworld journey.

**A Parable Of Reversal (vv. 19-31)**

Rabbi Joshua traveled to Rome in the third century. He was astounded at the magnificent buildings, but especially by the care lavished upon statues, which were covered with exquisite cloth to protect them from summer heat. As he was admiring the beauty of Roman art, a beggar plucked at his sleeve asking for a crust of bread. The sage looked at the statues and turning to the beggar said, "Here are statues covered with expensive clothes. And here is a man, created in the image of God, covered with rags. A civilization that pays more attention to statues than to human beings shall surely perish."<sup>8</sup> And it did. What Rabbi Joshua said of Rome, Jesus said of the unnamed rich man in the parable now before us.

Our tale starts with a snapshot of two lives in close proximity. Three lines are

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<sup>8</sup> Gerald Fuller, *Stories for All Seasons* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1996), 128.

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given to the plutocrat, three to the wretch. “There was a rich man/, who was clothed in purple and fine linen/, and who feasted sumptuously *every day*.” Egyptian linen, known as *woven air* was his undergarment, his robe a royal purple. Custom made, magnificent to behold. And food? Not food but *cuisine*. A blessed man, or so it appears, enjoying the best of the best. His home is protected by a gate from the riff-raff, an island of opulent indulgence and personal display, a life of sensuality and self-satisfaction. The kind of life many aim at, a life to be envied. He is unnamed; he is in this sense *every rich man* who sits on the isolated throne of self wondering what his next pleasure or leisure will be. “God is good,” he whispers to himself.

Each morning a wretch was dropped at his gate, not clothed with finery but with running sores. A cripple, a sick man, but he has a name- *Lazarus*, which means *God helps*. In the conventional theology of the day which strictly correlated earthly status with levels of divine approval, Lazarus was seen to be at the bottom, either because of his own or an ancestor’s sin. He is a man under divine curse. Just look at him; you can see it with your own eyes.

In those days of no napkins, great hunks of absorbent bread were use to wipe food and grease from the hands during a feast, then cast under the table. It was *the feast of beggars*. Perhaps a servant tossed Lazarus a piece from time to time. It was his daily begging post. His faith consisted of placing himself in the path of man who, by Jewish law, was supposed to show him charity.<sup>9</sup> If there had been no food at all, Lazarus would not have returned. The remark about the dogs is intended to mark Lazarus as ritually unclean from a Jewish religious perspective. Packs of dogs competed with him for food, and when they got none licked his salty, puss laden sores. Two portraits. A blessed man, a cursed man, the up-and-in and the down-and-out. A great divide in this life. Which one would you rather be?

The first surprise is what happens when Lazarus dies of disease or starvation. No mention is made of burial; perhaps he was left for the dogs or tossed on a garbage pile. To be unburied in that world was the greatest dishonor. What is invisible is that angels came and escorted him to the great banquet where he lay close enough to Abraham to to put his head against his chest. The Father of all the Jewish people now shares intimate fellowship with Lazarus. He is valued by God and given an place of honor. How can this be? I thought Lazarus was being punished during his life. Wrong. External circumstances are no indicator of moral worth or of true faith. The second surprise is not that the rich man died, but his fate afterwards. His funeral was

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<sup>9</sup> Deut. 15:1-11.

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**Luke 16:14-31 ..... 13**

likely as indulgent as his life. The punch line is verse 23, “And in Hades, *being in torment*, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off and Lazarus in his bosom.” At that moment his whole understanding of life was exposed as a lie. It was an unpleasant surprise for a once confident man. That scene repeats itself daily. I have no doubt that in my ministry I have buried such people.

Now because this is a parable, a fictional story with realistic intent, I’m leery to mine it too deeply for details about the afterlife, but this much is clear. The person is conscious; eternity is fixed at death, and it is characterized on the one hand by intimacy and bliss and on the other by torment and regret. There is no third, neutral option. Hades was then understood as the abode of the dead, and whether we see this as an intermediate state before the final judgment or not does not matter.<sup>10</sup> The judgment of God on the worth of both lives is made clear. Their status is reversed. The simplest conclusion is that earthly appearances are often deceiving. Another is that wealth and poverty cannot be simply correlated with the blessing and curse of God. Wealth does not imply moral superiority, and poverty and pain do not necessarily imply moral and spiritual inferiority. The worth of a life is not determined by circumstances in this life but by the true judgment God at death. We live before an audience of One. So do not envy the rich, and do not despise the poor. Keep your eyes on the prize. Live with an inner eye to God and always practice compassion.

Each and every day our decisions shape our character. An impulse become a thought, a thought becomes an action, an action a habit, a habit a character, and a character a trajectory to ones destiny in or out of the kingdom of God. The next scene in verse 24 through 26 is revealing on this account. The rich man’s character has not changed. It has been fixed forever and frozen in the flames. He still sees Lazarus as his inferior who can be sent on an errand for his comfort. In torment he restates his claim on his Jewish heritage and asks Abraham to tell *his boy Lazarus* to provide a bit of heaven-to-hell curb service. People in life had jumped at his slightest wish, but no more. In the language of Old South, Abraham said, “Lazarus ain’t gonna run no mo’ yo’errands, rich man.”<sup>11</sup> The class and race divisions we so easily assume and then tolerate will be upended and undone in God’s kingdom.

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<sup>10</sup> See I. Howard Marshall, “How did the early Christians know anything about future states?” *Journal Of European Baptist Studies*, 9, No. 3, May 2009, 7-23.

<sup>11</sup> Dr. Clarence Jordon of the famous *Cotton Patch Gospels* as quoted in R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke: The New Interpreter’s Bible, Volume IX* (Nashville, TN: Abington Press, 1995), 318.

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People often say to me, “But Pastor, isn’t everyone a child of God?”

“Yes, in a certain sort of general way, but many do not act like God’s kids, and that’s what matters, not genetic inheritance but family likeness.”

This explains why Abraham could call the rich man *Son*; he was still a Jew, but now a lost one, “But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.’” Part of the torment of hell is the remembrance of lost opportunities, all those times mercy could have been shown and wasn’t. Lazarus was the rich man’s hope for salvation; he was not deliberately cruel, just indifferent. Lazarus was an invisible piece of the landscape. Sins of omission and not just commission can condemn us. What we ought to do and don’t weigh as heavily before God as what we ought not to do and do anyway. One scholar comments:

“He knows the poor man’s name; he does not know Lazarus. His alms were cast-off clothing, toys that were no longer needed, time that satisfied a temporary curiosity, a five-dollar bill to ease his conscience. But to become involved with one inadequate person, to really share his problems, to live his heartache with him, and perhaps to endure the disappointment of failure, that was not to his liking.... He made only one mistake, he did not invite Lazarus in.”<sup>12</sup>

And now it’s too late. That gate that stood between them and divided their worlds has now become an uncrossable chasm. For persons who have had access to the Scriptures and to the faith- as this man did, there is no possibility of repentance after death. He was a Jew by heritage but not by faith and action, just as many who claim membership in the church are Methodist by family inheritance but show no fruits of faith. They take their values from the unexamined habits of the American culture rather than from God’s book and the fellowship of God’s people. It will be listed on their obituary that they were members of this church, and I will bury them with as much courtesy as I can muster, but neither the words in the paper or the words at the grave side will do them any good. For those who have never heard, we leave the door open to the mercy of God and the possibility of post-mortem faith.

There is a limit to God’s mercy; it will not coerce our free will. There are persons who by the distortion of their character through sin and the persistence of

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<sup>12</sup> Frederick Danker, *Jesus And The New Age* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton Publishing Co., 1976), 177.

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their rejection of love are fit for nothing but the garbage heap of the universe. They have become human shades when they could have been saints. God does not so much send them there as confirm the chosen trajectory of their lives, which is away from God forever. The hell of hell is that it changes no one. The saved grow in grace forever, and the lost are fixed in their corruption, frozen in sin and self-justification, forever blaming God for not giving them what they deserved. They eternally whine and think of themselves as unfairly victimized and not given enough evidence.

The final scene of our three-part parable is verses 27 through 31 where we return to issues this side of the grave. It's tempting to give the rich man a bit of credit for being concerned about his brothers, but that misses the point. Note that he is still only concerned about those who are *like him*, about his five brothers who likely live as royals in the same indulgent style, the implication being that if he had been warned that he would have turned around. There's no concern for those like Lazarus; the rich man still does not see the poor, only his circle of privilege. Behind his request is a veiled accusation that God had not given fair warning. Abraham's answer is instructive, "They have Moses and the prophets (who say much about the care of the poor), let them hear them." In other words, "Go to synagogue and listen; Scripture is enough; it's all God has to say." Lazarus appearing to them in a vision would be written off as bit of undigested food that brought on a bad dream.

But the rich man is persistent. He thinks he can have his way and save some shred of dignity. In his arrogance he even dares to contradict Abraham, "*No*, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead they will repent. Send a miracle. Do a divine trick. Get their attention. If they won't listen to Scripture, maybe a ghost or apparition will work! As men of status, they deserve something extra, Abraham." But a risen Lazarus would have nothing more to say than what Moses and the prophets have already said, which is love your neighbor and care for the poor at your door. God has nothing more to say, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead." Did the brothers repent? One day we will know, for we will be their companions in one of two places.

### CONCLUSION

Do not shut your heart to compassion, and if prosperous circumstances insulate you from direct contact with people in pain and misery, please rearrange your life because you're living in a fragile bubble. Nothing raises the questions for which our faith has answers like spending time with the poor and the unemployed and the addicted and

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the never-raised-right and the fatherless and the depressed and the ex-con and the lonely and the dying and the broken hearted and lonely of any class or status. That I am so often interrupted by people in great need is a great grace. It pulls me away from the books and the endless duties and into face-to-face encounters that draw on all I have learned. I cannot always meet their needs as they define them, but I can show kindness and courtesy to all. I can listen to their stories and pray and offer them Christ and the healing fellowship of this church, and sometimes I can meet their needs because of your generosity.

But at times, and I say this with trembling, I'm as direct as Jesus where sin and lifestyle issues are keeping them poor and in bondage. I recently asked a young woman who ticked me off, "Why is it that every time you find a few boyfriend I have to write a check to support another baby? I'm glad you're pro-life; have you ever considered pro-responsibility and pro-marriage?"

She looked at me in shock, "No one's ever spoken to me like that before!"

"Well, isn't it about time? If you want our food or help, then you need to follow our Jesus who has a better life for you than the one you're living. Why not become a woman of God and not just a baby-momma for some punk?"

Was I right, or was I wrong? Political correctness and hyper-tolerance is killing us. Compassion plus realism plus truth equals love, and Jesus was all three all the time. This is no *Sweet Jesus*, and he can only save us by shaking us loose from all the lies in which we are so easily entangled.

"We believe all men (and women) stand under the righteous judgment of Jesus Christ, both now and at the last day. We believe in the resurrection of the dead; the righteous to life eternal *and the wicked to endless condemnation*" (italics added).

What will you do with this teaching of Jesus and this doctrine of your church? I'm not threatening anyone. Like you I am a pilgrim and not home yet. But if Jesus and his church are true, there is no more important decision. Follow Jesus and learn the ways of love that are always close at hand.

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