

**Series: Lessons from the Lectionary**

**Today: Examining our Priorities**

**Text: Luke 16:19-31**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.  
Sunday, September 26, 2010  
First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

*Relentless*: That is the word I would describe the writer of this 16<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke. He is relentless in his attempts at helping us understand our responsibility as Christians to be good stewards of all that God has given us. Last week we looked at the *Parable of the Dishonest Steward*, and we learned about a day of reckoning; that the company we keep may determine the way we respond when that final day comes; and until that day we are called to manage all that God has given us to build a better world. Today we look at the *Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus* and we are challenged to examine our feelings about entitlement.

Entitlement is how most of us live our lives. We have been raised to believe that we deserve what we get. We believe that if someone has worked hard, they deserve good things. Likewise, we have been raised to believe that if someone is lazy, shiftless, and good for nothing, they get what they deserve: *nothing*. Such a view is not biblical. It is not even very rational.

I am reminded the story of two brothers. Michael was a successful businessman in New York City, and David took seasonal jobs at dude ranches, national parks, and resorts. Worried that his brother was wasting his life, Michael began to campaign to try and entice David with the so called ‘good life.’ He would send David photos with labels like, *my new sound system*, or *my new car*. The campaign ended when Michael received a poster from David showing a breathtaking view of Wyoming’s Grand Teton National Park. On the back of the poster David had written, “*MY BACK YARD.*”

The Pharisees in the time of Jesus thought they were entitled. It was their belief that money was a sign that they were blessed by God. Likewise, they believed that poverty was the direct result of God's curse. In order to challenge that belief system, Jesus tells them a parable about stewardship.

Luke suggests there are two different ways we can understand our responsibility to be good stewards of what God has given us: the way of the culture, and the way of the Bible. Culture suggests selfishness. The attitude is often expressed in statements like, "*I have worked hard for what I have, and I can do with it as I please.*" The Bible suggests that what we have is not ours in the first place. It is a gift from God. Culture says, "It's mine. I deserve it." The Bible says, "It is God's. How would God have me use it?"

The characters in the parable are a rich man, whom tradition calls Dives (from the Latin Vulgate translation) and a beggar who lies at the gate begging for food from the rich man's table. They are men who live in two different worlds. One is a world of wealth and privilege. The other is a world of grinding poverty and despair. If you were a Pharisee listening to this parable, it would only seem natural that the rich man would ignore the beggar. After all, the rich are blessed by God, and the poor are only getting what they deserve.

Jesus does not read the Bible in the same way as the Pharisees. He believes that those who are blessed with wealth have a special responsibility to the poor. Jesus was not opposed to wealth. This is not a parable about the evils of money. There is no judgment on the rich man for being rich. The judgment on the rich man has to do with his priorities. He chose to look after himself with the wealth that God had given him. He did not see himself as a steward of what God had given him to be used for the benefit of others.

In his commentary on this passage, Bruce Larson makes an intriguing observation. He says that most of us find it difficult to become involved in the needs of the poor because the problem is just too big. However, the rich man was not asked to solve the problem of poverty. He was simply asked to meet the beggar at the point of his need. Larson says that it is easy for us to have compassion for the human race and ignore the ills of those who are within our reach; the ones we can do something about. He tells a story with which most of us can identify.

It was early in his ministry when Bruce Larson was a pastor in Binghamton, New York. In addition to his pastoral duties, he served on the Board of Directors of a local rescue mission which helped the destitute and the chronically alcoholic.

One snowy day, a stranger appeared at his church wanting help. It turned out to be the son of a couple in the church he was serving; a boy who fit the description of the Prodigal Son several times over. The parents had taken him back many times, and they had finally given up. Larson complained to God, "*Listen Lord,*" he prayed. "*I can't take in every drunken beggar in Binghamton.*" No sooner had he uttered those words than he heard a still, small voice within him which seemed to say very clearly, "*I didn't ask you to take in every drunk; just this one.*"

Imagine the rich man's surprise when death comes. Since he had not used his wealth while he was alive to bring life, health, and joy to one of God's very own who was just outside his door, he is tormented in the afterlife while the poor man takes the honored seat at the banquet table in the Kingdom of God. However, culture's way is to remain arrogant to the end. The rich man assumes he can order God around. He assumes that God will do something for him in death even though he was unwilling to do something for God in life. He is still giving the orders, calling the shots, but God is not responding. Arrogance is part of the sin which now separates him from God.

The Bible's way has led men and women to use all they have to the benefit of others. You may recall that Albert Schweitzer was converted by this parable. He believed that Africa was the poor beggar at the door of Europe, and he left the academic world where he had earned five Ph.D.'s to care for his poor brothers and sisters at the gate in Lamborene.

Lucy Luc was also influenced by this parable (Source: Wall Street Journal, May 15, 1992). Her story was in the Wall Street Journal several years ago. At that time she was a 34 year old woman who lived in an affluent suburb of New York City, and she responded to a request of her church to be part of a team which made midnight runs into the city to help the homeless. Her story goes like this.

It was a particularly cold winter night, and the team packed the van full of lunches, soup, hot chocolate, donated clothes, sleeping bags and blankets. Her fellow workers were two other women and an older man.

Their first stop was Central Park at about 1:00 a.m. When the van pulled up, 50 homeless men and women descended on them. Lucy, who was a clothing buyer for Macy's department store, said she was terrified. The words of her friends kept ringing in her ears; that she was crazy to do this; that they were all drunks, or crazy, or addicts. She said she was too frightened to get out of the van, so she stayed inside passing clothes through the window. Then she had an epiphany.

As she handed the homeless the clothes, she watched them as they measured the garments against themselves saying that this was too small or too big and passing it to someone else. All of them were so gracious and appreciative, and it dawned on her: *"They are just people. It was exactly what happens at Macy's."* At the next stop she worked the hot chocolate cart, and

by 4:00 a.m. she was delivering sleeping bags and blankets to men who were huddled under overpasses.

She spent the rest of the day reflecting on her experience, both crying and laughing, until she and her husband went to a dinner party that night near her suburban home. While some at the party were moved by her experience, other's said that what she had done was just flat out stupid; that she was feeding the very people who were burglarizing their homes; that when we take care of the poor like that it is one more excuse for them not to get a job.

Lucy Luc reflected on the experience. She said her suburban friends look at her like she is different. She said she had lost her sense of boundaries because she now sees the poor as people, and this is a threat to some of her friends.

Culture's way or the Bible's way: the choice remains ours. Culture's way would tell us to be proud of what we have accomplished; that we are what we own. We've worked hard. We deserve it. The Bible's way reminds us that all we have belongs to God, and it challenges us to ask the difficult question: How would God have us use it?

At the end of the parable there is a warning. The rich man asks God to send someone to warn his brothers of their fate unless they change their ways to the Bible's way. He is certain that if someone appears to them from the dead, they will listen. However, God says no. They know what they are supposed to do. It is in the Law of Moses. What we have is not ours. It is a gift from God. It is on loan from God to be used as God might have it used, and if they don't believe in that Law, then it isn't likely they will believe anything. They will keep doing it their way, at the risk of losing their souls.

Culture's way, or the Bible's way? Which is your way?