**Luke 16:19-31** September 18, 2022

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*Luke 16:19[Jesus said to them,] “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

*22“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 24So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ 25But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’*

*27“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, 28for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ 29Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ 30‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ “*

Dear Friends in Christ,

**“What kind of return-On-Investment can I expect?”**

Maybe you’re not the money person in your house and have never asked that question—which is why you are not the money person in the house. And that is all good. We each have our strengths.

But it is a question that money conscious people ask—and let me state that being money-conscious is neither good nor bad in and of itself. Some people are careful with money because they are want to be good stewards of God’s gifts. That’s good! Other money conscious people make money into a god; that’s bad! Whether in a good way or bad, people who are aware of how money works will always ask themselves, “If I invest money in this mutual fund, or property, or CD, what can I expect to have at the end? More or less? A little more or a lot more?” There are other questions, to be sure, but this is foremost. In fact, even people who buy lottery tickets and play the slots are thinking, if not consciously asking themselves – “What kind of return-on-investment do I expect?” Regardless of how well informed or uninformed we are, we have expectations.

Today’s reading really is about this same question, not about money, but about life. What kind of return-on-investment should I expect from time, the ability, the money I pour into the pursuits of life?

**v.19a** ***[Jesus said to them,] “There was a rich man…”*** When Jesus starts a teaching session by saying, “There was a man…” he is speaking a formula. It’s like when we hear, “Once upon a time…” we know we are hearing a fairy tale. When we hear Jesus say, “There was a man…” we are hearing a parable. Now, to be clear, parables and fairy tales, are not the same thing and not very similar at all! In a parable Jesus tells us a realistic story that didn’t actually happen in order to teach us a point or two about our Christian lives.

**v.19b *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.”*** Jesus introduces us to a man who was not just rich, but rich enough not to have to work. And he wasn’t one of these closet millionaires who drives around in a used car and lives in an ordinary three bedroom house. No, this rich man lived splendidly. The Greek word (lamprwV) tells us that his life glittered like the life of a high-end influencer. He had the tailored sports wear, press appearances with camera flashes, whiter than white teeth. He had a mansion with all the conveniences, and nice ones at that, and on and on. This man not only had wealth, he knew how to use wealth to great effect. People noticed and were impressed.

**vv.20-21 *“At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.”***

Jesus sets up a contrast. The second man is not living splendidly. He is poor. He is starving. He is diseased. While anyone would envy the rich man, no one would ever want to be this man. We might feel pity for him, but we would never want to be him.

And yet Jesus dignifies him with a name, Lazarus. Jesus never gives the rich man a name. Think about that! That’s what it is to be loved by God. He knows!

Yet, in this world, some might think Lazarus unloved by God. The crumbs that you drop at supper time and call your pet over to clean up—this man dreamed about licking a bowl clean or getting the chewed off end of a hot dog. Disgusting? Just as disgusting is the medical attention he gets. Now when you think of dogs, you think of a pet who cuddles up next to you on cold winter days. Don’t think of them. These are the street dogs. We really don’t get the negative thoughts that would have gone through the minds of Jesus’ audience over dogs coming to lick Lazarus’ sores. Have you ever heard one of those stories about a little child in poverty and neglect, and how sometimes their toes get chewed on by rats?! Does that disgust you? That’s what the ancients thought of street dogs. And the fact that Lazarus was licked by these dogs made him… disgusting too.

So we have two men before us. When you were sixteen, thinking about what you wanted to do with life, who of these two men would you have said, “I need to follow his path”? This is how we decide—how we have decided!—what we do with life. We find impressive people and we follow them! Be careful!

**v.22 *“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried.”***

Two very different men with a very common denominator. Both die. You can do what you want, exercise all you want, eat the best you can, stay away from bad habits, you can even pray like King Hezekiah of the Old Testament and have God promise you an extra 15 years, but unless Jesus comes a second time in the next little bit, you are going to die. That’s Jesus’ point. What then?

But first pause to notice *how* Jesus states this unavoidable fact.

A little over a week ago, Queen Elizabeth II died, and, as is proper, the world sat up and took notice. The beggar Lazarus died and…God took notice! I don’t know if anyone else did. Maybe close family, if he had any. But most people were probably relieved that they wouldn’t have to look at that beggar on their way to the market. But God noticed. And as the angels of heaven rejoice over every sinner who repents, they rejoice over every believer who in Christ Jesus overcomes the world and enters eternal life.

Lazarus in heaven! God is not ashamed to be anyone’s God. All who call on the name of the Lord Jesus will be saved! And sometimes even the people who look least blessed by God, by God’s grace through faith, will be more blessed than any!

Meanwhile, the rich man who had awed and impressed the world around him, Jesus dismisses him as an afterthought. As if to say, “Oh yeah, forgot about him. That guy died, too.”

**v.23** And now we find out about returns on investments. ***“In hell, where he was in torment, [the rich man] looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.”***

The man who lived splendidly and caught everyone’s eyes discovers the return on his investment in the things of this world. Now, we need to remember this is a parable, and so we shouldn’t press every detail into a description of hevaen and hell. Yet in a general way this conforms to what Jesus specifically, and the Bible at large, frequently tell us about hell. Hell is the eternal place of torment and pain for all who reject God’s way while on this earth. In our day and age it’s almost cringe-worthy to mention it. We are almost allergic to bad news, and the news that our choices might have bad outcomes, and that sometimes it is an either/or and we can’t have it all. But you know what, Jesus needs us to know this! Whether the truth is popular or not, offensive or not, doesn’t determine whether he’s going to say it or not.

The returns this man got for his life are frightening! Jesus says that when we have achieved all that the world offers: the car, the house, the education, the travel, the retirement, the whatever, remember that if those were your measure of life, it will be like the smoke of a snuffed out candle. If we have been dazzled by living the dream, Jesus tells us the dream will end. It won’t all be like just, poof, over. There will be God’s judgment sentence of hell.

**vv.24-26 *“So [the rich man] called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’”***

The book of Hebrews tells us: *“We are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment”* (9:27). The conversation between the rich man and Abraham emphasizes that. At death, there is heaven or hell. There is no second chance. There is no middle ground, no purgatory. And the judgment that God pronounced upon the rich man is final and irreversible. This is the return-on-investment for those who focus their efforts and hopes on this world.

**vv.27-28 *“[The rich man] answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’”***

What the rich man had dismissed as the talk of overexcited preachers turned out to be true. And now he hopes that somehow, none of his own will end up in the same place. “Send Lazarus back to warn them!” If this rich man wanted to warn them, should we not too? Even with our own people who are drifting away? They need not to be coddled, but to be warned!

**v.29 *“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’”***

This man’s five brothers already have that which can keep them out of the torments of hell. ***“Moses and the Prophets!”*** Moses and the Prophets is the Jewish way of referring to what we call the Old Testament. The rich man’s brothers have all they need to be saved. They have God’s word.

Lest you think that Old Testament people had one faith and we another, elsewhere Jesus said this about Moses and the Prophets: *“You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me”* (J 5:39).

Abraham doesn’t say they have sharp intellects that can figure this out. Abraham doesn’t say that they are virtuous men, who, if they try really hard, can make it. Abraham doesn’t say that some sort of generic religion that different faiths share will get them to heaven. It won’t. Through the dialogue of the parable, Jesus directs all to the revealed Word of God. That Word of God is clear enough to be understood, and sufficient to save.

What the Bible says, that is where we are to be fully invested. And the center of what the Bible says—the Old Testament pointing forward and the New Testament pointing back—is Jesus Christ, our Savior from our sins.

It is becoming obvious what saved Lazarus. It was not his poverty—though there are some who think that that in itself is enough. It was not the many sufferings he endured in this world. Lazarus’ help lay in the same place as all believers of the Lord God of Israel. The Messiah’s, Jesus’, life is what saves. Faith and trust in what God says about him in this book is what connects us to his saving life.

**vv.30-31** But like so many people, the rich man objected that the Word of God just isn’t enough. ***“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”***

Jesus, through the words of Abraham, puts a stake in the coffin—not the coffin of the rich man or Lazarus—but the coffin of the notion that we need extra revelations from God, that God’s word written many centuries ago is not sufficient to the challenges of our time. “Maybe we need someone back from the dead!” some say. “Maybe some new revelation!” No. Just what is written here. This tells us everything we need to know.

It tells us where to invest ourselves, in Christ. It tells us how we stay strong in that truth—by staying in contact with God’s Word and Sacrament, and encouraging others to do so, too. It tells us how people invested in Christ live—by loving God first and our neighbors second. And it continually encourages us by reminding us of the final outcome of it all—just like what Jesus pictured in this parable of a nameless wealthy man and a beggar named Lazarus.

So now you know what kind of return-on-investment you can expect with your life. Amen.