

Radical Week 5
Lazarus at the Gate

- I. Let me ask you this morning, do you have a blind spot? I have many. For example, I have a major blind spot when it comes to décor. Some of my fellow husbands might relate to this. I will come home one evening and I will get that dreaded question. You know what it is, right? “So, honey, do you notice anything different in the room?” My pulse begins to race, I break out in a cold sweat and I begin to look around in a panic like I am on the show *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire* and the clock is ticking. “You vacuumed floor?” Her head shakes no. “The curtains, they are new?! I love them!” Again, head shaking “no” a little more vigorous this time. “The couch! It ties the whole room together! Perfect!” (using one of the few decorating terms I know) Now she is staring at me like I am a Neanderthal. She says, “You are kidding, right?! That is the same couch we have had since we were married.” So out of desperation, like a man falling off a cliff grasping for anything he can hold onto, I exclaim “Your hair! You got it cut! It’s beautiful! You look like a young Andie McDowell!” “No, I haven’t cut it since the beginning of summer. I said the room!” Where I sheepishly say “Can I have a lifeline and phone a friend?” And it turns out to be that she got a new hand towel for the kitchen. So yes, I have a blind spot when it comes to décor and honestly many other things as well.

- II. As we continue our Radical series, in which we have been looking at how we can live as fully devoted followers of Jesus, this morning we are going to talk about a blind spot many if not most of us Christians in America have. Author David Platt is audacious enough to point it out. So what is it? It’s how we deal with our wealth, or some might say “resources”, as Christians. Now I know what some of us might think. We pastor types love talking about money. Many of us grew up in churches or watching TV ministries, and it seemed like that was all the pastors or televangelists preached on. Well, let me tell you a pastoral secret. The vast majority of us, myself included, hate talking about money. I’d rather talk about fasting, explaining the trinity, or even preaching on hell rather than talking about money. I would even much rather play the “what do you notice different in the room” game! But here is the thing. I would skip this chapter in the book and totally ignore David Platte and this subject if it wasn’t for one thing...or really one person. Jesus. In the gospels He talks more about money and possessions than He does about heaven and hell combined. Not to mention that the Old Testament is chock full (a theological term) of passages about caring for the poor and money usage. So despite how I feel about it, and honestly how you might feel about it, we simply can’t ignore what our Lord has to say about how we use our wealth or resources if we want to follow Jesus. To do so would be to our own spiritual peril and as your pastor I simply can’t risk it.

- III. Speaking of Jesus, let’s look at the gospel of **Luke 16:19-31 NIV**. This is one of the most sobering passages on this topic. So what do we have here? A tale of two men. In the beginning for the one, it was the best of times and for the other, the worst. But by the end of the story the roles are reversed. And according to Jesus they will remain in their new

states...bliss or suffering...for eternity. Let's look at each one for a moment. Character A- Rich Man. Not only does Jesus tell us he is rich but he describes this rich lifestyle...wearing purple linen, which in our day and age would just be outright weird or creepy, but back then because of the cost of purple dye it was like being clothed in designer jeans or wearing a genuine fur coat. The image I get is of the late Hugh Hefner wearing his infamous robes. **(image)** So Rich Man is living it large in a gated community. And it is at the gate that we meet character B- Poor Man. But in this case Jesus gives this character a name, Lazarus, unlike Rich Man. Perhaps to further humanize him rather than seeing him as some faceless beggar. Even though Lazarus is probably no more than 25-50 feet away from Rich Man, he is living in a completely different world. No Calvin Klein for him. He is dressed in rags with Fido as his only friend and dining companion. Rich Man and Lazarus live so close together but are so far apart in almost every way imaginable. Then it happens. The great role reversal. Death, the great equalizer. This would have shocked Jesus' audience. Because at the time they equated wealth with God's blessing and poverty as self-inflicted, as in the one impoverished did something to deserve his low status. Glad we no longer think this way, right? Or do we? So Rich Man is in hell while Lazarus in heaven. Or should we say Formerly Known As Rich Man as there is nothing luxurious about his life now. Ex-Rich Man begs for mercy undoubtedly like Lazarus did while on earth. And Abraham, the father of Judaism who is speaking on behalf of God here, ignores his pleas for help just as the rich man undoubtedly ignored Lazarus. But that is not quite accurate, is it? Abraham at least responds to him and explains that he cannot help even if he wanted to, as there was a barrier between the two...kind of like the gate between Lazarus and Rich Man while on earth. And this gate too never opens. Despite all of this, even in his agony, ex-Rich Man still sees himself as superior and commands Abraham to send Lazarus to do his bidding. But the gate remains firmly shut and will do so for eternity.

- IV. So what do we make of this story and how does it speak to us and how we manage our money? I don't know about you but when I used to read this I would always think, "Oh those selfish rich people they are in for it! I wouldn't want to be in their silk slippers when I faced God." But over the years I have learned some disturbing facts that have changed my perspective. And Platte in his chapter brings them up. If we have running water, shelter over our heads, means of transportation (even if it is a POJ-Piece of Junk) then we are in the top 15 percent of the wealthiest people in the world. I don't know about you, but I live in a beautiful home (not a "McMansion" or anything, but at least 2000 square feet), have two cars (both used but one newish) and we are able to eat out from time to time. That puts my family in around the top 2 percent of the wealthiest in the world. My guess is that most of the rest of us fit into that category too. Especially when we consider that 2 billion people in our world live on \$1 day. These facts, for me, change the story completely. This parable no longer just pertains to the Hugh Hefner's of the world, but now it also pertains to me. I am the rich man. And frankly I don't like it. But if I am going to take my Jesus following seriously, I need to look long and hard at this blind spot in my life.

- V. Before we go any further, let's pause a moment and talk about what Jesus is not saying here.
- 1. Jesus is not saying the rich man was damned because he was rich.** We must remember two critical rules when reading the bible. First, we must always read it in context. Second, we must interpret each passage in light of the entire teaching of Scripture and not in isolation. Or to put it another way, interpret Scripture with Scripture. With this said, Jesus told this story according to Luke 16:14 to greedy religious leaders who were using their position to amass wealth for themselves. So Jesus was not speaking simply to wealthy people in general but the selfish wealthy.
- 2. Jesus is not saying that the poor man was saved because he was poor.** Looking again at Scripture as a whole there are at least three hundred verses in the bible about the poor alone. Most have to do with providing for or protecting these folks who often were taken advantage of by the rich and powerful. But nowhere in the bible does it say that you can be saved simply by living in poverty. When we look at what Jesus has to say along with the rest of the New Testament, it is clear that we are redeemed not by works or by our economic status but rather saved by our faith. See Romans 5-6. It is important that we keep these things in mind as we go forward.
- VI. Here is what I, along with commentators and Christian leaders like Platte, believe Jesus was saying in this story, at least in part. **How we use our wealth demonstrates our discipleship or lack thereof.** It's kind of like this. I asked Chad if I could mention his name and profession. Chad is a pilot for United Airlines. He flies the 737. Now let's say Chad let me borrow his uniform thinking I am just going to use it for a Halloween party. But instead I head to the Charlotte Airport and began traipsing around. I probably will get some greetings from other flight crews like "Hello, Captain" or the such. I might even get a free meal at United's Sky Priority Club. Since I know some basic airplane terminology like cockpit, cabin and air flaps (do planes have air flaps?) I might be able to fool lots of people. That is until a United employee spots me and tells me there was a mix up and they are short a pilot so they need me to fly the Charlotte to Chicago route. As soon as I stepped into that cockpit, the gig would be up. I can wear the uniform, throw around some of the jargon, but friends, I cannot fly a plane. And I believe part of what Jesus is saying here when it comes to this passage is that true followers of Jesus are not going to let the Lazaruses of our world starve at our gates. Just because we call ourselves a Christian and are familiar with some of the lingo doesn't mean we are followers of Jesus. We have to fly the plane, which in this case means caring for the poor. Platte puts it plainly: ***"Regardless of what we say or sing or study on Sunday morning, rich people who neglect the poor are not the people of God."*** And again, by standards of our current world, almost every one of us in here is rich.
- VII. My guess is that for many of us, this may hit us in the blind spot of our faith walk. We have never considered that how we use our resources or wealth should have anything to do with our faith. But when Jesus calls us to follow Him our money is part of that equation. It

would be like if I said, “Yes, I am committing to follow you Jesus but I am going to continue to mug people in downtown W-S on Friday nights.” Can you see how this might be a problem? In fact, one can argue from statics alone that I would be better off mugging people than not sharing my resources with those in need. How could I say that? Well, using a simple search program you can find about a few score of verses warning about stealing but around 2,000 about money, possessions and how we use them. Now please understand I am not suggesting we should start a mugging ministry where we steal from the rich to give to the poor but only that many Christians would never consider engaging in such behavior but then turn a deaf ear about financial generosity. And that is a grievous problem if we want to follow Jesus radically.

VIII. So what do we do to take care of the Lazaruses at our gate? Let me offer two principals borrowing from fables. First, **it is better to give to the poor like the turtle rather than like the hare.** What do I mean by this? Remember the fable? Turtle slow and steady, rabbit although much faster ran in spurts. Likewise, I have found it best to give regularly less rather than just occasionally more. Why? Because if we only give on a whim, what happens when the whim is not there? Or we forget? Or we are having a bad month financially? It doesn't happen. And then before you know it we stop altogether. This leads us to principle two. **Give like the ant rather than like the grasshopper.** Remember that fable? The ant planned ahead for winter while the grasshopper just goofed off? What do I mean by this? We need to have a plan for our giving to the poor just like we have a plan for paying our mortgage. If we wait till the end of the month to give, if you are like me, you will have almost nothing left. If we have automatic withdrawal with our banks to pay for our house, for our cars, or maybe school loans, why not to the poor? Most of us would never tell our bank, “Sorry but I am not up to paying you this month. We caught a concert in Charlotte and little Mary had her horse back riding lessons and we had a five-course meal at River Birch. Frankly there isn't anything left.” No, of course not. But might we do this when it comes to giving to the poor? And if we do, we too end up like the Rich Man in the story giving to the Lazaruses of our world our financial scraps.

IX. So what might this look like? I want to be very transparent this morning. I share this not to brag but to offer a tangible way to do this. My family sponsors two different children through two different ministries. One in Africa and one in Central America. Here is Gideon. **(pic)** And here is Maria **(pic)**. We felt called to do this over a decade ago when we recognized our own spiritual blind spot. Meg and I know we can't help everyone in the world, but we know that at least Gideon and Maria and their families won't be going to bed hungry tonight. And this brings us a deep abounding joy. Especially when we see pics like this. **(pic)** The payments come out every month automatically as if it were another bill. I promise you we have never missed this money one bit. This is in addition to what we give the church, not in lieu of. An important distinction. Since G3 helps the poor and the needy through ministries like Meadowlark Meals and Center of Hope, Meg and I are able to give to the poor both locally and internationally. But please understand, we are still not where we

want to be in our giving. God knows we can do more. Much more. And please don't hear me saying that you need to leave here and begin sponsoring children. I am just offering one way to live out Jesus' teaching rooted in the two principles I shared. **Giving consistently with intentional planning.** And there are a thousand ways to do it, but do it we must if we are going to follow Jesus.

- X. I love what John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement of which G3 is a part, said: **"Make all you can, save all you can so you can give all you can."** And not only did he say it, he truly lived it out. During the course of his lifetime he made thousands and thousands of British pounds. He was a rich man. But John used it to open the gate and to care for and invite the Lazaruses in. In fact, as the story goes, he only had two gold pieces left to his name when he died and in his will he gave them to the two impoverished men who buried his body. How about us? What are you and I going to do with the Lazaruses at our gate? Are we going to continue to ignore this blind spot or are we going to open our eyes and give as God has given us?