

April 11, 2021

Luke 16:19-31

Homeless Lazarus

Pastor Jonathan Romig
CornerstoneWestford.com

I always feel conflicted when I drive up to an intersection, and someone is holding a sign asking for money. Most of the time, what do we do? We look straight ahead and try not to make eye contact. I guess I don't know if that's what you do, but I know I've done that many times. Sometimes I've given money, Bibles, snacks. Recently, I've started carrying snack packs with Bibles and pamphlets in my car. But if I hold onto them too long, the snacks start to disappear mysteriously. I don't know where the snacks go. . .

What are we supposed to do with the homeless? Are we supposed to give them our money? Are we supposed to pay for somewhere for them to live or host them ourselves? Are we supposed to ignore them and keep on going? And I don't just mean we as individuals, but how about us as the church? What are we, as Cornerstone, supposed to do? I often think of this passage in James when I encounter homeless people.

James 2:15-16 (NASB)

¹⁵ If a brother or sister is without clothing and in need of daily food, ¹⁶ and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and be filled," yet you do not give them what is necessary for *their* body, what use is that?

I don't want to just pray for a homeless person and send them on their way. I want to do something! Some would argue that since James is talking about brothers and sisters, then he's talking about fellow Christians and how we only need to take care of the family of God. But I was struck by the first time we volunteered at Living Waters Center of Hope last November. I sat and talked with one of the homeless men, and he said he was a Christian. I went home thinking, you know, there are probably more homeless people who pray and believe in Jesus than we realize. So, I don't see any excuse here. We should help.

When we come to a passage like today's text, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, I think we find an even clearer call to be mindful and care for the homeless. Maybe you're wondering why I'm preaching on this passage today. I want to debrief as a church the Living Waters training in March. We had a good group, but many of you weren't there, and I want you to at least get a little bit of what we learned. We didn't talk about the story of Lazarus, but I've been thinking of how it applies to caring for the homeless.

Sometimes when we read this story, I think we're too quick to say, "The story is really about not rejecting Jesus, therefore, believe in Jesus. The end." But I think there's more to it than that. Jesus told us this parable to teach us a lot of things, and one of those is the value of people the world rejects.

Homeless people are precious in God's sight.

Jesus contrasts two people in this story, a rich man living in luxury and a poor man living on the street. We don't even get the rich man's name, but we do get Lazarus' name. Even though most of the text is about the rich man, Jesus parable shows more care for the homeless man Lazarus.

Luke 16:19-21 (NIV)

¹⁹ "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

When we read this story, we're not supposed to say, "Wow! I want to be like the guy dressed in purple!" Because right after this, what happens? They both die and go to very different places.

Luke 16:22-23 (NIV)

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. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

The wealthy guy goes to Hades (the waiting room of hell), and Lazarus goes to be with Abraham (the pre-crucifixion waiting room of heaven). The story tells us that Lazarus was precious to God. When he died, angels came and carried him to Abraham's side. That doesn't sound very warm in our language. The KJV translates this, "Abraham's bosom." Remember in the Last Supper when the disciple who Jesus loved, John, was reclining next to him, perhaps leaning on Jesus' chest (John 13:23)? That's the image we're supposed to get. Homeless Lazarus leans back on the chest of Abraham, the father of the Israelite people. Lazarus enjoys a place of intimacy, rest, and security.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus shows us just how much God values the least of these, the neediest, those without homes, without wealth, those in desperation. The first time we visited Living Waters, Diana Waddell was showing me around, and we walked by two posters. The first one said, "**This is what most of society thinks of me...**" Here's what those within their community wrote:

- "Homeless people are looked at as if they are plain lazy."
- "All addicts"
- "Perception: LESS THAN"
- "I felt invisible... & broken..."¹
- "No Good Bums"
- "People think were worthless & nothing"

Have you ever thought those things about homeless people? Let's repent. Let's say we're sorry and ask God to change our perception because homeless people are precious in God's sight. Diana asked us to write encouragement cards to the homeless. Just to say encouraging things because they never receive those—that's they're made in God's image and valuable. They can always use more. Andy mentioned that Mubshire packs zip locks with snacks and necessities, and they give those to homeless people instead of money. Living Waters does the same thing. Today our youth group and anyone who wants to participate is packing them after the service too. On the second poster, Diana had them write, "**This is who I am...**" to counter the lies they had bought into.

- "I am not an addict, I am not a bad person."
- "I am not who you think I am."
- "I like getting up early and getting things done."
- "I am a father & a good person."
- "Out of work"

¹ This is the correct spelling from the poster.

- “I have a purpose... But im only human...”

It’s the work of God to begin to rewire how “**street-involved**” people think. Street-involved means they’re homeless and living on the street. Some people lose their homes but don’t end up on the street. Often, they end up on the street because they suffer a serious **physical, emotional, social, vocational, or spiritual** loss, and they don’t have a good support system.

What if the wealthy man had taken some of that fine linen and bound Lazarus’ sores? What if he had acted like the Good Samaritan and cared for those in need (Luke 10:25-42)? How might the story have ended differently? But here’s the problem, Israel has a long history of the story not ending differently. God’s people continually reject the poor, and that comes up in Jesus’ parable.

God will judge those who neglect the poor and needy.

The poor man has gone to Abraham, and the rich man has gone to Hades, a place of torment.

Luke 16:24-26 (NIV)

²⁴ So 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.’

²⁵ “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. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

Have you ever heard a fire and brimstone sermon? I can’t say I actually have heard them all that often, but what it is when a pastor gets up and preaches about hell and personal salvation. Believe in Jesus or go to hell! The stereotype is there’s a lot of fist-pounding and yelling in the sermon. I’ve heard Jonathan Edwards simply read his famous sermon “Sinners in the hands of an angry God.” He describes people as spiders hung over an open flame. There was no fist-pounding, but people went wild. The Spirit convicted their hearts. Well, I hope today’s sermon is convicting too.

Because, here’s the issue. The rich man didn’t go to hell because he didn’t believe in Yahweh, the God of Israel. In fact, our story doesn’t mention if Lazarus believed in Yahweh either. For being a fire and brimstone parable, Jesus isn’t very clear. But Jesus does talk about the prophets.

Luke 16:27-29 (NIV)

²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

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

Do you know what the prophets spent much of their time warning the people about? Their misuse of their wealth! The prophets preached about idolatry but also neglect of the poor and needy. Isaiah the prophet condemned the Israelites for doing all the religious activity, praying, fasting, going to church, and being good Christians (maybe he’s talking to us now), but at the same time neglecting the impoverished.

Isaiah 58:6-8 (NIV)

⁶ “Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?”

⁷ Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood?
⁸ Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the Lord will be your rear guard.

God doesn't want pious religiosity. He's not impressed with the worship service in Westford if we, the wealthy, are neglecting the needy outside our gate in Lowell. God will judge those who neglect the poor and needy. If you don't think the prophets were all about this, then you have been reading your Bible through a political lens that blinds you to God's heart for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the immigrant, and the needy (See Amos 2:6-7; 4:1-5, 5:21-24; Zechariah 7:5, 9-10).

It's interesting that God brought Lazarus to the rich man's gate, to his gate. He had a responsibility to care for the ones God brought in his path. So what should we do?

Repent! Repent! Repent!

Turn to God and say, "I'm sorry, Lord!" But repentance isn't just saying "I'm sorry," it's living a life that demonstrates we're sorry. Repentance means changing what we're doing. I'm sure that rich man had plenty of good reasons to ignore homeless Lazarus. Maybe Lazarus was lazy, or wouldn't get a job, or made choices that led to being a homeless bum at the gate. The Bible doesn't seem to care all that much about those things. The wealthy man got what was good in his life, and now Lazarus is getting what is good for all eternity. In desperation, the rich man cries out.

Luke 16:30-31 (NIV)

³⁰ "No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

³¹ "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.'"

Do you know who Jesus is talking to? Right before our passage, Jesus is preaching to the Pharisees, the religious elite. "The Pharisees, who loved money..." (Luke 16:14). Right before this, Jesus was warning them about wealth, and the Pharisees thought that was stupid. They loved money. I like money! That's why we need to repent! Repent! We need to turn our hearts from loving money to loving the least of these.

Jesus says that even if someone comes back from the dead, the Pharisees won't change. That should alarm us. As evangelical Christians, we claim to believe in the resurrection. But if we live lives that look more like the wealthy man than the good Samaritan, we don't really believe in the resurrection.

The resurrection tells us that things in this life are of eternal consequence. That somehow, God is going to bring back the dead, and the things we do now will matter for all eternity. And as we look at the resurrection itself, I'm struck that the very nature of the thing is God bringing life out of death.

I think it's actually quite ironic that the place of safety and security in our story is Abraham's bosom. Because if you know anything about Abraham, his bosom wasn't a safe space. He's the one God told to go and offer his son as a sacrifice, and he nearly did it. He took Isaac, his son, to Mount Moriah, the future home of the city of Jerusalem. Abraham placed the wood for the offering on Isaac to carry it up the hill to become a sacrifice. And at the top, Abraham took his knife to slay Isaac, but God stopped him just in time.

Our Heavenly Father stopped Abraham from slaying his son because one day, he is going to send his Son to carry wood for the offering up the exact same mountain. Jesus was cast out from the bosom of his Heavenly Father so that, like Lazarus, we could enter in and find safety and security there. And if you haven't found the bosom of the Father yet. If you've been walking away from him, even doing good deeds like caring for the poor, come to the Father. Jesus had a perfect home but became homeless for us. By his death and resurrection, he offers us a new home for all eternity. Our good deeds matter, but they don't earn us anything. Jesus wins us eternal life by becoming homeless on our behalf.

Now we go and live in light of the resurrection. We embody the resurrection to those just outside the gate. And isn't that the opportunity the wealthy man had? The wealthy man had the opportunity to embody the resurrection to Lazarus. He had the opportunity to go and bring life to someone hurting just outside his gate. Who's sitting at our gate? The people of Living Waters? Other people you see on the way to work? A population we haven't yet discovered in Westford?

You might be surprised to find that simply by being a church and offering caring and supporting relationships, we're already helping prevent homelessness. That's right, our church, is the first line of defense. But we can still do more. We can help people get out of poverty by training them and help them develop. We can help the homeless by forming loving and caring relationships with them. We can move from prevention to redemption and restoration. We can take off our purple linen, go down to our gate, and bind the sores of Lazarus. It strikes me that Jesus was clothed in a scarlet robe at his crucifixion but let himself be stripped of it for us. I want to be like him. Let's pray.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above. You can also listen on [Apple Podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

Discussion Questions

1. Why does God care about the homeless?
2. How might our church help homeless people without hurting them?
3. What sorts of gifts or abilities could use train homeless people to do?
4. What does Jesus' homelessness teach us about his love for this people group?