Reaping God’s Justice

Spring Quarter: Justice in the New Testament
Unit 3: God Is Just and Merciful

Sunday School lesson for the week of June 24, 2018
By Rev. Earnestine W. Campbell

Purpose: To compare and contrast our personal understanding of justice with God’s will.

Scripture Lesson: Luke 16:19-31 (CEB)
Background Scripture: John 5:24-30

“There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day. At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores. “The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. While being tormented in the place of the dead, he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at his side. He shouted, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I’m suffering in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain. Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us.’ “The rich man said, ‘Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father’s house. I have five brothers. He needs to warn them so that they don’t come to this place of agony.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them.’ The rich man said, ‘No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives.’ Abraham said, ‘If they don’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.’”

Key Verse: But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain. (Luke 16:25)

The Text in Context

The Adult Bible Studies Summer 2018 Series’ writer begins with an interesting characterization of the Luke 16 parable as “unique” and says it is unique because the story uses a proper name, Lazarus, which is not usual in other parables. Furthermore, expressing an unlikely possibility of the connection between this parable’s Lazarus and the Lazarus found in John 11 (with sisters, Mary and Martha), because it is not certain that Luke would have been privy to that story. The writer continues with the context of
this week’s lesson and points out that Luke begins Chapter 16 with the second of the three parables about a rich man and provides a summary of the other two.

The first one, Luke 12:16-21, is about the rich man that wanted to build bigger barns because of his excess, equating these barns in the modern era to storage units we use today. The second parable, Luke 16:1-7, is about the dishonest manager or steward whose master calls “his ledgers and him to account.” In the parable, the dishonest servant quickly devises a clever plan to save his position and is himself called on the carpet for his dishonesty. Jesus’ conclusion to this parable is a remark we are very much familiar with, “No household servant can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be loyal to the one and have contempt for the other. You cannot serve God and Wealth” (Verse 13). For further context, in Verse 14, Luke writes “The Pharisees, who were money-lovers, heard all this and sneered at Jesus.” In Verse 15, Jesus responds, “You are the ones who justify yourselves before other people, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued by people is deeply offensive to God.” The writer’s interpretation of Jesus’ response is a reflection of God’s intention for his people to have justice.

**Bible Lesson**

**Three-Fold Division**

For the purpose and better clarity, the writer divides the lesson into three primary segments as 1) Parable proper, Luke 16:19; Place of the dead, Hades, the underworld; or, in Hebrew vernacular, Sheol; 2) Luke 24 – 26; 3) Conclusion of Luke 16, a dialogue between the rich man and Father Abraham.

**Rich Man, Poor Man**

**Luke 16:19-23**

The first segment begins with Luke describing the two characters of the text, the rich man and the poor man. The rich man lived behind the tall gate, clothed in purple and fine linen and ate well every day, and the poor man would lie outside of the gate, hungry and with sores that the dogs would lick. We read in the text that Jesus gave the poor man a name, Lazarus. However, the writer notes that Jesus did not give the rich man a proper name, but that tradition has given him the Latin nickname *Dives* ("rich man"). It is clear the text presents a stark contrast between the rich man and the poor man. By all accounts, it appears the rich man would be the successful person and in today’s society, living the “American dream.” The lesson’s writer says Lazarus ("one whom God helps") would appear in the story to be a “pathetic” person with the occupation “beggar,” and during Jesus’ time, beggars were thought to be sinners and poverty was their punishment by God. Moreover, the writer tells us that this ancient thinking has been around since Job and earlier and that some Hebrew Bible scholars refer to it as the “Deuteronomic theology,” why people prosper or suffer. This theology believes that “if people live well,
then God blesses them, and if people stray from virtue, then God curses or exposes sinners to evil’s penalty.”

**Teacher, ask:** Is the Deuteronomic theology present in today’s thinking about people who either prosper or suffer? If so, in what way? Is it a just way of thinking?

Additionally, the lesson teaches us that the Pharisees and other people who perceived themselves as the “righteous,” also thought because people were rich that God had blessed them and God cursed the poor. Clearly, this theology is not aligned with Jesus’ teaching because he never said to ignore or not care for the poor but taught the opposite. To this point, the Bible lesson cites John 9:1-2 as an example of the Deuteronomic theological thinking and questioning in the Gospels as well as the Book of Job as another example that dispels the Deuteronomic theology.

**Conversion: Rich Man and Abraham**

**Verses 24-26**

The second segment transitions to another scene in the story. We read in the text that the rich man has died and is now in a place of torment. He has gone from a luxurious life with the best foods in a gated community to the pit of hell. He is now a rich man begging for a drop of water from Lazarus’ fingertip to cool his tongue. In contrast, Lazarus, once the beggar, is now reclining at the side of Abraham. The irony here is that the poor man has entered into a life of abundance and the rich man is now in dire need. It seems they have switched places. To this point, the lesson’s author says the rich man is now the loner as Lazarus was before and now he is the one down and looking up. He sees his desperate situation playing out before him in plain sight. An important detail the writer points out is the rich man never saw Lazarus at his gate (never noticed him) because at the beginning of the parable it says that it was the first time the rich man had seen him. However, he notices him now and is astounded by this situation! The writer notes another important detail: Lazarus was passive, and the rich man was not. I guess Lazarus could have easily gloated about their reverse situations. Though, the rich man was vocal and demanding and not cognizant that he was no longer rich, powerful, and in control. It is suitable how the writer describes the rich man’s demeanor even in his current situation by stating, “It is as if the rich man, like some other people of means, automatically assumed a position of authority, power and voice.” We read in the text that the rich man is still giving orders and shouting at Abraham for Lazarus to cool his tongue. Abraham’s response, in essence, was a rebuke, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain. Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us.” The writer interprets the word “Child” as a term of endearment and Abraham’s response as bad news for the rich man that his good life was over and the good news for Lazarus that his days of suffering were over.
Teacher, ask: In what ways do the rich and people in places of authority and power control society with their “voice?” Are there pros and/or cons? If so, what are they?

The Errand Request for Lazarus

Verses 27–31

Lastly, in this third segment, the writer points out that the rich man goes from shouting (verse 24) to begging (verse 27) in his attempt to use Lazarus again as an “errand boy” to warn his brothers so that they would not fall into the same agony. It appears the rich man was still trying to wield his “power.” Nonetheless, Abraham’s response is non-compliant to his request and tells him that they have Moses and the Prophets to listen to, the same as he had (Verse 29). This response was not the answer the rich man wanted to hear, so he begs further and says to send the dead so they would be persuaded. Again, we read that Abraham rejects this request. The writer speculates that this was Luke’s way of “satirizing the Pharisees for not respecting Jesus enough or listening to his teaching…This may be a place where Luke was lampooning the religious establishment of his day.” Nevertheless, the writer wants us to remember as in the previous lessons that the Pharisees may have had some good intentions as they aimed to safeguard the sacredness of the law and acts of holiness.

Reflection: Do you feel that justice was served for the rich man and the poor man? Elaborate on the answer. How do we experience the parable and teaching in today’s society?

In conclusion, these parables teach us about acts of justice and living in God’s will. Luke’s writings make it plain about Jesus’ teaching of justice and setting the Pharisees, the Legal experts straight about the Law. As we engage in our everyday lives, let us remember there is no respect of person with God. No matter our socio-economic, political, educational statuses or station in life, we are all sacred and equal in the Kingdom of heaven. Therefore, let us show love and care to those who are in need, those for whom it is easy for us to pass by unnoticed, including the ones near and dear to us. It is vital for us to show compassion to the marginalized in our society and align with God’s justice for his people. We are God’s agents as the earthly vessels.

Closing Prayer

Father, God, we pray for a change of heart where may be heartened and lack mercy towards persons in need and for justice. Give us the wisdom to address issues that unjustly propel the rich and the powerful in our society and marginalize the poor. We pray the Holy Spirit is instilled in us and we act accordingly to do your will.

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The “Adult Bible Studies, Series Summer 2018, Justice in the New Testament” is used for the content of this lesson.