



**Weekly Study**  
**Week 3: The Gospel of Luke and the Poor**  
**Read Luke 16:16-31**

This lesson is about three things:

- 1) The Gospel of Luke, and some of the major themes in this gospel
- 2) Luke's focus on God's preference for the poor
- 3) Luke's parable of the rich man and Lazarus

**The Gospel of Luke**

**The author of the Gospel of Luke also wrote Acts**, and they are seen as two volumes of the same work.

Most scholars believe the author of Luke was a **Gentile Christian**, perhaps also living in Antioch of Syria. If you remember that is where many scholars believe Matthew was written, in the Jewish quarter there. But Luke was a Gentile, and you can see how these two writers would write for a different audience.

Luke never knew Jesus, and was not an eyewitness to his life. But **he was a traveling companion of St. Paul**. There are certain sections of Acts where he says "we" rather than "they," so we know he was with them at that time. So Luke views Paul's ministry, and the church that Jesus formed, with continuity. The author of 2 Timothy ascribes these words to Paul at the end of his life: *"Only Luke is with me..."* (2 Timothy 4:11)

**Luke was probably a physician**, as Colossians 4:14 says *"<sup>14</sup>Luke, the beloved physician, and Demas greet you."*

**Luke is viewed as an historian**. Listen to how Luke 1 opens:

*<sup>1</sup>Since many have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, <sup>2</sup>just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses*

*and servants of the word, <sup>3</sup>I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup>so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed.*

Here are some of the key themes of Luke:

- 1) **The Holy Spirit** was active in Jesus' life, and the same Spirit activates the church today. The angel told Zechariah that his son John the Baptist would be *"filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth."* (Luke 1:15) Remember that the angel Gabriel told Mary that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and she would give birth to a child. (Luke 1:35) After John's birth, Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and began to prophesy. (Luke 1:67) At Jesus baptism, Luke is specific that it is the Holy Spirit that descends on Jesus. And of course, it is in his second volume, Acts, that the Holy Spirit comes and fills the church.
- 2) **There is a great sense of joy** in the Gospel of Luke. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps for joy. Seventy disciples are sent out to do ministry, and they return with great joy. There is a wonderful party for the prodigal son when he returns home. Luke lets us know that the Christian life is a life full of joy.
- 3) **The focus is on a gospel for the whole world**, particularly those outside the Jewish circle. Remember that Paul's focus was on a gospel for the whole world, and his own personal and particular ministry was to Gentiles, non-Jews. So as Paul's companion, this was much of Luke's perspective as well. When you see Luke and Acts together, as a continual narrative, then that focus becomes abundantly clear.
- 4) Luke builds his gospel around the motif of a **journey from Galilee to Jerusalem**. For example, it is fairly early in Luke's account that Jesus decides to head toward Jerusalem. It is in Luke 9 that Luke says *"When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem."* (Luke 9:51) And then in Luke 12, he says *"Jesus went through one town and village after another, teaching as he made his way to Jerusalem."* (Luke 12:22) In Luke, much of Jesus' teaching and ministry happens along the way. In the other gospels, he teaches in Galilee, then heads north away from Jerusalem to Caesarea Philippi, the northernmost point in Israel, and then finally turns back toward Jerusalem.
- 5) Luke lifts up Jesus' ministry to and with the **outcasts and powerless**, tax collectors and sinners, Samaritans and Gentiles, women, and most particularly **the poor**. Those who have been set aside by society.
- 6) He speaks significantly of **the dangers and responsibilities of wealth**. He often points to what is sometimes called "the great reversal," in which the poor and powerless are lifted up and the rich and powerful are brought down.

### **A Preference for the Poor**

Let's talk about this preference for the poor, and the great reversal in Luke.

We see it right away in Luke 1, as part of the song sometimes called "**The Magnificat**," in which Mary celebrates that she will give birth to Jesus, she says of the Lord,

<sup>51</sup> *He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*  
<sup>52</sup> *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;*  
<sup>53</sup> *he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

It shows up again soon after that, as Jesus begins his ministry, when we see something slightly different in Luke than the other gospels. Two weeks ago we looked at a passage in Mark, in which the very first thing Jesus did was cast out an unclean spirit in the synagogue in Capernaum. In Luke, the first story of Jesus ministry, just after his temptation but before he goes to Capernaum, he goes to the synagogue in Nazareth, his old hometown. While this basic story happens in all three of the gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke, it is only in Luke that Jesus opens **the scroll of Isaiah, and reads his own sort of mission statement:**

<sup>18</sup> *“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
<sup>19</sup> to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”* (Luke 4:18-19)

**The year of the Lord’s favor** is what was called the year of the Jubilee. In Leviticus 25, there is a command from God that every fiftieth year, there would be a sort of a year in which things that had become askew would be returned to a state of shalom. All debts would be forgiven. All land that had been taken from families would be returned to them. All debtors in prison would be set free.

**We see Jesus’ preference for the outsider again in the Sermon on the Plain.** Remember, in Matthew, Jesus takes his disciples up on a mountain and sits down and teaches them. That is how a good Jewish rabbi would teach. So in Matthew we call it the Sermon on the Mount. Matthew is the Jewish gospel. But listen to the same story in Luke 6:

<sup>17</sup> *He came down with them and stood on a level place, with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon.*

**It was a level place**—all were welcome. And the people came from the surrounding area – Galilee, but also from Jerusalem and Judea, very Jewish areas, and Tyre and Sidon. Tyre and Sidon were very significant Roman cities – they had colonnaded streets and hippodromes for Greek games. But they also were viewed as the very northern edges of the land of Canaan, that Joshua conquered as part of the Promised Land. So when he is saying that they came from Tyre and Sidon, he is saying “people came from everywhere! All over the world. Even the outsiders of the Gentile world.” And then note also, in this

Sermon on the Plain, Jesus says “**Blessed are the poor.**” Not “poor in Spirit,” as in Matthew but just “the poor.”

One more example. Remember that Luke and Acts are two volumes of the same book. Note Luke’s **description of the early church**, after the resurrection and the day of Pentecost, Holy Spirit came: “*All who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as any had need.*” (Acts 2:44-45)

In the parable we will study in a minute, we see yet another example of the great reversal. “*But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.’*” (Luke 16:25)

What does it mean for us, this notion that Jesus had a preference for the poor and powerless, and a view of Jesus’ mission as bringing about a great reversal? The ramifications of this Biblical mandate have been a matter of debate in the church for centuries. Certainly, the abolitionists in the debate against slavery used it to support their cause. It has been used as support for many groups seeking to rise up against oppressive or authoritarian, non-democratic regimes. In our recent history, many theologians that came out of the third world – particularly Latin America and some from Africa, have embraced Marxism or socialism as an economic system consistent with the Christian faith. Others have turned to Jesus’ refusal to implement his kingdom by force to emphasize the spiritual nature of the reign of God. But one thing is crystal clear throughout Scripture: **God calls on God’s people to stand with the poor and powerless, to give ourselves away in service and generosity to them, and to see in them the very face of God himself.**

### **The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man**

Now I am jumping ahead a long way, and I know I am messing up our view of this arc of Jesus life, but I want to use this parable as a way of teaching about Luke’s perspective on the poor. In Luke, this parable happens fairly late in Jesus’ ministry, as he is on his way to Jerusalem. Luke has a greater focus on parables than any other of the three gospels, and Luke has five parables that are unique to Luke only: the rich man and Lazarus, the good Samaritan, the prodigal son, the unjust judge, and the Pharisee and the publican. If you haven’t read Luke 16:19-31, read it now.

Three things I want you to see here:

- 1) Look at the names. Note that this man, Lazarus, is the only one in any of Jesus parables who has a name. That has to be significant. This isn’t the Lazarus that was a friend of Jesus; this is a character in the parable. The name Lazarus means “God helps.” Remember that names in the Jewish culture of the time established a person’s core character. When we pray in the name of Jesus, we are praying in the character of Jesus. I will tell you that I suspect that many people who invoke the mighty name of Jesus are not in the character of Jesus at all, while there are others that never mention Jesus’ name but are much more in line with his character. As you may know, at this time, one’s name is indicative of their character. For example, Jesus changes Simon’s name to Peter, which means Rock, as a way to establish Peter’s character. So the character of the poor man here is “God helps.” Luke is once again telling us about God’s preference for helping the poor and powerless, rather than the rich and powerful.

**God does care a great deal about the poor, and the name Lazarus in this parable reminds us of that.** This is abundantly clear throughout Luke. It isn't that God doesn't care about others, but rather that the poor need extra care because of the circumstances in the world. My daughter wrote a blog recently, in which she reminded the reader that when she would ask her mother, my wife, which of her five daughters she loved the most, Dee would not reply with the traditional, "I love you all the same." Instead, she said, "whichever one needs me the most." The poor, the powerless, the outcast, the stranger...these are the people that need God the most. Additionally, when our hearts are broken, when life falls apart for us, when illness or pain covers us over, we are the ones who need God the most. Luke's perspective is that therefore, God indeed "favors the poor."

Unlike Lazarus, the rich man doesn't have a name. He is simply "the rich man." Both of the parables in Luke 16 begin with "there was a rich man, who..." What is your identity? What is your character? I suppose there would be days where you would like to be thought of as "a rich woman" or "a rich man, who..." Over and over in Luke, we are warned of the dangers of wealth. **The danger when we have all the resources we need, is to believe we don't need God at all, that we will not have the name "God helps," but instead have the name, "Rich man; I don't need God."**

When I came to St. Luke's, the church I serve, almost eleven years ago, I asked in the home meetings we had with the congregation what our greatest strengths and our greatest challenges were. Almost universally, people said our greatest strength was that the church has "some of the smartest, most talented, most motivated, most resourced people anywhere." But in one of those meetings, one of our key lay people answered the question about St. Luke's greatest challenge as follows: our greatest challenge is that we have "some of the most motivated, well connected and well resourced people in any church anywhere." In other words, our temptation is to see ourselves as the rich man, not "God helps."

What is your name? What is the core of your identity? Is it "I am the hardest worker anywhere?" Is it "I am the most successful in my industry?" Is it "I am the most popular and well liked of my social scene?" Or is your name "Lazarus – God helps?"

- 2) The Rich Man not only didn't help Lazarus, he didn't even see him.

*"...he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at his side."* (Luke 16:23) The rich man's problem was that he didn't notice Lazarus until it was too late. He only looked up when he saw Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham.

And we can decide what we will notice. There is a mechanism at the base of the brain called the RAS, the reticular activating system. This mechanism has many important functions, including controlling sleep and wakefulness. But it also seems to be a sort of filter, a portal which controls what we notice, what we pay attention to, with all the millions of stimuli confronting us in any given moment. Listen to how Shiela Kloefkorn describes it:

“Your reticular activating system (RAS) will respond to anything that you deem important. For instance, if you’re looking for a computer file that you’re sure you placed on your desk, your RAS alerts your brain to search for the name of the file — Clark Smith Employee Review, say — or focus on one word in the filename to help you find it. Here’s an example of how the filter mechanism of the RAS kicks in. Let’s say you’ve started shopping for cars and decided that a Honda CR-V is the ideal make and model for you. Suddenly, you begin to notice dozens of them on the road every day. Prior to having the vision of owning one, you really didn’t notice just how popular of a vehicle they were. Your RAS is playing a filtering role and the Honda CRVs become front and center in your field of view.”<sup>1</sup>

Often the homeless feel like they are invisible: According to Portland man, Troy Thompson, who has been homeless several times despite being a skilled carpenter (when he can’t find work, he can’t afford to pay rent), one of the many difficult things about being homeless is that you feel less than human. “It’s like being invisible; the non-homeless person almost never looks the homeless in the eye.”<sup>2</sup>

Friends, there is a Lazarus at your gate. It isn’t just about poor. It is about all of those who are in need. It may be the widow who lives next door to you whom you drive by every day and don’t even notice anymore. It may be the girl who is trapped in human trafficking and we ignore the problem. It may be the thousands of children who are affected by child abuse in this country, or the women who are victims of domestic violence. It may be the veteran returning home who can’t find work and struggles with PTSD. It may be the children who face substandard education, or can’t afford medical or dental care. We have been surrounded by so many Lazarus at our gates that we have trained our brains to ignore them. We have to wake up and smell the coffee. We have to wake up and see those in need.

3) The real core of this parable is about repentance. Listen to the dialogue:

*“Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—<sup>28</sup>for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.”<sup>29</sup> Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.”<sup>30</sup> He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”<sup>31</sup> He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”” (Luke 16:27b-31)*

It isn’t that the rich man can’t repent and change and begin to see and help the Lazarus at his gate. Jesus is simply teaching that he won’t. Those in power didn’t hear before. Their wealth and power blinded them, and us. Luke reminds us again that wealth is a dangerous thing.

It is a discomfoting parable, this one about Lazarus. Or, if you are poor and powerless, I suspect there is great comfort in it. I see it is a challenge, like Jesus is throwing down the gauntlet. I will repent, and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.bizjournals.com/phoenix/blog/business/2014/05/how-to-train-your-brain-for-success.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.friendsinthedesert.com/2016/06/29/what-to-say-to-a-homeless-person/>

look to see Lazarus at my gate, and reach out to him and let the example of the rich man warn me, before it is too late and the chasm between us just becomes too great.

**Questions for Discussion:**

- 1) Why does the rich man want Abraham to visit his brothers?
- 2) Why does Abraham say he won't send Lazarus?
- 3) What is the universal equalizer for the rich man and Lazarus, the thing that levels the playing field?
- 4) How far apart are the rich man and Lazarus in life? How far apart in death?
- 5) Why do you think Abraham is important in this story?
- 6) How does this parable make you feel? Do you think such a "great reversal" is "fair?" Why or why not?
- 7) What are some ways you are already seeing Lazarus at your gate?
- 8) What do you think keeps us from repenting, and seeing those who are really poor and powerless around us, and joining God's work to "lift up the lowly?"
- 9) What do you think Lazarus could teach you?



### **Daily Readings**

#### **Week 3: The Gospel of Luke and the Poor**

##### **Week 3, Day 1**

*Luke 14:15-24*

##### *Commentary*

There are four groups of people in this passage. First, there are the first of these, the usual list of guests who should have showed up to the party but never did. Second, there are the least of these, the marginalized who should have never showed up to the party but did. Third, there are the rest of these, everyone else on the streets, the poor and the rich and the spectrum of human condition. This group is always last to the party because they missed the message, but the party-thrower still wants them counted. He must have a full house. Fourth, there is the slave who does the inviting, the bringing, and the compelling.

##### *Reflection Question*

In which of the groups do you see yourself right now, and why?

##### **Week 3, Day 2**

*Luke 3:1-14*

##### *Commentary*

Luke is an historian. He is only the only gospel-writer to give precise historical settings for the stories of John and Jesus. Luke is always known for what theologians call the “preferential option for the poor.” The Jesus according to Luke shows a special favor for the poor, not because they are intrinsically worth more than the rich, but because they are cast aside by a society that favors the rich. It’s not that rich lives don’t matter; it’s that poor lives don’t, but in Jesus’ Kingdom they will. Jesus will take a page from John’s preaching in the desert. Luke is the only gospel-writer to include social justice among John’s requirements for repentance. John can tell if someone has really turned back to God if he or she has shared their resources with the poor.

##### *Reflection Question*

When did you last share your resources with the poor? How did God show up when you did?



### **Week 3, Day 3**

*Luke 12:13-21*

#### *Commentary*

Luke comes down hard on the worth, or lack thereof, of possessions. Our possessions are not worth much in and of themselves. The rich man's crops do not have crop-value. Instead they have limitless people value. How many people could he have fed? Our possessions are worth only as much as we can love people with them. A person's life, Jesus is saying, is tied up with his or her fellow person, not his or her capital worth. The rich man is a fool not because he is rich, but because he thinks his worth is based on his being rich. His worth lies in the people he could feed with his being rich. Luke's Jesus will always value kinship over against possessions.

#### *Reflection Question*

Which of your possessions could be better used to love your neighbor?

### **Week 3, Day 4**

*Luke 14:25-33*

#### *Commentary*

Verses 28-33 are unique to Luke and not found in any of the other gospels. Luke's Jesus does not want his followers to start what they cannot finish. It is better not even to begin building a house if you cannot make it past the foundation. Likewise, it is better not even to start following Jesus if you are not willing to go where he leads you, which just might be to the ends of the earth. This Jesus has a high bar of expectation, as high as the cross is tall. If we are not willing to go to the cross with Jesus, then Luke wants us to wonder why we began this journey at all.

#### *Reflection Question*

Has Jesus ever led to take a risk and you didn't do it?

### **Week 3, Day 5**

*Luke 18:18-30*

#### *Commentary*

Verse 22 is one of the most challenging demands of the Bible. It is not a request or a challenge. It is a commandment. Thankfully for us, in verse 26, Jesus reminds of God's grace, which fills the gap between Jesus' command and our unwillingness to obey. Those of us who have let our possessions influence our discipleship are still covered in grace. What is impossible for us is still possible because of grace. This passage reads differently after being reminded that it comes directly after another of Jesus' commandments: let the little children come to me. A child is born loving its mother; a child has to learn to love its toys. By placing the passage here directly after Jesus' commentary on childhood, Luke is saying that Jesus wants us to age backwards, to go back to the pure love we were born with, not the false love of possessions we have learned.

#### *Reflection Question*

Write about a time when a child taught you how best to love God.

