

Faith-Grounded Hope

Luke 16:19-31

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As Jesus is telling this parable to the people, He is presuming some things as truths that are important to the meaning of the parable. Those of us who hear it, like those who heard it the first time, should not miss these things, at least partly because all who hear – and heard – may not actually believe these things, and if you don't, the parable may not register with you.

First, Jesus presumes the truth of life after death. Not believing that there is any life at all after death doesn't take all of the meaning out of this parable, because there is stuff in here about living a quality life on earth. But Jesus tells this parable as if there were no question about life after death, and we agree with Him. Why do we agree with Him? We agree with Him because we believe God when God talks to us about eternal life. That is important, because if you don't believe God anyway, none of this makes sense to you.

Second, Jesus presumes that in this life after death, there is a separation for eternity between heaven and hell, between the place in eternity in the presence of God and the place in eternity in the torment of the absence of God. And from this story, we can see that one of the tormenting things about hell is that once you are there, there is no hope for anything else. Ever. That is important, because if you don't believe God anyway, none of this makes sense to you.

Third, Jesus presumes the truth that the authority of Scripture – the Word of God – is sufficient to define for people what it means to be in right relationship with God. When Jesus refers to listening to Moses and the Prophets at the end of this parable, He is talking about Moses as the scribe of God for the Law and about the Prophets as God's own messengers. That Word of God is all about leading us to understanding who God is and who we are and the nature of our relationship. That is important, because if you don't believe God anyway, none of this makes sense to you.

Do you see the pattern here? This whole parable is built on a foundation of belief in God and the Word of God, and if you don't believe God, none of it makes sense. The reality is that nothing really makes sense if you don't believe in God. Not even the life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus Christ make sense if you don't believe in God. If the best you can do is explain and understand the world and life and relationships and eternity in human, earthly terms, without reference to God, the result is intellectual chaos. People have tried to overcome that, and are still trying, but they will never get there. If you believe God – believe in God and believe what He says – it all makes sense. Faith in God means that we have faith that God makes sense, even in the things that we do not fully understand.

The essential message of this parable is pretty simple: without faith in God, there is no hope. Without faith in God, there is no hope for a meaningful life now. Without faith in God, there is no hope for eternal life. Hope for a better life here and something wonderful hereafter without faith in God is just wishful thinking. Neither of those things will happen without faith in God.

There are other messages in this parable, most especially the lesson to be learned from the rich man's self-absorbed life. He dressed in fine clothes and enjoyed the best food, but had no time for the beggar at his gate. He saw Lazarus, and knew him by name, at least well enough to recognize him and call to him when he saw him at Abraham's side. His lack of concern for Lazarus amid his luxurious life, however, revealed his character, and so he went to hell. He did not go to hell because he was rich, but because he had not listened to and believed and put into practice what the Law and the Prophets consistently and clearly taught about our obligations to care for each other. If self-centeredness is really at the root of all sin, this fellow had zeroed in on it.

In his torment, with the hope that he had placed in himself and in his wealth burned away, he does display concern for his brothers, who we might guess were similarly wealthy and self-absorbed. He was too late.

There is also a lesson here about the meaning and purpose of miracles, including miracles of healing. An appearance of someone from the dead, telling the rich man's brothers the same thing that God has already told them through Scripture, will make no difference to them at all. We can read into this a foreshadowing of the Risen Christ. If they didn't believe God anyway, a miracle, no matter how personal or how spectacular, even the Resurrection of the crucified Jesus, will not make them believe. After Jesus had walked on water, and healed who knows how many, and fed thousands of people from one boy's lunchbox, the people came to him and said "When will you give us a sign that you are the Messiah?" People may say their faith is based on the healing or a miracle they have seen or experienced, but what happens when the healing or miracle that we so earnestly pray for does not come? Does that faith then crumble for lack of a foundation? Bargaining with God for proof that God is who He says He is is as far from faith as rank disbelief. Faith that is based on God performing is no faith at all; faith that is based on who God is... that's the faith God wants in us.

Who is your Lazarus? What are the needs of people around you that you simply overlook? We never have to look far to find people in need, maybe no farther than people we are with every day. Sickness and hunger are the easy marks. The harder ones are hopelessness and despair, which people can mask with great success. We may sense something wrong or missing, but what are we doing about it? How often do we change the subject when the conversation gets tough? Why are we so reluctant to offer God?

And who are your brothers and sisters who are not getting the message of God's love and mercy and forgiveness and grace? Every time we miss an opportunity to speak a word of God's grace, we take one more step toward the time when it will be too late. Every time we miss an opportunity to tell someone how the presence of God matters to us, all the time, we take one more step toward the time when it will be too late. Every time we miss an opportunity to personally deliver a gift of God's grace, in a word or a meal or a prayer or a phone call or a visit, we allow another person to take one more step toward the time when it will be too late.

Each of those opportunities is about exercising our faith – about turning our intellectual belief in God and our intellectual belief in the Word of God into action that matters to the kingdom of God. It is about opening up the dark places and the hard hearts of the world to the grace of God, and then watching God’s grace give hope to life. It is the desire of God’s heart that we believe Him, that we believe in Him, that we believe God loves us. Those things were taught by Moses and the Prophets. Those things were taught by Jesus Christ. And those things are still being taught by Jesus Christ, who was in fact raised from the dead, and speaks to us through the Holy Spirit.

We do have hope if we have faith. God has given us His promise of His presence, grounding our hope in the God who never fails us. Allow God’s grace, that prevenient grace that is calling to us before we ever think to listen, to bring you to faith – to faith in God who saves us now for this life and saves us forever for eternity in Him.

Amen