

Self-Serving!

Luke 16:19-31

Southside Church of the Nazarene

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I have a very vivid recollection of one of my early attempts at applying Scripture to a life-situation. It was the summer of 1980; I was coming out of grade 9 and going into grade 10. And I was absolutely nuts about basketball! We had a hoop set up on the gable end of the chicken coop out on the farm where I grew up, and every night after the chores were done, my best friend and I could be found out there: practicing, practicing, practicing – till 10:30 or even 11:00. When it got so dark that we could no longer tell whether the ball had gone in or not, we knew we only had, maybe, another half-hour to play!

Well, in May of that year I had caught wind of a week-long basketball camp to be held on the campus of Briercrest Bible College in Saskatchewan – and oh man, I wanted to go! That would be getting pretty close to HEAVEN, I thought! There was only one problem; I didn't have an application form. So around the end of June I wrote a letter to the college asking for information about Basketball Camp . . . and then I sat and waited, and waited, and waited. Weeks dragged by, and still nothing came.

Well, somehow in the midst of all the waiting, I came to the conclusion that I needed to try to determine whether or not it was God's will for me to attend basketball camp. So I decided to set a date: if I got the information back from the college by such and such a date, then that would mean it was God's will for me to go! And if not, I guessed I'd know it wasn't. So I prayed and told God about my plan, sure that He'd follow through for me.

Meanwhile, I was engaged in a systematic reading of the book of Proverbs, and one day I read this verse in Proverbs 10:24: "What the wicked dreads will overtake him; what the righteous desire will be granted." And I thought – Hey, there's a promise for me: that means that I'm going! Well, that became my verse for the next several weeks, as my date drew nearer and nearer: "what the righteous desire will be granted."

Finally the fateful day arrived. I heard the mail truck arrive at the end of the driveway; I raced to the mailbox; I rifled through the mail – NO ENVELOPE FROM Briercrest! I was devastated! Could it really be God's will for me to stay home? Could it really be that the desire of the righteous wouldn't be granted? Could it really be that what I dreaded was overtaking me???

Well, the strangest thing happened. The VERY NEXT DAY, I got a PHONE CALL from the Basketball Camp Director! He said, "I just got your letter today. You sent it to the College Athletic Director, but he was away on vacation. He just got back and opened it and passed it along to me. I'm dropping an application form in the mail for you today, and I really hope that you'll come!"

Now . . . what would you do? What should I have done?

I . . . rationalized.

I thought, “Maybe God was just testing me, to see whether I would really give up the hope of going; now that I did, He’s saying, ‘It’s OK to go!’” So, I went. I thought, “Praise the Lord! The desire of the righteous IS BEING GRANTED!” I had a great time!

I wasn’t struck by lightning or killed in a car accident – so it must have been the right thing to do, right?!! Please?!!!!

Well, I don’t tell you that story as an example of what I think we’re supposed to do. In the first place, I don’t really think it mattered all that much to God whether I went or not! And in the second place, I certainly don’t recommend my method as a means of discovering God’s will.

The reason I tell you the story is to demonstrate by a rather light-hearted and harmless example, a very deeply rooted human tendency. It’s the tendency to be self-serving. Where else would I have gotten the notion that MY desire to go to basketball camp was what that verse in Proverbs was talking about? That self-serving habit is stuck WAY DOWN DEEP inside us.

And my story demonstrates something else: even the very Scriptures themselves, with their ringing invitation that is front and center all the way through – the invitation to find **real life** by giving up our self-serving ways – can easily be interpreted in self-serving ways!

It’s rather frightening how easily we can distort Scripture to make it say what we want it to say. And it’s always so much easier to notice the distortions created by another person or a group to which you don’t belong, than to see yourself or the group you’re a part of doing the same thing. So deep is our bent toward self-centeredness that we rarely discern the fault in ourselves.

It’s not terribly hard to multiply examples of the kind of thing I’m talking about. Not many decades ago, there were slave-owners in both Britain and America who argued vigorously and successfully from the Scriptures, in favor of the continuation of slavery. We hear stories of men who, in the name of a so-called “Biblical view of the family” dominate and abuse their wives and children. There are some who take it as their God-ordained duty to fight against the homosexual agenda by spewing venom and hatred, by whatever means possible, in the direction of gays and lesbians. Or how about this: how long would it take you to name a television preacher who tells people that it’s always God’s will for His children to be healthy and wealthy -- and who demonstrates what he means by a lifestyle of extravagance and conspicuous consumption?

In each case, the Scriptures are being interpreted in a self-serving way! And the thing is, it’s easy for me to see the distortion — in them! But what about my own blindness? What about my own distortions? Those aren’t nearly so easy to discern!

Well, that’s the very kind of thing that Jesus has his sights set on in the story we find in Luke 16:19-31 (read it).

The parable is provoked by the Pharisees' response to Jesus' warnings against letting wealth become an idol (see vv. 13-15).

We need to understand some things about the Pharisees. First of all, they were very religious people. They were students of the Scriptures; they were the experts on religious matters in Jewish culture at that time. And secondly, Luke tells us that they were lovers of money — that was why they scoffed at Jesus and his warnings about wealth.

When you put those two facts together, you realize that the Pharisees must have found a way to reconcile their love of money with the teachings of their Scriptures — what we now call the Old Testament. And that's exactly what they had done. New Testament scholar Fred Craddock says this about them: "The Pharisees love[d] money within a theological framework that justify[d] their position (v. 15). Jesus has separated God and mammon (v. 13), and they scoff at his view. This apparently means that theirs is a theology in which God and mammon are comfortably joined. [They based their ideas on passages in the OT where it says] obey God and you will be blessed in war, in the marketplace, in the field, and at home (Deut. 28). Godliness is in league with riches; prosperity is the clear sign of God's favor" (*Interpretation* commentary on Luke, 192) "Jesus, who blessed the poor and urged a free sharing of one's goods with those in need, regarded the Pharisees' view as a gross misinterpretation of the Old Testament" (*ibid.*, 194).

You see, the Pharisees had interpreted the Scriptures in a self-serving way, in a way that justified their pursuit of wealth and their neglect of the poor.

So Jesus tells them a little story. Everybody likes a story, right? — but it's hard when you're the target of one of Jesus' stories, because they're designed to shock you into sudden awareness of something you hadn't formerly recognized. They're designed to improve your vision — but sometimes what you see with your improved vision is quite painful! Jesus tells them a story which vividly dramatizes to the Pharisees a gross misreading of the Scriptures and the consequences of that misinterpretation.

The Rich Man: it's obvious from the description of his wardrobe and diet that this was a very wealthy person! Pharisees would equate his wealth with God's blessing, seeing wealth as a legitimate reward from God for a righteous life.

Lazarus: here is an extremely poor, sick, hungry man.

- So hungry he would gladly have eaten the rich man's table scraps.
- Street dogs licking him: made him unclean as well as poor; therefore a social outcast. Also, an indication of helplessness; presumably he would have stopped the dogs if he'd been able.
- Probably diseased; perhaps a leper, from the mention of running sores.
- Lay at the rich man's gate, in full view of the rich man in his daily round of activities: a silent appeal for help which was ignored.

- Pharisees would conclude that this man was living under God's curse, being punished for some unknown sin; therefore it was not their duty to help him.
- They would identify themselves with the rich man completely.

Well, they are in for a shock, for now comes the surprise element in the story: the great reversal! The hero, the one with whom they were identifying – turns out to be the villain! The one they were sure was living under God's blessing turns out to be living under God's curse! And the cursed poor man turns out to be the one whom God is defending!

The rich man goes to a place of eternal punishment; the poor man to an eternal reward! You see, Jesus is telling this story to shatter the Pharisees' confidence about their wealth being a sign of God's blessing, and to warn them to open their eyes to the plight of their poor neighbors while they still have time to change their ways.

Please notice: the rich man is not condemned for an active hatred toward the poor, or spiteful actions against poor people. No, his fault is one of omission: he simply never noticed Lazarus before; he was blind to the plight of a person whose needs were as obvious as could possibly be.

Does it seem kind of harsh to you that a person could be condemned to eternal punishment, just for not noticing? Well, the truth is that some forms of "not noticing" are evidence of a deep moral fault.

There's another place in the gospels where the Pharisees asked Jesus, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" And Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains'" (John 9:40-41).

The tragic truth is, as one commentator writes, "The rich man's wealth has so distorted his vision that he is unable to perceive the plight of the beggar at his gate, to identify with his predicament, and to ease his suffering. Unfortunately, prosperity has a way of limiting our perspective, of closing down the shades on the distasteful so as not to disturb our enjoyment. It is an age-old story" (Gaventa, in *Texts for Preaching*).

Well, it's too late for the rich man in this story to repent and change his ways now. But his vision has been fixed; he sees clearly now what is really at issue. And his thoughts go to his five brothers who are still living, who still have the opportunity to change their ways. He realizes that they are just as blind as he was, and he intercedes for them: please send Lazarus back from the dead, to warn them not to come to this place of torment!

But once again he is rebuffed, for Abraham tells him that **if his brothers are still blind after a lifetime of being instructed by the Scriptures** – Moses and the prophets – then **nothing** will change matters for them now. If they simply listen to Moses and the prophets, they will hear that their attitude towards wealth, and their neglect of the poor, is wrong. The law of Moses contained clear provisions for the poor to be looked after, so that no one would go hungry in Israelite society. If the rich man's brothers

couldn't hear the message in the Scriptures they already had, then nothing would move them, not even someone rising from the dead!

Well, how prophetic can you get, Jesus?!

We know from the continuing narrative of the gospels that what Jesus says here through this story is exactly what happened: Someone did rise from the dead – and many of the Pharisees still weren't convinced! It's a powerful statement about that deep tendency toward self-serving. All of the warnings they had in their Scriptures about not neglecting the poor, didn't convince them that their ways were wrong. It didn't convince them that they should rethink their theology, share their wealth, care for the poor – for that would have involved giving up their self-serving ways.

And to believe in Someone who actually rose from the dead? Well, they couldn't do that either, for it would have involved giving up their self-serving ways and acknowledging that He – who came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many – He was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords!

But like we noticed before, it's always easy to see the distortion in someone else. It's easy to point the fingers at the Pharisees and say, "How could you be so blind and so self-centered?" It's easy to point out the self-serving distortions in other people around us today. But the Scriptures aren't speaking to "those other folks" today; they are speaking to us! They are searching US out; they are judging us, the thoughts and intents and motives of our hearts. So as you hear this parable today, I invite you to ask yourself, "Who am I really serving?" I invite you to pray for the grace to see your own self-serving distortions of the word of God, for grace to repent and to obey.

You see, there is a way of life that God in His grace has made available to us – a holy life in which we can be freed from those self-serving ways that come so naturally to us all.

God does offer us forgiveness for our sins, for the damage we do as we pursue self-serving ways. But then, going far beyond that, he extends to us this magnificent offer of sanctification, through which we are changed from the inside out, so that serving Him and serving other people become higher priorities to us than serving ourselves!

The internal atmosphere of our lives can be changed from always having to get our own way, having to get our point across, having to make sure that things work for our own advantage, having to look good to others and to ourselves. That's not a change that we can bring about in our own strength or ability – only God can do it. But when we recognize these self-serving characteristics in ourselves (even though we may have been Christians for a very long time!), and we reject them, we loathe them, we turn away from them – then we are open to God's transforming grace that makes us holy!

We are creatures of God and we were made to serve. It is our very nature to find meaning and purpose and fulfillment not by hoarding life to ourselves but by giving it away. And Jesus, when He comes into the world as the perfect revealer of God's plans for us, comes as a servant. He tells us that in His church the highest designation, the

title of greatest honor, the peak of maximum privilege, is to be the servant of all. Well, that can never happen as long as we're mired in the mud of self-serving and wandering around in the dark, blind to God's revealing light.

But today we've been addressed by God's Word, bathed in His light, and offered the opportunity to embrace the change He can make in us. Oh, my dear friends, let us not turn away! Let us humble ourselves and pray, and seek His face, and turn from self-serving to worship God with all that we have and all that we are!

Let us heed these words from the Epistle of James: "Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear! Those who hear and don't act are like those who glance in the mirror, walk away, and two minutes later have no idea who they are, what they look like.

But whoever catches a glimpse of the revealed counsel of God—the free life!—even out of the corner of his eye, and sticks with it, . . . That person will find delight and affirmation in the action" (James 1:22-25, *The Message*).