

Sermon for September 25, 2016 – 19th Sunday after Pentecost

Luke 16:19–31 (NIV84)

Theme: **The truth about fame, fortune, and living the highlife.**

- 1) *The earthly myth.*
- 2) *The eternal reality*

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. 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 hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 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 fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ ²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, 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.’ 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.’ ”

How many of you remember the TV program “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous”? Robin Leach hosted the show and, as the title indicates, he would show off the homes of rich and famous people while talking about their lifestyle. Beautiful houses, cars, and friends, going wherever you want and doing whatever you wish . . . “Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous” gave viewers a dream to chase. Even if we could never obtain the extravagant luxuries of the people on the show, we were nevertheless encouraged to pursue our dreams and live as comfortably as possible.

But is luxurious, carefree living really the highlife? The world thinks so, but Jesus doesn’t. Let us listen to him explain **the truth about fame, fortune, and living the highlife.** 1) *He dispels the earthly myth* and 2) *presents the eternal reality.*

Part One: The earthly myth.

Shortly before our text takes place, Jesus talked to his disciples about the shrewd use of earthly wealth and warned them not to love it more than God. Some money loving Pharisees overheard what Jesus said and ridiculed him. This gave rise to Jesus’ instruction about fame and fortune. He said:

¹⁹ *There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.*

Jesus doesn't name the rich man in the story, but we can assume that he was well known to his contemporaries. The fact that he could afford purple clothing (which was very expensive in Jesus' day) and live in luxury tells us that he was very rich and used his wealth for extravagant living. I imagine his lifestyle being like that of billionaire Donald Trump before he ran for president: a real tycoon who threw the classy parties that all the "who's who" went to. I could imagine that everyone wanted to be like him: carefree and enjoying all kinds of extravagance.

²⁰ *At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

What a pitiful sight Lazarus must have been. You can almost picture the crowds coming to one of the rich man's parties and quickly passing this no-name pity of a person by in disgust. No one wanted to be like him. They didn't even want to be near him! This man's only friends were the dogs who licked his sores. In the world's eyes, Lazarus was the picture of what it meant to be at rock bottom.

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.*

There is no mention of Lazarus having a funeral. His body was probably picked up and disposed of because no one knew who he was. Nobody cared.

But God did care. God knew Lazarus by name. His name means: "The Lord helps." Lazarus trusted in the LORD for salvation. He clung to his God throughout his tough life. Even though Lazarus had no earthly riches, fame or pedigree, he had faith in the LORD – because of which, he was known by God and welcomed to Abraham's side in heaven.

When the rich man died we can be sure that his funeral was as lavish as his lifestyle. Celebrities probably spoke about how he lived well. But, even though a lot of people may have been shocked and saddened at his death, the Lord didn't care. Did you notice that throughout the story, the rich man's name is never mentioned? This fulfills what the Lord says in Psalm 16: that he will not even take the names of the wicked upon his lips. The rich man's death was of no importance to heaven. He was just another poor soul going to hell.

Which of these two men had a fulfilling life? The world claims that the rich man did. Wasn't his luxurious lifestyle the very definition of living well? Wouldn't we also like what he had: a fancy house with lots of beautiful and influential friends? Wouldn't it be nice if money were no object and we could live carefree?

The problem is that focusing on this kind of life separates us from the LORD. Even though this man was wildly rich, he was spiritually poor. He failed to follow the Lord in faith. He was unknown to him, and therefore lost all he had in death.

Brothers and sisters in Christ: don't fall victim to the earthly myth of fame, fortune, and living the highlife. Even though the world encourages you to do all you can to pursue a life of earthly ease, the LORD warns us that this pursuit separates us from him. He says: ¹⁵ *Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.* (1 John 2:15 NIV84). And again: ³⁶ *What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?* (Mark 8:36 NIV84) And isn't this exactly what happened to the rich man in our account: didn't he gain the world at the cost of his soul?

Yes, not the rich man, but poor Lazarus was the one who had it all. He had it all because he had Christ, who forgave his sins and gave him his righteousness as a free gift. Even though every aspect of his life seemed to indicate that the LORD had forsaken him, Lazarus continued to trust Him for salvation. And, his faith did not disappoint! God welcomed him to heaven – giving him the honor of being comforted by the famous father of faith himself: Abraham.

Part Two: The eternal reality.

Our text continues describing the plight of the rich man. We read:

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

Because of his unbelief, which was demonstrated by his life of self-indulgent luxury, the rich man was in hell. The one from whom Lazarus once begged, now became a beggar himself. As he sees Lazarus sitting next to Abraham, he asks the father of faith for a small favor: just a drop of water from the tip of Lazarus' finger. I wonder how often Lazarus begged for a similar crumb of mercy from the rich man during his life on earth – only to be refused.

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 fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'*

Abraham reminds the rich man that, in life, he loved luxuries more than the LORD – proof of which was allowing his fellow Israelite suffer right outside his house! God left ample warnings for the rich man through the Scriptures of what his fate would be if he pursued wealth over the LORD. The rich man chose to ignore those warnings in order to do the opposite of what God commanded. His punishment was just and final – just like God said it would be.

Lazarus, on the other hand, persevered in his faith - in spite of receiving only bad things in life. God gave Lazarus the reward he promised to all the faithful throughout the Scriptures: eternal life with him in heaven. This judgement was also final. Nothing could take Lazarus away from the blessings he now enjoyed with the LORD.

I want to pause here to point out something else about the rich man: did you notice that his attitude didn't change in hell? There's no word of him repenting of his sins. He still thinks that, just because he is a Jew by birth, father Abraham should listen to him and grant him relief. He still doesn't get it: salvation has nothing to do with who we are and what we do. Salvation comes only through faith in Christ Jesus. This is why it is of the utmost importance for us to grow in our faith through genuine repentance and meditation on God's Word.

Mark the warning well. Many people have the same kind of hope in their heritage that the rich man did. They say to themselves, "As long as I am baptized, belong to a church and pay my dues all is well. I don't need to regularly go to worship, Bible Class or study God's Word at home. Why? Because I am a Lutheran – just like my parents and grandparents were before me. As long as I pray and stop in to worship every once in a while, I'm fine." How easy it is to trust in "belonging to a Church" or "our Lutheran heritage" for salvation, instead of in Christ and the Gospel! All those who have such a shallow faith in Christianity instead of Christ will find themselves next to the rich man in hell, who relied on his being a child of Abraham to save him.

²⁷ "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house,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.'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.' "

Again, the rich man, though sorry for what he is suffering, doesn't actually show any sign of repentance. Instead of confessing that his sinful lifestyle got him where he was and endangered his family, he asks that Lazarus be sent back from the dead to warn his family. By doing this he is, in effect, blaming God for being in hell. "If only God had sent someone to warn me, then I wouldn't be here. I would have changed my ways. Someone has to warn my family, so that they don't stumble into hell like me."

Abraham rightly pointed out: *They have Moses and the Prophets. . . 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'*" God has left his testimony on this earth – warning people about sin and directing them to his Son for salvation. He has given his Word, which is sufficient for all warning and consoling because God has promised to send his Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of all those who hear it. God's Word warns us against all selfishness and sin. It calls us to repent and points us to Jesus as the only source of forgiveness. It creates and strengthens faith in our hearts - encouraging us with God's promise of eternal life and salvation through faith in His Son.

But what about what the rich man said: wouldn't a flashy miracle be more effective in getting people to repent and believe in Jesus for salvation than just preaching God's Word?

Well, Jesus raised another man named Lazarus from the dead. How did the leaders of the Jews receive that message? The Bible says that they wanted to kill that Lazarus to cover up the evidence of Jesus miracle! Jesus rose from the dead: how did the Jews receive him? Most didn't

believe. Miracles do not create faith: only the Gospel in Word and Sacrament can accomplish that.

The only way to heaven is through repentance and faith in the Gospel. It's only when we realize our sinfulness and look to Jesus for forgiveness that our attitudes and lifestyles change. Because of Christ's forgiving love for us we want to love each other. If we experience bad things in life, like Lazarus, we are not afraid. Why not? Because we are convinced that God will keep his promise to deliver to heaven. And if we experience good things in life, we rejoice and share with others the blessings God has given us.

Living a life of faith and good works to God – all in response to his saving love toward us: this is what God wants our lives to be all about. So, brothers and sisters in Christ, learn the truth about earthly fame, fortune and living the high life. The ability to live luxuriously on this earth may seem like a dream we ought to pursue, but God warns that pursuing such a life separates from him. Let us then be like Lazarus and pursue the LORD in everything because, even if we lose everything in this life, we will have lost nothing. The Lord will remain our help and deliver us home to himself in heaven – just like he did for Lazarus. Amen