

Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Psalm 146
1 Timothy 6:6-19
Luke 16:19-31

Sermon: September 25, 2022

THE LOOPHOLE

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Summary: By the grace of God

I've told this story from the pulpit before, but it came to mind again as I was thinking about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, so let me tell it again. Maybe by now you will have forgotten the punchline. It's about two different deathbed accounts. Henry David Thoreau, the author of *Walden* and a very good and religious man in life, was reportedly asked on his deathbed if he would like to make his peace with God, and Thoreau reportedly replied: It's not necessary. We have never quarreled.

Contrast that with the deathbed statement of W. C. Fields. A friend apparently came to visit him very near end, and was surprised to see Fields – who was a notorious drunk and womanizer and gambler and all around hell-raiser – reading a Bible. When asked why he was reading the Bible, W. C. Field's replied: I'm looking for loopholes.

Maybe you'll be able to detect the similarity here to the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. So let me read it to you.

Luke 16: 19-31.

In order to understand the lesson Jesus is teaching in the parable we read in today's selection from Luke's gospel, it's important to point out a few things by way of background.

The first thing is that the audience to which he would have been offering the parable was, as Luke informs us a few verses prior to our selection, the Pharisees and the religious leaders of Israel, the same audience to whom he addressed the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin that we talked about a couple of weeks ago. And just as there, the attitude on their part that he is bringing into focus is the self-righteous indignation that they felt over the fact that Jesus welcomed the outcast, the religious outsiders like the tax collectors and the ritually unclean into his company.

The second thing to keep in mind is that those same religious authorities would have shared with all other Jews the conviction that there is a divinely ordained connection between Godly righteousness and worldly reward.

For the Jews of Jesus' generation, the fact of worldly success and wellbeing and social status demonstrated beyond any debate that the person in question was looked upon favorably by God. The outward circumstances of a person's life were a reflection and a direct consequence of God's approval of their inner spiritual status; and conversely, if someone's worldly life was impoverished and full of misery and ill-health, it must be because the person's spiritual relationship with God was defective.

In a few brief strokes at the beginning of the parable of Lazarus and the rich man, Jesus offers us two characters who starkly represent these two different worldly types. On the one hand, we have a rich man whose life is a one of perfect worldly comfort and success: he dines sumptuously every day, and wears the finest clothing. And on the other hand, we have poor Lazarus, desperately poor and sick, clothed so scantily that the miserable dogs of the street lick his wounds.

It's noteworthy that Jesus doesn't tell us anything about the background of these two individuals. We're never told that the rich man became rich by nefarious means; for all we know, he might have become rich by building up a business that benefited countless numbers of people, or by writing a book that helped people overcome their personal tragedies, or by finding a cure for some terrible disease. And neither are we told what Lazarus might have done to end up in such a piteous condition. Perhaps he drank himself into this pitiable condition; perhaps he was just so lazy and shiftless that he couldn't or wouldn't hold a job. At the outset of the parable, we are simply given two individuals whose separate lives had led them to their two strikingly different situations.

For the audience listening to Jesus, therefore, the natural assumption would have been that the rich man had led a religiously upright life and consequently received favor from God; while Lazarus must have somehow been derelict in his duties to God, and has consequently received God's rejection and punishment.

We laugh at this connection in the Jewish mind, but perhaps we shouldn't be so quick in our judgment. Don't we at some level respect those people who live in those big houses with pools and carefully tended estates, and attribute their success to their personal qualities; just as we glance askance at the people sitting outside on the stoops of the boarding house as you drive up to the canal bridge coming into Albion? Aren't we also inclined to read from the outer to the inner of the people we meet, even if we don't explicitly put it into words?

Well, the Jews did put it into words, and it was in fact an essential element of their theology, of their beliefs about how things work in just God's universe, where virtue was materially and visibly rewarded, and vice visibly and materially punished.

And it's because of that unquestioned belief on the part of his audience that the parable, as it continues, must have been received with such shock and confusion. What should have happened after the two men died, therefore, according to this universally accepted way of thinking, is that the afterlife should have revealed what there was about their separate worldly lives that led them to such dramatically different situations. The inner spiritual life of the rich man should have been shown to be one of pious reverence for God; while the sins of poor Lazarus should have been unveiled to demonstrate how he had incurred God's rejection. That would have brought the story to a close in a way that Christ's audience would have felt made satisfying moral sense.

But shockingly, that's not the story Jesus tells. In the parable, after they both pass away, we see Lazarus sitting in a heavenly place of honor, while the rich man suffers horrible torment. And Jesus adds the interesting detail that there's an unbridgeable gap between the two of them.

So what point is Jesus making? To understand the point, we have to remember to whom he was offering the parable's instruction. His audience was the Pharisees. And who were they? They were the group who most clearly articulated and lived out the central fact about the Jewish religion, viz. it's a religion of works.

And what is a religion of works? It's a religion according to which God apportions his love towards people in proportion to what they do, according to their works. In the Jewish religion of Jesus' time, the works in question involved strict adherence to specific laws explicitly stated or implied by the books we find in the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. But the specific nature of the works isn't important to the general classification. Islam is also a religion of works, although the works in question are different in many ways from those of Judaism. And there are other work religions as well.

In fact, I would argue that every religion that believes in God is a work religion, with one exception. And what is that exception? Why, it's our religion, the one we call Christianity. Our religion, to use Paul's language, is a religion of grace, not works. Paul puts it straightforwardly in his letter to the Ephesians:

Ep. 2: 4-9.

And surely this is the point Jesus is illustrating to his audience, the Pharisees, in telling them his parable. The religious complacency of the Pharisees derived from the conviction of their own self-righteousness, based on their strict adherence to the rules of Judaism, that is to say, based on their works.

From the point of view of the Pharisees, the parable is beyond understanding, because it illustrates a bad man being rewarded by God, and a good man punished. And that's exactly the point: It's beyond their understanding. Or a better way of putting it is that it's outside their understanding.

Remember when Jesus instructs his disciples that you cannot put a new patch on an old article of clothing, or pour new wine into an old wineskin? What he's saying is that what he's bringing into the world is something new, something the old can neither understand nor accept.

The point of the parable is not that God punishes good people and rewards bad people. But neither is it that God punishes bad people and rewards good people. The point is that God's attitude towards us is based on something else altogether. God's attitude towards us is based on his attitude towards his Son, our risen Lord.

"While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us," Paul writes elsewhere (Romans 5: 8) While we were yet sinners, Christ earned our salvation for us, and now offers it to us free of charge.

In the gospel of grace, salvation is not a reward, it's a gift. We do not earn it, we accept it. And how do we accept it? First, by acknowledging that we could never earn it: in Christian language, that's called repentance. And second, by accepting Jesus as our Savior and Lord, and following him.

The fact is, as believing and living Christians, our loophole has been provided us, free of charge, for the eternity past, for this day, and for the eternity to come. So perhaps our closing prayer for this morning might go something like this simple version of what has come to be known in evangelical circles as the Sinner's prayer. If you like, you can repeat it after me, even to yourself: Heavenly Father, I confess that I am a sinner. I recognize that I do not and cannot deserve the heavenly life eternal. I accept Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, and I make this prayer in his name. Amen.