

Simple message, difficult grace

By [Evan D. Garner](#)

September 18, 2016

Several of my friends bemoaned yesterday's difficult Gospel passage ([Luke 16:1-13](#)) in which Jesus told the parable of the dishonest manager. I didn't have to preach, so I had the luxury of listening to a good sermon instead of trying to craft one. As I look at the Gospel lesson for this coming Sunday ([Luke 16:19-31](#)), however, I think it may be even more difficult but for the opposite reason. The parable of the dishonest manager uses a difficult package (dishonesty) to convey a simple message (prioritization of the kingdom), but the parable of Lazarus and the rich man uses a package that is so simple and straightforward (be nice to poor people) that it's very difficult to find the gospel message of grace hidden in this Lucan morality tale.

What is the point of this parable? As Father Abraham explained to the rich man, "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." It's tempting to stop there. That's the part of the story that hooks us. How many poor people have we passed by? How many beggars have we turned down? Borrowing from [Amos](#), don't we "lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on [our] couches" while the homeless in our communities sleep in shelters, on park benches, under overpasses, and in the woods behind the grocery store? Don't we hear Jesus' parable and think, "I don't want to end up in hell like the rich man. I'd better start being nice to poor people."

But that isn't the gospel. That isn't grace. That's a fruitless, hopeless, faithless pursuit that leads straight to that same place of torment where the rich man yearns for even a finger-dip of cool water.

PLEASE, dear preacher, don't confuse "be nice to poor people" with "believe in the one who has risen from the dead." It's so deliciously tempting to climb into the pulpit and remind your congregation that Jesus loved poor people, so we should too. And that's true: we should. But that's not what this Gospel lesson is about. That's confusing the description for the prescription. Don't forget the foundation of the gospel. Our hope does not lie in our actions. Our hope lies in Jesus and his

victory over sin and death. The parable of Lazarus and the rich man isn't designed to call us to acts of charity. It's to remind us that life in God's kingdom is qualitatively different from the life we experience here on earth and that those who follow Jesus live in a different reality.

Let the closing lines of the parable speak for themselves: "...If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." Don't shy away from this half of the parable because some have used it to espouse an anti-Semitic message. Absolutely, we should reject such a mischaracterization of the Christian story, and that isn't the point of the parable either. The point is that those who believe in the one who has been raised from the dead are those who understand that the good life is not found on earth but in the life that waits for us. Those who believe in Jesus understand that participating in God's kingdom means forsaking all of our earthly possessions in pursuit of God's vision for this world. Those who have their hope in the resurrection know that Lazarus' poverty gives him unfettered access to God's table while the rich man's riches are a hurdle he cannot climb on his own. This is where the parable finds its real identity as a message of grace. Our hope is in the one who has risen from the dead—not in our riches nor in giving those riches away.

Look for the hard message of grace buried within this parable of works. Actually, it isn't that hard to find, but you have to let go of an easy, pre-packaged sermon to get there. But it's worth it. Don't forget: works can't get us to heaven any faster than riches can.

*Originally posted at [A Long Way from Home](#)*