

The Great Debate

Luke 16:19-31

September 25, 2016 First Christian Church

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Are you excited about the first presidential debate tomorrow night? The number of viewers is expected to set a new record for presidential debates, breaking the current record that was set in 1980 for the debate between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. There were 80 million viewers in 1980. 100 million are predicted for tomorrow night's debate.

Tom Sander, who runs a program on civic engagement at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, told the NY Times that "Many of us come to these events more to confirm what we already think we know."

"It's like waiting for the Ali-Frazier fight," said Dick Cavett, who plans to cut short a dinner tomorrow night so that he can be in front of his television at 9 pm. "There's possible drama and fireworks and insults and horror and disaster and potential enlightenment," Cavett said. "It would attract anybody!"

There's a debate in front of us in our scripture today. The Pharisees have a serious disagreement about the interpretation of scripture when it comes to the matter of wealth.

The Pharisees hold to a biblical theology that could be described as Deuteronomic. And I think it is only fair to give their side some attention. So turn with me in your Bibles to Deuteronomy chapter 28. That's right—open up your pew Bible to page 182 in the Old Testament or Hebrew scriptures.

Blessings for Obedience: Deuteronomy 28

28 If you will only obey the LORD your God, by diligently observing all his commandments that I am commanding you today, the LORD your God will set you high above all the nations of the earth; ² all these blessings shall come upon you and overtake you, if you obey the LORD your God:

³ Blessed shall you be in the city, and blessed shall you be in the field.

⁴ Blessed shall be the fruit of your womb, the fruit of your ground, and the fruit of your livestock, both the increase of your cattle and the issue of your flock.

⁵ Blessed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl.

⁶ Blessed shall you be when you come in, and blessed shall you be when you go out.

⁷ The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before you; they shall come out against you one way, and flee before you seven

ways. ⁸ The LORD will command the blessing upon you in your barns, and in all that you undertake; he will bless you in the land that the LORD your God is giving

you. ⁹ The LORD will establish you as his holy people, as he has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the LORD your God and walk in his ways. ¹⁰ All the

peoples of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the LORD, and they shall be afraid of you. ¹¹ The LORD will make you abound in prosperity, in the fruit

of your womb, in the fruit of your livestock, and in the fruit of your ground in the land that the LORD swore to your ancestors to give you. ¹² The LORD will open for

you his rich storehouse, the heavens, to give the rain of your land in its season and to bless all your undertakings. You will lend to many nations, but you will not

borrow. ¹³ The LORD will make you the head, and not the tail; you shall be only at the top, and not at the bottom—if you obey the commandments of the LORD your

God, which I am commanding you today, by diligently observing them, ¹⁴ and if you

do not turn aside from any of the words that I am commanding you today, either to the right or to the left, following other gods to serve them.

So, there it is. The platform for prosperity according to the Pharisees. Their Deuteronomic Theology is rooted in the Law of Moses.

You can find the same teaching in Psalm 1:

Happy are those...whose delight is in the law of the Lord. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper.

There is it again. Prosperity is the clear sign that we are in alignment with God. Those who suffer, well...if you continue reading in Deuteronomy 28 you learn that those who do not obey the Lord will be cursed, God will send upon them disaster, panic, and frustration in everything they attempt to do.

(v. 22) *“The Lord will afflict you with consumption, fever, inflammation, with fiery heat and drought, with blight and mildew, they shall pursue you until you perish.”*

Hmmm...It makes you wonder what the poor man Lazarus did wrong.

Especially in the gospel of Luke, Jesus must work hard to push back against this Deuteronomic Theology that was the dominant world view of Jewish leaders in his day. Jesus believes the Pharisees are playing fast and loose with scripture, setting to the side the teaching about generosity that is found throughout the Law and the Prophets.

Leviticus 19:9-10

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, you shall not strip your vineyard bare, you shall leave the gleanings of your field and the fallen grapes of your vineyard for the poor and the alien.

Deuteronomy 15

Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the Lord your God will bless you in all your work. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, “Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land.”

Clearly you can support both sides of this debate with scripture. And the Pharisees, in order to hedge their bets, can make some charitable gifts out of their abundance.

To help push back against the assumption that prosperity is a sign of righteousness, Jesus tells a story. A very famous story. The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus can be found in many ancient cultures and quite possibly has its origin in Egypt. Ancient Egyptians were fascinated by stories of the after-life. At least seven versions of this story appear in rabbinical sources and the version we find here in Luke’s gospel has been revised for Jewish audiences. That explains the central role of Father Abraham in the story.

There may be an economy of words in the story that Jesus tells, but there is a wealth of details. Pay particular attention to the sharply drawn contrast.

The Rich Man and Lazarus

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

Despite the physical proximity of the two characters, the gulf is wide between them. There is no evidence that the rich man is corrupt, that he neglects his family,

that he takes advantage of his employees. For all we know he works hard to provide a good lie for those who depend upon him.

Eventually death comes to both men, and the sharply drawn contrast continues, only it seems now that their status has been reversed.

²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.^[g] The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.^[h] ²⁴ He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘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. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’

Thus ends Act I of the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. At least that’s what the writers of the commentaries suggest. Because the images in the first part of this story are so haunting, we tend to miss what comes next. And what comes next is the primary argument Jesus presents in his debate with the Pharisees.

²⁷ The Rich Man said to Abraham, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

In a brilliant move, Jesus ends by turning the debate back to the Law and the Prophets. God's word contains no trap doors, no loopholes, no fine print meant to trip us up. Everything we need to know in order to live in alignment with God's plan can be found in scripture provided we avoid choosing a few favorite passages and ignoring the rest. God's word is sufficient as long as we devote a lifetime to the whole of scripture. You remember what happens near the end of the gospel of Luke. The risen Christ appears to two disciples on the road to Emmaus and how does Jesus spend this precious time he has with his followers? By taking them back through the Law and the Prophets to help them understand what they had missed.

I suppose that most of listening to the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus don't really identify with either character. Our lives are some place in between the luxury of the Rich Man and the misery of poor Lazarus. Perhaps we can identify with the five brothers. For us there is still time for a course correction, we can still choose to engage in a serious relationship with scripture and discover for ourselves God's blueprint for a life of obedience. God's word is sufficient.

The late Fred Craddock in his interpretation of our scripture for today offers a word of warning that has stuck with me this week. Dr. Craddock writes that "God's assessment of our endeavors is frequently a reversal of our own."

A word to the wise...to five brothers who still have time to reconsider.