

Why do the Wicked Prosper?
Andrew Kneeland, September 25, 2022
Luke 16:19-31

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

There was a farmer in the Midwest who was strongly opposed to anything “religious.” He didn’t like religious ideas, he didn’t like religious places, and he certainly didn’t like religious people.

He was out harvesting his field one Sunday morning and from the cab of his combine he watched car after car drive down the road to the small church in town. He saw this happen every Sunday and it made him angry. He was angry that so many people could be fooled by this myth of religion; a psychological crutch, he called it.

A few days later he had finished his harvest and sold it all off, and it was the biggest harvest of his life. His best crop ever. He was feeling particularly smug, so the next day he took out an ad in the local newspaper where he bragged about his large harvest and made fun of the Christians who weren’t as successful as he was.

He wrote: “Your faith in God must not be working if someone like me can have so much success!”

Someone godless like him. It’s easy for us to feel that way too, isn’t it? To look around at all the sinful people doing sinful things and never seeming to suffer the consequences. In fact, the most sinful people in today’s world—the most godless, the most corrupt—are often the most wealthy. They’re often the most successful.

“Why do the wicked prosper?” And why do the faithful seem to always suffer?

The prophet Jeremiah put it this way: “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?”

It’s a big question, isn’t it? Our Gospel text from Luke this morning takes this question head-on. It’s a story about a rich man and a poor man named Lazarus. It’s a story where Jesus tells us what is truly fair and just. True justice for those of us who belong to the family of God.

Let’s pray before we look at this story again: *Father God, this is your Word and your Word is perfect truth. Bless us as we look at and learn from your*

truth this morning. Help us see you even more clearly through these heavenly words this morning. In your name we pray, amen.

Once upon a time there was a rich man, Jesus said. This man lived in luxury; never worrying about his food, his money, or his possessions. He dressed in the finest clothes and ate the most delicious meals that money could buy. He lived in a large estate and undoubtedly had many servants and slaves to care for his every need. The rich man lived comfortably.

But there was another man, whose name was Lazarus. Lazarus was not rich; he didn't have endless resources or a bottomless bucket of money. Jesus said he would have been more than happy to eat the crumbs and scraps that fell off the rich man's banquet table. On top of his hunger, though, Lazarus had painful sores all over his body, making his physical life one of constant misery.

There couldn't be two lives more different. How can this be *fair*? How can this be *just*?

But there was another difference between these two men. The rich man in this story is nameless; he is unknown to the hearers of this story and he was unknown to God. But God knew Lazarus. Lazarus had a name, and his name literally meant "Helped by God."

When these two men die, they end up in very different places, don't they? The rich man used to sit in his comfortable dining room, eating delicious food while his servants took care of his needs. Lazarus used to sit in the street by the gate... sick, hungry, and wasting away. Now, look at how the roles have been reversed! Lazarus sits comfortably in eternal life, his every need and want more than satisfied by a perfect God with whom Lazarus is perfectly at peace with. Where's the rich man? Suffering the consequences of his sin. Suffering because he *didn't* trust in God; because he *didn't* believe in the promise of salvation.

Jesus is telling us this story to illustrate what *true* fairness and *true* justice looks like. The rich man walked the "Way of the World;" Lazarus walked the "Way of the Word."

In the eyes of the world, the rich man did everything right. He did everything successful people today are supposed to do. He had rich parents or a high paying job. He lived a luxurious life in a safe home and had all of his needs met.

The rich man had wealth, he had health, and he certainly thought he had influence. Even after he had died and his soul was taken to the fires of hell, this rich man thought he held enough influence to get his way.

But his earthly sway wasn't worth anything. The rich man tried to persuade Abraham to relieve his misery — more misery than even Lazarus had ever experienced — and he tried to get Abraham to send a special missionary delegation to his father's house to save his unbelieving brothers.

But the way to be saved is not wealth or health or influence. The Way of the World might be lined with comfort and success, but it leads to destruction.

Lazarus was on the Way of the Word. He didn't have wealth, he didn't have his health, and he certainly didn't have any earthly influence. But he did have the Word. Jesus tells us in this story that the way to be saved is to hear the Word.

"Moses and the Prophets" meant the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. The true stories about the creation of the world, the sinfulness of God's chosen people the Israelites, their need to be forgiven for their continual sin, and the repeated promises that even in the bleakest, darkest nights... God was working on a rescue plan. God would save his people.

This story is our story, too. This world is our world, too, and we are also God's chosen children. We also have a need to be forgiven of this sin that blackens our souls like a plague. God has also give *us* promises and He's delivered on those promises. Even in the bleakest, darkest moments of our lives, God is still God, and God still saves anyone who believes in Him.

"Faith comes by hearing, and hearing the Word of Christ." Jesus is the rescue plan; Jesus is the one who made a way for us to be saved; He paved the Way of the Word so that we can be with him in eternity.

The Way of the Word doesn't come with earthly comfort or material blessings. You *might* have a good, earthly life. You *might* have plenty of money, a long life of good health, a successful career and a happy home life. But maybe not.

Is it unfair that the wicked seem to prosper more than we do? Is it unjust that we are often poor, sick, and marginalized by society?

No, that's not unfair. The Way of the Word leads to something even greater than earthly comfort: it leads to everlasting life. The Way of the World leads to

destruction. It might feel like there is a great chasm of injustice separating us and them; *our* ways from *their* ways; but the suffering we endure now is nothing compared to the suffering *they* will one day endure. And the chasm between us and them will be permanent.

Verse 26: “And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’

Let’s put it another way. Is it fair that the rich man couldn’t get another chance? Is it just that he wasn’t even allowed to have the comfort of a drop of water to refresh him from the torture and anguish of the burning fires of hell?

No, that’s not unfair. The rich man in this story was experiencing true justice. He was paying the *just* sentence for his crimes and his sins. Romans 6 says: “The payment for sin is death.”

The rich man enjoyed a comfortable and successful earthly life. But just like everyone else, he died and came face-to-face with the Creator of the Universe and was confronted with a long list of each and every one of his crimes. Each and every one of his sins.

This happened when Lazarus died, too. And you know what? This is what will happen when you die. You will come face-to-face with the God of Everything—the perfect, holy, sustainer of all life—and you will also be confronted with a list of all of your sins.

“The payment for sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus.”

God is a just and holy God. Why should he let you, riddled with sin and soaked with guilt, into eternal life? Psalm 89 says that “justice is the foundation of his throne.” Psalm 33 says that He loves righteousness and justice.

The Way of the World leads to destruction. But our way, the Way of the Word, leads to eternal life because God satisfied the law for us. He satisfied the demands of justice and righteousness so that God can give us the free gift of eternal life.

It was a great exchange, between Jesus and you. Listen to these words written

by an anonymous Christ just a few decades after the Apostle John had died:

“O sweet exchange! ... The holy One for transgressors, the blameless One for the wicked, the righteous One for the unrighteous, the incorruptible One for the corruptible, the immortal One for those who are mortal. For what other thing was capable of covering our sins than His righteousness? By what other one was it possible that we, the wicked and ungodly, could be justified, than by the only Son of God?”

What a “sweet exchange.” This doesn’t seem very fair, does it? All of our sin, for all of Christ’s perfect righteousness?

Life might not seem fair to us; the wicked might be prospering, the godly might be suffering. That’s how it was for Lazarus and the rich man. But after this life, after this world, when everything meaningless is stripped away, what does true justice and fairness look like?

It looks like the rich man receiving what his works earned him. And it looks like Lazarus receiving what the works of Christ earned *him*.

This story teaches us many things. It teaches us that there are no second chances after death. It teaches us that believers often suffer, and the wicked are often successful, but each will get their due.

But mostly, it teaches us that the Way of the World leads to destruction. And the Way of the Word leads to life. Christ is the true and perfect judge of what’s fair and just.

I want to close this morning by reading a poem to you. It’s a hymn, actually, but I’m going to read the words so we can really reflect on them and remember the unfair but truly just eternal life we have in Christ:

1) And can it be that I should gain
An interest in the Savior's blood
Died He for me, who caused His pain
For me, who Him to death pursued?

Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me?
Amazing love! How can it be
That Thou, my God, should die for me?

2) He left His Father's throne above
So free, so infinite His grace
Emptied Himself of all but love
And bled for Adam's helpless race
Tis mercy all, immense and free
For O my God, it found out me!

3) Long my imprisoned spirit lay,
Fast bound in sin and nature's night
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray
I woke, the dungeon flamed with light
My chains fell off, my heart was free
I rose, went forth, and followed Thee

4) No condemnation now I dread
Jesus, and all in Him, is mine
Alive in Him, my living Head
And clothed in righteousness divine
Bold I approach the eternal throne
And claim the crown, through Christ
my own

Amazing love! How can it be,
That Thou, my God, should die for
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