

LUKE 16:19-31

FUN? OR A FUTURE?

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 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.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”¹

The focus of existence for our contemporaries—even for fellow Christians we consider to be “mature”—appears to be “self”—self-gratification, self-interests, self-preservation. Undoubtedly, there are notable exceptions in the ken of many, but for most fellow Canadians, if the conduct of daily life is any indication, it is apparent that the *summum bonum* of life may be defined by what is fun—and fun is defined as that which is amusing, entertaining or personally enjoyable. In short, the focus for most folk is “self.”

Few people seem capable of taking stock of their lifestyles, or of reflecting on the fact that their focus has become utterly self-centred. Fewer still seem cognizant that a major transition has occurred in society. Not that many years past, western society emphasised serving others rather than serving only—or even primarily—one’s own interest. We esteemed the individual who made sacrifice for the benefit of the nation or for the benefit of mankind. However, today such attitudes now appear passé at best, and perhaps even absurd or bizarre.

Christians are more likely to adopt as role models the denizens of this dying world than they are to choose to emulate the lives of quiet saints that endeavour to follow the Master. Singers(?) such as Chris Brown, who uses crude and salacious rhyming to entertain, or Enrique Iglesias who croons the crudest terms imaginable as a love(?) song, are the heroes—even serving as heroes for many older people.

THE SUMMUM BONUM OF LIFE — How does one determine what is good? How does one determine if he is blessed? Let’s be honest, conceding that most of us think of ourselves as blessed and enjoying divine favour when things are going well and we face no specific difficulties. In short, we define blessing by our personal situation and the absence of conflict.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible, English Standard Version**, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

By this criterion, we are blessed because we live in Canada. The assessment is true. However, when one faces illness or financial reversal or problems in personal relationships, the temptation is for us to question God, doubting that we are blessed. At the outset of our study, it is vital that we establish a truth that is often neglected. In the midst of illness, we may still be blessed if we have a vital and vibrant relationship with God. In time of financial reversal, when our outgo exceeds our income, we may still be richly blessed if we have a relationship with the True and Living God. Similarly, even should we be deserted by all our earthly friends, if we know God—or rather, if we are known by God—we are blessed.

The Psalmist wrote a perspective that is not often heard in our day when he penned,

“It was good for me to suffer,
so that I might learn your statutes.”

[PSALM 119:71 NET BIBLE]ⁱ

I can only wonder how many of us could speak as did Job in time of extreme suffering, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD” [JOB 1:21]?

Similarly, when he lost his health, Job responded to the negative sentiments of his wife, “Shall we receive good from God, and shall we not receive evil” [JOB 2:10]?

I would remind you that when deserted by earthly friends, when even fellow Christians speak ill of you, “There is a friend who sticks closer than a brother” [PROVERBS 18:24]?

Though we know the truth that life does not consist of this moment, we are still tempted to envy the godless, redefining blessing so that we are focused on our personal situation. We would benefit from recalling the words of Asaph.

“Truly God is good to Israel,
to those who are pure in heart.
But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled,
my steps had nearly slipped.
For I was envious of the arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.

“For they have no pangs until death;
their bodies are fat and sleek.
They are not in trouble as others are;
they are not stricken like the rest of mankind.
Therefore pride is their necklace;
violence covers them as a garment.
Their eyes swell out through fatness;
their hearts overflow with follies.
They scoff and speak with malice;
loftily they threaten oppression.
They set their mouths against the heavens,
and their tongue struts through the earth.
Therefore his people turn back to them,
and find no fault in them.

And they say, 'How can God know?
Is there knowledge in the Most High?'
Behold, these are the wicked;
always at ease, they increase in riches.
All in vain have I kept my heart clean
and washed my hands in innocence.
For all the day long I have been stricken
and rebuked every morning.
If I had said, 'I will speak thus,'
I would have betrayed the generation of your children."

[PSALM 73:1-15]

Have you ever felt that way? Have you ever questioned the "fairness" of God's conduct of the world? Are you one who has become so focused on what others have that you are blind to who they are? Or more importantly, are you blind to who you are?

The United States has a sitting President who is exceptional at stirring up class envy. He speaks often of fairness; focusing on the inequality of possession; he does a less commendable job of reminding people of the equality of opportunity. Consequently, a surprisingly large number of people who adulate this man grumble because of what others have, or they grumble at how others live, rather than seeing that they have great opportunities to advance themselves through hard work. In Canada, we struggle with the same issues of what is presented as "fairness" as political parties promise to redistribute wealth so that there is "fairness" for all.

Asaph was beginning to be consumed by what he saw as the unfairness of life—people he knew to be wicked were marked by ease of life, arrogance and injustice toward those who were weaker. The song writer pondered the issue, coming finally to this resolution.

"But when I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I discerned their end."

[PSALM 73:16, 17]

Without a solid doctrinal foundation, any one of us can slip into gross error. Each of us is capable of rejecting foundations instilled by godly parents and taught by those who loved us and who provided sound instruction during our formative years. Recently, I've become aware of some of those who are adulated in this fallen world, and how far they have moved from positions that marked their parents.

Brad Pitt is a recognised star who appears to have attained all that anyone could want. In almost every interview, the writer appears to stress his Baptist roots. One interviewer identifies him as having grown up in Springfield, Missouri, the oldest of three children in a conservative, Southern Baptist family.² In that interview, Pitt says, "I always had a lot of questions about the world, even in kindergarten. A big question to me was fairness. If I'd grown up in some other religion, would I get the same shot at Heaven as a Christian has? ...In high school I started to realize that I felt differently from others."

² "I have faith in my family," Parade, http://www.parade.com/articles/editions/2007/edition_10-07-2007/Brad_Pitt, accessed 18 May 2011

He continues that interview by noting, “I had crises of faith. I thought you had to experience things if you want to know right from wrong. I’d go to Christian revivals and be moved by the Holy Spirit, and I’d go to rock concerts and feel the same fervour. Then I’d be told, ‘That’s the Devil’s music! Don’t partake in that!’ I wanted to experience things religion said not to experience.”

The interviewer notes that by the time he entered college, Pitt had scuttled his “fundamentalist beliefs.” “When I got untethered from the comfort of religion, it wasn’t a loss of faith for me; it was a discovery of self.”³

What seems to have driven him to his current position that rejects the Faith to embrace his own ability was a perceived unfairness in the world. The star says, “Whoever said all men are born equal never left his own backyard.” Apparently, fairness, as he defines fairness, is a big issue to Mr. Pitt. In another interview, he is quoted as saying, “I always had a lot of questions about the world, even in kindergarten. A big question to me was fairness. If I’d grown up in some other religion, would I get the same shot at heaven as a Christian has?”⁴

Another contemporary star who had Christian parents and yet rejected their training is Katy Perry. Born Katheryn Hudson, the singer is quoted as saying, “I didn’t have a childhood.” She laments the strictness of her upbringing, complaining that she could not go to Planned Parenthood or do as she wanted. She speaks ill of her parents, though stating that they get along. Her mother seems not to speak ill of her daughter, however.⁵

The story Jesus told about a rich man and an impoverished man named Lazarus serves as a warning against falling into the trap of cynicism, or questioning the fairness of God. Israel complained that God wasn’t fair. He didn’t condemn people because of the sin of their parents; each individual was held accountable for his or her own actions. However, God pledged to punish sin. So, the people complained. God’s prophet, Ezekiel, exposed their contempt for God. “You say,” he wrote, “‘The Lord’s way isn’t fair.’ Now listen, house of Israel: Is it My way that is unfair? Instead, isn’t it your ways that are unfair” [EZEKIEL 18:25 HCSB]?

There is an Arminian streak in sinners. They want God to do things in their way. So, they complain when God demonstrates His sovereignty. Paul deals with that very issue when he writes of God’s choice of Jacob whilst rejecting Esau. The Apostle argues, “What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God’s part? By no means! For he says to Moses, ‘I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion.’ So then it depends not on human will or exertion, but on God, who has mercy. For the Scripture says to Pharaoh, ‘For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth.’ So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.”

Anticipating the objections of those who disagreed with him, the Apostle then wrote, “You will say to me then, ‘Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?’ But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its molder, ‘Why have you made me like this?’ Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use” [ROMANS 9:14-21]?

³ Ibid.

⁴ “Brad Pitt says Christian upbringing was ‘stifling,’” May 17, 2011, <http://entertainment.blogs.foxnews.com/2011/05/17/brad-pitt-says-christian-upbringing-was-stifling/>, accessed 18 May 2011

⁵ “Katy Perry on Her Religious Childhood, Her Career, and Her Marriage to Russell Brand,” Vanity Fair, May 3, 2011, http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2011/05/katy-perry-on-her-religious-childhood-her-career-and-her-marriage-to-russell-brand.html?mbid=synd_foxnews, accessed 3 May 2011

Jesus told of a man who was so focused on his own personal situation that he was unable to see the needs of others. What is worse, he was unconscious of God Himself. This is Jesus' story—a story and not a parable. A parable does not provide names; a story provides detail. Jesus was able to speak of events beyond the pale of human ken. “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side” [LUKE 16:19-23].

Perhaps one could say much concerning the rich man of whom Jesus spoke, however, one significant truth stands out—he was focused on the moment. As the old southern preachers used to say, this man sacrificed the permanent on the altar of the temporary. He was unconcerned either about honouring God or about the needs of others. I must wonder when the Master says that Lazarus “desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table,” whether his yearning was from afar, or whether he was permitted to pick up scraps? Whichever may be the case, it is obvious that the rich man was unconcerned for the welfare of poor Lazarus. I will imagine, however, that he made a pretense of compassion by allowing some scraps from his own table to go to Lazarus. This hardly qualifies as compassion any more than tossing a few scraps toward needs in our day is compassion. Much of what parades as compassion for the down-trodden of society can be classified as cheap grace.

Undoubtedly, greed is wrong. In fact, the Apostle makes the point in dramatic fashion in one list of dreadful sins which may contaminate the life of a believer. He warns the Christian, “Put to death whatever in your nature belongs to the earth; sexual impurity, impurity, shameful passion, evil desire, and greed, which is idolatry” [COLOSSIANS 3:5 NET BIBLE]. However, it is equally dishonourable to compel generosity in others. Let me state without equivocation that it is not compassionate to take from those who labour and earn something to redistribute to those who are without. Charity consists of that which is freely given to those in need. Charity does not consist of taking from those who are unwilling to share and distributing with a sizeable portion retained for expenses of those doing the redistribution.

If you choose to share what you have with others, you do well and you are to be commended. After all, we are taught, “It is more blessed to give than to receive” [ACTS 20:35]. If there is a blessing in giving, however, it must be because we have made the choice to do so. Again, we are taught in the Word, “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” [2 CORINTHIANS 9:7]. However, if your concept of generosity is to compel others to surrender what they have earned in order to redistribute it, you should be condemned. In such instances, the supposed generosity is false and contrived. Such concern is shallow and even meaningless; it is mere window dressing.

THE DESTINY OF ALL MANKIND — The life of each one moves inexorably toward a finale. Each of us has a date with death. At the last, we must all appear before the True and Living God. Ultimately, the rich man died, as each of us must one day die. Were death the end of the story, there would be no story to tell. We are cautioned by the writer of the Letter to Hebrew Christians, “It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” [HEBREWS 9:27]. There is more to the story of life; and though it is often forgotten, each one knows it is pending. We know that “the spirit returns to God who gave it” [see ECCLESIASTES 12:7].

You will recall that I spoke earlier about Asaph's struggle to understand why God didn't act more equitably to hold the wicked to account? Asaph didn't simply stop with questioning God's fairness; he worked through the problem and arrived at an answer. I want us to return to that 73rd Psalm to pick up where we left off earlier. You will recall that I cited two verses as I concluded consideration at that time.

“When I thought how to understand this,
it seemed to me a wearisome task,
until I went into the sanctuary of God;
then I discerned their end.”

[PSALM 73:16, 17]

There was more to come; and Asaph needed to look ahead, just as we need to look ahead. Here is what he saw when he projected into the days beyond this moment we call life.

“Truly you set them in slippery places;
you make them fall to ruin.
How they are destroyed in a moment,
swept away utterly by terrors!
Like a dream when one awakes,
O Lord, when you rouse yourself, you despise them as phantoms.
When my soul was embittered,
when I was pricked in heart,
I was brutish and ignorant;
I was like a beast toward you.

“Nevertheless, I am continually with you;
you hold my right hand.
You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will receive me to glory.
Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.
My flesh and my heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

“For behold, those who are far from you shall perish;
you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you.
But for me it is good to be near God;
I have made the Lord GOD my refuge,
that I may tell of all your works.”

[PSALM 73:18-28]

“[God] set [the wicked] in slippery places.” “Those who are far from [God] shall perish.” “[God puts] an end to everyone who is unfaithful to [Him]”. There is more to the story than is seen in the moment. Jesus did tell a parable on another occasion warning against presumption. The parable is found in Luke's Gospel, the twelfth chapter.

“The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, ‘What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?’ And he said, ‘I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God” [LUKE 12:16-21].

Did you notice what the Master said? One who amasses treasure for himself is a fool! This doesn’t mean that he lacks ability or intelligence; it means that he is morally corrupt. The position of one who is unconscious of responsibility toward God adheres to a morally indefensible philosophy. It matters not whether that one professes to be a Christian or whether that one makes no pretense of religious affection, she or he is morally destitute. When life ends, and it shall end, what will such an individual say? How will one answer God who gives life if they have ignored God throughout life?

Thus, the Master draws back the curtain that separates the living from the dead, permitting us to see what happens after this life. “The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. 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’” [LUKE 16:22-26].

Lazarus died, and God’s messengers were dispatched to conduct him into the presence of the Living God. Each one who is twice born may anticipate such divine escorts into God’s presence. The rich man also died; his final condition was quite different. The text reads, “In hell, as he was in torment, he looked up” [LUKE 16:23 NET BIBLE]. Death does not end all. The Psalmist has warned, “The wicked shall be turned into hell” [PSALM 9:17 NKJV].

Is the preacher malicious if he warns that neglect of the soul results in death? Is the physician cruel if he warns that smoking can cause serious health problems that threaten life? We recognise that the physician seeks our welfare when she warns against injuring our bodies. Is the accountant wicked if he cautions that borrowing to spend on our own pleasure leads to financial ruin? Rather, we understand that the accountant seeks to avoid disaster by issuing the warning. Does the educator who insists that we must learn the multiplication tables seek to injure us? Isn’t she rather endeavouring to ensure that we have a foundation on which to build for the future? Just so, when the preacher warns that living for the moment must result in eternal disaster, that man is our dearest friend; he seeks our eternal welfare in giving warning.

Here is my great fear. I am convinced that many of my fellow Canadians are lost. Surfeited with goods, there is little perceived need to consider our spiritual need. Consequently, we are quite prepared to settle for a few spiritual feelings, creating our own version of righteousness in which our considerations are centred on how we feel and what brings us pleasure. If the words of the Master mean anything, we are fools if we think thusly. I fear that tragically most professing Christians fall into precisely this category. And if those who profess to know the Master are focused on this dying world, what hope is there for those who never think to enter into the House of the Lord?

THE NECESSITY OF DECISION NOW — This brings me to a final point. In the Second Letter to Corinthian Christians, Paul, referring to the writings of Isaiah,⁶ wrote, “Look, now is the acceptable time; look, now is the day of salvation” [2 CORINTHIANS 6:2]. Today, while it is day, is the time for all to decide whether they will live for eternity or whether they will squander the gift of time on this transient moment. I would be remiss in my responsibility to you were I to fail to remind you of this truth.

In Hades—the gathering place of the lost who await the final, great assize—the rich man to this day continues in torment. After his death, he pleaded with Abraham to send someone to warn his five brothers. He thought that if perhaps Lazarus were to rise from the dead in order to warn his five brothers, they would surely repent and avoid eternal condemnation. It seems likely that this wealthy man had influenced his brothers toward living for the moment rather than living in the light of eternity. Now—in hell—he realised the folly of his decision. So, he pleaded with Abraham, assuming that Lazarus risen from the dead would deter his brothers from following his dead-end lead.

It is a thought that many harbour. Perhaps if someone were to rise from the dead, others would listen. If only some dramatic incident were to occur, surely people would pay attention. Abraham dashes such thoughts, however, with his terse response. “‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

I have always been intrigued by the accounts of people who had great experiences with the unseen world. The literature abounds with stories of people who profess to have seen demons, or who experienced great deliverance, and yet walked away from the Faith. Though these individuals may have been religious for a period, the exciting event that had such a great impact on their lives was transient at best. They slip into the routine of living as they have always lived. You see, what is required is not a new way of life; what is required is new life. This is the reason the Bible speaks of being born again. Mankind needs a fresh start; and this is the central message of the Word of God.

We have witnessed a generation of supposed Bible teachers that taught the world a new way to live, without insisting on new life. A number of years past, the evangelical churches were quite taken with teachings presented in a popular seminar format. That seminar had the motto, “Teaching the world a new way to live.” The church to which we belonged paid for Lynda and me to attend one of these seminars. Though a relatively young believer, I was alarmed at what was being taught. The principles presented were an effort to teach how to live christianly without insisting on the need for new life. Consequently, it was not surprising to me when I learned that leaders within this seminar movement were exposed by grievous sin.

Recently, Phil Vischer, founder of Veggie Tales, is quoted as saying that Veggie Tales “convinced kids to behave christianly without actually teaching them Christianity.” In an article in World Magazine,⁷ Mr. Vischer is quoted as saying, “I looked back at the previous 10 years and realized that I had spent 10 years trying to convince kids to behave christianly without actually teaching them Christianity. And that was a pretty serious conviction. You can say, ‘Hey kids, be more forgiving because the Bible says so,’ or, ‘Hey kids, be more kind because the Bible says so!’ But that isn’t Christianity, it’s morality.”

⁶ ISAIAH 49:8

⁷ Megan Basham, “It’s not about the dream,” World, September 24, 2011, 57-8

Vischer delivered a stinging rebuke to modern Christianity when he continued, “American Christian[s] ... are drinking a cocktail that’s a mix of the Protestant work ethic, the American dream, and the gospel. And we’ve intertwined them so completely that we can’t tell them apart anymore. Our gospel has become a gospel of following your dreams and being good so God will make all your dreams come true. It’s the Oprah god... We’ve completely taken this Disney notion of ‘when you wish upon a star, your dreams come true’ and melded that with faith and come up with something completely different. There’s something wrong in a culture that preaches nothing is more sacred than your dream. I mean, we walk away from marriages to follow our dreams. We abandon children to follow our dreams. We hurt people in the name of our dreams, which as a Christian is just preposterous.”

While I do believe that the Christian lifestyle is a better life than a dissolute lifestyle, I am equally convinced that it is impossible to live as a Christian without being a Christian. I am convinced on the authority of God’s Word that each individual must be born from above if they will please God. It is not in saying that one is a good person that God’s righteous wrath is assuaged; it is in being twice-born that one enters into a living relationship with God who is life.

Therefore, the question must be posed for you: Are you a Christian? It is not sufficient to say that you are trying, or to argue that you live a good life; the real issue is, have you been born again! Are you one who has new life and now enjoys the living relationship with the True and Living God? This Faith is not a hope-so situation; it is a know-so condition!

Jesus, very God is human flesh, presented His life as a sacrifice because of your sin. He was certified as dead and then buried. However, He burst forth from the tomb, walked among His disciples and ascended into the Glory where He is now seated at the right hand of the Father. The call to each one now is that which I present week after week. “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, ‘Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.’ For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For ‘everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” [ROMANS 10:9-13]. Amen.

ⁱ NET=The NET Bible First Edition (Biblical Studies Press 2006)

HCSB = The Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version (Holman Bible Publishers, Nashville, TN 2009)

NKJV = The New King James Version (Thomas Nelson, Nashville, TN 1982)