

June 24
Lesson 4 (NIV)

REAPING GOD'S

JUSTICE

DEVOTIONAL READING: Luke 6:20-26

BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE: Luke 16:19-31; John 5:24-30

LUKE 16:19-31

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

²⁵ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

³⁰ “No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

³¹ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’

KEY VERSE

Abraham replied, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.—Luke 16:25

LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Relate the primary details in Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus.
2. Explain what this passage teaches about caring for those who are poor materially and/or spiritually.
3. Help implement one specific improvement to his or her church’s benevolence ministry.

LESSON OUTLINE

Introduction

- A. *Noblesse Oblige?*
- B. Lesson Background

I. Inequity in Life (LUKE 16:19-21)

- A. Living in Luxury (v. 19)
Who’s Entitled?
- B. Suffering in Squalor (vv. 20, 21)
What Will You Do?

II. Justice in Death (LUKE 16:22-26)

- A. Reward and Punishment (vv. 22, 23)
- B. Request and Reply (vv. 24-26)

III. Warning in Writing (LUKE 16:27-31)

- A. Anguished Plea (vv. 27, 28)
- B. Adequate Proof (vv. 29-31)

Conclusion

- A. Who Were “the Needy” Then?
- B. Who Are “the Needy” Now?
- C. Prayer
- D. Thought to Remember

Introduction

A. *Noblesse Oblige?*

Western culture has long emphasized that those of greater wealth have a duty to be generous with those less well off. The French phrase *noblesse oblige* has been used for centuries to refer to this sense of obligation. The phrase means “nobility obliges.” It expresses the idea that those with privilege are obligated to be generous with those less privileged.

We commonly hear people express this sense of obligation. They say that they must “give back” because they have been blessed beyond what they need or want. They want to “pay forward” what they have received, to show themselves grateful for their abundance.

These are virtuous impulses. We encourage them, and we admire them. But from the perspective of the gospel of Jesus, some adjustment is required. Jesus showed his followers that godly generosity springs not simply from our realization that we are abundantly blessed, but from our sense of our own need. The idea of *noblesse oblige* may permit me to think of myself inappropriately as different from the person in need. The gospel in general and today’s text in particular reveal, however, that I am really in the same position as the person in need.

What Do You Think?

How can you protect yourself from the defective aspects of *noblesse oblige* thinking?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- To avoid having a condescending attitude
- To avoid failure to sense your own need
- Other

B. Lesson Background

The story in our text comes at the end of a series of parables found in [Luke 15 and 16](#). The series begins with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, or scribes, complaining about Jesus’ practice of feasting with sinners ([15:1, 2](#)). Jesus responded by telling three stories of things lost and found—a sheep, a coin, and a son. At the end of each of those three stories is a celebration that what was lost has been found. Expressed or implied in each case is comparison with the rejoicing of God and angels over sinners who repent ([15:7, 10, 32](#)). In contrast, the Pharisees and teachers of the law failed to celebrate what God celebrated. They were indifferent to God’s generous grace; they did not share God’s character.

The dialogue continued with the Pharisees scoffing at more of Jesus’ teaching because in their covetousness they loved money ([Luke 16:14](#)). Jesus replied that these religious leaders were trying to make themselves appear to be righteous, concealing hearts that harbored a condescending pride that is the opposite of what God values ([16:15](#)). Apparently not long afterward, Jesus told the story in our text.

Some Bible students question whether this account should be considered a parable. As evidence, they point out that in no other parable does Jesus give a name to one of the characters. Regardless of what position one holds on this question, the impact that the story was intended to have on Jesus’ detractors is unmistakable ([Luke 16:15](#)).

I. Inequity in Life

([LUKE 16:19-21](#))

A. Living in Luxury (v. 19)

^{19a}. “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen

The story begins with a brief description of a *rich man*, who is unnamed in Scripture. There is a tradition that his name is Dives. This probably comes from a Latin word for “rich,” which was mistaken to be a personal name in the Middle Ages.

He is described briefly in a way that lets us know that he is substantially wealthier than all but a few others around him. In the ancient world, clothing of any kind is expensive because it involves time-consuming manual labor at every stage of production. People with surplus wealth, however, can afford even more expensive clothing—clothing that allows them to display their abundance publicly. *Purple* dyes are especially rare, so purple clothing is notably expensive (compare [Acts 16:14](#); [Revelation 17:4](#); [18:12, 16](#)). Linen cloth is more comfortable and desirable than something made of cheaper wool, so *fine linen* is also prized and expensive (see [Ezekiel 27:7](#)).

HOW TO SAY IT

Hosea Ho-zay-uh.

Lazarus Laz-uh-rus.

noblesse oblige no-bless uh-bleezh.

Pharisees Fair-ih-seez.

Vitellius Vih-tell-ih-us.

^{19b.} **“and lived in luxury every day.**

Most people in the ancient world use a majority of their income or labor to obtain subsistence-level food. But the wealthy can use their abundance for more costly, exotic food and drink. They approach their meals not as needed nourishment but as a way to indulge themselves. The rich man of this story enjoys all these benefits of his wealth. His actions bespeak an attitude of entitlement.

WHO'S ENTITLED?

History supplies a large number of public figures noted for their demands, vices, and peculiar habits. Consider Herod the Great, the king of Judea when Jesus was born. His infamous deed of massacring infants ([Matthew 2:16](#)) is only one of his many deranged actions. He was so unpopular among his subjects that he arranged for some prominent Jewish men to be executed when the time of his own death would come, to ensure that sorrow rather than joy would be expressed! Fortunately for them, Herod's son did not carry out this order.

Or how about the Roman emperor Vitellius, who loved to eat? While feasting during his three or four daily meals, all accompanied by drunken revelry, he regularly vomited so he could eat more. Delicacies were brought from hundreds of miles to satisfy his gluttonous habits.

But the powerful and wealthy are not the only ones with demanding expectations. Just look how often the word *entitlement* is used in our culture! Most of us desire recognition and status as well. But we must be careful to reject the world's seductive pull and maintain our relationship with the one who denied his own rightful, entitled place. In doing so, he showed us true servanthood ([Mark 10:35-45](#); [Philippians 2:5-8](#)).

—C. M. W.

B. Suffering in Squalor (vv. 20, 21)

^{20.} **“At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores**

The second man provides a complete contrast to the first. His name, *Lazarus*, is a variation on the name Eleazer, meaning “God will help.”

But God's help seems absent from his life. He is a *beggar*, unable to obtain what he needs to survive. He seems too weak to walk, so someone has to carry him to the *gate* that guards the rich man's luxurious home. His destitution is visible in every way. His body, *covered with sores*, makes him unclean and repulsive to others, and certainly in a miserable condition (compare [Job 2:7, 8](#)).

^{21a.} **“and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table.**

The poor man isn't picky. All he desires are the scraps *from the rich man's table*—stuff that the rich man isn't going to eat anyway. But there is no indication that the rich man offers even that small gesture, which would cost him nothing. Lazarus is ignored, left to starve and suffer alone.

^{21b.} **“Even the dogs came and licked his sores.”**

The poor man's only apparent relief ironically comes from the *dogs* that lick *his sores*. But even that is a disgraceful condition, one associated with uncleanness and the stench of extreme misery.

God has called his people Israel to be generous to the poor ([Deuteronomy 15:7-11](#)). He had generously called Israel out of Egypt and brought them into the promised land ([15:15](#); [24:17-22](#)). To fail to be generous in turn is to deny the generosity of God. The rich man of Jesus' story has sadly founded his identity, security, and pleasure in his wealth rather than in God's provision (see [Proverbs 18:11](#)).

WHAT WILL YOU DO?

Some time ago, I was approached by a person asking for a handout as I exited my car at a shopping center. It took me by surprise, but I managed to scrounge up a few small bills. After a lavish display of appreciation, she turned and headed toward another arriving vehicle. As I continued on my way, I noticed an onlooker sitting in a nearby vehicle. The look on his face and the shake of his head expressed his disdain at what he'd just witnessed—calling into question the poor person's genuineness and my gullibility at giving to her.

Such occasions may indeed cause us to pause and wonder about the sincerity or actual need of a person appealing to our generosity. We experience it frequently: someone holding a sign at an intersection, solicitations by phone or mail, people approaching us on the street, etc. It is easy to distrust any request if at some time we have been duped by tricksters. Also, we do not want to violate [2 Thessalonians 3:10](#): “The one who is unwilling to work shall not eat.”

It's tempting to use the question “What would Jesus do?” as a guide, as Charles Sheldon proposed in his 1896 classic *In His Steps*. There's a lot to be said for using that question as a model. But there is also a limitation as we realize that we cannot do everything Jesus did. He fed thousands miraculously ([Matthew 14:13-21](#); [15:29-38](#)). Although we cannot match that, we can all do something ([Mark 9:41](#)). One of the church's earliest benevolence efforts was tainted with wrong motives ([Acts 4:32-5:11](#)), but that didn't stop the willingness to help.

—C. M. W.

II. Justice in Death

([LUKE 16:22-26](#))

A. Reward and Punishment (vv. 22, 23)

^{22a.} **“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side.**

Jesus chooses to depict the beggar's status after death in terms drawn from a popular Jewish conception of God's people in the afterlife. The Old Testament says remarkably little about life after death. But by Jesus' time, many Jews have developed the belief that God's faithfulness and justice mean that he must bring his people to a place of blessing beyond death.

One way of depicting this future is to draw on Old Testament passages that depict God's promised future as a great banquet ([Isaiah 25:6-8](#); compare [Luke 13:23-29](#)). That image is present here. Because people in Jesus' time commonly eat in reclining positions gathered closely around low tables, a person at a banquet often reclines near another guest. For Lazarus to be positioned at *Abraham's side* echoes such a situation. This represents a complete reversal of the beggar's condition.

22b. “The rich man also died and was buried.

The rich man apparently dies at about the same time as Lazarus. We can imagine a rich person’s lavish funeral and burial in a family tomb, but these mean nothing to the bigger picture of the story. The man’s wealth does not spare him from the fate common to all. Despite vastly different lifestyles, the earthly outcomes of the rich man and Lazarus are one and the same: they both die.

What Do You Think?

In what ways should remembering our mortality affect how we live without becoming fatalistic?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Regarding use of time

Regarding use of money

Regarding relationships we choose to have and choose not to have

Other

23. “In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

The rich man’s lavish burial is not reflective of his condition on the other side of the grave. Whereas he enjoyed nothing but the good life while on earth, now he is *in Hades*, . . . *in torment*. The Greek word behind the translation *Hades* occurs nine other times in the New Testament; context always indicates an undesirable place—a place of abandonment or condemnation (see [Matthew 11:23](#); [16:18](#); [Luke 10:15](#); [Acts 2:27, 31](#); [Revelation 1:18](#); [6:8](#); [20:13, 14](#)).

Perhaps the rich man’s worst suffering is mental in nature as he realizes that the *far away* distance of *Abraham* means exclusion from the blessings of God’s people. His condition is now reversed from what it was before.

B. Request and Reply (vv. 24-26)

24. “So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

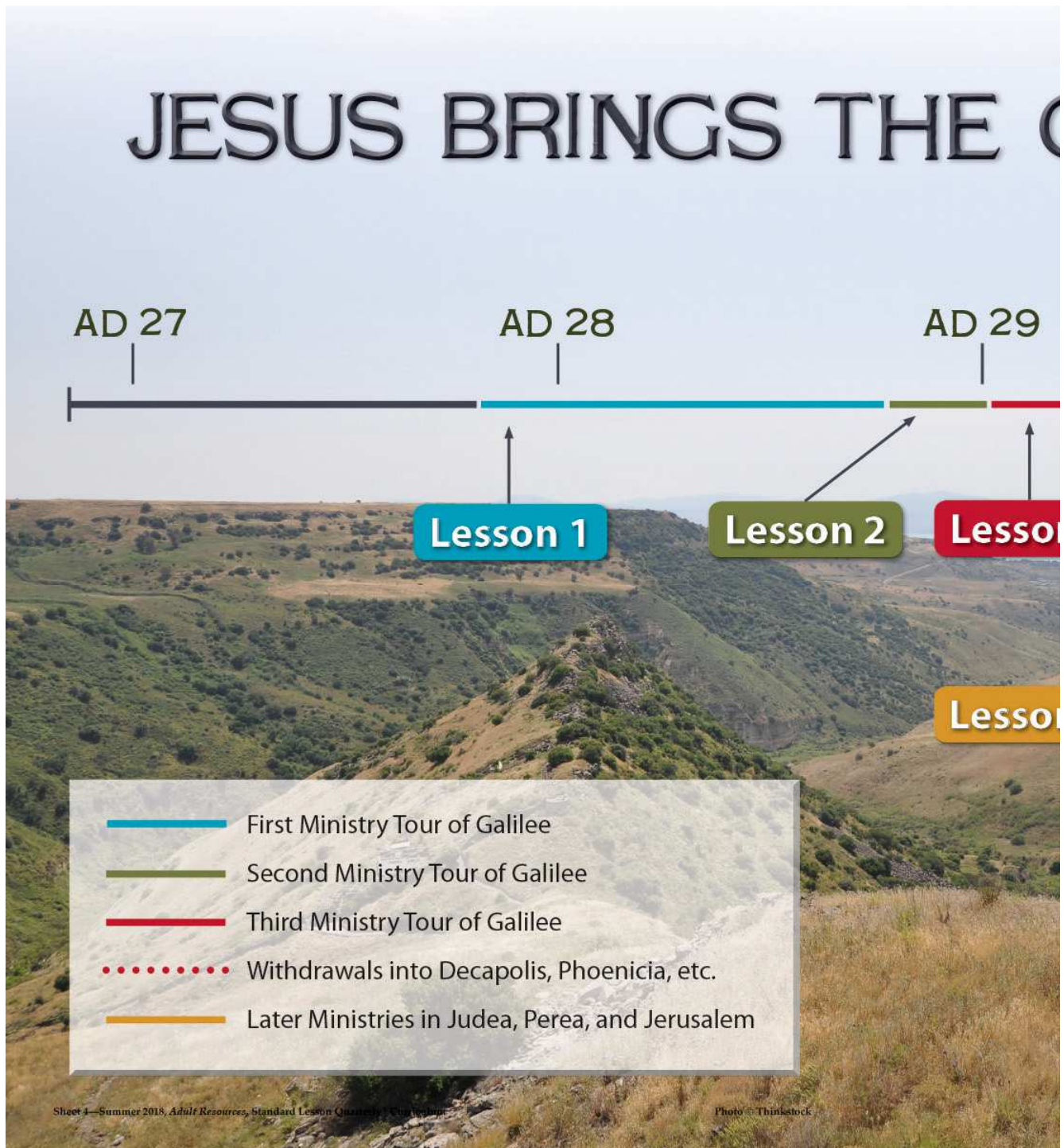
As the rich man speaks, we notice that he addresses not the poor man but *Abraham*, not the one he knows to be of low estate but the one who had also become rich ([Genesis 13:2](#)). The request is to *send Lazarus* as a servant to relieve his suffering, if only with the slightest drop of *water*.

Thus we see in this request a blend of newfound humility and long-established haughtiness. The rich man seems to accept the justice of his condition, asking only for the slightest relief. Yet he still speaks as one accustomed to commanding. He has more to learn.

25. “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.’

Abraham makes clear the justice of the new reality. The two men’s conditions after death represent reversals of their conditions in life. The rich man had the capacity and the responsibility to see that the poor man was treated with compassion, but the rich man willfully neglected that responsibility.

So what the rich man did not do, God now does. The poor man reclines in comfort. The rich man, transported from luxury to abject misery, longs for even the tiniest drop of water that might come from the poor man’s hand, just as the poor man, in his earthly torment, had longed for the slightest crumb from the rich man’s table.



Visual for Lesson 4. Post this visual next to the map visual for [lesson 1](#) so learners can have the chronological perspective as well.

What Do You Think?

What more can our church do to help its members maintain a proper awareness of the reality of God's retributive justice?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

In proactively addressing the issue before false ideas arise (see page 340)

In reactively addressing the issue after false ideas are already causing trouble

26. "And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."

If [verse 25](#) leaves any doubt regarding the permanence of the reversal, this verse removes it. While one lives on earth, crossing status lines between riches and

poverty is possible. But after death there can be no going back and forth between the place of blessing and the place of punishment.

The barrier in this reality is pictured as a *great chasm* that separates the two. Not only is the rich man unable to reach the company of Abraham, Lazarus cannot cross to provide relief, even if he wanted to.

The message is that the opportunity for repentance and receiving mercy remains open while life lasts. And there is no guarantee that everyone will get 70 years of life (compare [Psalm 90:10](#)). Reading today's text carefully, we realize that the rich man expresses no repentance despite his torment; a similar attitude is seen in [Revelation 6:15-17](#).

III. Warning in Writing

(LUKE 16:27-31)

A. Anguished Plea (vv. 27, 28)

27. **“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family,**

The rich man realizes that it is too late for him to change his surroundings. So he turns his attention to others, specifically the members of his own family. Perhaps they can avoid the misery that he now experiences. Notice that the rich man does not ask that either he himself or Abraham go; rather, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent as a servant to those who live in privilege. This presumes that Lazarus would even want to go!

28. **“for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’**

The rich man's *five brothers* who remain alive are presumably as wealthy as he was. The rich man assumes that they are as unaware as he was of their need to (1) repent and (2) work for distributive justice so that those having the greatest need are provided with resources to meet those needs. Perhaps something can be done to warn them.

B. Adequate Proof (vv. 29-31)

29. **“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’**

Abraham's reply is terse. The man's brothers already have sufficient witness to their responsibilities, in the form of *Moses and the Prophets*. In Jesus' day, the sections of the Old Testament are seen as three in number: the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms (see [Luke 24:44](#)). The first section is the first five books of the Bible; the second consists of books bearing names of prophets as well as several historical books such as Joshua and Kings; the third includes not only the Psalms as such, but also every book not included in the other two categories.

The first two of the three divisions are sufficient for communicating God's just requirements. The man's brothers should already know what the Scripture calls them to do ([Leviticus 19:10](#); etc.).

What Do You Think?

How can you safeguard yourself against things that interfere with your hearing God's Word?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

- During your initial preparations for the day
- As you endure ungodly talk
- In how you manage your time
- Other

30. **“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’**

The rich man knows that his brothers, like him and like so many before him, do not heed the message of the law and the prophets. Living as if God has provided no witness of his will, they are as heedless of their responsibility as their late brother had been.

But the rich man hopes that a spectacular intervention will help. Perhaps if someone *from the dead* will show up to warn the brothers, then they will listen. After all, who could resist a message from a dead person who has been restored to life?

31. **“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”**

The story ends abruptly with these grim words from Abraham. The rich man is informed that he has wrongly assessed what his brothers need. The witness of *Moses and the Prophets* is formidable. They testify to the mighty deeds of God and their implications. They offer God's rich promises, but promises that are conditional.

To ignore the requirements of the promises is a symptom of a hard heart, of a human will that refuses to align with God's will. Even if someone were to return *from the dead*, those who do not listen to God's Word now will not listen then. Thus the story reaches its climax as it points in a veiled way to the resurrection of Jesus.

Conclusion

A. Who Were “the Needy” Then?

Jesus' opponents fancied themselves to be experts in the Law of Moses and the books of the prophets. They sought to apply those laws zealously to every aspect of life.

In that process, however, they lost sight of the God who gave the law. They became deaf and blind to his initiatives. Standing before them was the greatest of God's prophets—and more. He stood head and shoulders above Moses and the prophets. God was present in the world as he has not been before. In Jesus all the law and the prophets come to fulfillment.

Yet many Pharisees and teachers of the law did not see this. Their love of power and wealth left them insensitive. So when Jesus rose from the dead, many still did not believe. Those who looked down on the poor could justify their attitude by misreadings of texts such as [Proverbs 13:18](#); [20:4](#); [24:33, 34](#); etc. In ignoring the physically needy, they missed seeing the most spiritually needy: themselves.

B. Who Are “the Needy” Now?

When we see need around us, what comes to our minds? Gratitude that we are not in their situation? Memory of what it was like to be in need? A sense of annoyance? A sense of responsibility? A sense of opportunity? A mixture of these?

Jesus’ story reminds us that regardless of our circumstances, we are all people in need. Before we label someone else as “needy,” we first ought to see ourselves that way. We are not self-sufficient. Even as we live as responsible, productive citizens, we do not make it on our own. We depend on God for everything, especially eternal life. One day we will stand before him either to receive that great gift or to be consigned to eternal ruin for rejecting it. Today’s text offers a solemn call to listen and repent *now*, before it’s too late.

What Do You Think?

If an unbeliever dismisses “before it’s too late” as a scare tactic, how would you respond?

Talking Points for Your Discussion

Responses that agree, at least partially, with the unbeliever

Responses that disagree with the unbeliever

C. Prayer

Gracious and loving Father, we confess that we depend completely on you for life, both present and eternal. Open our eyes to our own need. Open our hearts to the needs of others. Make us your instruments of mercy, never growing weary in giving that reflects your generosity. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

D. Thought to Remember

To meet a needy person, look in the mirror.

INVOLVEMENT LEARNING

Enhance your lesson with NIV® Bible Student (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the NIV® Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition).

Into the Lesson

Option 1. Begin class by asking, “Can you identify the person who said this: ‘It’s not a coincidence that in the Scriptures, poverty is mentioned more than 2,100 times. It’s not an accident. That’s a lot of air time, 2,100 mentions.’ Was it (a) Franklin Graham, (b) Bob Dylan, (c) Bono?” (The correct answer is Bono.) Ask, “Why do you think God’s Word talks so much about the poor?”

Option 2. Ask your students, “Was there a time in your life when you considered yourself to be poor? If so, what was the hardest aspect of poverty for you?” Allow time for responses.

After either activity say, “We know that God has compassion for the poor. In today’s lesson Jesus tells about a poor person who experienced a complete reversal of his situation. But it’s much more than a feel-good story.”

Into the Word

Option 1. Distribute copies of the “Turnabout Is Fair Play” activity from the reproducible page, which can be downloaded. Ask four of your students to read through and be prepared to act out the parts. Select your best actors for the parts of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Have a stuffed dog for Lazarus to use.

Option 2. Ask for three volunteers to read the Scripture text aloud; assign them the parts of the narrator, the rich man, and Abraham. The narrator will read all of the text except for the words actually spoken by Abraham and the rich man.

Lead a discussion of the story and its central meaning with the following statements and questions: (1) “Earlier in this chapter Jesus was talking to the Pharisees about not putting their trust in money; but the Pharisees were rich and mocked him. How did this story help Jesus make his point clearer?” (2) “The Pharisees also looked down on all the ‘little people’ who weren’t as righteous as they were in keeping the law. What might this story say about that?” (3) “In this story Abraham says that some would not believe even ‘if someone from the dead goes to them.’ In what way did this come true for the Pharisees? Why didn’t they believe?”

Before class write the following statements on separate index cards: (1) “I’ve worked hard to earn my wealth, and I intend to use it to enjoy life.” (2) “My life has been hard ever since I became a Christian, and it feels like God doesn’t care about me.” (3) “I just don’t believe in life after death; once you’re gone, it’s lights out.” (4) “I believe that we all go to Heaven when we die; I just don’t think a loving God would condemn people to Hell.” Prepare enough cards so that there is one for every two people. Have students pair off and discuss how they would respond to a person with that opinion. Ask for volunteers to share their discussion.

Into Life

Tell the following true story: “A church in Rochester, New York, became aware of the large number of people who were deaf or hard of hearing in their community who were attending the local college for the deaf. Several members worked at the college and knew sign language, so they were able to provide interpretation for worship services as well as training others to sign. Many close friendships developed between hearing and non-hearing, and many hearing-impaired people came to the Lord. In turn, they reached out to their unchurched friends. Can you think of a similar opportunity that we have in our community among the disadvantaged, disabled, or poverty stricken?” Allow time for people to discuss this and suggest ways to establish such a ministry.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Different Kinds of ‘Poor’” activity from the reproducible page. Briefly talk about the three kinds of poverty mentioned. Then ask students to pair off and talk about which of those types of people they can best reach out to and help.