

The One Whom God Helps

Luke 16:19-31

Sermon by Dan Schrock

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¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.

The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴He 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.’ ²⁵But 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. ²⁶Besides 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.’ ²⁷He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house—²⁸for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He 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.’” (NRSV)

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This morning I want to talk about dogs. Not just any dogs, but the dogs in this parable. It turns out that the dogs have an important role in this story—and when we properly understand the role of the dogs, a doorway opens to understand the parable more clearly.

Not House Pets

When Americans think about dogs, they generally think of house pets that are well-groomed, well-fed, and well-behaved. In 2012, Americans spent serious money on their pets—\$53 billion. While this \$53 billion includes cats, birds, fish, reptiles, the largest share of these expenses is for dogs.¹ Several decades ago I knew a Mennonite woman in a nearby town—member of a local Mennonite church—who had a pet dog. In addition to providing the usual dog food, this woman also bought steaks and chicken for her dog. In every way she pampered her dog.

Jews treated their dogs much differently. Dogs in Israel were not house pets. Instead dogs were mostly semi-wild and freely roamed out-of-doors. We have a little bit of evidence that people sometimes used dogs as work animals; shepherds, for example,

used dogs to help control their sheep. Yet most dogs were not work dogs, it seems. Dogs lived outside, roamed wherever they wanted to go, and fended for themselves. They were mangy, not well-groomed; thin and scrawny, not well-fed. A close parallel would be the dogs you see now in many countries of the world. They live on the streets, look shabby and rundown, and often act a little mean.

Jewish people had a low opinion of dogs. The Bible mentions dogs about 40 times, and most of the references are unsavory. Carrion—dead animals—were thrown to dogs (Ex. 22:31). Dogs were mean enough that people sometimes only approached them with sticks in their hands (1 Sam. 17:43). And in several places, the Old Testament talks about dogs eating the bodies of dead people (1 Kings 14:11, 16:4, 21:24). The most gruesome of these references is the prediction that dogs will eat the dead body of Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 21:23, 2 Kings 9:10, 36).²

When dogs appear in this parable of Lazarus and the rich man, do not imagine pampered house pets. Instead picture mangy, wild street dogs that roved from place to place and likely had no clear owner. The parable specifies that Lazarus lay at the rich man's gate. That is, the man was so rich he could afford to put a wall around his property. Outside of that wall, where the gate interfaced with the street, lay Lazarus. There the dogs on the street came up to Lazarus and licked his sores.

The Translation of *alla*

Lazarus was not only poor and hungry for whatever food scraps the rich man threw over the wall out onto the street. Lazarus was also a sick man with sores on his skin—sores that the dogs came and licked.

Many English versions of the Bible seem to say that these dogs joined the rich man in mistreating Lazarus. For example the NRSV says in verse 21 that “even the dogs would come and lick his sores.” The NIV says almost the same thing: “Even the dogs came and licked his sores.” These translations imply that even the dogs gave Lazarus a hard time, that they spurned Lazarus as the rich man spurned him.

These translations are not as good as they could be. The Greek has the word *alla*, which means “but.” So a better translation is this: “*But* the dogs came and licked his sores.” In other words, the rich man ignored Lazarus, *but* the dogs did not. Instead the dogs came and licked his sores. The Greek wants us to contrast the behavior of the dogs with the behavior of the rich man. Those scruffy street dogs paid attention to Lazarus, but the civilized rich man did not.

There’s another key point here. The saliva of dogs contains endogenous peptide antibiotics, which of course help the process of healing. And it’s possible that Jews and others in the Mediterranean world knew that when dogs licked a wound, it tended to get better.³

The dogs act compassionately toward Lazarus. The contrast between the rich man and the dogs could not be more vivid. Here’s this very rich guy who wears expensive purple clothes that only royalty could usually afford to buy. He feasts on fine food and wine every day. But he won’t do anything to help Lazarus, the sick man outside his gated house.

Contrast the dogs. They are in many ways poor themselves. Their food comes from whatever they can scrounge off the streets and surrounding countryside. They have no fine house to live in, no human beings to look after them. Indeed, they are probably wary of human beings who sometimes mistreat them. Yet they trust Lazarus and have compassion on him. They lick his wounds and without self-consciously knowing it, try to heal him.

Reversal

In spite of the dogs’ compassion, Lazarus dies. Perhaps he was too sick and too malnourished from hunger to survive. In any case the story hints that Lazarus wasn’t even buried, because angels come, pick him off the street, and carry him away to be with Abraham. There in a blissful state of existence, Lazarus lies next to Abraham, the founder and figurehead of the Jewish people. There he finds a sort of comfort he did not find in the world. For the first time, he is well-cared for.

The rich man also dies and gets a decent burial, probably an opulent burial. But surprise! He ends up in Hades, a place of intense flames and high heat. He burns. He's tormented with a terrible thirst. And he looks up and sees Abraham and Lazarus far away.

You would think that the rich man, sitting there in the fires of hell, would have learned his lesson. You'd think he'd be humble, chastened, sorry for the way he lived his life. A personal confession of sin would be highly appropriate about now.

But no, such is not the case. This rich guy tries to order other people around, just like he ordered people around on earth. Listen to his language.

- "Abraham, send Lazarus to give me some water."
- "Abraham, send Lazarus back to warn my brothers about these hellish flames."

These sentences are commands, worded in the cadences of a man used to ordering servants around to take care of his every whim. Make me breakfast. Fetch my slippers. Get me a glass of wine. The sense of privilege still clings to this man.

Abraham patiently but persistently smashes this man's delusions.⁴

- No, rich man, you're not going to find any comfort any more. The outcome of your life can no longer be changed.
- No, rich man, no one can cross the chasm between us and you.
- No, rich man, your 5 brothers back home already have scriptures to read the teachings of Moses and the prophets. If they won't listen to the Bible, they won't listen to messengers from hell either.
- Sorry, rich man, this is the way it is. Now you're stuck.

And there the parable ends.

God, the Helper

There is one more detail in the parable for us to notice. It's the name Lazarus. In all of Jesus' parables, in all of the four gospels, this is the only person who gets named. The name Lazarus (*El 'azar*) means "the one whom God helps." At first blush this seems like an odd name for a guy who died in pain on the streets. Yet throughout the parable,

God has indeed helped Lazarus. In mysterious but real ways, God's mercy came to Lazarus through the dogs who had compassion on him; through kind friends who carried him to the rich man's gate; through the angels who carried him off to Abraham; and through Abraham himself, who defended Lazarus against the shrill demands of the tormented rich man. God was with Lazarus and helped him all the way.⁵

The rich man's problem wasn't that he was rich. His problem was that he did nothing—absolutely nothing—to comfort Lazarus. He should have known from Moses and the prophets. He should have been reading scripture and letting it alter the shape of his life.

This may well be the point left for us to ponder. If we privileged people want to be saved, there is scripture. We have Moses and the prophets. We have Jesus and the Holy Spirit. We can listen to them, if we want. Through them, God helps us too.

¹ http://www.americanpetproducts.org/press_industrytrends.asp, <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/02/these-4-charts-explain-exactly-how-americans-spend-52-billion-on-our-pets-in-a-year/273446/>, both accessed August 9, 2013.

² Geoffrey David Miller, "Attitudes toward Dogs in Ancient Israel: A Reassessment," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Vol. 32.4 (2008), 487-500, has tried to argue that Jews sometimes thought well of dogs. Perhaps so. But in my judgment the biblical evidence overwhelmingly indicates strongly negative attitudes toward dogs. We are very far away here from North American ideas of dogs as pampered house pets.

³ H. Mygind, et al, "Plectasin Is a Peptide Antibiotic with Therapeutic Potential from a Saprophytic Fungus," *Nature* 437 (October 2005), 975-980, quoted in Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (IVP Academic, 2008), 385.

⁴ J. Mary Luti, "Send Lazarus," *The Christian Century*, September 9-16, 1998, 819.

⁵ Bailey, 394.