

“Godspell: The Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus”  
Luke 16:19-31

Today we are going to start with a quiz based on the work of Hans Rosling in his book *Factfulness*. You received the quiz when you walked in. If you are like the average person, you would have gotten most of the answers wrong. Let’s review the answers.

1. In all low-income countries across the world today, how many girls finish primary school?
  - a. 20%
  - b. 40%
  - c. 60% (correct)
  
2. Where does the majority of the world population live?
  - a. Low-income countries
  - b. Middle-income countries (correct)
  - c. High-income countries
  
3. In the last 20 years the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty has...
  - a. Almost doubled
  - b. Remained more or less the same
  - c. Almost halved (correct)
  
4. What is the life expectancy of the world today?
  - a. 50 years
  - b. 60 years
  - c. 70 years (correct)
  
5. There are 2 billion children in the world today, aged 0 to 15 years old. How many children will there be in the year 2100, according to the United Nations?
  - a. 4 billion
  - b. 3 billion
  - c. 2 billion (correct)
  
6. The UN predicts that by 2100 the world population will have increased by another 4 billion people. What is the main reason?
  - a. There will be more children aged below 15
  - b. There will be more adults (age 15 to 74) (correct)
  - c. There will be more very old people (age 75 and older)
  
7. How did the number of deaths per year from natural disasters change over the last hundred years?
  - a. More than doubled
  - b. Remained about the same
  - c. Decreased to less than half (correct)

8. How many of the world's 1-year-old children today have been vaccinated against some disease?
  - a. 20%
  - b. 50%
  - c. 80% (correct)
  
9. Worldwide, 30-year-old men have spent 10 years in school, on average. How many years have women of the same age spent in school?
  - a. 9 years (correct)
  - b. 6 years
  - c. 3 years
  
10. How many people in the world have SOME access to electricity?
  - a. 20%
  - b. 50%
  - c. 80% (correct)

This is not about shaming or tricking you. It is about examining our mindsets and assumptions about the world. Most people who respond to these questions get them wrong because our preconceived ideas say that the world is getting worse. A lot of what we think we know now is based on an old worldview of dividing the world into only two categories of rich or poor countries. Rosling's book and foundation [www.gapminder.com](http://www.gapminder.com) try to help people understand the positive global trends so that our solutions to the problems would be based on current facts. With the exception of global warming, all the numbers are pointing in the right direction. This is important because our awareness makes a huge difference in how we find solutions. Here is a video by Hans Rosling about how this kind of knowledge can help us find solutions to the problem of poverty: [https://youtu.be/5JiYcV\\_mg6A](https://youtu.be/5JiYcV_mg6A)

Our awareness makes a difference. Much of our struggle today is because of lack of awareness and how we get manipulated by politics. Rosling writes, "The Democrats and Republicans in the United States often claim that their opponents don't know the facts. If they measured their own knowledge instead of pointing at each other, maybe everyone could become more humble. When we polled in the United States, only 5 percent picked the right answer. The other 95 percent, regardless of their voting preference, believed either that the extreme poverty rate had not changed over the last 20 years, or, worse, that it had actually doubled -which is literally the opposite of what actually happened."

This relates directly to the problem being presented in the parable of Jesus for today. The biggest challenge in the story which Jesus told was that the rich man simply did not notice Lazarus. In the parable, the rich man is not presented as a cruel kind of man who chose to ignore Lazarus on purpose. He simply did not even see him. Lazarus was invisible to him. Their worlds were so different from each other that it was impossible for the rich man to even notice Lazarus. This parable is not a story about a focus on the other side as in eternal life. It is a story about learning to see the realities of others and their struggles

outside of our gates. We have to get the facts right. We have to see what helps us move out of our own bubbles to be in touch with the realities of the world.

Chapter 16 in Luke deals with greed and people's attachment to money which often leads to overlooking the pain of others and to the creation of economic systems that are set up for the advantage of the few at the expense of the many. Jesus understood that the people who were attached to their wealth at the expense of others, did not set out to do so with bad intentions. Often, they were just misled by their worldview of what was rightfully theirs and how to get it and use it. Another illusion in life is that we are separate from others and that their suffering does not affect us. In the telling of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus was trying to help reverse people's expectations about wealth and about who is important and who is not in the eyes of God. In this parable we hear Jesus naming the man who is on the bottom of the social ladder, while leaving the rich man nameless. The poor man is given a name, Lazarus. This is the only person in all of the parables of Jesus who is called by name. In contrast we see that the rich man was just being labeled as rich. What is even more intriguing about this is the fact that the name Lazarus in Hebrew means, "God helps." So, Jesus was clearly assigning tremendous significance to the one who is seen by society as an outcast. The whole parable exaggerates this point in order to make it clear for all who were listening. The two men in the parable clearly come from two social classes. The rich man is someone who is not just rich. He would be in our terms today one of the wealthiest men in the world. He lived in a gated house which was only the privilege of nobility. He wore purple clothes which was another sign of nobility. He feasted sumptuously every day. On the other hand, we are given a vivid image of how severe life was for Lazarus. He waited every day for crumbs to fall off the rich man's table in order to eat. He also had severe sores on his body. What is worse is that the dogs licked his wounds. Dogs in that culture were considered unclean and vicious. But even the dogs took pity on Lazarus and licked his wounds. The parable could not be any stronger in its language about the difference between the life of Lazarus and the life of the rich man. The purpose of this sharp contrast was to show the people that the reality of the kingdom of God about which Jesus was preaching was so different from the realities of the world as they knew it. In the kingdom of God which Jesus invited his disciples to proclaim and to live, the poor are important to God. Their names are known to God and are just as important as rich and powerful people. What is also interesting about this parable is the fact that Jesus reverses a religious and theological concept about prosperity and blessing. In that time, and even in our time to a certain extent, wealth was seen as a sign of God's blessing, while poverty was seen as a sign of God's displeasure. In a way, it was seen as God's will to have some people rich and others poor. But here in our parable Jesus was challenging such worldviews by telling a parable to show how God's blessing was not connected to wealth. In fact, the opposite was true. The one who neglected the suffering of the poor was the one who did not receive God's blessing.

How does this parable apply to us today? I think the key is to enhance our ability to care. The problem with seeing poverty as an overwhelming problem that cannot be solved is that it creates a sense of apathy or helplessness. If we have a pessimistic view of the world, it is hard to get motivated to do something. Also, if the real problems and opportunities are not known to us, it is hard to move forward. The Gospel of Jesus for this

week challenges us to open our eyes and to connect with our fellow human beings. Breaking down the barriers that separate us, whether they are our mindsets or social systems, is essential to the work of the kingdom. We could look at the parable as a way to vilify the rich, but a more faithful way to look at it is to examine ourselves and the barriers we create that limit our compassion and work for justice. It is not about us and them. It is about seeing that we are all in this human struggle together.

Last Monday was Holocaust Remembrance Day marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of liberation from Auschwitz. It is good to remember that we have come a long way since then, and yet our work is not done. Compassion and awareness of the suffering of others are still needed. The parable of Jesus about the suffering of Lazarus is a call and a challenge for each of us to look at those around us.

I would like to end with an example of someone who put her care for the poor into a creative solution. Her name is Leila Janah. She was the child of Indian immigrants who had deep compassion for those in need around the world. She created digital jobs that pay a living wage to thousands in Africa and India. She believed that jobs, not handouts, offered the best solution to poverty: <https://youtu.be/pJlNgL42-D0>

In 2012 author David Foster Wallace gave a powerful commencement address at Kenyon College, in which he spoke about compassion by paying attention to the humanity and struggles of others. He used the typical scene of being in a grocery store in a checkout line when you are annoyed by others in the line. He said, "Most days you can choose to look differently at this dead-eyed, over-made-up lady who just screamed at her kid in the checkout line. Maybe she is not usually like this. Maybe she has been up three straight nights holding the hand of a husband who is dying of bone cancer. Or maybe this very lady is the low-wage clerk at the motor vehicle department, who just yesterday helped your spouse resolve a horrific, infuriating, red-tape problem through some small act of bureaucratic kindness. Of course, none of this is likely, but it's also not impossible. It just depends what you want to consider. If you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars: love, fellowship, the mystical oneness of all things deep down." Amen.