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Date: August 18, 2013  
Sermon Title: Biblical Literacy: David's Response to "Elysium," Reza Aslan, and FOX News  
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe  
Scripture: Luke 16:19-31

## **Luke 16:19-31**

'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He 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." But 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. Besides 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." He said, "Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house — for I have five brothers — that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." 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 listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." '

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So ... there is our Scripture story for today, the story of a rich man and the beggar who lived outside his gate. The rich man had a life better than good. The beggar, Lazarus, had a life worse than bad.

Back in my Habitat for Humanity days, I preached on this Scripture all across America, the story of "The Rich Man and Lazarus." I preached it pretty straightforward, modernized it a bit, gussied it up, helped people to feel the inequities and injustices of poverty. Some places like it so much they invited me back and demanded that I preach the exact same sermon.

Unfortunately, you're not getting that sermon today. Instead, you're getting a sermon on "Biblical literacy." That's a topic to stir the blood, don't you think? "Biblical literacy" means having at least a passing acquaintance with the Bible, at least a casual familiarity, to know enough to know when somebody is using the Bible right or wrong. I often tell people the two most quoted verses from the Bible are "The Lord helps those who help themselves," and "Charity begins at home." Neither verse is in the Bible, but if we don't know the Bible, we won't know when someone is using it or abusing it.

Rush Limbaugh this week announced that you can't believe in God AND believe in human-made global warming. Rush is the most popular radio talk show host in America. People may think he's right about economics or politics; he may be a leading expert in climate change and global warming. But he's wrong on God, and that's important, that's our business. But to know that, you have to know the Bible.

Years ago, New York State was debating the death penalty, and a state representative, arguing FOR the death penalty, said that if there hadn't been a death penalty, there would be no Christianity. He was using the crucifixion of Jesus, an innocent man according to the government, in order to rationalize the death penalty. Interestingly, a year or so later, the politician was diagnosed with a terminal disease. He was dying, and he changed his view on the death penalty. In other words, he was about to meet his maker, and he didn't want to have to explain to God his shoddy misuse of the Bible.

In each instance, very important people were deciding very important matters on the basis of their read of the Bible. We need to know the Bible to make sense of it all. You all have proficiencies, expertise, areas in which you know a thing or two. And I bet it annoys you when others with little or no knowledge misrepresent, misstate, or flat-out get it wrong when they talk what you know.

The other day I was watching FOX News, when its religion editor was interviewing Reza Aslan, who has written a new book about Jesus called *Zealot*. It was one of the silliest, most inept interviews I've ever seen. The poor interviewer had obviously not read the book. Her main question

was, "You're a Muslim. Why would you write a book about Jesus?" And it all had the tone of "Who do you think you are?" "What right do you have?" The interview was silly and offensive on so many levels. First, do we really want our scholarship to be limited by a religious litmus test?

I first studied world religions as a sophomore at the Mount Hermon School for Boys, learning about Judaism, Hinduism, Taoism, Shintoism, Islam from a world-famous basic text written by a Christian

When I studied at Harvard, I was immersed in Hinduism, studying with the Methodist Diana Eck and the Baptist John Carman, two of the best scholars in the world. My professor for Islam, now up at Yale, was Lamin Sanneh, a Catholic. And truly, the most effective lessons I ever learned about other religions came from my dear Indian friend Azariah, a Christian evangelist. He knew his stuff, which I would think would be the number-one criterion for scholarship: do you know your stuff?

But here's my major complaint with the FOX News interview. The interviewer, Lauren Green, is a self-described evangelical Christian. Because her interview was so awful, it has gone viral. Zillions of people have seen it. It launched the book to No. 1 on Amazon, which means more zillions of people are reading the book and thinking that the book is right. And it's NOT. Zillions of people, including Christians, are getting a sloppy, half-baked view of Jesus. If we knew our Bible, that wouldn't be a problem.

It could be fun, invigorating, even helpful to be challenged and pushed and questioned, when know our stuff. But if we are in the dark, it is NOT helpful to be pushed around. And if we are Biblically illiterate, if we don't know our stuff, then we are in the dark.

Now, this sermon isn't meant as a review of Reza Aslan's book, good or bad, but I'll give you a quick opinion. It's an interesting book. There is a lot of useful history of the times in politics and religion of Jesus's day. He puts Jesus in a context, and that's good. But he doesn't get Jesus, and he doesn't get at least half of the Old Testament. If the FOX News journalist had read the book, and if she knew her Bible, she could have eaten him for lunch! But she went for the cheap shot, questioning him as a Muslim and ended up making Christians look silly and the author look good.

There's actually not much new in Aslan's book. Christian scholars have been looking for the "real Jesus" for ages. Albert Schweitzer wrote a book, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, 100 years ago. There are Christian scholars who sit around and vote, literally vote, on whether Jesus really said such

and such verse or not. The bottom line is Aslan is good at history, mediocre on religion, and since Jesus is the heart of our religion, Aslan misses a lot.

If we don't know the Bible, we miss a lot, and that's the core argument for "Biblical literacy." Two years ago, two musicals, "Jesus Christ Superstar" and "Godspell," were both on Broadway. Dan Brown's famous book, *The Da Vinci Code*, and his current book, *Inferno*, are both immersed in Christianity. This summer's "Superman" movie, Kanye West's hip-hop album, countless rock 'n roll lyrics, and almost every political debate get into Scripture or religion or faith or all three. The world is smack dab in the middle of our religion. So we'd better know our stuff.

Let me make a string of very strong, even outrageous statements and see if you get my point: America is a mess. We were the New Israel, the chosen people, but we turned the Ten Commandments upside down. Our cities are Sodom and Gomorrah. Hollywood has sold its soul for a bowl of porridge. We are like sheep gone astray, abomination upon abomination, and the wages of our sins is death, period. The antichrist rules the capital. The end is near. What's happening in the Middle East is clearly Armageddon, and the only hope is to repent, to be the Remnant, worthy of the New Jerusalem.

I just made 14 strong statements. You see and hear them every day, and not one of them makes any sense if you don't know the Bible. I see and hear them every day. Our friends and relatives and coworkers believe this stuff, read it on the Internet, e-mail it to us. It's "conventional wisdom" and, "common knowledge" in lots of circles, so I'm not making it up. What you need to know is each and every single one of those statements is rooted somewhere in our Bible. So you need to know the Bible to know if folks have it right or wrong

I went to see the new movie "Elysium" this week. It's both hot and controversial, a science-fiction movie set in a futuristic world, 100 years from now. The rich have created a paradise just a few miles above the earth — beautiful, safe, serene, healthy, a truly gated community. The earth is hell, a vast urban wasteland of poverty, violence, despair, sickness. Well, naturally, some folks, led by Matt Damon, don't think that's fair, so they are constantly trying to break into Elysium, especially to secure the health care available only for the rich. I think you can already guess what the pundits and critics are saying: "left-wing ... Hollywood ... communist ... occupy Wall Street ... socialized medicine ... Obamacare ... anti-capitalist propaganda"! Could be! Nowadays absolutely everything is viewed through the lens of politics. But it might be fun as Christians to view more stuff through the lens of faith and of Scripture.

That's actually how we raised our kids. I decided long ago that I wasn't going to stalk my kids, checking to see what movies they snuck into or what songs they were listening to. Instead we challenged them to see their movies, listen to their music through the eyes and ears of Christian faith. When some behavior, some attitude, some language is out there to see or hear, ask yourself, in our church, do we talk that way? In our Bible do we live like that? In our faith do we treat people that way?

So anyway, I'm at this movie, "Elysium," and I'm well aware of all the attacks on the movie, and my first thought was, "hey, it's only a story!" Then immediately, right there in the theater lobby, I remembered today's Scripture, a story, "The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus," just a story.

In Jesus's story, there is a rich man living the life of Riley in his own private "Elysium," enjoying what the Bible describes as "all the good things of life." Meanwhile, Lazarus lives in the gutter just outside the rich man's gate, his body covered in sores, his life an endless hell. At some point, both men die and go to their eternal reward. Lazarus ends up in a nice place — comfortable, pleasant, central air, nice, healthy. The other guy ends up in a place considerably hotter. There's one little exchange that says that it all. The hotter guy, suffering his eternal torment, orders Lazarus to bring him a drink, but he won't even talk directly to Lazarus. He asks the great Biblical hero Abraham, he orders Abraham to order Lazarus to bring him a drink.

You see the point? Even in death, even in his place of punishment, even with God listening, even with the chance of time off for good behavior, he can't treat Lazarus like a human being, with a little respect, a little dignity. He stayed true to his nasty self that got him into a living hell in the first place. End of story. After all, it's just a story, right? Unless, Jesus meant something by it. To know that, you have to know a little Bible and know little Jesus. You need a little "Biblical literacy."

Does the Bible say anything to us, rich or poor? Does it have any suggestions, any requirements, any policies? Does it speak to society, to politicians, to business people, to churches? Does it tell us about our responsibilities, whether poor or rich? Yes, actually.

I've been to hell a few times in life, real hell on earth, exactly as portrayed in the movie scene in "Elysium." Cap-Haïtien in Haiti, the slums of Mumbai in India, a coffee farm in Nicaragua. But the hell portrayed in "Elysium" matches most perfectly the hell I experienced in Juarez, Mexico, just across the border from El Paso. I was in El Paso to try to start a Habitat project, and early one morning a Catholic priest asked me to join him as he

smuggled food across the border. We always hear about smuggling into the U.S. — smuggling people into the U.S., smuggling drugs into the U.S., smuggling other people's problems into the U.S. We were smuggling our bounty, our blessings, out of the U.S. into Mexico. We were like drug runners in reverse.

We had food and medicine packed and stashed everywhere — in our pockets, in the glove compartment, under the spare tire, under a false floor, above the visor. Our destination was an entire village built and living on a garbage dump. Literally. I've seen poor people living *near* a garbage dump. But these people, over 1,000 of them, were living *on and in* a garbage dump. Flies, maggots, rotting refuse, filthy water. Hell.

It's possible my little garbage dump village was just a Hollywood set, just a left-wing, socialist, occupy-Wall-Street propaganda "Potemkin village." Or, they were real people in real hell.

Go back to our Scripture, "The Rich Man and Lazarus." What was the rich man saying? Here's what the Bible tells us about him: he was rich, he wore purple, he lived in a big house, he ate good food. Other than the purple thing, he's me. But the sin isn't in the people, or the house or the food or the riches. This is one of those rare parts of the Bible where almost everybody agrees: the sin was it not seeing, not feeling, not caring.

William Barclay, the great Scottish Biblical scholar, the bedrock of all of our church's Bible study, put it this way: "His sin was that he could look on the world's suffering and feel no answering sword of grief pierce his heart. He looked at his fellow man, hungry and in pain, and did nothing. His was the punishment of the man who never noticed. It was not what he did that got him into [hell]. It was what he did not do." (Barclay, William. *The Gospel of Luke*. p. 214: Westminster, 1956. Print.)

But to know that, you need to know the Bible.