

## It's Not What You Might Think

### The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16: 19 - 31

\*\*\*"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 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

\*\*\*"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 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.'

\*\* "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. 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.'

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

\*\* "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

"No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

"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.'"

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\*\*The parable of Lazarus and the rich man has been the foundation for many erroneous beliefs about the afterlife and particularly, "hell" within traditional Christianity. That's because many people have viewed this passage not as a parable, but as a teaching passage, a true story Jesus told to give details about the punishment of sinners in the next life.

But, I'd like to suggest to you right out front here that "It's Not What You Might Think". In fact, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man really has *nothing* to say about punishment or reward in the afterlife. Jesus here used a story, which fit a common conception about life after death in his day, to make an entirely different point - a message about the fate that awaited the Jewish

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nation because of the unbelief and faithlessness which led them to reject him as the Messiah. That's what this parable is about.

But before we talk about what the parable really means, I'm guessing I'm going to have to say a little more about what it *doesn't* mean. Anyone who insists that this is not a parable, but a true, literal, story that Jesus told to describe the condition of the lost in hell needs to overlook several glaring problems with that conclusion.

First, Jesus the Messiah never accuses the rich man of any sin - or any evil at all. He is simply portrayed as a wealthy man who lived the good life. And Lazarus, on the other hand, is also never portrayed as a *righteous* man, or a believer. He is just one who had the misfortune to be poor and unable to care for himself. The parable doesn't say that the rich man ever hurt anyone, stole, murdered, cursed God, didn't believe in God, or ever did anything bad. It says nothing negative about the Rich man. It doesn't say Lazarus was good, kind, faithful, righteous, or that he loved God. In fact, it really doesn't say one, single, positive, anything about him whatsoever!

If this story is literal, then the logical implication is both of the following statements...

*\*\* Live a life of good things now, blessed of God, and you'll burn in the flames of Hell forever.  
Live a life of evil things now, cursed of God, and you'll live forever in Heaven.*

Quite frankly neither one is a pretty picture, who'd want to choose either? That's because this is figurative and symbolic language, so of course it doesn't make sense literally! It's a parable.

This parable, like all the others, has a broad range of significance. This is not the story of a single, nameless, rich man and one poor beggar in the street whose name was Lazarus.

\*\* (blank) Again, if the intent of this parable is to truly picture hell, then we would have to also believe that the saved will be able to view the lost who are burning there. Can you imagine anyone enjoying an eternal existence if they were able to see lost friends, family, and acquaintances being incinerated, yet never burning up? Additionally, if hell (as it has traditionally

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been taught) is an abyss of fire and brimstone where sinners are tormented *forever*, what good is 'one drop of water' going to do?

In spite of that (and other similar beliefs), largely based on this passage, Christians have gone to great lengths over time to uphold the teaching of an 'eternal, conscious, torment' for the wicked in the afterlife (as opposed to other interpretations of the same scriptures, such as punishment with eternal *consequences* - i.e., destruction - or, the concept of a redemptive correction - with an eternal opportunity to receive Grace) [which was the belief of C. S. Lewis, by the way!] But, sadly, many in the church will vehemently condemn, and label 'a liberal' anyone who questions the more popular view.

People have also drawn from *this passage* the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, a belief that has deeper roots in Plato and Greek philosophy than it does in Scripture.

As Rob Bell has powerfully pointed out (in his book, Love Wins) there is a lot of misunderstanding and a lot of assumptions made in our modern theology concerning the fate of unbelievers and the wicked. And Bell's writing has caused a huge backlash, and he has been labeled as a heretic and condemned by lots of people in the Church - many of whom have never actually read anything that he's written.

Strangely enough, because it's so significant, this is one of those topics that preachers (other than 'fire and brimstone' type) shy away from, because we know that for some reason this is an intensely emotional topic for many, and we also know that even hinting at alternative ways of interpreting Scripture opens up the likelihood that someone is going to get angry, and your orthodoxy as a preacher will be questioned (and, really, who wants that?).

But, you know (something that I can't quite understand, to be honest with you) I've known people who seem to have a deep seated desire for this to be true, they *want* a hell with eternal, conscious torment for the 'sinners', something that I find a bit disturbing. Whatever your belief about hell is, it should always be a topic we talk about with tears, and somber tones. not with glee and anticipation.

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People in some churches today find themselves afraid to even ask the questions about hell and punishment that should be at the top of the list for anyone who has come to know the love of God in Jesus Christ - "How can *eternal* punishment for *temporal* sins be just?" I know the stock answers, and frankly, I don't find them satisfying. I think it should be OK for us to struggle with that question. But then, I remember when I wrote a paper on that topic in Seminary and suggested that other interpretations of the fate of the wicked have some validity (without making us universalists), and I received a big fat "F"! Not because the paper was poorly written, but because this prof didn't want to consider any other theology.

Another one of those significant questions we should be struggling with is this one, "We believe in a God of great compassion, a God whose very *nature* is love, to the extent that he poured out his life for us; we believe and teach that our God *has done everything* possible for us to be forgiven and find grace because he loves us so deeply he just wants us to find him and be with him..."

Unless we die - whatever our age, young or old - because then, everything changes. And God suddenly becomes something very different, dangling the sinners over a pit of eternal flames, while others 'enjoy' the bliss of heaven, which they did not earn, and this arrangement will last *forever and ever*. You know, our young people are asking these questions, and I'm proud of them for that.

I'm probing gently here, and hopefully, we can trust each other enough to speak in love. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, and however you have formed a comfortable response to these questions, I would hope and pray that we surely would have an open heart so that we can at least recognize that there are some other ways of looking at this, and, then, like the Church of Berea in the Book of Acts, not just assume one thing or the other, but instead, "examine the Scriptures to see what is true."

But, wherever you are in your theology of eternal destiny, if we are going to be honest with the Scripture, we *have* to conclude that today's parable says *nothing* helpful in that regard. We've

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looked at just some of the difficulties we encounter when we try to make the account of Lazarus and the rich man *literal*, instead of realizing that it is a parable. If all the points of the story are *not* literal, then we must view this tale as an analogy, a story Jesus used to teach larger spiritual truths.

So, just as there was no real man with a hundred sheep who really lost one, there was no real woman who had ten coins and lost one, there was no real man who had two sons and lost one...there was no real rich man. And there was no beggar named Lazarus (although, given the fact that Jesus did raise a Lazarus from the dead shortly after, it's quite possible that this name wasn't chosen randomly!)

\*\* Let's start looking for the real point of this story by considering the context in which Jesus told it. A couple of weeks ago, in the message "Lost and Found" (where we looked at the parable of the Lost Sheep) we read Luke's description of all the tax collectors and sinners who were coming to Jesus to hear what he had to say (Luke 15:1). He even 'ate with them' - which they found quite scandalous (Luke 15:2).

So in response to them, Jesus told three parables, or we might say, a *three-part parable* to those gathered around him (the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son). The point of *all* these parables was to show the tax collectors and sinners (as well as the Pharisees) that God was concerned for them and that He would seek out the lost and welcome them into His family when they repented and turned back to Him. He was sharing the heart of God in these stories. But, His parables had no effect on those leaders at all, so He finally told them a truly hard parable that got their attention and burned their ears.

Afterward, (now we're in Luke 16) Jesus is speaking primarily to his disciples but with the Pharisees (and probably the crowd) still listening in, Jesus related the parable of the unjust steward (Luke 16:1-13). The Pharisees, who were "lovers of money", realized that he was alluding to them with this parable and took offense. They scoffed at Jesus. The final part of Jesus' response to their scoffing and derision was the parable of Lazarus and the rich man. It's all connected in the context.

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\*\* The character "Lazarus" in this parable is a fitting representation of the position of the Gentile nations before Jesus' sacrifice for the world's sins. They were certainly (to use Scripture phrases) "excluded from the commonwealth of Israel," "strangers to the covenants of promise," and "without hope and without God in the world." The Gentiles were the beggars, located outside Judah and longing to be fed spiritual crumbs from the table of the divinely blessed Jews.

Additionally, we are told that dogs came and consoled Lazarus in his misery, licking his sores. The Jews considered the surrounding Gentiles to be unclean "dogs." That was their term for the Gentiles. Even Jesus himself kind of used this term when he was talking with the Syrophenician woman while in the region of Tyre (Mark 7:24-30) (although he softened it, and made it playful - because actually the Greek term he uses is 'little puppies!')

Also important to this story as I mentioned a moment ago, is the name Lazarus. This Greek name is a form of the Hebrew *Eleazer*, and it literally means "the one whom whom God helps." The use of this particular name is very significant to the message of the parable, for the Gentiles would, in fact, become "those whom God helped" through the sacrifice of His son, Jesus.

One main point of the story of the rich man and Lazarus is that an individual's wealth and social standing, or the lack thereof, is not necessarily an indication of that person's *spiritual* standing before God. It's a heart issue. Many of the Jews in that day - just like many Americans today - believed that the fact that they had accumulated wealth, and that this wealth bought them social status and prominent positions in the religious community, all proved that they were under the blessing of God.

By the same logic, they believed that those who were poor were under the curse of God. They knew the promises made to Israel in the Law of Moses concerning the blessings of prosperity for obedience to God's Law and the curses of poverty because of disobedience, **but** (again, as people do today) they failed to recognize the national rather than a personal focus of those promises. They thought their wealth was a sign of God's favor.

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By representing the beggar as being in heaven and the rich man as lost, Jesus taught His hearers that, contrary to the prevailing view, wealth was not necessarily an indicator of divine favor, just as poverty was not a sign of God's judgement upon a person. In the end, the tables could be turned, and there will be a different dividing line.

But, you see, Jesus here, as he did at other times as well, was also trying to show the Jews that salvation would not be theirs by birthright. Being born a "Jew" did not make you a child of God. Having wealth doesn't indicate, necessarily, God's blessing. (Likewise, being baptized, or attending church doesn't make you a child of God, either.) The rich man in torments in this story calls out to "father Abraham," just as the Jews of Jesus' day were mistakenly pointing to their heritage as proof of their assurance of salvation.

(And remember in the message two weeks ago we looked at Jesus' statement that "Not all who say to me, 'Lord, Lord', will enter the Kingdom of heaven." There's something more that God is looking for - our response, our faith, but also our obedience.)

The fact that the rich man has *five brothers* is a significant clue to his true symbolic identity. Judah, the forefather of the Jews - whose name and tribe became the name of the Southern Kingdom - was the son of Jacob through Leah (Gen. 29:35). He had five full-blooded brothers: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Issachar, and Zebulun (Gen. 35:23).

While this might seem like a pointless detail to us today, we can be certain that it did not escape the notice of the Pharisees and scribes to whom Jesus was speaking. They thoroughly knew their history and were extremely proud of their heritage. Jesus wanted those self-righteous Pharisees to know *exactly* who He was referring to with this parable. This detail cements the identity of the rich man as the house of Judah!

And so those 'with ears to hear', might just catch the warning of Jesus - a time is coming when the fortunes of many will be reversed. The Gentiles will be blessed, and you will be in want; and you are in danger of missing the time of your greatest blessing...

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I am sure that there is much more that can be learned regarding this very unique parable in our Scripture. But, whatever we teach regarding it has to stand on solid Scripture teaching. The real truth of this parable is not nearly as morbid as it may appear at first glance. So lets try to sum it up...

Lazarus represent the Gentiles and the Rich Man was Judah. (This son of Jacob had five literal brothers as did the Rich Man.) The Rich Man (Judah) also had the kingship (purple) and the priesthood (linen) - Jesus is making this very clear.

Yet Judah (who was supposed to be representing God on this earth) did not fulfill his function as the true steward of the blessings of Abraham. They kept it all for themselves, and showed no kindness or mercy to the nations around them who were suffering in spiritual darkness.

Though he and his literal brothers had been graced with the "words of God" (the Old Testament) they would not respond even to the One resurrected from the dead (Jesus Christ).

Another purpose of this parable is that Jesus wanted to lead His hearers to understand that only faithfulness to God's Word would prepare them to enter into eternal life. When the rich man asked for Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to 'warn his family' he replies,

**\*\*** *They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'*

*"No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' "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.'"*

Jesus here affirms the power of the Scriptures in pointing to him; the power of life that is found in the word of God, but he also recognizes that if a person's heart is hard, even a Resurrection will not change them. That was a powerful prophesy of what was to come ... as the raising of *Lazarus* caused both faith and hatred among the religious leaders, and his own Resurrection is still the stumbling block of faith for many people.

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\*\* (blank) I had an extended conversation (over a dinner) in that regard, with someone not from this area recently. This person considers herself to be very 'spiritual', and holds to some sort of eclectic mixture of Eastern thought and very "New-Age" kind of stuff. It was really a difficult conversation, because there was very little point of contact between us, although I was really looking hard for one.

But at one point she made a statement - that Buddah, Mohammad, Jesus, Moses, and all the main religious figures of history really taught the 'same thing' - which was, I guess, "be nice to each other", or, something. We were having dinner, not debating, (and we both recognized that) so I didn't want to get too into this, and I didn't point out that, in fact, there is significant difference in what each of these people taught about God and life.

But something came to me, so I said to her, "There is one very significant difference between those people. Whether you believe it or not, only one of those claimed to have risen from the dead."

And she said, "Oh... his followers took the body."

I turned to her and said, "And you know that... HOW?"

Her response: "Because no one rises from the dead."

That was it.

\*\* I thought of this parable, the passage I had chosen for this week's message, where Jesus says "Even if someone would rise from the dead, they will not believe." For many people, that is true. The Resurrection is the stumbling block of faith.

And yet, there are untold millions who *have* believed. This is the dividing line, and this parable comes down to the true 'bottom line' of the Gospel. The Resurrection. To some, it is hope, to others, it is nonsense.

When Paul mentioned that Jesus was raised from the dead some of the Greek philosophers

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sneered, and I think we get the same reaction as we speak the same way today. Do they sneer because the resurrection of the dead is so far-fetched? I used to think that, and maybe that's part of it. I'm starting to think that the idea of the resurrection is more sneered at because it challenges the very basis of any outlook of life that places human beings in the center.

The resurrection causes many stumbling blocks to our current secular worldview. First and foremost, it directly challenges the idea that we can at all be the lord of our own life. If there is a resurrection, then that tells me that there is a force greater than me that has a will over my existence and my destiny.

As well, the resurrection of the dead leads us to realize that we will all be held accountable for the way we live our lives. How we live in this world really does matter.

Lastly, the resurrection clearly pronounces that there is life after death. The life we live on this earth is not all there is. There is more! And if that is true, we would have to admit that 'man' is NOT the measure of all things, that what we believe and how we live in this world matters, and that life continues beyond the one we're living.

The resurrection *proves* that what Jesus said is true, and that what he *did* has eternal significance. But, as this parable highlights in such a powerful way, the Resurrection is not an automatic 'ticket' to heaven... some will receive (believe) and others will not, based on the openness of our hearts to God.

So, I'll end here, by pointing out that *that* (the state of a person's heart) is a matter of prayer - both for ourselves, that we might always be open to the leading of the Spirit, but also for the world at large, that *their hearts might be opened to hear the Good News of God's love and grace*

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*in Jesus Christ. How important are those kinds of prayers to you? How important are those prayers to this church?*