

SERIES: Parables from the Master Story-Teller

SERMON: **Rich Man, Poor Man: Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus**

SCRIPTURE: Luke 16:19-31

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Our Scripture text for today comes from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 16, verses 19-31. This whole chapter is about money. It opens with the parable about the Shrewd Manager—one we studied together last October and which is one of the chapters in the free book we offered you at the Debt Elimination table in June. If you didn't receive one, it is still available at the Welcome Center.

Jesus' point is to underscore the link between money and spirituality. He indicated that man must love God and use money instead of using God and loving money. But because of His teaching the Pharisees ridiculed him, as we read in verse 14: "The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus." Then just a few verses later we read the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Please follow along in your Bible as I read Luke 16:

*"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 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 hell, 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 fixed, 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 father's house, 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.'"*

There was a cover article in *U.S. News and World Report* some seven years ago entitled, *Farewell to the Rich, the Famous, and the Unforgettable.*<sup>i</sup> The article concerned the key obituaries of 1997: Princess Diana, Mother Teresa, James Michener, Gianni Versace, Paul Tsongas, John Denver, Jacques Cousteau, William Brennan, Ben Hogan, Charles Kuralt, and

many others. Following a relatively short time on earth, all of these people tasted death, but all of them are still living somewhere in eternity. The question is, “where?” and how is that destination determined? The author of the article wrestled with these questions as he continued his obituaries for that year of ‘97:

*“Red Skelton, who used to end his radio and television shows with the sign-off ‘God bless,’ must by now know if he really does. Allen Ginsberg, similarly, must by now know if Buddha is prepared to take a profane Jewish poet to his ample bosom. . . . For Jimmy Stewart, it was a wonderful life, and let’s hope that what he found after death compares well with it.”*

He then concluded with this comment:

*“But too lengthy contemplation of the fragility of life cannot be good, either for the complexion or for the appetite. It can only turn us, as we consider the past year’s deaths into the spiritual equivalent of the Chicago Cubs fans, saying, ‘Wait until next year,’ not with hope but with a slight shudder.”*

I, for one, think we can face the future with considerably more confidence than Cubs’ fans. The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus was offered by Jesus to give us insight into these critical issues. This story can be viewed as a one-act play in three scenes: A Great Contrast, A Great Reversal, and A Great Debate.

### **Scene One: A Great Contrast (19-21)**

The story opens describing two men here on earth. No greater contrast could possibly exist between two people.

**An unnamed man enjoys ostentatious wealth.** Tradition has given him the name Dives, but that is just the Latin word for “rich man,” and we can be pretty sure that was not the name his mother gave him. The combination of purple (the most costly dye of that day) and fine linen (worth more than six times its weight in fine gold) stands for the ultimate in ostentatious luxury. No doubt he sat at a very fine gourmet table. And this was normal—it’s how he lived every day, verse 19 notes for us. He is not said to have committed any grave sin, but he seems to have lived a hollow life, concerned only with self-indulgence. He is unconcerned about God or the poor people around him, some of whom lay at his gate to beg.

**A man named Lazarus suffers in stark poverty.** The name Lazarus means “God is my helper.” This is not the Lazarus whom Jesus raised from the dead, but perhaps Jesus borrowed the name for this story because Lazarus of Bethany was such a good friend of His. His name is an early hint that this Lazarus is a godly man, but though godly, he is sick and hungry and his body is covered with running sores. Someone laid him at the rich man’s gate, indicating he was disabled and couldn’t reach that spot on his own. He longed to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. We don’t even learn whether or not he received these crumbs—only that he longed for them. The only help that came to this man was from the dogs who would lick his sores.

By the way, this story alone should be sufficient to dispel the heresy that has captured so many today known as health-wealth theology. Here's a man who had neither health nor wealth, but he clearly enjoyed God's blessing in eternity.

### **Scene Two: A Great Reversal (22)**

**Both men die.** First, the poor man dies. Nothing is said about his being buried, so perhaps his body is simply dumped with the refuse into the landfill outside of Jerusalem known as Gehenna. That's where the unclaimed bodies of the poor and homeless were thrown. Because the garbage was burned, the Jews borrowed the term Gehenna to refer to hell itself.

**Then the rich man dies as well.** He *is* buried. In fact, one can imagine the funeral service—probably professional mourners, a lengthy eulogy, a finely carved wooden casket, a granite tombstone, perhaps even a mausoleum just for himself. But once he is dead, all his earthly power, position, influence, and wealth remain behind. He leaves his fine purple robes to the moths and his wealth to quarreling relatives.<sup>ii</sup> Not only do both men die, but also

Both men are conscious in the after-life. Is there life after death? You bet there is! Jesus indicates in the story that there are feelings; there are thoughts; there are hopes and aspirations; there is the ability to communicate; and for some there is the bitterest of disappointments.

In hades, translated “hell” in the NIV (“hades” is the Greek word for the place of departed spirits), he lifts up his eyes and is aware of Lazarus' presence in the bosom of Abraham, though he is obviously far away. He calls to Father Abraham because he believes, as all Jews did, that being Jewish gave him automatic access to the father of the Jewish faith. Not so, says the Apostle Paul. “It is those who have *faith* who are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.” (Gal. 3:7).

**But Lazarus is now rich and the rich man is now poor.** If we focus on the rich man, our natural response to this Great Reversal is probably satisfaction, for most of us probably tend to resent the one who flaunts his wealth. This bloated rich guy has now become the beggar, pleading for a few drops of water. He has received his comeuppance and richly deserves it.

On the other hand, if we focus on the poor man we may be tempted to take the common view that heaven is designed to balance the books economically—to square accounts so that those who have little here will have much later. But friends, the rich man is not in hell because he is rich, any more than Lazarus is in heaven because he is poor. The determination of who ends up where is made on an entirely different basis, as we shall see later.

### **Scene Three: A Great Debate (23-31)**

**The rich man wants Lazarus to relieve his torment.** “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.” But his begging is refused. Here's how Abraham puts it: “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your

good things.” These were the things on his own priority list: beautiful clothes, fine food, influence, position, luxury. His investments were earthly and they produced earthly dividends. But he did nothing to build up treasure in heaven. He ignored the Great Commandment, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself.” He has already enjoyed all the heaven he is going to experience. Furthermore, Lazarus cannot go from his place in the afterlife to where the rich man is. Why not?

**Abraham reveals that a Great Chasm makes that impossible.** “Between us and you,” the great Patriarch says, “a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” The message here is clear: one’s eternal destiny is established at the time of death and there is no possibility of change. The notion is pure fiction that after death one can negotiate with St. Peter to get into heaven. It can’t be done.

Reality is beginning to sink in. The rich man realizes that because of the Great Chasm Abraham isn’t able to show him mercy; he isn’t going to get any water for his tongue; and he isn’t going to escape his eternal torment. But now we see the faintest ray of love and concern for his fellow-man showing through. He begins to think of his five brothers who are apparently living much like he did on earth. (There is still a hint here of continuing selfishness, of course. He is still not interested in the poor, only in his relatives).

**The rich man then wants Lazarus to warn his five brothers.** “Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.” That’s the verse one disgruntled student wrote in my Bible College yearbook (“warn my brothers lest they also come to this place of torment”) but it has a lot more serious message than that. His fear is that if someone does not warn his relatives about the hellish place he is in, they too will follow their instincts to the same place, much like a herd of dumb sheep following one another off a cliff.

But he has a plan—send someone who has already seen the other side. Who could argue with such a warning? His brothers would hear the bad news of his situation and would immediately repent, place their faith in God, and end up in Abraham’s bosom!

**But Abraham reveals that such an effort would be futile.** He says, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” In other words, they have the revelation God gave to His people to lead them to eternal life. There was not a Jewish family anywhere without access to the Torah, just as there is no one in our country who does not have access to a Bible. The message of salvation is clear in the OT and in the NT. It’s clear in the Catholic Bible and the Protestant Bible. It’s clear in the KJV and the NIV. It’s clear in the Greek and the English and the native language spoken by 99% of the people on earth.

But the rich man continues to argue, “But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.” I think the essence of what he is saying is, “My brothers aren’t much at Bible reading, I

grant you, but a first-class miracle, like someone coming back from the other side, would sure get their attention.” No, says, Abraham, even that would be futile. “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”

The rich man is not denied his request because God is unwilling to give his brothers as much opportunity as possible. The request is denied because *it will not work*. You want proof? Not long after Jesus told this story the other Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, died, and Jesus raised him from the dead. Did the religious leaders of Israel fall on their faces in repentance? No, they renewed their conspiracy to kill Jesus.

A very short time later Jesus Himself died for the sins of the world, was buried in a guarded tomb, but was raised by God, appearing to hundreds in His resurrection body. Did the religious leaders of Israel, or even the common people, fall on their faces in repentance? No. Oh a few did. But most went right along with their everyday lives ignoring the clear message that what we do with Christ in this life determines where and how we spend the next.

### **The Theology of this Parable**

I will divide this discussion into three parts: What the story does *not* tell us about life after death, what it *may* tell us, and what it *does* tell us.

**What this parable does *not* tell us about life after death.** One concept this passage does not teach is that rich people all go to hell and poor people all go to heaven. In fact, Father Abraham himself was perhaps the second richest man in the OT after Solomon, and he obviously made it. Note also that verse 25 does not read, “Son, remember *because* . . .” but rather “Son, remember *that* in your lifetime you received your good things.” Abraham is not attempting to draw a direct causal relationship between the wealth of the rich man and his eternal destiny. On the other hand, to say that a person’s economic station in life is totally unrelated to his eternal destiny would not be quite right either, for this parable does appear in a chapter devoted to a discussion of riches—and the man’s riches do seem to have *something* to do with his predicament, namely the fact that his attention to wealth seems to have kept him from giving attention to God and to his fellow man.

Another concept which, in my opinion, this passage is *not* revealing about life after death is the physical nature of heaven and hell. There is no attempt here to explain the geography of the after-life. Just because the rich man looks “up”, for example, doesn’t mean that hell is in the heart of the earth while Abraham’s bosom is up in the clouds somewhere. As a matter of fact, Abraham uses the expression “over here” and “over there” in verse 26. I don’t know where heaven or hell are located geographically right now, and I’m rather inclined to believe they are in an entirely different dimension than we are in. But eventually heaven is going to be located right here—on earth—for God is going to do a major remodeling project and give us a New Heaven and a New Earth.

Nor is there any attempt here to describe the literal, physical character of the after-life.

Abraham's bosom is obviously figurative, and so may be the flames of hell. Some people get nervous when we start saying that some of the descriptions of heaven and hell are figurative, but how could they be otherwise? Finite language cannot adequately describe eternal concepts from a different world. Besides, some of the figurative language is self-contradictory. For example, often the Bible speaks of the outer darkness of hell, but of course, flaming fire and darkness are contradictory to our experience. In fact, the very words "lake of fire" must have seemed totally paradoxical to a first century mind. It wasn't until very recently that rivers got so polluted that they would occasionally catch fire.

My point is not to lessen the awfulness of hell. What is clearly *not* figurative in this parable is the torment. If the rich man is not in torment, then there's no point in warning his five brothers. Our response should be, "If the symbol is so terrible, how awful must be the real thing?"

**What this parable *may* teach about life after death.** As soon as I say, "may," it is a warning to you that I am sharing an opinion, not something that can be asserted dogmatically. In what He teaches about Lazarus, Jesus may be describing the intermediate state of the righteous between their death and the Great Resurrection.

The argument goes something like this: Before Christ died believers who died could not enter the presence of God, for their sins had been forgiven only in anticipation of the death of Christ. Those sins were atoned for but not washed away. The very word "atone", so common in the OT, means "to cover." Sins were covered by God's grace in anticipation of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on the cross, but not until that sacrifice was actually offered could those sins be buried in the deepest sea and washed away as far as the east is from the west. Thus Abraham's bosom is viewed as a sort of ante-room to heaven.

Some use this notion to explain that part of the Apostles' Creed which states that Jesus descended into hell for three days. Actually, they say, he descended into the place of the dead—not that awful portion inhabited by the rich man but rather that blessed portion known as Abraham's bosom, and then when He rose from the dead He led captivity captive. That is, He emptied Paradise, the anteroom of heaven, and allowed its inhabitants to enter God's presence in the white robes He purchased with His blood.

As I said at the beginning this notion *may* be true. I know nothing about it that particularly conflicts with other biblical truths. But at the same time, I'm not certain we should push the parable that far. Let's turn our attention finally to what *is* clearly taught!

**What this parable *does* teach about life after death.** The most obvious fact this parable teaches is that there is conscious life after death for every human being—for some that life is good, for others it is terrible. But clearly death is not the cessation of existence, as Carl Sagan claimed. Religious liberals long ago abandoned the notion of conscious eternal punishment of the wicked in favor of universalism, the belief that everyone will eventually get to heaven—some in one way, some in another. All roads lead home, they say.

Furthermore, there are many New Age prophets today telling us that when we die we will be met by a warm light at the end of a long tunnel. We will feel love all around us, and we will be met by our family and friends who have died before us. Some will, some will not. This rich man does not.

Recently some evangelicals have also been trying to soften the horror of hell by flirting with what they call annihilationism, the view that God annihilates the wicked rather than allowing them to suffer eternally. But universalism and annihilationism are impossible to square with this story or dozens of other passages in the Word of God. There is no happy ending for this rich man; nor is there any relief for his pain.

I recognize that the existence of hell and eternal torment are not pleasant thoughts. In fact, we would banish the concept in a moment if we could. But as C. S. Lewis stated so well in his marvelous book, *The Problem of Pain*,

*The answer to all those who object to the doctrine of hell is a question. "What would you like for God to do?" To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They refuse to be forgiven. To leave them alone? That is hell.*

*For to be in hell simply means to be utterly separated from God, but in such a way that one is compelled to see him, that one must see him as a thirsty man sees a silvery spring from which he dare not drink. This is hell; to be forced to see the glory of God and have no access to it. The opposite of the peace of God is not the silence of extinction . . . but being compelled to endure that state in which everything is forfeited forever, in which the splendor of the eternal majesty no longer lights and warms us, but consumes us.<sup>iii</sup>*

Another truth this parable definitely teaches is that after death the decisions that affect eternity can no longer be made. During their lives on earth the rich man and the beggar had choices, and upon those choices their eternal fate depended. After death the time for choice is past. "It is appointed unto men once to die and after this, judgment" (Hebrews 9:27). Dante put these words on the mouth of his inferno: "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here."

Finally, this parable teaches that everyone has had sufficient revelation and sufficient evidence to make a responsible decision about his or her relationship to God and to His Son, Jesus Christ. I won't address this morning the case of the pagan who has never heard the name of Jesus; clearly no one in this story or in this room fits that category. The rich man had been exposed to Scripture; his predicament was due to his neglect of God's Word. And everyone in this room has heard enough to be held accountable. And Jesus seems to imply that anyone who does not respond to the truth he has will not be convinced even by a miracle.

Sometimes we tend to think, "If only they could prove that Noah's ark is really on Ararat, or the Shroud of Turin was the actual burial cloth of Jesus, then people would flock to church." Hogwash! Jesus says it wouldn't make a hill of beans difference.

In conclusion I would share with you that perhaps the most important concept conveyed in this parable is the tremendous seriousness of life on this side of the grave. If you are one of the five brothers, sauntering down life's road with great plans and prospects, do not expect that God will send you a messenger from the other side. Nor is He likely to perform some miracle to bring you to your knees. He is no shock therapist. You have the Word of God in which Jesus says, "I am the way, the Truth and the Life. No man comes to the Father except through me."

You see, the Great Chasm is still there. The world religion's are all designed to help you build a bridge across that Chasm. It may be a bridge of good works or one of religious ritual. But there's no way you can build a bridge across. The good news is that God has already done it. It's a narrow bridge. It's as narrow as a cross, and only those who come by way of the Cross can come to the Father.

Jesus said, "Except a man be born again he cannot see the kingdom of God." Those who are born twice only have to die once. But those born only once have to die twice. If your only birth is a physical birth you will someday die physically and also spiritually, as the rich man did. But if you are born twice—physically and spiritually—the only death you will ever die is, like Lazarus, physical death.

Eternal life has been offered to you. Don't neglect it. Don't delay.

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i. *U. S. News And World Report*, December 29, 1997.

ii. Ron Ritchie, "*Have You Heard the Real Story of the Rich Man, Poor Man?*", sermon December 29, 1991, Discovery Publishing, 4.

iii. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 128.