

“THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS.”

Rev. Robert T. Woodyard

First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Luke 16:19-31

Introduction.

People these days seem drawn to books about near-death experiences. There's a certain curiosity and fascination with the afterlife. I don't trust those books. It would be much more spiritually fruitful to consider this story of not just a near death experience but a total death experience. Here Jesus pulls back the curtain to give us insight into the ultimate human reality.

This passage of Scripture is unique in all the Bible as the only place where the feelings of those in hell are described.

Remember the context. Jesus was confronting Pharisees.

Luke 16:13-14 No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”
14 The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.

Obviously Jesus hit a nerve. The Pharisees were people who lived double lives; they kept everything in two separated compartments. In one compartment, their religious compartment, they kept all their beliefs and rituals, going to church, praying, reading the Bible, obeying certain laws, talking nice, acting nice, all those things they figured would make them look good to God and others.

In the other compartment, their secular or non-religious compartment, they kept their daily activities, their jobs, how they treated their wives, what they did on Saturday nights, their secret sins and prejudices, what they said behind people's backs.

Pharisees and people like them believed that the two compartments could be kept separate and didn't have to have anything to do with each other. So they ridiculed and mocked Jesus for saying that you can't actually serve two different masters, you can't live two separate lives, one as a lover of God and another as a lover of money and things, one with God on Sundays, and another without God on Monday through Saturday.

Jesus burst their bubble by showing that going to heaven has something to do with the connection between the two compartments. Our ordinary, daily lives, how we live and act in this world has a lot to do with where we end up.

Luke 16:19-21.

So Jesus tells a parable about a rich man who was also a lover of money. He had it all, he lived a good life and gave little thought or concern for the needs of others, even those right outside his door or at the end of his driveway or across the street.

The purple linens and sumptuous feasting signify just how rich he was. I have heard that this material can cost up to four years wages. Today this might be imported silk, designer jeans, Italian suits, Gucci handbags.

This fellow would have had no trouble buying his wife that \$38,000 purse that Oprah Winfrey was denied by that sales clerk at Trois Pommés (trwa puhm) in Zurich, Switzerland last month.

Enjoying the finer things of life is not in and of itself necessarily a sin, but the problem is when we start to enjoy more and more of the fine things before long we develop an attitude of entitlement and then increasingly grow more selfish and self-absorbed. Before long things are idols and then our master. Finally we think we are better than others and if someone is poor, well it's his own fault and certainly deserves no help from us.

Prosperity has a way of getting in our eyes and blinding us to real issues and soul problems. Oprah may have experienced some racism, but she's blind to her materialism and to the shame of even considering buying a \$38,000 purse.

There sat a very poor man, whose poverty brought great suffering in mind, body and spirit. He was disabled, having to be laid here to beg. He was more cared for by dogs than by people. How hard must a heart be to not be moved to sympathy at such a sight right outside your door?

The rich man was a first century Ebenezer Scrooge. One man had everything in this life, another had nothing. But the deepest difference of all was not evident to the human eye.

Hidden inside this poor miserable wretch of a man, smelly and gross, disgusting to look at, hidden inside was a soul loved by God and full of His grace.

The true measure of value in this world is grace. Those who are rich in God's grace, those are the ones who have favor and who have a good inheritance, a good destiny. If you are going to be rich in this world, make sure it's rich in grace and mercy.

I hope no one thinks only rich people go to hell and only poor people go to heaven. Remember Abraham is in heaven and he was a wealth man, but he was a lover of God and not of money.

We are not justified by poverty, we are justified by faith. But the faith that justifies is never alone, it has children, it bears fruit, it purifies our hearts and purifies what we do with money. The way you use your money shows if your heart has really been changed by Jesus or not. Do you use it to show how much you love God or do you use it to show how much you like stuff?

Luke 16:22-26.

Both men died. Regardless of how much you have or don't have, regardless of how well off you are or not, regardless of how you compare with someone else, death is the great leveler. Death is the great fact of life that few talk about or plan for. There are two eternal realities, heaven and hell, and Jesus talks about both.

Heaven and Abraham.

Lazarus was carried by angels to Abraham's side, signifying God's acceptance and care.

Abraham was the covenant father of all the faithful, the head of the Jewish family. To him God gave the covenant of eternal life, salvation by faith. All who believe are his children and are welcomed by him in heaven as their father. We are pilgrims and strangers on this earth, but welcomed into friendly arms when we are at last home in heaven.

We know very little about what actually happens in our last moments on earth and in our first moments after death. It's an unknown journey to an unknown country.

But from this parable we get a glimpse that God takes special care of His children at the time of their death. God is attentive of those very details. We are never abandoned or homeless, but kept in God's care and ushered into the company of the saints in glory.

At the moment of death we will know the instant joy of freedom from every misery. At the moment of death we will feel instantly at home, at home with Christ. It will feel like this is where I have belonged, this is where I have longed to be.

Hell and torment.

We also learn in this parable about the harsh realities of eternity in **hell**.

Jesus doesn't hesitate to talk about it and He minces no words.

Hell is **real**. It's certain, there is a wrath to come.

Hell is **horrible**. It's conscious, fire, misery, anguish. Before the rich man was sumptuously dining with fine wine and abundant drink, now he's begging for a drop of water from the end of Lazarus' finger.

The fire is like the fire on the burning bush, always burning but not consuming. The fire of hell is always tormenting, but never consuming. There is no annihilation. The wages of sin against an infinitely holy and righteous and just God is eternal. Only Jesus could pay the price and if we don't trust in Him, then we must pay the price forever.

Hell is **final**. It's unchangeable and endless. There is no temporary purgatory. It's inescapable. The time of escape is now, not then.

The truth is hell is far more terrifying and heaven is far more glorious than our finite minds can grasp.

It would seem that even in hell the rich man doesn't get it. First, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus on a servant's errand, and bring him relief. He shows no humility. Abraham's words are particularly sobering.

"Remember how good you had it in this life and how satisfied you were with the good things of this world. And remember how you neglected your soul for the sake of your body. You made your choice and now you must live with the consequence of your choices."

Luke 16:27-31.

He was a rich man, he wasn't used to taking no for an answer. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers. Rebuffed again, he presses Abraham to send someone raised from the dead.

One old preacher said it this way, “Hell is nothing more than truth known too late” (quoted from J.C. Ryle, *Luke*, Vol. 2).

Jesus is telling us the truth before it's too late. Jesus is telling us about the value of our souls before it's too late. Jesus is warning us about the danger of neglecting our souls.

Last week I spoke of remembering Lot's wife. This week remember Esau, a picture of someone who traded away eternal happiness for a bowl of pottage. Don't trade heaven even for everything this world has to offer.

Miracles and the Word of God.

A final truth taught in this parable is about the nature of miracles and the Word of God.

The rich man begged that a miracle be sent to his five brothers so they would believe and not end up where he was. He believed a miracle would bring them to repentance.

What's the implication of this man's request? He's saying God didn't do enough, God didn't make it clear enough, God didn't get his attention. It's God's fault not his fault.

Woody Allen is known for dealing with death in his films. In the movie *Love and Death* his character says, “If only God would speak to me – just once, anything, one sentence, two words. If he would just cough. If I could just see a miracle. If I could see a burning bush or the seas part. Or my uncle Sasha pick up the check.”

Do you think that's true? Do you think a miracle would make a difference? Do you think you would be influenced by someone coming out of the grave? Would that get our attention?

Want evidence to the contrary? Think about Pharaoh and all the miracles he saw, yet his heart remained hard. Think about that other man named Lazarus. What happened when he walked out of the tomb after four days? Some people believed and “the chief priests made plans to put Lazarus to death” (John 12:10).

Jesus Himself rose from the dead, and yet how many then and now remain unbelieving?

The issue is not enough evidence or proof, the issue is hard hearts and unbelief. We don't need more, we need to believe what we have already been given.

See how dangerous money and things and this world's pleasures are? They make us blind and deaf to the truth, to the Word of God which is the power of God for our salvation.

The principle Jesus is teaching is that faith comes by hearing the Word of God and that nothing can be added to Scripture. The Scriptures contain all that is necessary for our salvation, all we need to know to be saved.

Jesus came not to do miracles but to preach the good news of the Gospel. His miracles only served to confirm that He had authority and that what He said was true.

We don't need more truth to repent, we need to make use of what we have already been given. If Moses and the prophets were better than a dead man back from the grave, how much better for all of us is the testimony of the NT.

Application and Conclusion.

This parable isn't just about money. This could have been a parable about a politician and his power or a professor and his intelligence or a farmer and his agricultural success or even a preacher and his eloquence.

We all possess gifts and talents and abilities and strengths and resources. We are given a life to live and a span of time in which to live it. How you live it, what you do with it in the here and now matters in the hereafter.

Jeremiah 9:23-24 Thus says the Lord: "Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, 24 but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord."

We all have test cases outside our doors. We all have opportunities and obstacles and temptations along the road that expose our hearts and our attitudes. Daily life has a way of showing what we love, what we care about and who's will we want to follow, God's or ours.

Paul wrote a letter to the Christians in the church in Ephesus and in it he warned:

Ephesians 5:14-17 "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you." 15 Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, 16 making the best use of the time, because the days are evil. 17 Therefore do not be foolish.

What is the condition of your soul? Are you awake or asleep? Are you ignoring or neglecting your soul, or are you tending and feeding your soul? Are you awake or are you sleeping? "Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you."

Where do you get your joy and satisfaction? From the love of God or the love of things?

May there be some sense of urgency in all of us for our own souls and for the souls of others. Urgency in our prayers, urgency in our conversations.

When you talk to someone else and you share the truth from Scripture you don't have to worry about yourself, trust God and His Word and the power of the Holy Spirit.

Romans 1:16-17 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. 17 For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

II Timothy 3:15 ... the sacred writings, ... are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Don't walk by the Lazarus at your gate, stop and show the mercy and compassion of Jesus Christ. Moses and the prophets have spoken. "Love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength ... and love your neighbor as yourself." (Deuteronomy 6:5; Leviticus 19:18).