

LUKE

Part 62: “In Light of Eternity” (pt. 2)

Luke 16:19-31

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Scripture Reading

“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ And 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 hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead” (Luke 16:19–31, ESV).

Introduction

As a church, we have been walking through the gospel, according to Luke. Luke’s gospel is the longest of the four gospels, and the section that we are studying now is the main reason for that. Luke gives lengthy attention to Jesus’s final journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, where he will die on the cross and rise again. As Jesus walks to the Holy City, he is teaching his disciples truth that they will need to know when he is gone.

Jesus speaks in the language of parables and symbols to help them understand big spiritual ideas that are often hard for us to understand. Specifically, as we saw last week, Jesus has been teaching his disciples to live in light of eternity. That is, followers of Jesus are not to live their lives simply for the here and now. Rather, they are to look toward eternity and unto the greater reality of God’s everlasting kingdom.

This week’s passage, which is based out of one parable, continues that theme. It is the tale of a rich man and poor man, and the great disparity between them.

Now “disparity” is a big word, and I know that we have our first through fifth graders here with us on this family Sunday, so I want to start with a definition. “Disparity” means a big difference between two things. Think about it this way. Apples and oranges. Are apples and oranges different? Yes. What about apples and elephants? They are even

more different. There is a big difference between apples and elephants. In other words, there is a disparity between apples and elephants.

Today's parable is about disparity.

It is about big differences between the rich man and the poor man and how those differences are very important. So for the rest of our time today, we are going to look at three disparities: *1.) The disparity between the rich man and Lazarus in this life, 2.) The disparity between the rich man and Lazarus in eternity, and 3.) The disparity between faith and unbelief.*

Exposition

1. The disparity between the Rich Man and Lazarus in this life

The first character of our story is known simply as a “rich man” (Lk. 16:19).¹ He is clothed in purple, which was a status symbol of opulent wealth that normally only royalty would possess. He wears fine linen undergarments, which would have needed to be imported from Egypt. And he feasts sumptuously every day.

Now in the ancient world, just like today's world, there were special holidays where you and your family would have a great big feast. But this particular rich man did not wait for special occasions. He wants Thanksgiving dinner every day of the week. It is a picture of great wealth that is used only for personal significance, comfort, and self-indulgence.

The Rich man is at one extreme of the spectrum of wealth. The poor man named Lazarus is at the other (Lk. 16:20). He lies outside of the rich man's palace, near the gate. His body is covered with ulcerated sores. He watches the sumptuous feasts that the rich man consumes day after day, and his longing is for the leftovers and table scraps. He is hungry, homeless, and suffering.

To make matters worse, the local dogs surround him and lick his sores. Now, in today's world, when we hear the word dog, our first image is that of the romanticized “man's best friend” and pet. This was not the case in the ancient near East. In this culture, dogs were filthy scavengers that roamed the streets. Lazarus is already in misery. The dogs represent torment on top of his misery.²

Jesus says the poor will be with us (Mt. 26:11; Mk. 14:7). But poverty, especially extreme poverty like the case of Lazarus, is not the way it should be. This type of radical disparity is part of the brokenness of creation. History shows us, the more corrupt a society gets, the more radical the economic disparity. And if that goes on a long time, it even destabilizes that society.

¹ Is this the same “rich man” of the previous parable (Lk. 16:1-9)? There is no way of knowing for sure, but they seem to be cut from the same cloth.

² Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, *The New American Commentary* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 423–424.

As the rich man feasts, Lazarus is starving. He longs for the crumbs of the rich man's table, but he never gets them. The implication here is that the rich man is actively sinning against Lazarus by his neglect. The rich man's sin is one of omission, rather than commission.

A sin of commission is doing something that you know is wrong. A sin of omission is failing to do something that you know is right. That's why in some of the older prayers of confession in church history ask of the Lord: "O Lord we confess we have sinned against you...by what we've done [sins of commission] and by what we've left undone [sins of omission]. We have not loved you with our whole heart, and we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves."

The rich man's love of self crowds out his ability to love his neighbor. His greed is proof of his sin.

Now I want to be careful here that you do not get the wrong impression. It is not sinful that the rich man possesses money. *To possess wealth is not a sin. To fail to steward that wealth in such a way that evidences a love for God, a love for neighbor, and an awareness of eternity is a sin.*

This is hard truth to hear as Americans. We live in the most prosperous society in history. Regardless of how you would evaluate your own economic condition, the fact that you live in this time in this place means that you are vastly wealthier than most people in this world. You should not feel bad or guilty for this. But you should feel a sense of gratitude and responsibility to help those who are poor.

God cares about the poor, and he wants his people to care about the poor too. This is kind of a big deal to God in both Old and New Testaments.

During the time of the Prophet Isaiah, the kingdom of Judah was fasting and praying and doing all kinds of religious gatherings to cry out to God. But it seemed like God wasn't paying attention. In fact, in chapter 1 of Isaiah, God tells the people of Judah that their worship services are so bad that he cannot endure them (cf. Isa. 1:9). You know church is really bad when God doesn't want to be there! Why is the case? Despite all the religious activity, the people of Judah have injustice in their society; they are oppressing the widow and the fatherless (1:17). So later in the book, God tells exactly the type of worship he wants:

"Cry aloud; do not hold back; lift up your voice like a trumpet; declare to my people their transgression, to the house of Jacob their sins. Yet they seek me daily and delight to know my ways, as if they were a nation that did righteousness and did not forsake the judgment of their God; they ask of me righteous judgments; they delight to draw near to God. 'Why have we fasted, and you see it not? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you take no knowledge of it?' Behold, in the day of your fast you seek your own pleasure, and oppress all your workers. Behold, you fast only to quarrel and to fight and to hit with a wicked fist. Fasting like yours this day will not make your voice to be

heard on high. Is such the fast that I choose, a day for a person to humble himself? Is it to bow down his head like a reed, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? Will you call this a fast, and a day acceptable to the LORD? "Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh? Then shall your light break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up speedily; your righteousness shall go before you; the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard" (Isaiah 58:1–8, ESV).

And if you are tempted to think, well that was the Old Testament so it doesn't apply now, this is from the New Testament book of James: *"Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have corroded, and their corrosion will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure in the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, are crying out against you, and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in self-indulgence. You have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter" (James 5:1–5, ESV).*

Jesus himself says in Matthew 25, *"For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.' Then they also will answer, saying, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to you?' Then he will answer them, saying, 'Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.' And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life" (Matthew 25:42–46, ESV).*

I know this a lot of Scripture to throw at you, but I want you to see how much the Bible has to say about this. I want you to see the intensity with which the Lord speaks about his care for the poor. Suffice it to say. I think our Lord is rather passionate about this issue. For this reason, if you look at the history of Christianity, Christians have always cared about the poor. For this reason, Redeemer Christian Church has always cared for the poor too. We know that Lazarus still sits at the gates of our palaces.

Since our earliest days at Redeemer, we chose to be a church in which a significant percentage of our giving goes outward to missions, which includes a lot of ministry to the poor. We know that when we combine our resources together, we can make a bigger impact together than we would individually. So I want you to know if you have given to Redeemer in the past, you have also given to the Acts 29 Catalyst Fund, which helps to resource church plants that are doing ministry in some of the most under-resourced places in the world. You have helped us drill water wells in Turkana, Kenya through Christian Relief Fund. You have helped us give shelter and vocational training through to women who have been rescued from human trafficking in Ethiopia. You have helped us provide eyesight to the blind in Mexico through Christian Ophthalmic Surgical Expedition Network. You have helped us build houses for the indigent in Juarez through

Casas Por Cristo. You have helped us give food and clothing to the poor and homeless in Amarillo through Faith City Ministries and City Church.

And I believe every dime we have given is worth it. We give because in giving to the poor, we give to Christ. We give to the poor because Christ has been given to us.

2. The disparity between the Rich Man and Lazarus in eternity

The poor man dies and is taken to Abraham's side, which is a representation of heaven (Lk. 16:22).³ The rich man dies and is taken to Hades, which is a representation of hell (Lk. 16:23). Whatever the disparity was between these two men in life, their disparity in eternity is even greater.

Which, by the way, this teaching is an assault on the so-called "prosperity gospel." The prosperity gospel teaches that if you believe the right things and do the right things, God will bless you in this life with health and wealth. But this parable shows us in no uncertain terms that material blessing and health is not a guarantee of favor with God. The rich man possessed wealth, but he was not blessed. In fact, the rich man's wealth became a stumbling block that caused him to fall into eternal judgment.

Now, we need to remember at this point that Jesus is teaching a parable. This is a highly stylized, symbolic form of speech. Our goal in understanding this parable is not to build out a specific theology of what heaven and hell look like.

But there are a few general statements that we confidently make about the afterlife. The first statement is that heaven is better than anything we could ever imagine. In fact, heaven is so amazing that Scripture has to use a multitude of metaphors to describe its joy. In Isaiah 25, heaven is like an everlasting feast on top of a great mountain. In Revelation 21 and 22, it is like a restored Garden of Eden that has grown into a city. Here, heaven is like a child sitting in the lap of a perfect father.

Lazarus goes to Abraham's side. Abraham is the ancient father of all the people of Israel. He is the one who first received the promise of God's covenant. Thus, to die and go to Abraham's side means that Lazarus has been eternally received into the covenant community of God's people. Despite all the suffering he received in life, Lazarus is now eternally loved and known.

Notice, by the way, that only Lazarus has a name that goes into eternity. The rich man, however, has lost all sense of his personhood and identity.

As heaven is presented as a wonderful reality, hell is terrible. Hell is described by Scripture in the language of "everlasting destruction" (1 Thes. 1:9), "eternal punishment" (Mt. 25:49), and a "blazing furnace" where there will be "weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Mt. 13:42). Whatever your opinion might be about hell, it is a terrible thing.

³ Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 424.

But, as terrible as hell is, isn't fascinating that the rich man never attempts to leave it, and he never asks to leave it. Look at the text in verse 24: *"And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame'"* (Luke 16:24, ESV).

The rich man wants and expects Lazarus to come to him. He believes that it is Lazarus's job and place to satisfy his desires. The rich man does not want to go to heaven because he does not love God. He loves himself, and that self-love is isolating, destructive, and all-consuming.

Pastor Timothy Keller says it this way, *"Hell is simply one's freely chosen identity apart from God on a trajectory into infinity."* C.S. Lewis says, *"In each of us there is something growing, which will become hell unless it is nipped in the bud."*

Hell is the natural, destructive end of sin. Lazarus's suffering wasn't worth comparing with the goodness of heaven, and the rich man's life, comfort, and wealth wasn't worth the horror of hell.

The Apostle Paul says it this way in Romans: *"For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us"* (Romans 8:18, ESV).

And again in his second letter to the Corinthians: *"For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens"* (2 Corinthians 4:17–5:1, ESV).

3. The disparity between faith and unbelief.

Again, it would be really easy to read this parable and make it all about wealth. After all, most of chapter 16 is in some way dealing with the topic of wealth. But the eternally important issue isn't money. It is faith and repentance. The rich man's money isn't his sin. Rather, it is the thing that reveals his sin, which is unbelief.

Look at the ending of our text: *"And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' And 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 hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead'"* (Luke 16:27–31, ESV).

Part of what this is saying is that the Old Testament and the New Testament do not teach two different religions. The entire Bible is proclaiming to us the need for the

gospel and how God has met that need in Jesus. The Old Testament is the gospel concealed. The New Testament is the gospel revealed. But from beginning to end, the gospel is all about Jesus. The only right response to this message is faith.

If the words of Scripture are not enough to lead someone to faith and repentance, then nothing else will ever be enough either.

The word of God must be received with the eyes of faith. We are to place ourselves under the authority of Scripture, not above it. That doesn't mean we should believe every opinion about the Bible without discernment. We are critical when it comes to making sure we rightly understand what Scripture is saying. But when we understand Scripture, we are to turn away from what the Bible calls sin and turn toward our God who is so much better than our sin. This is what the Bible calls faith and repentance.

But what about those who say, "I need more evidence"?

The Bible is showing us that for those with eyes to see, the evidence of God is all around them. For those who refuse to see, no evidence could ever be enough.

Christians have faith in Jesus, not because of a lack of evidence, but because of overwhelming evidence.

Let's, for the sake of argument, do a thought experiment. If there is a God, how would people come to truly know this God? All the major world religions talk about how to get to God, but what if the real God chose to make himself known to humanity? What if this God chose to enter his own creation and become a part of human history? How would he need to reveal himself?

Perhaps he would reveal his goodness by acts of mercy and love. Perhaps he would show his power over creation by signs, wonders, and miracles. Perhaps he would do something utterly unique like – I don't know – publically dying, resurrecting, and then ascending into heaven in front of hundreds of witnesses. Perhaps then he would pour his own Spirit and power on those that believe him so that they could tell the whole world about him. Perhaps he would empower them so much that the movement they began would split human history in two pieces. Surely that is enough evidence, right? If God came into history and rose from the dead and made a dent so big that the way we tell time is before he came and after he came, then everyone would repent and believe, right?

No. The reason for unbelief is not lack of evidence. The reason for unbelief is a hardened heart. May the Spirit of God have mercy on us and give us hearts that are susceptible to the gift of saving faith!

Conclusion

Jesus put aside the glory of heaven. He came to earth, not as a rich man. But he entered into human history, by being born into a barn animal's feeding trough. He became the poor man. He lived in humility and righteousness. He experienced the weight of eternal judgment and death on the cross so that all those who believe in him could inherit an eternal weight of glory that we could never earn or deserve.

When we could not come to him, he came to us. No other God of any other religion is like this.

Whatever we might lose in life for being faithful to him, it is eternally worth it!

As the Apostle Paul says in his letter to the Philippians, *"Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead"* (Philippians 3:8–11, ESV).

AMEN.

Community Group Discussion Starters

- 1. Read Luke 16:19-31 and summarize this parable in your own words.*
- 2. Where might we see the rich man and Lazarus in today's world?*
- 3. Where might we see the rich man and Lazarus in our own lives?*
- 4. According to the Bible, how should God's people view and interact with people who are poor (ex. Isa. 58 & Mt. 25)?*
- 5. How does this parable challenge us to view eternity?*

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