

Lazarus and the Rich Man

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[0 : 0 0] My name is Brian Wandel. It is very good to be with all of you here. As Dan said, I'm a pastoral intern at Church of the Resurrection. I've been a member there for quite some time.

Many of you know, most of you probably know, that our churches have a kind of intermingled history together. Three quarters of a decade ago, a group from Church of the Resurrection came over to this neighborhood to start this church. And not only do we have shared roots, but we've had many shared fruits as well. The Easter Vigil has often been a collaboration between our churches, many ministries and friendships and help between us. And most recently, the mission in the Brooklyn neighborhood, which I've been a part of along with quite a number of you. So it's so good to be here with you and to share these things in person because we have this unique sisterhood and brotherhood with each other. We today have this parable in front of us, the rich man and Lazarus. Perhaps you're familiar with this one, perhaps you're not. It's a favorite of Christian paintings. Other than that, it's actually not very commonly taught on. So I hope that we'll get something from it. I love this parable. I think this is fascinating. There are a lot of unique things going on in this parable that are unlike almost any of the other parables that Jesus says. First of all, if you can believe it, this is the only parable that Jesus spoke in which one of his stock characters, so you know, like he talks about a rich man or a poor man or a son or a father. This is the only parable where one of them is given a name, the name of Lazarus. This is also unique in that a historical figure is present in the parable, Abraham. And finally, the most fascinating part is that it's set in the afterlife. It's amazing. You have these different characters talking to each other after they're dead, and it has us wondering what's going on. You could throw purgatory in between. This would be basically Dante that we're going through here. It's so interesting. However, I want to start out by pointing out tonight that this is a parable. This is a story. This is a story that Jesus taught. And because of that, there are a lot of questions here about the afterlife that are not going to get answered because that's actually not the point of the parable. That's the setting of the parable, but the point is to teach us how we should live right now. The Bible actually has a very rich history, sorry, a rich set of teachings about what happens after death. It talks about the resurrection of the dead. It talks about judgment and vindication. It talks about the convergence of heaven and earth as Jesus makes all things new. But this is not that. This is not those things. That's some of the setting for this parable, but it's not the teaching. So if you have questions on what the afterlife is like, that's a great conversation to have on the back porch with some whiskey with some friends. And if you do have that, I suggest you call the pastoral staff as soon as possible because they would love to join you.

So we're going to learn a few things tonight, and here's what we're going to get. We're going to learn something in the story from each of the three characters. First, so we have the rich man, we have the poor man, Lazarus, and we have Abraham. First, the rich man will teach us that injustice is fun, but God will not let it pass. Injustice is fun, but God will not let it pass. And second, Lazarus, the poor man, will teach us that trust in God is hard, but it is worth it. Trust in God is hard, but it is worth it. And finally, Abraham, the third character in the parable, he'll teach us that, he'll teach us about the particular kind of trust that Lazarus had that was so important, and we'll see that Jesus became an even better Abraham. So let's walk through this thing here.

We'll start with the rich man. Like I said, this is the only parable where one of the characters is given a name, and that's kind of fun. You can almost imagine Jesus having some fun with this, and the early church saw this too. Whenever the early church wrote about or talked about this parable, they frequently threw in a name for the other guy. If you can give a name to the poor man, why not for the rich man? So they gave him all kinds of names, most of which are in ancient Near Eastern languages that we don't understand. But we can see a little something of what they're doing if you try to throw it in yourself. So who's a rich man? What kind of a rich man name could you throw in there? Maybe Bill Gates or Elon Musk or Donald Trump? And you could throw it in there. There was a rich man, Donald Trump, who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously every day. And we can do that, but it focuses a little too heavily on throwing the character of the rich man farther from us. If we want to get more details about this rich man, we need to know who this parable is addressed to. So if you're in your Bibles here, sorry, what page are we on here? We're on page, well, you guys don't have a few Bibles, but Luke 16, chapter 16, verse 14 is where the section actually begins. Before Jesus starts teaching,

Luke 16, verse 14, it says, the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard these things, and they ridiculed him, and then Jesus spoke to them. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, ridiculed them, and then he spoke to them. So this is who Jesus is talking to. This is his set of subjects. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money.

[5 : 48] Who here is a lover of money? I'll tell you who. This guy right here. Anyone else? Lovers of money. In fact, I think we all feast so sumptuously that we have trouble. It takes disciplined effort to keep the weight off.

And furthermore, this story is addressed to the religious leaders, the Pharisees, right? These are the guys who went to church and prayed. So we have the churchgoers, we have people who are eating well, and who love money.

I don't know about you, but I feel like most of the people in this room have just been selected for the character of the rich man. So we're going to go forward with that in mind. There was a rich man, you and me, clothed in purple and fine linen, who feasted sumptuously. That's a great word. Sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores.

At his gate was laid a poor man. He was laid there because he couldn't get there himself. Someone laid him there. Someone could no longer take care of him. He was at the very end. And I guess if you're going to be laid anywhere, it might as well be at the gate of a rich man.

And so this was Lazarus' best shot, and this was his last shot. This is all he's got. Here's a crippled and deformed and infected homeless man who slouches in front of the rich man's house, and he just stays there.

[7 : 13] It says the dogs were with him. The dogs licked his sores, but please understand that in this part of the world, dogs are not exactly man's best friend. Even in the Middle East today, if you walk through a city and you see the wild dogs running through the streets, about a 30% chance those dogs have rabies.

So these are dirty, disease-ridden, despised animals. We might imagine pigeons or rats running through his clothes between his legs. So this Lazarus, it says he desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.

And of course, Lazarus is at the gate, not the table. So if he's not there, and that's what he wants, someone's going to have to take the food to him or at least throw it somewhere in his vicinity. Instead, the rich man, his guests, his family, knowingly discarded the food, probably to the dogs, and then walked out right past Lazarus.

So, we have some pretty bad injustice here, don't we? This is pretty ridiculous. This is terrible. And I know you might be thinking, I do help homeless people. I would not do that in that situation.

And you may not. Thank you. That's fantastic. But I think it's clear here that we have some principles by which to search our hearts a little bit further, to go a little bit deeper than this, because we do love money, but we have further problems than that.

[8 : 32] Our riches extend beyond our bank accounts and beyond our meals. Perhaps your gifts are intelligence. Perhaps you are socially skilled.

Perhaps you have a good group of friends. All of us tend to cluster in similarly gifted groups of people rather than using our blessings for the sake of others.

Our Old Testament lesson tonight was from Genesis. Part of it was from Genesis 12, when God is making promises to Abraham, and Abraham is trusting God. And part of these foundational promises, one of the foundational promises, this is what God said to Abraham, in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

God's purpose for our gifts was that they would be a blessing to others. And so every day, this rich man had a moral question open to him. Is the comfort of this man, whether he is unintelligent or annoying or just not part of my social crew, was this man worth the smell or the contamination or the time?

Every day he ignored it. He said no. And so the scene shifts now. We're going to shift the scene in verse 22 here. The scene shifts, as in all the best jokes, to the afterlife.

[9 : 55] And Jesus does not tell us here. He does not tell us, and then the rich man was judged for his crimes. No, it's just assumed, isn't it? You saw it coming during the story. You knew what he acted like.

And when Jesus says, in Hades or in hell, being in torment, it doesn't take Thomas Aquinas to figure out what's going on here. The first thing that we learn from the rich man tonight is that Jesus tells us there is cosmic justice in the universe.

There is recompense. There is a balancing of the scales. And maybe it feels like a cop-out to say that accounts are only settled in the afterlife.

I know it can feel like that. And now it is true that justice in the Bible is sometimes a long justice, but it is a real justice because wickedness really does consume us eventually.

Because it really did matter that the rich man's heart was having such a good time that he couldn't be bothered by someone else's problem. And it really matters when white people prefer white people and black people prefer black people and straight people prefer to think that gay people were not around.

[11 : 09] And it really matters because when I prefer to think that a certain person just wasn't part of my life and was not worth my time, when we do that, we turn our backs on the God who made them.

And because that same God is the God who made me, my own heart dies a little bit more. And so the cancer spreads a little bit farther. And it's a long process.

It does take time, but the cosmic order of the universe catches up and the cancer kills. Before we move on, let's note something further.

Let's notice how even after the death of this rich man, he just doesn't get it. Verses 24 to 31, the rest of the parable here, this guy just keeps on jabbering.

So he's talking with Abraham, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus. And Abraham responds, verse 27, I beg you, Father, to send him to my father's house to help my brothers. Abraham responds, they have Moses and the prophets.

[12 : 07] And he says again, no, Father Abraham, no, he just, he can't give up. No, if they have someone else goes to them, then they will repent. Now, I realize that that you and I might begin to feel a little bit sorry for this guy.

We don't like the finality that is applied to this bargaining dead man. It almost sounds like he's trying to find a way out. Now, clearly, he wants to save himself from a little pain, obviously.

But is he changing at all? Did you notice how he is still Lazarus' boss? Verse 24 there, send Lazarus, send Lazarus to do it.

Verse 27, send him to my father's house. Send Lazarus, send Lazarus to my father's house. He knows that Abraham is the head honcho, the guy he needs to talk to.

And he knows how one rich man needs to talk to another rich man. But Lazarus is still his little minion. Nothing has changed at all. On the surface, it looks like he's trying to find a way out, kind of like a repentance.

[13 : 07] But the rich man wants it on his own cancer-hearted terms. Honor the rich guy, trample the poor guy. This is a bargainer. The rich man's fake repentance should be a reminder to all of us because you and I don't need a bargain on our own terms.

We need real repentance. Abraham said to him here, they have Moses, he's speaking about the man's brothers, they have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them. Moses and the prophets, that's a code word for the scriptures.

They have the scriptures, let them hear them. Jesus teaches that repentance needs to be on the Bible's terms. There's no way around that. So let's sum up here.

Let's take a subtotal of where we're at with the rich man. First, injustice is fun, but it will catch up. Not just like catching up with you from behind and grabbing a hold of you, but from the inside as the cancer spreads in our own hearts and there is no good flesh remaining.

Second, the way out is through repentance, but bargaining is not repentance. More likely, it's the same old manipulation. Manipulation is on our own terms, but repentance is on someone else's.

[14 : 21] That is, on the terms of the scriptures which we believe have come from God. So there's the rich man. Let's move on to Lazarus. It's easy to forget about Lazarus, this poor guy, because he doesn't actually say anything in the parable.

In fact, he barely does anything. We actually don't have a whole lot of reasons to know why he's in heaven here. He just goes. It says in verse 22 there, the poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.

What we do have here is that he was poor, right? So let's unpack that for a bit. Each of the gospels has their own kind of unique flavor to it, their own unique way of telling the story of Jesus.

And Luke's gospel, the gospel of Luke that we're reading from here, has its own kind of special seasoning, its own, you know, something, you know? It has its own thing and what Luke likes to do is emphasize the great reversal.

What is the great reversal? The great reversal, this is the way that Jesus put it. Some of those who are last shall be first and some of those who are first shall be last.

[15 : 25] This is a theme that Luke likes to use to bring out certain colors in the gospel. In one of the first Christmas carols that Mary, the mother of Jesus, sang before he was born, this is how she sang about what her child would become.

She said, he has filled the hungry with good things, but the rich he has sent away empty. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

That's the great reversal here. Now, it's not a one-to-one ratio, right? Abraham was rich and there he is in heaven, so it's not every rich person goes to hell and every poor person goes to heaven, but it does show off something great about the gospel.

Something really cool about the way the gospel works, and what it shows us is that the stuff that we love and admire counts for jack squat compared to what Jesus loves and admires.

So we've got this contrast here, is what we're working with. The contrast, that Lazarus, the symbol of the poor guy who's on God's good side, in comparison with the Armani-wearing, hybrid SUV-driving, nice hair, goes to church every week, rich man, who winds up as the butt of the Bible's only afterlife joke.

[16 : 44] Some of those, some of those who are first shall be last. Because the hybrid SUVs and the nice hair and going to church, they aren't anything in and of themselves, they're derivative, secondary goods.

They are only good if they are based in the one really good thing. They're only good if their purpose is found in the one really good thing.

Trusting in Jesus is what matters. Trusting in Jesus is the one really good thing that these things can possibly root in. So besides being poor, there's one more thing we can learn about Lazarus.

Very little information, so here's what we have. Jesus could have picked any name, and he gave one name to this man. Picked the name of Lazarus. The name Lazarus means the Lord is my help.

The Lord is my help. Here's everything that we know about Lazarus. He lived for a while, and mostly sucked, and then he died. But, but, in those years for him, the Lord was his help.

[17 : 53] In those years for him, the Lord was his help. Now, let me be, as I talk about this, let me be the first to tell you. Believing in Jesus changes lives, and it changes the world. I have a story to tell about how Jesus has changed my life, and many of you do too.

However, there are a few times in the Bible when God asks us a hard question. What if you didn't have a story to tell at all? What if the things in your life were not turning around for the better?

And what if this community thing that's been awesome for us, what if it's not working out for you? What if the sermon stunk? Would the Lord still be your help? And what if you lost your friends, and you had a disfiguring, maiming disease, and you had no health care, and the very person who could do something about it preferred to think that you did not exist?

For Lazarus, the Lord was still his help. We identified with the rich man earlier. We talked about that. But, even if we don't have it as bad as Lazarus, we can identify with his need for God's help.

So let the Lord be your help. Because it can be hard to trust in God, but it is worth it. Let's take another subtotal now of where we're at with Lazarus this time.

[19 : 16] No matter how bad things get, trusting God is still worth it. Just like the rich man showed us that the scales of injustice eventually swing back to crush the oppressor, in the same way, God's promises to help those who trust him will be fulfilled, and you will receive comforts when you are gathered to your mothers and fathers in the faith, just like Lazarus did.

It can be hard to trust in God, but it is worth it. Speaking of fathers in the faith, we come to Abraham, our last character here, Abraham, and I hope this point will flesh out for us a little bit more the kind of faith that Lazarus had that was so worthwhile, and it will show us that Jesus became a better Abraham.

For Jews around this time that Jesus was preaching, in this part of the world, in this particular religion, Abraham was a symbol for people trusting God and for God helping people.

He was a symbol for that. Abraham trusted that God would help him, and he trusted that God would make him a blessing to the world. That was our reading again, Genesis 12, 3.

In you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. That was the foundational promise which Abraham passed on to his sons, his sons passed on to their sons, and so on forever until Lazarus.

[20 : 42] Lazarus, Lazarus knew that the only trust that could possibly be worth it was a trust like Abraham had, one that carried faith in God's promise, God's promise to help, and to make him a blessing, and carried that over many miles and over many mountains.

That was the kind of faith that Lazarus needed, and that was the kind of faith that he had for God to help him. And that was great, but it was also easy to see Abraham as the way of salvation himself, that by being born a son of Abraham that it would work out.

But Abraham couldn't do that. Abraham couldn't affect that himself. He was a model for faith, but he could not be the way himself. The first mention of Abraham that we have in this parable, he plays a big role.

The first mention here is in verse 22. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. Actually, what it says there is to Abraham's bosom.

Go ahead and laugh. To Abraham's bosom. It's a quaint old phrase, but I like it. I think it works. I like that older translation because I think it gives a sense like a bunch of chicks being gathered together to the mother hen or cubs being gathered by the big mama bear.

[22 : 02] But let me tell you, just like Lazarus died, coming to Jesus like this will mean a kind of death for us too. If we are going to enter into this portal, this death portal that Jesus had, I'm sorry, the thing that Abraham couldn't do was make bad hearts good.

He couldn't cure the cancer in people's hearts. So Jesus fulfilled that role for Abraham. He pulled us into himself and his way of death became our way of life.

So I'm going to use an illustration here before we close. My illustration has to do with a famous fire from 1949. It's a fire in Montana in a place called Mangulch.

It's called the Mangulch Fire. This is one of the greatest tragedies in the history of the U.S. Forest Service. I'm going to read in here a short passage from a book called Young Men and Fire that details it by Norman McLean.

The way the situation happened was this. It was in Montana outside of Missoula. It was a hot August. If you can imagine for me, 16th Street out here is the Missouri River and this is a big gulch.

[23 : 16] A gulch is like a valley that kind of comes together in the middle and then goes up on steep slopes to the side. It's about two miles long, several hundred yards across. There was a fire there and so the Forest Service sent their elite, the smoke jumpers who parachuted in.

15 jumped in and within an hour the fire became what's known as a blow up and it claimed 12 of them. Two survived by pure luck as they raced through the smoke to find a rock formation where they escaped and the other survivor was Dodge who was the leader of the crew.

So here's what happened. The group parachuted in to the top of the gulch which led down toward the Missouri River. Near the mouth of the river, near the mouth of the gulch where the river was, there was about a 60 acre fire going on and that's what they were going to stop.

What happened was that one side of the gulch was heavy, heavily timbered and good source for fuel to make a very, very hot fire and the other side of the gulch was mainly brush and high grasses which could spread the fire very fast and that's what happened in the blow up phase of this fire.

The one side kind of egged the other on and what happened was the winds blew the fire up toward the top of the gulch and created these kind of fire tornadoes throwing the fire forward almost at the speed at which the wind could push it.

[24 : 40] So trees and grass caught fire and in about 10 minutes 3,000 acres were consumed. That's about 5 acres per second in this 10 minute time span. So the leader Dodge, he has his crew going down toward the fire and he sees what happens and he sees what's happening down there so he has his men turn around and walk the other way and then he has them run and then he has them drop all of their equipment and save their lives but he could see they needed to get to the top of the ridge but he could see that they weren't going to make it and so he did something unusual and something unprecedented in the history of the forest service up to this point.

There was a fire behind them that they were running away from and Dodge lit a fire in front of them a small fire to burn up the dry ground and to use up the fuel before this 2,000 degree blow up main fire could do so.

Here's the situation as it unfolded this is what one of the survivors said I saw Dodge bend over and light a fire with a match I thought with the fire almost on our back what the hell was the boss doing lighting another fire in front of us?

The narrator goes on here it shouldn't be hard to imagine just what most of the crew must have thought when they first looked across the open hillside and saw their boss seemingly playing with a matchbook and dry grass this is the only fire any member of the forest had ever seen or heard of in which the foreman got out in front of the crew only to light a fire in advance of the fire that he and his crew were trying to escape in case I hadn't understood him the first time the man repeated we thought he must have gone nuts a few minutes later when Dodge's fire became more spectacular still Sally this man having reached the top of the ridge looked back and saw the foreman enter his own fire and lie down in its hot ashes to let the main fire pass over so Dodge laid down his fire and a wall of fire about a football field deep swept over him destroying everything in its path except for the two men who got lucky and Dodge in his escape fire Dodge lit that escape fire because it was the only way out his men couldn't believe that the way out of fire was fire they couldn't believe that the way out of death was an apparent death in fact the fire's own strength was used against it again the author says here when the main fire paused for a moment in front of the escape fire the red flames crowded together until they became ravaging military monsters enraged by the precocity of the obstacle in front of them the escape fire then for a moment these deranged military monsters blocked in their advance raged sideways up and down the line looking for a way to pass

Dodge yelled to his men get in and one by one they ignored him one man near the front said to hell with that I'm getting out of here in the same way in the great conflagration of the world Jesus has given us a safe place by setting himself on fire he died to sin and destruction so that sin and destruction could not kill us and I know it sounds crazy just like it sounded crazy to Dodge's men but we must jump into that escape fire of Jesus' death we must die with Jesus to find life and to be gathered into his bosom as it were in the New Testament that means baptism and repentance which are consistently described as a kind of death that avoids death a death that gets us through to life you remember at the end of the parable here at the very end the rich man says

[28 : 36] Father Abraham if someone goes to them his brothers from the dead they will repent but Abraham didn't buy that did he? Abraham knew that resurrection from the dead was not some cheap trick to make people believe something they didn't already believe it was a death life portal it was an escape fire that we need to enter through real repentance we trust in Jesus' death and resurrection because if we trust him and enter it he will make it our death and resurrection too in conclusion this is a judgment parable it has a pretty simple message avoid the judgment but we've been able to clear some ground I know that sounds simple but we've we've been able to clear some ground now and flesh that out a little bit more and so here's what we've here's how we've stratified this injustice may be fun but it will eat its own on the other hand the life of trust and faith in God can be tough but it is worth it just like it was for Lazarus and finally that faith is really a trust in Jesus to make his death our death through real repentance according to the standards of the Bible just like Abraham said there to make his resurrection our lives that we can bless the families of the earth just as Lazarus was drawn into Abraham's bosom in the story here so may we be drawn into the bosom of Jesus who made himself an escape fire a way of healing and safety for all the Lazaruses out there so may the Lord be our help let's pray heavenly father thank you thank you thank you that you are just but thank you that trust in you is so worth it and thank you that you have provided a way so that by trust we can be with you and you can bring us from death to life amen amen to heaven amen