

If you will not listen...

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[0 : 00] I came across this week a series of photographs, striking images of two worlds divided.

I think we might have them on our screen. Pictures from Mexico, pictures from South Africa, where rich and poor live side by side, divided only by a corrugated fence or a concrete wall.

So living shoulder to shoulder, but their worlds could not be any more different. It helped me to picture this story that Jesus paints for us, a story of extreme wealth and extreme poverty.

Two men living side by side, divided only by a gate, but their worlds could not be any more different. Jesus, quoting from the Old Testament, once said, you will always have the poor with you.

There will always be societies made up of the haves and the have-nots. And too often, as Jesus recognized, the haves, those who have money, turn a blind eye and even show contempt towards the poor.

[1 : 27] And Jesus tells a story to challenge that. I suspect I'm not alone in loving stories like that of Robin Hood. Maybe you grew up listening to the Robin Hood story or watching some of the many film and TV variants.

You have the cold-hearted sheriff of Nottingham imposing taxation after taxation, you know, stealing from the poor. But then Robin Hood comes, the hero of the people.

He steals from the rich and gives to the poor, and there's a sense of justice done, and we celebrate. We come to Jesus' story, and we find that same quality.

There's a final judgment that falls on the rich man, the one who chose to love money, not mercy, the one who put his own pleasure over the people around him, the voice that he listened to was the call of money rather than the call of God's Word and God's will.

And as I said at the beginning, this story is part of a sequence, and within that sequence there's a danger that Jesus keeps pointing towards. And the danger is that of not listening to Jesus, not listening to him as King, as Lord, as Son of God.

[2 : 50] It's the danger of not listening to his message that we are saved by God's grace and not by our efforts. And now, as he closes this series of stories, he gives us another note of urgency.

If we will not listen to Jesus, there is the prospect of future judgment. And so we have a really important story to consider, and we have three important themes to consider, as Jesus asks us also to listen up and listen in.

The first theme is that of reversal. One of the things, remarkable things about Jesus, is the way he is able to paint a picture for us, a story for us in so few words.

In just a few short sentences, we are given a picture of extremes in this life. Verse 19, we meet the rich man, dressed in purple fine linen, luxury every day, and then the extreme poverty of the poor man, begging for just a scrap, out on the street, covered in sores.

Before we go any further, it's important to note that in Jesus' day, as people were listening, they had the belief that if you had wealth, then you had God's blessing, that you were in.

- [4 : 16] So it's really striking, in a couple of chapters, Luke chapter 18, Jesus speaks of a rich man, and he says, verse 25, it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who's rich to enter the kingdom of God, and the people around him are surprised.

Who then can be saved? Their automatic assumption, wealth and possessions, equals God's blessing. And so imagine, you know, you're tuned to think that way, imagine how they hear this next scene, which takes us to the next life.

Because what happens is a complete reversal, isn't there? There's a reversal of position, and a reversal of expectations. Because now it's the poor man, who's living in comfort, and it's the rich man, who's living in agony.

What's happening here, what's happening, is that Jesus is reminding us that his kingdom doesn't work the way the world works. In the kingdom of God, because it operates on the basis of grace, there is reversal.

And it's really interesting, if you read Luke's gospel, and if you look for that theme of reversal, you'll find it in almost every chapter up until this one. He really wants us to hear this.

- [5 : 36] So we have Mary, the mother of Jesus, when she hears that she's going to give birth to the Savior. She says in, she sings, I suppose, chapter 1, verse 52.

Speaking of God, he has brought down rulers from their thrones, but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things, but has sent the rich away empty.

That's the way God's kingdom operates. We can think about chapter 5, where there is Levi, the tax collector. Everybody despised the tax collector, but Jesus welcomed him.

Jesus shared food with him. Indeed, Jesus shared a feast with Levi and all his tax collector and sinner friends, and he was glad to be known as a friend of sinners, even if others were muttering.

Luke chapter 6. Jesus delivers some teaching that clearly connects with this parable we just read. Luke chapter 6, verse 20. He says, looking at his disciples, he said, blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

- [6 : 43] And then verse 24, but woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort. There's that warning in teaching form we now hear in a parable.

If all you want is comfort in this life, then you're looking for too little. So as we listen in to Jesus and to this parable, he helps us to discover that grace turns things upside down.

Because God's kingdom does not run along the lines that we would humanly expect. We would expect the basis of merit. You know, you earn it.

You prove yourself. You come with your right track record and CV and say, here's why you should accept me. But that's not how Jesus operates. And that's profoundly good news.

Rather, if we enter into this story, we are invited by Jesus to come like Lazarus, the poor man, in our sense of need and despair, in a dreadful state because of our sin.

- [7 : 50] We come empty-handed. We gladly confess Jesus has paid it all. Jesus has done everything for salvation.

Jesus declared on the cross, it is finished. God's work of salvation, complete by Jesus, God's Savior, so that we enter the kingdom, it's now by grace.

It's a gift that we receive by faith. And another thing, as we listen into this story, it reminds us, and Jesus is always pushing His disciples and His followers in this way, we need to learn to put on the glasses of the gospel.

Because we will typically also divide people and imagine perhaps, oh, these are the kind of people that God will naturally accept, or these are the kind of people that will listen to the message of good news.

And Jesus would have us to avoid that trap of limiting God's grace in any way to say that this person is a likely candidate, this person is unlikely. No, it's all gift. It's all grace.

[9 : 07] So when we put on the gospel glasses, we don't limit who we share good news with. We learn to celebrate as we see God's grace and kindness being extended in surprising places, and we learn to welcome people that they might come to know the grace that we have come to discover.

So that's one theme, and it's a repeating theme, and it's here in our story. A second theme, one that Jesus deliberately addresses because of his audience is the theme of riches.

Another feature of Jesus' storytelling, and we get this recorded in the Gospels, is that as he tells stories, he intends to provoke a response from his audience.

He's constantly looking to draw people into the story, to think about where am I in the story, to challenge wrong beliefs and behaviors through story.

So perhaps even as we read this parable, we felt sympathy towards the poor. We perhaps felt a sense of anger towards the rich who was so callous.

[10 : 28] Another storyteller, Charles Dickens, wrote the novel A Tale of Two Cities. And in The Tale of Two Cities, which in part focuses on the French Revolution, we're introduced to a character called Monseigneur.

The Monseigneur, who is just a horrible character. Dickens had this great phrase to describe him. He said he was deformed by the leprosy of unreality, which is a great phrase.

Basically, he was living in the lap of absolute luxury while all of France was starving and suffering. And having only, I'm rereading A Tale of Two Cities, and having only been introduced to Monseigneur, already I've decided I want justice to fall.

It's our heart response, isn't it? We see the body, we see injustice, and we want justice to be done. There is a clear audience for Jesus as he tells this parable, and it's the Pharisees.

Remember, we met them in verse 14. They are those who love money and were sneering at Jesus. They've rejected Jesus as God's Savior and King.

[11 : 38] They're rejecting his message of grace. They're rejecting that warning to put away the idol of money and to trust and give their heart fully to God.

We find them also in chapter 15 in verse 2 before the trio of lost and found stories, muttering again, this man welcomes sinners and eats with them.

They love money, they despise other people, and they despise and reject Jesus. And so, they become in part the target of the story.

Jesus says, if you will not listen, if you will not use your money for the sake of others, which is God's will, if you'll not show mercy with your resources, be warned.

Jesus sounds a warning to them. This rich man is pictured as having it all, living in the height of luxury, but he doesn't know how to use it, using God's good things apart from a right relationship with God.

[12 : 51] God. Those gifts that we receive from God, our money, whatever our resources, possessions are, they are to be used for the sake of others.

For the rich man in the story to do that, all he needs to do is open his eyes and open the gate, but he refuses.

And so we have this awful scene in verse 21 of poor Lazarus, the beggar, longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table, and even the dogs came and licked his sores.

He's getting more sympathy from the street dogs than he is for the rich man. But there's another awful portrait that Jesus paints, far worse than that of Lazarus.

It's the portrait of a person who is gripped and held a slave by money, a person whose heart has shriveled up, become too small, become so focused on self, only serving themselves with money, ignoring the way that God wants us to show love, the love that God seeks is a love that sacrifices for other people.

[14 : 17] That's so far from the rich man's thoughts. Before we hit the judgment scene, let's skip to the end, verse 27. So we find the rich man in torment, and he's begging that Lazarus be sent to sound a warning.

And notice, remember, Jesus is telling the story, but he puts these words in the mouth of Abraham, they have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.

What's Jesus saying there? He's saying that it's really clear when you read the Old Testament how we should treat others and how we should use our resources.

It is really clear that God cares for the poor, and that how he wants us to worship is to show care to those in poverty and in need.

Let me give you a couple of examples from the writings of Moses. Deuteronomy 10, this is speaking of God. First of all, he, that's God, defends the cause of the fatherless and the widow and loves the foreigner residing among you, giving them food and clothing, and in response, you are to love those who are foreigners.

[15 : 37] Now, Deuteronomy 15, there will always be poor people in the land. So, should we just fold our hands and arms and just say, well, nothing we can do about it? No, God says, therefore, I command you to be open-handed towards your fellow Israelites who are poor and needy in your land.

To hear the same truth in story form, that's why Keith read from Jeremiah 22, we have the obscure king Shalom there, who is growing richer and richer as king by injustice.

Rather than using his position and his wealth to bless others, he is taking advantage, and so judgment falls. So, the clear message of the Old Testament is that riches are to be used to express love for God through the way that we love others who are in need.

So, as Jesus has invited the Pharisees into the story, so he would invite us into the story as well, and he invites us to listen with urgency to his teaching, which calls us to seek wisdom to look inside of ourselves in the first place.

As John Calvin who famously said, our hearts are idol-making factories. we can turn anything into an object of worship that we look to for hope and security rather than the one true God.

[17 : 05] Jesus, in his teaching, saw money as the idol to warn against most often, the one with the greatest capacity to rob God of glory, to steal our hearts away from him.

So, as wisdom looks inside, do we see are there areas where money has taken a hold in our life, where the priorities that we place, the hopes that we have, are they rooted in money or Christ?

How does the love of money show itself in our lives? Where are those tendencies? How to break that spell, how to break the stranglehold becomes such a significant question to ask.

And when we're thinking about wisdom, God's wisdom, if we want to break the stranglehold of money, then we need to practice generosity and to practice it as an act of worship, not out of duty, but out of joy.

And to do that, we need first to receive, don't we? We need to receive God's generosity towards us, God's grace to us in the Lord Jesus.

[18 : 16] Because it's only as that love melts and captures our hearts that we then have the capacity to love others for God.

So wisdom looks inside, but wisdom also looks outside. So that we ask ourselves the question the rich man should have asked, where is the Lazarus at my gate?

Who is the Lazarus at your gate? Who is it that God has placed into our lives? Where are the opportunities that we have to bless and to serve others with our resources?

How can we do God's will and show God's love to the people around us? So that's the second theme, the theme of riches.

And the third theme is that of reward and punishment. As we listen in to Jesus, the storyteller, there is that repeating note in his stories, that note of urgency.

[19 : 25] So remember the story of the two sons? The younger son gets to such a dreadful point in his life that he realizes his desperation, he comes to his senses and he repents and he goes back home.

Then the older brother needs, Jesus wants the Pharisees to listen, they need to see the urgency of their situation, to not stand on the outside thinking they don't need Jesus to save them.

Rather they would urgently turn and receive the father's welcome. Then last week in the beginning of chapter 16, we heard the story of a manager who knew that his end was coming, his job was coming to an end and there was an urgency there, an urgency to prepare for future welcome.

Jesus is moving us closer and closer towards the climax here. This parable speaks about urgency in the context of the afterlife, the life after this life.

There is an urgent need to listen to Jesus, to hear and to respond to the good news of saving grace before it's too late.

[20 : 37] And so Jesus introduces these two destinations and two destinies, and what becomes clear is that listening or not listening to Jesus, the King, the Savior, the Son of God, will determine our destiny.

verse 22, 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.

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.

Two destinations described. Heaven pictured as being at Abraham's side, or literally in Abraham's bosom.

[21 : 50] It's the place where God's angels are. It's the place of comfort. It's the place of loving relationship.

It's the place where we are truly human. Notice that Lazarus is given a name the rich man is not. It's a place where the bad things of this life have now become a distant memory, and he is enjoying good things in the presence of God at Abraham's side.

It's a wonderful place of comfort. But there's another destination and destiny to describe. Jesus is talking to us of hell.

He is spoken of as Hades, the place of death, the place of torment, the place of agony. So, remember this is parable, so it's a story.

But remember, Jesus' stories always map onto reality. It is a place where the rich man finds himself separated from all that is good and can do nothing about it.

[23 : 06] It is a place of conscious punishment. It is a place where there is no prospect of escape. where the good things that he enjoyed in this life have no ability to help him in the next.

Jesus wants this loving warning to be sounded loud and clear to the Pharisees of his day and to people in every day, that to love money or indeed to love any idol over loving God, to choose the way of self-righteousness over the way of being saved by Jesus is the road to destruction and punishment.

This story helps answer the striking question Jesus asked in chapter 9, verse 25. What good is it for someone to gain the whole world and yet lose or forfeit their very self?

This rich man gains nothing. No reward, only punishment. Misses salvation, misses true life. There is an urgent need to respond to the message of Jesus.

Now let's stop for a moment to ask a hard question. Perhaps it's something that you've wrestled with and many of us have. Perhaps it's a question you've been asked. How could, how can a loving God send people to hell?

[24 : 35] This is Jesus, Son of God, clearly teaching heaven and hell. Bertrand Russell, famous British philosopher of a previous century, said that Jesus' belief and Jesus' teaching on hell was his great moral defect.

Jesus is defective, morally bad, because he believed and taught about hell. That's one voice, and we'll hear that in many different forms. There's another voice, a chap by the name of Miroslav Volf, who in the early 90s was living in Croatia, so living through the Balkan War, so so many atrocities between people groups.

He says something very different. He says, if God were not angry at injustice and did not make a final end of violence, that God would not be worthy of worship.

Which is it? Is it a moral defect or justice worthy of worship? Consider a few things with me together.

First of all, to think about the view of God that we have. So perhaps the popular belief is that God is love and God is only love, and therefore it seems impossible or barbaric that a God who is only love could send people to hell.

[25 : 59] Is that how the Bible is presented? Because that's where we need to get our ideas about God, from His revelation, His speaking to us of His character. In the Bible we discover, yes, God is love.

Absolutely God is love. But we also discover God is holy. That God is just. And it's not the case of there's one over and against the other is both and.

So we need to be guided, first of all, by who God is, and not to limit it according to our own perhaps favorite ideas about God.

The whole idea about hell takes us to the idea of justice. Think about our view of justice. Humanly speaking, don't we all want justice to be done?

Whether we're reading Robin Hood or A Tale of Two Cities, or whether we're reading our newspaper and we hear about war crimes or abuse or injustice, we would hate the idea that there would be a court where a judge would fold his arms and ignore the demands of justice.

[27 : 14] It would just sweep guilt under the carpet. We want justice to be done. We feel anger rightly when awful things happen.

We need to remember that we are made in the image of God. We care about justice because God cares about justice.

We have a sense of right and wrong because God has established right and wrong and has placed that reality in our hearts. So we must allow for God to be angry at injustice.

We must allow God to be angry at what destroys and defaces creatures made in His image. Indeed, for many believers around the world, the reality of final justice gives them hope.

If you live in a war zone or if you live under fear of your life because there are hostile enemies all around you, your longing and your prayer is that in the end, justice will be done.

[28 : 28] That those who oppose God, who practice horrible deeds, will be punished so that God and His people might live in peace forever. So it is important to our hope to have a God of justice.

Perhaps when we ask the question, we need to take a think about our view of ourself, especially in relation to God. I suppose it's easy for us to consider ourselves as basically good.

The people that we speak to are basically good. Most of the time we're dealing with good citizens, good parents, family members, employees, employers. Basically good compared to others.

But there's another standard. It's the perfect standard of God and His law. And before that perfect standard, Romans 6 23 confirms what I think we already know all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.

God's word and God's law exposes to us our failures. We don't love God perfectly. We don't love our neighbors perfectly. We don't use our money perfectly to show and to satisfy mercy to others.

[29 : 52] We do break the commandments. We do turn our back on God. Perhaps like Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's play, we too find ourselves at times haunted by a sense of guilt, a guilt that we cannot remove.

Just like Lady Macbeth haunted by bloodstains having killed the king. And when we allow that there is a God who is both loving and just, when we think about a God who must deal justly, when we think about ourselves and the reality that we break God's law, another question begins to emerge.

Not how does God send anyone to hell, but actually how can God receive anyone into heaven? If we judge ourselves honestly against God's perfect standard, we're confronted with that question.

And as we allow those realities about God and about justice and about human sin to become real to us, then the gospel becomes wonderful for us.

The gospel becomes the only hope that we have because it's a good news of grace. God doesn't deal with us on the basis of how we have performed, which is great news because we have not performed perfectly.

[31 : 23] But rather, God, in the good news presented in the gospel, he sends his son, the Lord Jesus. The Lord Jesus who became poor for us, leaving the glory of heaven, suffering and dying, taking on himself our sin, bearing our guilt, facing punishment for it, absorbing the wrath of God that should fall on us, it falls on him as our substitute before he rises from the dead in victory.

God, out of infinite kindness, gives us the Savior that we need. He alone secures forgiveness and peace with God.

The Son of God, on the cross, experienced the realities of hell, being punished and being cut off from his Father.

Think about that. So that we, by his grace, could experience the joy of a welcome from a loving Heavenly Father. Salvation is a wonderful gift, freely offered to us in the gospel, to be received by faith, if, if we will listen and if we will respond.

So as we close, let's ask ourselves that question. You and I, have we listened to Jesus? Will we listen to Jesus?

[32 : 56] The story ends, in many ways, on a sad note for those Pharisees. Jesus knows the future. Verse 31, or verse 30, they say, No, Father Abraham, through the words of the rich man, if someone from the dead goes to them, they'll 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 anticipates something there, that he will die, that he will rise in glory and victory.

Yes, at the moment, we follow him on the road to the cross, where he will experience shame, humiliation, and death, but that's not the end of his journey and his story. He'll be raised, he'll return to heaven to be enthroned as glorious King and Savior.

But as he speaks to his audience, he knows that many of them will stay unconvinced. The Pharisees and Jews of the day, many of them, despite the evidence for the resurrection, they will say no to Jesus.

Despite him bringing the kingdom and announcing God's grace, they will reject him, choosing their own path. Let's not make their mistake.

[34 : 16] Let's not follow their path, because we see where it ends. We're called today to listen and to act, that we might know comfort and joy and hope, that we would listen to be saved by grace through faith in Jesus, and we would show our love for our God and our Savior by using the things that he gives to us to help others, because he has helped us and saved us by his grace.

Let's pray together. Lord, our God, we thank you for Jesus, our Savior, and we thank you for the stories that he told that have so much truth and power contained within them.

We ask that, as he called his original hearers to listen in, to listen.