

Listen whilst you can

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 07 February 2021

Preacher: Benjamin Wilks

[0 : 00] Good morning. Our Bible reading this morning is taken from Luke chapter 16, reading from verses 19 to 31. The rich man and Lazarus. Luke 16, 19 to 31.

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 lit 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 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.

But Abraham replied, Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things.

[1 : 20] But now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place 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 family, 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 them, If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead.

Amen. Okay, we'll pick up then in Luke chapter 16, looking from verse 19 onwards.

[2 : 27] Now, folks, you don't need me to explain riches and poverty to you. We're familiar with the idea that high-rise apartments can exist cheek by jowl with the slums where the poorest live without even basic sanitation.

We've seen the beggars sat outside the towering offices of city financial institutions. You can go down to New Lanark and you can see the workers' single-room dwellings for 10 people.

You can see that juxtaposed against the mill owner's multi-bedroom house. That, of course, would have been one of the more progressive and enlightened mill communities of its day.

A contrast between rich and poor has been there through the ages. It's still readily apparent today. It has always been this way. You don't need me to explain this to you. But it does bear reminding ourselves.

It bears reminding ourselves that on a global scale and in historical perspective, it bears reminding ourselves that those of you listening to me this morning, you are rich.

[3 : 28] Whether you feel that way or not, if you have the technology to listen to me speaking to you, I assure you, you are rich by comparison to many. So let's not too quickly read ourselves into the place of the poor man in this parable.

Well, Jesus' parable in this passage here, this points us to quite an extreme example of riches and poverty, but far from an isolated one. On the one hand here, there is verse 19, the rich man dressed in purple and fine linen, feasting every day.

Purple cloth, this has long been associated with loyalty. Loyalty? Royalty. Purple cloth associated with royalty. Why? Well, because it was the costliest dye to produce, rendering, therefore, clothes made with that dye, the preserve of the richest of the rich.

This man is not just well off. This man lives a lavish lifestyle. He is deliberately ostentatious with his wealth, and by contrast, at his gate lies Lazarus.

Do you see verse 20? The passive verb there, Lazarus, was laid. There's a good chance, therefore, that Lazarus is paralysed, unable even to move himself to a better begging spot.

[4 : 39] You might have thought that the rich man's gate, that this would be a choice location, but it certainly didn't prove so in this case, did it? Lazarus is covered with sores, and like the prodigal son longing to fill his belly with the pig's food, Lazarus longs for even the scraps falling from the table.

And the dogs, the dogs who lived scavenging from the rubbish heaps and so on, don't think of carefully groomed family pets, the dogs licked his sores. Lazarus is in a sorry state.

And therefore, in this parable, we have the very richest contrasted against the very poorest. And as we look in more detail at what's going on here, we'll see three key points along the way.

Firstly, God cares for the least. Secondly, God punishes the wicked. And therefore, thirdly, listen to God. God cares for the least. God cares for the poor.

Maybe it doesn't at first look that way in these first couple of verses of the parable here. Maybe it doesn't always look that way in day-to-day life either. Maybe it doesn't always look like God cares for the least, because very often the poor remain poor.

[5 : 48] It isn't uncommon for somebody to go through life sorely afflicted the whole way through. There's a common misconception in Jesus' day that there was a straightforward correspondence between riches in this life and God's blessing and favour, that to be rich is evidence of God's blessing.

But the truth is God causes his son to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. It is not uncommon to have neighbourhoods full of rich atheists, and then across towns slums with plenty of evangelical Christians.

Why? Well, because God's care doesn't always mean an easy and comfortable life here and now. Because God doesn't prioritise your material comfort as highly as perhaps you are inclined to.

God's focus isn't so much on the here and now as on your eternal well-being. So then, if it's not apparent in the first couple of verses that God cares for the least, why here in this parable do I say that he does?

Lazarus is dumped there at the rich man's gate. But it hinges, doesn't it, on what happens next. The time came when the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham's side.

[7 : 06] Abraham's side here, this is a place of comfort, a place of rest, a place of peace. Abraham, the great father of the faith, there he is. This is a place of God's favour, this much is readily apparent.

Now, we're not going to attempt a kind of comprehensive look at life after death here, not least because that isn't the point of this parable. But it is clear that where Lazarus is, that this is a happy place.

Even we could say on the basis of later verses, we could say this is a place of reward. Some of you perhaps will be more familiar with the King James Bible, the authorised version.

Maybe you know this not as Abraham's side, but as Abraham's bosom. That's a more literal translation of what modern translations here phrase Abraham's side. King James language is a little bit confusing in modern English, isn't it?

We don't talk about men having bosoms. But the idea here is the same as it is in John chapter 13 verse 23. When at the last supper the disciple whom Jesus loved was reclining next to him, or was leaning on Jesus' bosom.

[8 : 12] Why do I bring this up? Well, because this phrasing of Abraham's bosom, Jesus' bosom, that it conveys a greater sense of closeness, of intimacy, than it does when we just say by his side.

Leon Morris, he says that the bliss of the saved is pictured as a kind of great feast in which the favoured one reclines with his head on the bosom of the great patriarch.

That is the picture here, the place of honour, the place of favour. Lazarus. Lazarus was never in his life invited to a feast, was he?

People would have been horrified by the idea of him drawing close to them. If he tried to go into a place where other people were feasting, he would have been quickly ushered out. The idea that at a banquet, he would have reclined with his head on the host's chest.

It is laughable, isn't it? And yet here he is in Abraham's bosom. Friends, God cares for the least. However, by contrast, our second point this morning, God punishes the wicked.

[9 : 23] Here in verse 22, whilst when Lazarus died, he was carried by the angels to Abraham's side, the rich man, on the other hand, is found in torment in Hades. Verse 24, he's in agony in the fire.

Verse 28, this place of torment. The rich man's lot is terrible, isn't it? Verse 25 makes it very clear. This is not accident.

This isn't happenstance. This is a consequence of the rich man's behaviour in his life. He received good things in his lifetime. Now he's in agony. Now, again, the point of the parable isn't to teach us the details of the afterlife.

But let's not use the fact that this is a parable to kind of tone down the awful reality that's being portrayed here. Dale Ralph Davis, he says, Beware of saying the rich man is only using figurative language when he speaks of this flame.

Well, what of it? If the language is figurative, what is it figurative of? Why do we feel the need to use figurative language? Isn't it to express a reality that can't be grasped otherwise?

[10 : 32] You can't dissolve realities away by blathering about figurative language. So, friends, whether there is a literal fire or some other agony of which the flame is an appropriate picture, what does it matter which of those two?

The warning here is clear, isn't it? God punishes the wicked. And when we put this picture together with the other teaching of Scripture, it's clear there is no end in sight to this punishment.

Now, many people today are very keen on the idea of heaven, and yet dismissive of the possibility of hell. But the Bible clearly sets out the reality of both.

Even in these few short verses, even here we could point to numerous reasons why this is righteous judgment on the rich man. We could point to the riches that he has so selfishly enjoyed in his lifetime.

We could dwell on how easily the rich man could have eased Lazarus' lot, at, frankly, no cost to himself whatsoever, just by sending out his leftovers. Perhaps even more tellingly than those things, though, we should consider his attitude even after death.

[11 : 46] Do you see here how he speaks in verse 24? See, even as this rich man is in his fiery torment, even now he assumes Lazarus will be at his beck and call.

His entitlement is breathtaking, isn't it? Even there in Hades, he thinks Lazarus is there to look after his wants, even though not once in his life did you spare a thought for Lazarus' own wants.

This man remains blind and unrepentant. And even rebuked for that attitude, admittedly gently in verses 25 and 26, even still his attitude remains the same in verse 27.

Yes, verse 27, he does finally have concern for someone else, but only for people of his own class and station, only for his own immediate family.

And yes, he's again respectful towards Abraham, the great patriarch, but then who wouldn't be? This is Abraham we're talking about. But still, do you see, he still assumes that Lazarus is at his beck and call.

[13 : 05] He begs Abraham, he begs Abraham not to, not to entreat Lazarus, he just begs Abraham to dispatch him. Lazarus' own wishes are irrelevant. Lazarus is to be sent willy-nilly at the whim of his betters.

This rich man's attitude doesn't change. And ultimately that's the issue, isn't it? There's nothing in these verses to say that being rich is itself worthy of judgment.

If you're in any doubt about that, well, think about Abraham himself. Abraham was a very rich man, and here he is. The issue is not this rich man's riches.

The issue is his attitude to them. The problem isn't his behaviour, but his standing before God. Look at verse 30. What does he hope for his brothers? If someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.

That's the problem, isn't it? The issue is one of repentance. The issue is that this rich man had no interest in his lifetime in his standing before God, just as he knows his brothers don't either.

[14 : 08] God's judgment is for the unrepentant. God's judgment is for those whose attitude is unremittently hostile towards God. It is for those who, faced with the offer of mercy, throw it back in God's face.

God's judgment is just when he punishes the wicked. And this brings us then to the third point. This brings us back to the title of the sermon. Listen to God.

Listen whilst you can. This is my plea to you this morning. The first half of this parable, verses 19 through 26. This is relatively unsurprising, right? This much wouldn't seem particularly out of place in a collection of secular fables and morality tales.

Even some commentators think Jesus has picked up a kind of existing Egyptian fable and has kind of reworked it a little bit for his purposes. Of course, if he has done that, well, he's done that only in as much as it works for his own intention.

If anything, he's easing people in with something familiar in 19 through 26, so that verse 27 and following comes as an even more of a shock to his audience.

[15 : 14] Recognising that there's no help for him. Recognising that the chasm is fixed. The rich man turns his thoughts to those still on earth. Turns his thoughts to how to help his brothers.

And that's good. Though, as we've seen already, hardly evidence of true repentance. But see how Abraham responds, verse 29. 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.

Now, in the rich man's plea here, there's a kind of implicit accusation, isn't there? He acts as though, as if God is in some sense responsible for the horrible situation that this rich man is now in.

He acts as though God hadn't given him enough information. He knows, just as his brothers do now, he knows that he had Moses and the prophets. Moses here, of course, another word for the law, for that first part of the Bible.

[16 : 21] In other words, just as in verse 16, the law and the prophets. This is the shorthand for the Old Testament revelation. So too here. He's referring to the Old Testament.

God has spoken. God's word is known. God's word was readily accessible to this rich man. It is readily accessible to the rest of his family. And unsurprisingly, the rich man fears they're not going to listen to this any more than he did himself.

And he wants to give them a better chance. Now, maybe you have some sympathy with that attitude. Maybe either for yourself or for those who you love, maybe you wish that God would make it clearer, that he would make himself more obvious.

Maybe you wish for some kind of a dramatic miracle. If not a resurrection, well, at least a dramatic healing. But Abraham is right in his response. If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead.

Why is that true? Well, that's true because the issue isn't actually a lack of evidence, is it? The issue is hardness of heart. The issue is that people don't really want to believe the evidence that is there.

[17 : 33] That people don't want to listen. To people with eyes to see and ears to hear, Jesus does offer evidence to support his claim. Those of you who were on the Christianity Explored course back before Christmas, maybe you'll remember that we considered the implications of Jesus' authority over the wind and the waves.

And of course, we've thought about some of these things in previous chapters of Luke's Gospel as well as we've worked our way through. Jesus does offer some evidence for the claims that he makes. And of course, exactly the scenario that Abraham sets out, well, that's what happened.

Did you notice the rich man only asked for a messenger? But Abraham talks about someone rising from the dead. Abraham says even a more impressive miracle than the rich man wants, even that wouldn't be enough to convince people.

And it is that more impressive miracle that played out, isn't it? Even Jesus rising from the dead wasn't enough to convince everyone. But the bigger point is, the bigger point is there's already more than enough evidence.

Moses and the prophets should be convincing. And today, well, a man did rise from the dead. So will you listen? Will you be convinced?

[18 : 47] Will you repent? Now, of course, as well as a call to repentance for us all here, there's also implications for how we think about ministry and evangelism, aren't there?

Because it's often tempting, isn't it, to aim for something impressive. We're inclined to compete for people's attention, aren't we? We're inclined to put our confidence for the effectiveness of our proclamation.

We're inclined to put our confidence in what we say and do. We want to offer some kind of a souped-up approach, so we want the flashy and the dramatic. We think that's what will convince people, but so often, and in many ways, God's kingdom is insistently undramatic and low-key.

Salvation is not in spectacle and sensation. But in the name of Jesus. The rich man's brothers had the scriptures. So do we.

They had all they needed to believe. We have all we need to proclaim. So let's trust God's word to do the work, not anything else that we might offer. So then, so God cares for the least.

[19 : 55] God punishes the wicked, so listen to God. What do you and I do with this today? Well, first and foremost, if the reason this rich man is condemned is ultimately his failure of repentance, our first response must be to come in repentance ourselves, mustn't it?

We have been told. There is more than enough evidence for us. Even the Old Testament scriptures, let alone the New Testament, let alone these stories of what Jesus did, and the writings of the church thereafter, these things are sufficient to reveal God's truth to us.

It's sufficient that we are guilty if we fail to listen. And one day it will be too late to listen. So listen while you can. Repent whilst you can.

Secondly, secondly, let's not leave our consideration of this parable on a kind of spiritual plane. Because it's readily apparent, isn't it, that for this rich man, and for his brothers for that matter, that repentance would have necessarily involved a change of behaviour.

After all, repentance always includes not just a change of mind and attitude, but also a change of action. The repentant legalist stops imposing her unbiblical rules on other people.

[21 : 10] She stops looking down on people for their failings. She stops thinking that she's justified before God because of what she does. The repentant adulteress stops sleeping with their lover.

The man who repents of his pride is going to stop acting as though he's always right and start listening to other people. Repenting of envy will mean deliberately congratulating other people on their successes, will mean being generous with our resources, our time, our talents, will mean wishing to see others flourish.

Repentance always involves a change of action. And for the rich man, well, that repentance would clearly have had a massive impact on how he used his money, wouldn't it? Remember I said this right at the start, we do well to remember that by pretty much any standard, we all of us are rich.

So, we have to ask then, what does repentance look like when it comes to our finances? What does it look like to repent of a luxurious lifestyle? What is involved in proper stewardship?

Of course, we're back to some of the same questions we were asking a couple of weeks ago, aren't we? It feels perhaps slightly like laboring the points, but, well, Jesus seems to labor the points, so here we are again.

[22 : 22] And it's tempting, perhaps. It's tempting to think about the programs that could be set up. We're inclined to wonder, well, what are the most effective ways of responding to poverty in our society and globally, for that matter?

We think about the massive programs and the government interventions and so on. And maybe there is reason here for us to think about how we use our votes and what we lobby our employees for, and maybe even for some of us to be getting involved in organizations on that kind of a scale.

Doubtless, too, there's a place for us thinking about how we as a church might organize effectively. But, friends, the primary application here is surely much smaller scale and much more immediate.

Because the rich man in this passage isn't condemned for his failure to give away his whole fortune, is he? He isn't chastised for the fact that he didn't kind of implement a national-scale redistribution of wealth.

What's his fault? He failed to meet the need that lay immediately before him. The need literally on his doorstep. Friends, you don't need a grand, organized program.

[23 : 32] Nearly a year ago now, there were appeals on Facebook, weren't there, for people to sew masks. Appeals to make bags for healthcare workers to carry infectious clothing home in in order to wash it safely.

Appeals to donate toiletries to the hospital for those who came suddenly and their family couldn't then bring them in. These kinds of things don't need mass organization, do they? They just need a community that's willing to actually see a need and step up.

To recognize, well, here is something I could do to help. I can do it, so I will get on and do it. Not I'll run around trying to organize everybody else to do it.

I'll just get on with it. Maybe you're tempted to think, won't it be great when we have our own building and we can run a food bank and we can organize debt management courses?

I mean, why would we run a food bank? There's a perfectly good food bank in the valley already. Stop dreaming about the grand program you never get around to. Just start putting something in the food bank trolley when you go to the supermarket or add a little bit to how much you give already.

[24 : 40] But even that's at one remove, isn't it? Sometimes it's easy to pass ourselves on the back by helping in that kind of a way without being willing to actually muck in and actually do something that costs us something.

We don't want to have to wash Lazarus's saws ourselves, do we? And it's much safer to dispatch a servant with the table scraps. I mean, don't get me wrong, it would have been good if the rich man had done even that.

But folks, let's be resolved to seek to meet needs as they present themselves. To do that even when it is costly to us to do so. Finally this morning, finally, maybe it's helpful to consider that the needs before you might not always be financial.

That they might not always be practical in an obvious sense. I was struck again by something that Dale Ralph Davis said. He says, Your Lazarus, Lazarus, might be the wife you've been neglecting.

The husband you've emotionally stiff-armed for years. Maybe your Lazarus is the child who you seldom read to or pray with or play with because there's always such pressing items on your agenda. Then again, he may be the widow next door who you've never visited since the death of her husband.

[25 : 54] Who needs programs or committees for this? So which need that lies before you are you neglecting? Let me be specific.

Let me be concrete. May I suggest that we all resolve to decide, to decide before the sun goes down tonight, which need we will seek to meet in the week ahead.

which thing that we've been neglecting will we now address? Let's actually do something. Let's pray now that God will help us to do so.

Lord God, thank you for your word. Thank you that though it is not always comfortable, it tells us what we need to hear. So Lord, help us to take this message to heart.

Help us to hear the warning. Help us to hear the call to repentance. And help us to repent in ways that transform our behaviour. Help us to change not only our attitude, help us to repent not only at that surface level of wanting salvation from you, but to repent at a level that changes our behaviour.

[27 : 08] Lord, show us the needs before us. give us the willingness to seek to meet those needs, to do what is within our power, to even today seek to help those who are most in need.

Lord, use us, we ask, for your glory. Amen.