The Rich Man & Lazarus

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[0:00] Well, this morning we're continuing our way through the Gospel of Luke. If you have your Bible, please open it up to Luke chapter 16. And if you forgot your Bible, then there's always those pew Bibles.

These aren't really pews, but just in the seat in front of you, there's a black book there that you can use because the words won't be on the screen this morning. So we're in Luke chapter 16, and we're picking it up in verse 19.
This is another teaching moment of Jesus, and it's also a difficult teaching of Jesus for a couple reasons.
First, what we're about to hear raises all sorts of questions for us. And some of those questions may be answered in the passage and some not so much.
Second, it's a difficult teaching of Jesus because of what it's about. A topic that's uncomfortable.
Well, let's let Jesus do the talking first, and I'm just going to read the whole thing, starting in verse 19.
[1:07] 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 licked 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'm in agony in this fire.
But Abraham replied, Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things.
[2:21] 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 him, If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead.
This is quite a shocking story. Jesus tells us this story of two men who die, and what happens to them after they die.
[3:39] One goes to the good place, and the other goes to the bad place. And then there's this heart-wrenching conversation that takes place.

I think the first thing that we need to settle is what this story is. Most, I think, understand this to be another of Jesus' parables. But there are some who believe that this is a real account that actually took place.
That there was a rich man, that there was a guy named Lazarus, that both of them died and found themselves in the afterlife, and that this conversation between Abraham and the rich man really took place.
And those who believe that it really happened usually point to two things. First, Jesus uses names in this telling, but he doesn't use names in any of his other parables.

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We hear about Lazarus and Abraham and Moses. And second, Jesus doesn't introduce this as a parable, or give any application or lesson at the end, like he does in some of the other parables. [4:56] But I think if we look carefully at Jesus' other parables, we notice that they may not be as rigid in their presentation as we might expect.

There are other parables that the gospel writers put before us without first saying, then Jesus told a parable. In fact, if we look back just up the page to the very first verse of this chapter, Jesus told his disciples, there was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions.
And two weeks ago, we looked at that parable of the shrewd manager, and we sort of all recognized it as a parable. And this account starts in the exact same way.
The first several words are exactly the same. There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. And we should also notice, too, that Jesus doesn't always give an explanation at the end of his parable.
Some of them are just sort of left hanging for people to chew on. This story of the rich man and Lazarus starts like a parable. It kind of reads and feels like a parable.
[6:17] And we kind of know with how it ends that Jesus is using it to make a very specific point, or perhaps more than one. And just because Jesus doesn't normally put names in his parables, I don't think that means that he can't do that in this one case.

In fact, others have noticed that the names that are chosen are especially significant. One final reason I think it should be understood as a parable is that if it's not a parable, then there are some really puzzling elements to this account which seem out of sync with other teachings in the Bible about what happens after we die.
For example, the Bible seems to teach that there will be a future bodily resurrection of both the wicked and the righteous. And prior to that event, the Bible teaches that if we die, our souls, our spirits leave our earthly physical bodies.
And if we belong to Jesus, then our spirit goes to be with him. And if we do not, it goes to another place while we wait for that future bodily resurrection.
And yet, here in this story, the rich man and Lazarus, they already seem to have bodies. We hear of tongue and finger.
[7:45] It's also, many have noticed, strange that if this is the actual heaven and hell that Jesus is talking about, or even the version that existed before Christ came, it seems rather odd, doesn't it, that people can see each other across this chasm and talk to each other while there?

And so for those reasons, I think this is a parable. I think it's an illustrative story that Jesus tells. But like all of his parables and illustrations, it's meant to communicate certain truths and realities.
And yes, it does have to do with real outcomes, such as heaven and hell. So let's work through this, starting at the top.
Jesus first sets the scene by introducing us to two of the main characters. First, there is this very wealthy man. Jesus says he's clothed in purple, which is a sign of his wealth, because purple dye was known to be very expensive.
He was also wearing fine linen, says Jesus. And it doesn't really come through in English, but the sense here is that this is how he was dressing himself customarily, normally.
[9:05] He lived in luxury every day. The second character in this story is the complete opposite, a beggar.

He is not living in luxury at all, but is suffering. His body is all covered with sores. He's starving. He's longing to eat the leftover scraps from the rich man's table. And he was laid at the gate of the rich man, says Jesus.
Perhaps it means that he was crippled and had to be laid there by others, or else that he was just too weak to move himself around and had to be carried and laid there.
Even that the rich man has a gate is evidence of his great wealth. According to one commentator, that word for gate that's used there was typically used of a certain type of high ornate gate, like the kinds that would be at the entrances to a city or a palace or a temple or a mansion.
[10:17] And so this is probably not the gate to his house, but the gate to his very large estate.
Well, back to the beggar. His name, Jesus says, was Lazarus.

In Hebrew, it's the name Eliezer, which means God helps. And that name really seems to fit his situation.

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The rich man won't help him. And so it is God that he must look to and rely on for help. Not only that, but at the end of this story, as we read, we'll see that God does help him.
God does comfort him and bring him out of his affliction. The last detail we get about the beggar is that the dogs licked his wounds.
And there are a few people that see that as sort of a kindness given by the dogs. But most point out that these dogs were not your typical sweet puppy dog kind of dogs.
[11:21] No, the word used here is that of your mangy, wild, dirty street dog. And almost everywhere that dogs are mentioned in the Bible, it's a negative.

They're a negative thing. And so not only is Lazarus completely neglected and ignored by the rich man, not only is he suffering with sores and some form of immobility perhaps, but he's harassed by the dirty creatures of the streets who poke and lick at him.
Well, next comes the death of both men. Jesus says, 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 Lazarus, the beggar, is carried to Abraham's side. Quite literally, Abraham's bosom. And it has been taught in the past that this was a technical term for the place that righteous saints of the Old Testament went to when they died.
[12:43] But actually, that's not accurate. This is the only mention of Abraham's bosom in the whole Bible. The bosom, of course, is the chest of a person.

And so it carries with it that feeling of closeness and intimacy, of family or a close friend, of a hug, or an image of a head of a child resting on the chest of a father.
I believe Jesus is using a metaphor when he says Abraham's bosom or Abraham's side. And the most important part of this metaphor is the name whose bosom or side Lazarus is carried to.
And it's Abraham. Abraham. Just like with the name of Lazarus, Abraham is very significant here. Jesus could have just used another word for heaven.
He will later use the word paradise with the thief on the cross. But what Jesus is saying is more than that. Not just that Lazarus went to the good place of the afterlife, but that he went to the same place as Abraham did.
[14:03] To Abraham's place. Even to Abraham's bosom. In other words, Lazarus is welcomed as a true son of Abraham in the same place that Abraham went to.

And we know if we look back in the story, Abraham was counted as righteous because of his faith in God. He was promised all kinds of blessing from God.
And so the point, I think, is that Lazarus is now receiving his share in that inheritance, that blessing like a true son of Abraham.
He is there with Abraham in the place of the righteous, the place of those who are blessed by God. But the rich man does not go to Abraham's side.
He finds himself in Hades. Now there's some discussion over whether Hades just means the realm of the dead and whether it refers to sort of both places.
[15:09] And there's also discussion of whether maybe Hades is just the bad place where the rich man went to and Abraham's side is the name for the other place.

Whatever the case, it's clear that the rich man suddenly finds himself in a hell-like situation. 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'm in agony in this fire.
And so the rich man is now in the place of agony, the place of torment, and the awfulness of his situation comes out again and again in the way that Jesus tells this.
We see it in verse 23. In Hades, he was in torment. We hear it in his own words. Have pity on me. Cool my tongue because I'm in agony in this fire.
[16:22] Later on in verse 27, let Lazarus warn them so that they will not come to this place of torment. And back up in verse 25, I think these are some of the most haunting words of all.

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.

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And here in these words of Abraham, I think we get the first big point of this parable and it's that the great reversal has come.
And we've talked about this. We've heard Jesus talk about this. The great reversal is coming. We heard it back in the sermon in Luke chapter 6. Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
But woe to you who are rich, for you've already received your comfort. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied. And woe to you who are well fed now, for you will go hungry.
[17:43] Jesus declared that. The great reversal is coming. And really this parable of the rich man and Lazarus is Jesus giving us a very personal feel through story of what that reversal will be like when it happens.

Those who had everything self-indulgently living for themselves and who ignored the suffering and affliction of others around them and refused to show mercy or to give to the needy, they will find themselves now suffering and afflicted in agony, wishing that God would take pity on them, but instead he will give to them what they deserve.
The rich man finds himself in the position of Lazarus. And it's the punishment for his selfish, greedy, wicked life.
And Lazarus, in a manner of speaking, finds himself in the position of the rich man, now having everything that he ever wanted. Blessed beyond measure. And I think it's implied that though he was poor and afflicted, he was a true son of Abraham and had faith like Abraham did.
It's a powerful picture of what the great reversal will be like when God finally brings it about. But let's dig in a little more.
[19:14] Let's see a little more. Look at what the rich man says when he finds himself in hell. In verse 24, Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.

Notice how he refers to Abraham. Father Abraham. He thinks he's on the wrong side of the chasm. He thinks of Abraham as his father.
He considers himself a son of Abraham. And isn't that what many of the Jews and especially the Pharisees were guilty of? They saw themselves as heirs of all the promises that were made to Abraham simply because they were physically descended from him.
But the appeal to Abraham as father doesn't work because this man proved that he was no son of Abraham in the way that he lived.
He lived selfishly. He lived wickedly, without care for the needy around him. I mean, even in hell, the rich man seems to think that Lazarus should serve him.
[20:33] He's like, send him over to me with some water. I think the truth that comes out here is that having a parent or a grandparent or a relative with faith in God is not enough.

Each of us must have our own personal relationship with God, our own personal faith in God in order to be saved.
The true sons of Abraham, those who will inherit the blessings promised to Abraham, are those who have real faith in God like Abraham did.
I mean, Paul says it clear as day in Galatians chapter 3, verse 7. He says, Understand then that those who have faith are children of Abraham.
So those who rely on faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith. And it's implied here in Jesus' story, but we know that this rich man did not have a genuine faith in God because look at how he lived.
[21:48] Walking by Lazarus day after day. Selfish, greedy, no love, no compassion. And it's sort of subtly implied later on towards the end of the parable.

But this rich man all along had the words of God spoken through the law and the prophets, but he did not listen to them. And so he's now receiving what he deserves for his wickedness there in hell.
I'll say it again. Having a parent or a grandparent or a relative with faith in God is not enough.
Each of us must have our own personal faith in God. Our own personal relationship with God in order to be saved.
And the proof that we did have faith in God will be seen in whether we obey God's word and live our lives in love and compassion and generosity.
[23:02] Well, another truth of this parable, and we've already touched on it a little bit, is that the punishment that God has in store for the wicked is terrible.

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And I already highlighted some of those emphases of Jesus in the passage. The words torment and agony and fire.
And while I think this is a parable and doesn't necessarily describe the actual landscape of hell, I think Jesus does intend to convey that the place of punishment for the wicked is an awful place of conscious torment, anguish, and suffering.
Yes, hell is a real outcome, a real place, a place of terrible punishment where people will go.
And another truth that comes through in Jesus' words is that hell is forever. It's eternal. verse 26.
[24:22] We hear it in the words of Abraham to the rich man. 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.

There is this uncrossable chasm or gulf between Hades and Abraham's side in the parable and it represents the truth that hell is permanent.
It is a permanent final destination. It's a prison of punishment that can never be got out of. Once the great reversal takes place, our situations will never be reversed again.
this is very much in line with what we heard from Jesus a little bit earlier in his teaching about the narrow door. How we must make every effort to enter through the narrow door while it's open because eventually the time is coming when God will close it and entrance will no longer be possible and it will be too late.
the time to respond to God's mercy and grace is now. There will be a time when it's too late.
[25:47] Heaven and hell are forever. forever. And I know that that's a hard truth to accept. It's certainly not one that we like to dwell on.

But it's what Jesus taught and what the rest of the Bible clearly teaches. We can wonder about the justness of an eternal place of punishment but God is the judge.
He's the creator and we are the creature. Whether we understand just how sinful we have been or how wicked or corrupt we are or not, hell is what God himself gives warning of.
And so we should take his gracious offer of salvation while it's on the table. Well, once the rich man realizes that his fate is sealed and cannot be changed, he begins to plead with Abraham to send Lazarus to tell his family who haven't died yet and warn them so that they won't end up there with him in hell.
But Abraham's response is surprising, isn't it? In verse 29, Abraham replied, they have Moses and the prophets.
[27:19] Let them listen to them. In other words, God has given them warning, lots of it, 1,500 years of warnings delivered by many men, Moses, David, Micah, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and more.

God has been speaking for centuries. He's been giving warning for centuries. And the words of God through all these men were enough to lead this rich man to true faith in God so that he didn't end up in hell.
And so Abraham basically says, they already have received ample warning. But the rich man presses further.
No, Father Abraham. I'm not sure what that means. Is it, no, that's not enough. Or don't say that. No, Father Abraham.
But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent. In other words, they just need a great miracle to get their attention.
[28:40] And then they'll repent. Then they'll believe. And the final words of Abraham are jolting. 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.

the condition of the human heart and mind is far worse than we realize. Sin has so corrupted our thinking and our judgment and our desires that an undeniable miracle of the greatest magnitude is not enough to soften an already unresponsive heart.
This is something we need to chew on. Because in our minds we have that question, don't we? Why is it that some reject God and will end up in hell?
And I think at least part of the answer is here in these words of Jesus. Somewhat ironically, this is how the very story of Jesus plays out.
He's already done so many signs and miracles. Things of great power and authority and yet many of the people are stubborn hearted and refuse to listen.

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[30:12] Later, he will raise a real man named Lazarus from the dead. And what's the next thing that the Jewish Sanhedrin will do?

We got to kill him. They started to plot to kill him. not Lazarus, but Jesus. And so Jesus is right. Witnessing the greatest of miracles by itself is not enough. A person must soften their heart to God and must listen to the words that he's already spoken.
Now, of course, that doesn't mean that we shouldn't point people to the miracles of Jesus and tell them about him. The Apostle John himself said that he put all these signs in the gospel that he wrote so that we might believe.
And that by believing we might have life. But I think it does highlight the urgency of things.
[31:19] We need to respond to God's words which he has spoken, which we have. Now, while we have opportunity. What God has said through Moses, through the prophets, and then through his son is enough that we would be saved from hell.

That we would be at the place that we want to be, the place where Abraham is going to be. The kingdom of God, heaven, there are many names for it.
This parable is a sober warning. And it comes in a chapter where Jesus has already said a lot about money and worldly wealth. Just back up in verse 13, he said, no one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.
money. This is a sober warning of what will be for any who do not choose to worship and serve God.
[32:38] For any who instead choose to worship and serve themselves and to go after the stuff of this world and amass wealth. It brings us to that question of who or what we are living for.

The most important of questions. Who am I serving? What am I doing with my life? Will I heed the words of God's one and only son, the warning sent from heaven?
Am I prepared for that great reversal? That God is going to bring? Let's pray.
Father in heaven, we ask that you would cause these words to pierce deeply and penetrate deeply into our hearts. That you would bring great fruit from them.
if we've already embraced you in faith and are headed for heaven, then we ask that you would stir us even more deeply to hold out your words of life to those who haven't heard yet or who are still teetering on the edge.
[34:12] fill us with compassion. Fill us with love. Help us to see the Lazaruses around us. Go to work in us, we pray, Lord, by your Holy Spirit.

In Jesus' name, amen. Amen.
Amen. Amen. Amen.

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