

The Rich Man and Lazarus

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[0 : 00] 150 years ago, a famous free church evangelist called Brownlow North preached a series of evangelistic sermons on this parable. Thousands of his listeners here in Glasgow responded by placing their trust in the Lord Jesus Christ and becoming Christians.

This is one of Jesus' most powerful parables. There's so much here about poverty and wealth, judgment and salvation, hell and heaven. The name Lazarus is taken from the Hebrew name Eleazar, and it means God has helped. This poor man is the only figure in any of Jesus' parables to be named. Jesus' description of him reminds us of the Old Testament figure, Job.

He is destitute of everything and afflicted with boils and painful sores. He spends his days sitting outside the gates of a rich man's house. He longs to be fed with the scraps the dogs are eating, but they get there before him, and then they lick his sores. Lazarus, the man God helps, cuts a very sad figure. There's an irony in his name, is there not, which is perhaps why Jesus gave him that very name in the first place. This is the man whom God helps, and yet here he is. He is the poorest of the poor, his physical health is broken, and he is all but dying of hunger.

Now, the irony of all this is that in the world of Jesus' day, poverty, ill health were viewed as marks of God's curse and displeasure. They would have looked at Lazarus and shook their heads and concluded that he must have sinned grievously against God to have been cursed with such horrific, horrifically bad health and such poverty. Poor Lazarus. He's judged by everyone, but not by God. Poor Lazarus. Everyone knew his name, but to them he was a pest.

The Israel of Jesus' day contained many people like Lazarus. Some were poor, others afflicted by painful illnesses, and some of them both. They were judged by the religious leaders of Israel as being cursed by God beyond the pale. They're unwanted, and they are unclean. Well, then we've got the rich man.

[2 : 47] We don't have a name for him. In the Israel of the day, the Sadducees, the contemporaries of the Pharisees, tended to be rich. So, Jesus here may be deferring to a Sadducee. They lived in big houses with fences and gates. This man dressed, we read, in fine purple clothes imported from Egypt and wore expensive linen, a reference to his underwear. This man's pants could have fed Lazarus for a month, but every day this man feasted sumptuously wearing his lovely linen pants.

It's impossible for a man to eat as much as was on his table, so there were always scraps. But rather than give them to Lazarus, the rich man fed them to his guard dogs. He was a very rich man. He lived in a very rich way, and the Sadducees of Jesus' day were known for their extravagant lifestyles.

As far as the religious life of Israel was concerned in Jesus' day, riches and wealth were a mark of God's blessing. People looked on this rich man and concluded that he must be a righteous man for God to have rewarded him so well. So, up to verse 22, we have Lazarus, a poor man with ill health, who would be considered to be living under God's curse, and we have a rich man who was considered to be living under God's blessing. But then we have verse 22 and 23.

Lazarus dies and is carried by the angels to Abraham's side. Don't you think that's a most beautiful picture of the death of a Christian?

But at the very moment of their passing, the angels carry them into heaven. Carry them into heaven. Isn't that beautiful?

[5 : 00] When we read these words, Abraham's side, or more literally, Abraham's bosom, we're to think of a feasting table where Lazarus is placed right beside Abraham at the top of the table.

Lazarus has gone from being a poor man with ill health to sitting beside Abraham at the anti-messianic feast in heaven. Well, the rich man also dies, but far from the angels carrying him into heaven, he is buried.

How true the words of John Buchan, son of a free church man, who said, what is the glory of man when it all ends in six feet of dirt? The man's wealth can't follow him into the grave.

For all that the tombs of the pharaohs are filled with gold, the pharaohs are still dead and can't enjoy any of it. Well, the rich man wakes up, and he's in Hades.

Hades is the underworld, what we'd call hell, a shadowy place of eternal suffering, and he's there in torment, in anguish. There's been a turnaround.

[6 : 10] Lazarus' life was marked by suffering, but his afterlife by feasting and comfort. The rich man's life was marked by feasting and comfort, but his afterlife by suffering.

In an instant, Jesus contradicts the prevailing Jewish worldview of his day, that worldly wealth is a sign of God's blessing, and worldly poverty is a sign of God's curse.

For all that Lazarus looked as if God was not helping him, the reality is, he is now in heaven. For all that the rich man looked like God was blessing him, the reality is, he is now in hell.

We've got to be really careful about judging by appearances and being drawn into the false teaching of the health and wealth prosperity gospel, which focuses on worldly wealth and worldly health as being marks of God's blessing.

Did Jesus, our master, live in opulent wealth? Did Peter, Paul, James, and John?

[7 : 21] Beware of the false teaching of the health and wealth prosperity gospel you will see on so much Christian TV channels. The Christian's best life is not now.

It shall be hereafter. Well, the rich man, silent so far, is outraged. But for all that his circumstances have changed, he's not changed.

He still thinks of himself as being superior to Lazarus. He still thinks he can order Lazarus around. Isn't it interesting that he knew Lazarus' name? Even though he didn't care enough about Lazarus to do anything about his suffering and lifetime.

He knew Lazarus' name. But he never once gave Lazarus something to eat or assumed Lazarus' bodily pain. But here he is, this rich man, and he's still trying to order Lazarus around.

Send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I'm in anguish in this flame. When Abraham refuses, the rich man tries again. Send him, Lazarus, to my father's house, for I have five brothers so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.

[8 : 38] When is this rich man going to give up his superiority complex? When is this religious Sadducee going to recognize that he is in Hades on account of his own wickedness and hypocrisy, and that perhaps part of that was that he did not love his neighbor as himself, in that although he saw Lazarus in great need every day, he did nothing to help.

Let's clear something up. The rich man is not in hell because he's rich. Abraham was fabulously rich, but he's in heaven. So it's got nothing to do with wealth.

It's got everything to do with how the rich man failed to use the money God blessed him with to help the poor. Likewise, Lazarus is not in heaven because he's poor.

We know next to nothing about Lazarus except his name means God has helped, Eleazar. So perhaps that means he was a man of faith, but it wasn't his poverty which took him to heaven.

In the 20th century, a way of thinking called liberation theology swept into the poorer districts of South American cities. Liberation theology viewed wealth as a sign of wickedness.

[10 : 01] Influenced by Marxism, it fought for the liberation of the economically oppressed. Now, liberation theology does have some good things to say, but just because someone is poor doesn't mean to say they are virtuous or faithful.

So the rich man's not in hell because he's rich, and the poor man's not in heaven because he's poor. There's a lot more going on here. This passage fits into Luke chapter 16 because of its emphasis on wealth and poverty.

The chapter begins with the parable of the dishonest manager, which concludes with Jesus' famous saying in verse 13, you cannot serve God and money.

It continues with Jesus confronting the Pharisees because, we read in verse 14, they were lovers of money. And it ends with the story of the reversal of the rich man, probably Sadducee, and the poor man, Lazarus.

But it also fits into Luke 16 in another way. It emphasizes on how the religious elite of Israel may be experts at external obedience to the law, at looking good to others, but they do not obey God's law from the heart.

[11 : 32] So remember, in the previous passage, saw this two weeks ago, Jesus challenged the Pharisees because, as we read in verse 15, they justify themselves before men, but God knows their hearts.

In this passage, the rich man, who was probably a Sadducee, for all his fine appearance and worldly wealth, and for all that he could call Abraham father, found himself eternally separated from God in hell.

So both themes are present in this passage. There's poverty and wealth, but there's also the theme of obeying God's law from the heart. But I'd suggest it's probably the second of these, obedience to the law of God from the heart, which is uppermost in Jesus' mind, as he tells this parable.

The most important dialogue in this parable, and why I say this is a parable, not so much about the rich man and Lazarus, but the rich man and Abraham, is in verses 27 through 31.

Because in these verses, the rich man is complaining about how he didn't realize how in living the way he was, in purely observing the law externally and not from the heart, he was headed not for heaven, but for hell.

[13 : 04] So he pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus back to tell his brothers that obedience to the law of God must come from the heart. So they must repent of their legalism and love God and their neighbor from their hearts.

But Abraham refuses. What this rich man had in this life was more than enough for him to have realized that God is not pleased with merely external change.

God wants internal heart obedience to him. The religion, the heart of our religion is to be the religion of our hearts.

If it was more than enough for this rich man, it should be more than enough for his brothers. And if it was more than enough for the rich man, it should be more than enough for us.

We need to know that God has given us more than enough to recognize that the heart of our religion must be the religion of our hearts, which is exactly what Jesus' message was in the previous passage from verse 14 through 18.

[14 : 25] So after this lengthy introduction, longer than the rest of the sermon, what are those things which God has given us which are enough for us to recognize that our devotion to God must begin in our hearts and not outside in our behavior?

In our passage, Jesus provides us with three things God has given us that should be enough for us today. Faith in God is enough.

The law and the prophets are enough. And the resurrection of Jesus is enough. Faith in God is enough. Faith in God is enough.

In the previous passage, we looked at this last week about the law, Moses, Jesus has been talking about how God's primary intention for His law is that it's kept from the heart.

One would therefore expect that the figure who meets with Lazarus in heaven and speaking with the rich man would be Moses, right? Because after all, it was through Moses God gave the law and Moses was one of Israel's greatest prophets.

[15 : 39] But it's not Moses who comforts Lazarus and it's not Moses who speaks to the rich man. It's Abraham. Now, one might suggest it's Abraham because Abraham was the father of the nation of Israel.

To be a child of Abraham is to be a true Israelite and therefore, by Lazarus being in heaven and not the rich man, Lazarus, for all his poverty, is being held up as an example of a true Israelite, a true son of Abraham, whereas the religious leaders of Israel, despite all their insistence upon Jewishness, are not true Israelites.

But I think it's something different. Abraham's greatness did not consist in his being the father of the nation of Israel, for that came after what made him truly great.

Abraham's greatness did not consist in his wealth, for again, that came after what made him truly great. Abraham's greatness consisted in what we read in one verse in Genesis 15, verse 6, and read this verse earlier, where God came to a childless Abraham and made him promises.

Look toward the heaven and number the stars if you're able to number them, so shall your offspring be. And then comes the crunch. Abraham believed the Lord and he counted it to him as righteousness.

[17 : 10] Abraham's greatness consisted in this. He believed or had faith in God. That's why it's Abraham who greets Lazarus and speaks to the rich man.

It's because Abraham, the father of the nation of Israel, was characterized by something we cannot see on the outside, faith in God.

The rich man should have known that what God primarily desires is inward faith in him. If all you had was the story of Abraham, that would be enough to know that the most important thing to God is that we believe in him from our hearts.

The rich man calls him Father Abraham, but he doesn't realize that Abraham's greatness lay in his faith in God. Faith in God is enough.

One may observe every religious ceremony and one may obey every law in the Bible as this religious sardust he probably did, but not have faith in God.

[18 : 20] Such were the religious leaders of Jesus' day. This is why the rich man's in hell. What about us today? Why are we here?

Is it because we think we can earn God's favor by our moral obedience or our religious devotion? Is it all about being seen to be here? Or does it go deeper? Do we have a living faith in our hearts in the Lord Jesus Christ?

For all that we know so little about Lazarus, that's what he had. Faith. And that's why he took his seat beside Abraham in heaven.

Faith in God is enough. Second, the law and the prophets are enough. The law and the prophets are enough. When the rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers so they don't join him, Abraham replies, they have Moses and the prophets.

Let them hear them. Moses and the prophets comprise the whole of the Old Testament. If the rich man, in other words, had heeded and obeyed the teaching of the Old Testament, he would not have gone to hell.

[19 : 36] He would have been in heaven. We talked about this last time, two weeks ago, where we cannot read the Old Testament without realizing that God's primary interest is in our hearts.

Obviously, this rich man did not have the law of God in his heart, especially when it came to how he treated Lazarus. The Old Testament is insistent upon the duty of care we must give to those less fortunate than ourselves.

If the love of God is in our hearts, we shall love our neighbors as ourselves, especially those who are struggling as much as Lazarus was.

Let me give you one example out of many from the Old Testament. In Isaiah 58, verses 6 and 7, God is condemning his people for observing religious fasts, not from the heart out of devotion to him, but just to be seen by others.

God says to them, is this not the fast I choose, to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the straps of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

[20 : 49] Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless into your house when you see him naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?

If this rich man really did have God in his heart, he would have shared his bread with Lazarus rather than giving it to his dogs. He would have brought Lazarus into his house, he would have covered Lazarus' nakedness and paid for physicians to heal his painful sores.

If this rich man had been obeying the Old Testament law and the prophets from his heart, he would have loved Lazarus. The fact that he didn't shows that the law to him was something merely to be obeyed on the outside.

The rich man did not use the wealth God had given him to help those in need. Well, to bring it home to us today, acts of love for those in need is evidence of our heart love for Jesus.

To express that love in practical ways is the message of the Old Testament and the prophets, the whole Bible. If we love God from the heart, we will express that love by loving our neighbor as ourselves.

[22 : 12] We will not be able to stand by while our fellow Christians struggle. If we have it within our capacity to help, and we don't always, but if we do, our love for God will motivate us to do what we can to help.

It may only be giving a cup of cold water to someone who's thirsty, but we'll do what we can. It may only be sharing our bread with someone who's hungry, covering someone's nakedness, but it's the natural outpouring of our inner faith in God and the law of God which demands love for Him and love for our neighbors from the heart.

So then, in what ways am I, are you, expressing our heart love for God? The law and the prophets are enough.

Well, finally, the resurrection of Jesus is enough. The resurrection of Jesus is enough. The rich man makes a final plea. He says, no, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.

You get his logic here, right? someone returns from the dead, tells us it's all true, that God demands obedience from the heart, it's all about faith in Him, then we'll believe.

[23 : 35] Here's surely the trump card, right? That even such a hardened atheist as Richard Dawkins would repent if a person who once was dead but has been raised stood in front of him and told him that he was wrong not to believe in a God.

Surely that would be enough to convince Richard Dawkins. But Abraham knows better. He says, if they did not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

The Jewish leaders had Moses and the prophets in their scripture but they did not believe. And Abraham's saying, suppose someone should rise from the dead, they still won't believe.

Because if someone doesn't believe on the basis of what the word of God says, it doesn't matter what other evidence is provided, they still won't believe.

The truth is that the Jewish religious leaders didn't believe in Jesus and His message because they didn't want to believe in Jesus and His message.

[24 : 48] To use technical terms, the problem with them wasn't cognitive disbelief, it was volitional. They didn't want to believe. They couldn't allow themselves to believe in a message which would turn their lives upside down and put their status and wealth at risk.

It wasn't a problem with their intellects but with their wills. They didn't want to believe. The proof of this is that when someone did rise from the dead, they still refused to believe.

The religious leaders of Israel, we know this from the end of the Gospels and the book of Acts, they knew that on the third day after His crucifixion, Jesus rose from the dead but rather than repent and believe in Him, they constructed a fictional narrative that His disciples had stolen His body away.

Jesus Christ rose from the dead on the third day and still they refused to change. In a very real sense, the risen Christ stands face to face today with Richard Dawkins but Richard Dawkins refuses to believe.

Easter is fast approaching. That's season when we focus on the death and resurrection of our Lord. There can be no greater evidence to the truth of all Jesus said about the vital importance of heart faith in Him than that He died and rose again.

[26 : 11] Still, we do not believe. Whenever someone says to you, I need more evidence to believe in God, look behind their objection and see there a person who doesn't believe because they don't want to believe.

God has provided more than enough. God had provided the religious leaders of Israel more than enough evidence for them to have believed in Jesus as Lord and Messiah but they crucified Him rather than believed in Him.

No wonder, no wonder Brown-Lonor chose this parable as his chief evangelistic message. It cuts to the heart of the matter which is the matter of the heart.

Where we will spend eternity is not a matter of external obedience to a set of man-made laws. It is a matter of heart faith in Jesus Christ.

We all have a choice to make this morning to follow in the footsteps of the rich man or to follow in the footsteps of the man God helped, Lazarus.

[27 : 37] Which will it be? Faith or folly? Strength or weakness? Humility or pride? Trusting in Jesus or trusting in wealth?

Choose this day whom you will serve.