

The Response of a Humble Heart

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] The reading this morning comes from Luke chapter 16, verses 14 to 31.

The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.

For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were until John. Since then, the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the law to become void. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery, and he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery.

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.

[1 : 13] Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.

But Abraham said, Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things.

But now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you, a great chasm has been fixed in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.

And he said, Then I beg you, Father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.

[2 : 27] But Abraham said, They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them. And he said, No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.

He said to them, If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead. Amen. Morning, everyone.

Please do keep Luke chapter 16 open, and let me pray for us as we begin. Let's pray. Psalm 119, verse 130.

The unfolding of your words gives light. It imparts understanding to the simple. Heavenly Father, we know that we live in a dark world, and we know that we are spiritually simple.

And we pray, therefore, please, this morning, would you grant us light and understanding as we look at Luke's gospel together. And we ask it in Jesus' name.

[3 : 36] Amen. There was an article in the Times, I think it was two weeks ago, written by Graham Tomlin, the Bishop of Kensington.

The headline, It's too late to think about death when you're dying. Let's do it now. The following week, the NHS fundraiser, Sir Tom Moore, died of COVID in hospital.

His daughter, interviewed afterwards, explained that none of the family had been expecting him to die. He hadn't been expecting to die. Indeed, he has already been planning his next fundraising event.

It's too late to think about death when you're dying. Just as for most people, it's also too late to think about heaven and hell when you're dying.

Yes, of course, we do hear about deathbed conversions, but not many. For most people, death is either so unexpected that they have precious little time to think about it, or it is so drawn out with endless trips to doctors and medical appointments that they don't have the energy and inclination to think about it.

[4 : 55] And that is why this parable of the rich man and Lazarus, a parable about heaven and hell, is one we need to listen to. But if you've got an outline in front of you, then before we get to the parable itself, you'll see we're going to look at verses 14 to 18, which help us to answer the question who needs to hear this?

Who needs to hear this parable? Because at first sight, verses 14 and 18 look rather disconnected, don't they, from anything else? And if you've been following our series in Luke's Gospel, I guess we'll be very conscious of that.

So verse 14, if you look at it, we're told the Pharisees love money. Verse 16, that's all about the Old Testament law. Verse 18, about divorce. I guess it's tempting simply to think, well, you know, here are a few bits and pieces that Luke had on his desk somewhere.

He wasn't quite sure where to put them, so he thought, I know what, I'll kind of put them all together and we'll just dump them here. And yet, of course, that cannot be the case because we know, and Luke tells us at the beginning of his Gospel that he's writing an orderly account.

So let's remember that at the heart of this section, which runs from 1322 to chapter 17, verse 10, are the three parables of lost things.

[6 : 15] The lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost son. To teach us the joy, the joy to God when people repent and come back to him.

So chapter 15, verse 7, just so I tell you, there'll be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 righteous persons who need no repentance.

And chapter 15, verse 10, just so I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents. That was then followed by the parable of the shrewd but dishonest manager.

Chapter 16, verse 1, addressed to Jesus' disciples. And now, have a look at 16, verse 14, this next little bit addressed to the Pharisees, the religious establishment.

In verse 14, we're told, the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things. And they ridiculed him. In other words, they won't do the thing that Jesus has been urging people to do.

[7 : 24] They will not repent and turn back to him and receive the forgiveness of sins. Why? Because they love money. And as Jesus has said in the previous verse, in verse 13, you cannot serve both God and money.

And so rather than repent, they ridiculed Jesus. And yet, notice verse 15, they justified themselves before other people.

He said to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.

God is the judge. And he reminded us of that earlier. And therefore, what ultimately matters, of course, is not the opinion of other people, but God's verdicts, God's assessments.

And yet, they are far more concerned with what other people think than what God thinks. And Jesus says that to try and justify yourself like that is an abomination.

[8 : 30] Literally, the word means it stinks. Well, just how do they justify themselves? Well, they lower the bar of God's law. The law of God stands, verse 17.

It's easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the law to become void. And yet, they've lowered the bar, just as at school, if you've ever done a high jump, then if you weren't able to jump over the bar, then there was a very easy solution, wasn't there?

Which generally was applied certainly to me and a number of others. You simply lower the bar and you make it easier to jump over. Well, that's what they did with God's law.

And in particular, you'll see in verse 18, with marriage. They drew up a whole list of exceptions to God's law which said you may not divorce and remarry.

Exceptions like, well, if your wife spoils a meal, you can get divorced. Or if you fancy someone else, you can get divorced. In other words, verse 18 is not here to give us a sort of detailed presentation, if you like, of Jesus' views on divorce and remarriage.

[9 : 40] Rather, he's reminding them how far short they fall of God's law. And all along, they dismiss Jesus' call to repent and to come into his kingdom.

Verse 16, The law and the prophets were until John. Since then, the good news of the kingdom of God is preached and everyone forces his way into it.

That little phrase, everyone forces his way into it. If you look at the footnotes, if you've got a Bible in front of you, if you look at the footnotes, you'll see there's an alternative. It could equally well be translated. Everyone is forcefully urged into it.

Which I think makes much more sense of what's going on in this whole section of Luke as Jesus urges people into his kingdom. So then, who is this parable about heaven and hell for?

Well, anyone who, like the Pharisees, has heard the words of Jesus and hasn't yet repented. For some, because they love money or perhaps they love something else, career or something else, and they don't want Jesus to be Lord over that area of their lives.

[10 : 57] And therefore, rather than repent and put their trust in Jesus, they simply dismiss him. And their confidence, by contrast, is in the fact that they are well thought of by others in the community, in the world of business, and so on.

And they lower the bar. I'm not as bad as so-and-so. I'm a respectable person. I do the right thing. And I guess there may well be one or two of us this morning, and that is exactly where we are.

But of course, the fact is that all of us need to hear this parable because London is full of people like this, isn't it? Friends, neighbours, people at school, colleagues, family members.

And if we're followers of Jesus, we need to know what Jesus says to them so that we can be of most help to them. So then, what does Jesus say to people who won't repent and follow him?

Well, firstly, he says, repent now before it's too late. Verses 19 to 26. Let's pick it up at verse 19.

[12 : 14] There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus covered with sores who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table.

Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. Now, the contrast between these two men in this life couldn't be greater, could it? The rich man clothed in purple and fine linen, the kind of thing that kings and queens would wear, the most expensive clothes, he oozes prosperity.

By contrast, Lazarus, living in great poverty, longing for the scraps that fell from the man's table, has only the scavenger street dogs for company.

The rich man, notice, is defined by his wealth. It's all we're told about him. Whereas Lazarus, notice, is defined by his name.

In fact, he's the only person in all of Jesus' parables who is given a name. His name means, God is my help. And I think it's just worth us pondering, isn't it, which of these two would we rather be?

[13 : 35] Would we be someone who is wealthy and who has the most wonderful lifestyle? Or would we be someone who is known by God and named by God and knows God and is in relationship with him?

And yet, the contrast between the two men in this life is as nothing compared with the contrast between these two men in the next.

Have a look at verses 22 to 26. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.

The rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.

But Abraham said, Child, remember that you in your lifetime receive your good things and Lazarus in like manner had bad things. But now he is comforted here and you are in anguish.

[14 : 48] And besides all this, between us and you, a great chasm has been fixed in order that those who had passed from here to you may not do so and none may cross from there to us.

the rich man finds himself in hell. Not because he's rich, because of course Abraham himself was rich, but rather because his riches demonstrated who he was serving, himself.

In fact, the contrast between these two men and what they experience in this life and the next is precisely the reversal that Jesus speaks about throughout this section of Luke.

Just turn back to the beginning of the section to Luke chapter 13 and you'll remember how the section begins with the question in Luke chapter 13, verse 23, Lord, will those who are saved be few?

The rich man in the parable is then exactly like those in verse 24, as Jesus says, strive to enter through the narrow door, for many, I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.

[16 : 00] The parable illustrates precisely Jesus' teaching in verse 28, in that place, they'll be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves cast out.

And in verse 30, Lazarus, very much one of the last in this world, becomes one of the first, while the rich man, very much amongst the first in this world, becomes amongst the last.

It is the great reversal that lies at the very heart of this section. Now, some have dismissed the way Jesus described eternity in the parable on the grounds that it's simply a parable.

And certainly, there's nothing to suggest elsewhere in the Bible that people in hell can communicate with those in heaven. But all the other details in this parable correspond precisely with what the Lord Jesus teaches in chapter 13.

In other words, there is a life beyond the grave. There is both a heaven and a hell. Hell has real people in it. The decisions we make in this life are the ones that affect our destiny in the next.

[17 : 19] And at the point of death, those destinies are fixed. In other words, we can't dismiss the parable simply as a story which doesn't really teach reality.

And clearly, the point of the parable is very simple. It is that after death, the moment of decision is past. It's too late.

It's too late to do deals. The idea of purgatory, for example, the idea that there is a place after death where we go to make amends, that is simply an invention of the Roman Catholic Church.

I know it's kind of popular culturally and lots of people believe in it. But it is not in the Bible. Or it may simply be the widespread view that we so often hear, you know, someone says, I'm hoping for the best, the implication perhaps being I'm sure I'll be able to do some kind of deal the other side.

Nor must we kid ourselves about those who die and tragically haven't repented and haven't put their trust in the Lord Jesus.

[18 : 31] Can we see what Jesus is doing? He is giving us clarity. Not of course because he takes pleasure in speaking about hell, but because he wants to warn us against going there.

And as any parent knows, warnings are always acts of kindness. Again, Andy reminded us of this earlier. Don't run into the road.

It's dangerous. What a loving thing to say. How very unloving to say nothing. Don't head off into eternity unprepared. What a loving thing to say.

What a very unloving thing to say nothing. Because the whole point of Jesus coming into the world was to die on the cross so that those who trusted him can be forgiven our sins and brought back into relationship with God before it's too late.

And yet, tragically, for this man, it is too late. I guess if you were to ask him in this life, then of course the very idea that God would send him or his successful and respectable friends to hell would have been preposterous.

[19 : 49] None of them believed in that kind of thing and he certainly didn't. And yet, now in the next life, he sees the things which in this life he was so obstinately blind to.

I wonder what you have been late for. I wonder what the thing is you've been late for and it's kind of been the worst kind of thing you've been late for. I don't know, perhaps a flight you missed or perhaps recently an online bargain and you just kind of, you know, if only I got there sooner.

Or perhaps there was a girl or a boy and someone else got there first. Or a job application and you missed the deadline and you were just kicking yourself for missing the deadline. Or a house purchase and you got there too late.

Or a medical diagnosis that was too late. That's the point of the parable. Jesus is saying, stop putting it off.

Repent now if you haven't done so before it is too late. he's showing us the seriousness of the choices we make in this life or the choices we fail to make in this life.

[21 : 05] It shows too that our friends, colleagues, neighbours, family members, schoolmates, need to hear this.

Because remember that Luke is writing to give us certainty, certainty about the gospel to be proclaimed to the nations. It's a gospel of repentance, turning back to God for the forgiveness of sins, trusting in Jesus who died on the cross for our sins.

None of that makes any sense if there is no hell. And yet, who wants to speak about hell?

I guess none of us want to speak about hell. I don't want to speak about hell. But I hope that if you're someone who knows the joy of forgiveness and the warm welcome that God gives to repentant sinners, then I hope you are convinced that love demands that you do speak about hell.

So firstly, it says Jesus, repent now before it's too late. Secondly, verses 27 to 31, repent now, you have all the information you need.

[22 : 22] Let's look at 27 and 28. And the rich man said, then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, to send 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. It's just a reminder that however indifferent we are to heaven and hell this side of the grave, no one is indifferent the other side of the grave.

And the rich man longs for his brothers to be warned. But Abraham replies, verse 29, they have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them. And so the man asks again, and this time more urgently, insistently, verse 30, no father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.

you can almost hear what he's thinking, can't you? The Bible, you can't expect people to listen to the Bible. Now, don't you understand, if someone actually goes to them in person and explains that heaven and hell really do exist, that people like us go to hell, then surely that will make a difference.

And yet, do you notice that verse 30 is also an acknowledgement by the rich man of what he should have done in this life. Do you see that? Just have a look down at verse 30.

[23 : 51] What is it he should have done? Like the prodigal son, he should have repented. And his brothers are now making exactly the same mistake.

Well, Abraham replies, verse 31, if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

They have all they need. Now, I think it's very easy to misread this and to mishear what Abraham is saying as if God is being mean and he's not being fair.

It's not that he only gives the minimum evidence necessary to believe in him in the same way that you might play hide and seek perhaps with your kids. And you tell them you'll go and hide someone, they've got to go and look for you, and you say to them, okay, if you can't find me after five minutes, I'll give you one clue, but only one clue.

And if you can't find me after that, then too bad, it's the end of the game. I think that would be pretty mean, wouldn't it? Well, God is not doing that. Because the problem wasn't the rich man's lack of evidence, but his unwillingness to accept God's word.

[25 : 12] It's just what he admits in verse 30. It follows that more evidence won't persuade his brothers, not even if someone were to be raised from the dead.

If you're looking into the Christian faith, I wonder if you've occasionally thought to yourself, if only God would give me some kind of sign, some kind of visible demonstration, then I'd believe in him.

In other words, it's a request for new information. Or I guess some of us will have friends, colleagues, neighbours, who effectively have said that to us.

You know, I would believe if there was some new information to believe in. You know, I'd believe in Jesus if... I guess some of us are instinctively like that in life, aren't we?

Whether it's a business deal or making a decision about a property or a significant decision in life, rather than working on the basis of the facts we already know, we want new information.

[26 : 17] But Jesus is saying when it comes to the issue of repentance and putting our trust in him, there will be no new information because we have all the information we need.

because the fact is, if we don't heed the Bible's warnings, no amount of signs or new information will persuade us.

Just listen to one commentator. The person who has the Bible and can read it and yet waits for more evidence before committing to Christ is deceiving himself.

And yet, of course, we have been given more evidence. We have been given the very thing the rich man asks for because Jesus himself rose from the dead never to die again.

There's plenty of evidence for his resurrection. It's well documented for those who consider it and yet it hasn't been the game changer that the rich man thought it would be.

[27 : 27] Yes, it's true that countless people throughout the world, millions of people, have put their trust in the risen Jesus but countless others continue to reject him and ignore him.

You think more evidence is what you need? Think again. The gospel accounts are full of people who saw Jesus in the flesh, they heard his teaching and they still walked away unbelieving and unrepentant just like the Pharisees in verses 14 to 18.

Can we see what Jesus is saying? The Bible is enough. If you're looking in on the Christian faith or friends, neighbours of ours who are looking in on the Christian faith, the Bible is enough.

The gospel accounts of Jesus' life are reliable, they're trustworthy, the problem lies with our hearts, not with a lack of evidence.

We've seen that throughout this section of Luke's gospel. I'm going to flip back for a moment to chapter 14, verse 11. To repent and to turn back to God and to seek the forgiveness of sins, that is a humbling thing to do.

[28 : 47] As we have to admit our sin, as we admit our need for a saviour, it's a humbling thing to do. Many people won't do it. Or think of some of the excuses people gave in chapter 14, verses 18 to 20, for turning down God's invitation to the heavenly banquet.

I'm too busy. I've got a business to run. I've got a wife and family. In other words, other things are more important to me.

none of those are lack of evidence problems. All of them are heart problems. They are matters of the will problems.

And if you're already a Christian, the Bible is also enough. It's enough for friends, neighbours, family members, colleagues to make a clear-headed decision about Jesus.

It's why these real lives events are coming up, beginning in just over a week's time. The main thing will be a Bible talk. So don't fret, and I know that different people are being interviewed on different evenings as well, but don't fret about who to invite to which one.

[30 : 03] In a sense, it doesn't really matter because the main thing each evening will simply be Roger Carswell explaining the Bible. and it's why afterwards as we encourage people to investigate the Christian faith, we do so by either encouraging them to join us on a Christianity Explore course going through Mark's Gospel or to read John's Gospel one-to-one with a friend.

Because as Jesus says, if they won't listen to the Bible, they won't be convinced even if someone should be raised from the dead.

let me lead us in prayer. Let's pray together. They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them.

Heavenly Father, we thank you very much that in your great kindness we have this parable Bible. Thank you for the way which the Lord Jesus warns us of these realities of heaven and of hell.

And we pray, Heavenly Father, please would you both help us to take his words to heart and we pray that we would have confidence in the Bible as we seek to make Jesus known.

[31 : 30] And we ask it in his name. Amen.