

A reality you can't ignore

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Preacher: Simon Dowdy

[0 : 00] So the reading is from Luke chapter 16 verses 19 to 31 which is on page 1055. 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.

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 do so 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 into this place of torment. 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 him, If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

Alice, thanks very much indeed for reading. Let me add my welcome to you this morning. It's very good to have you with us. My name is Simon Dowdy for those of us who haven't met. Now, please do keep that reading open on page 1055. And I'm going to pray and ask for God's help to understand that passage. Let's pray together.

Heavenly Father, we thank you for your word. We pray, please, that you would help us to understand this parable that Jesus told that we may indeed have certainty about Jesus, certainty about life, certainty about what is beyond life. And we ask it for Jesus' sake. Amen.

[2 : 48] Well, Richard Wilson was the cabinet secretary to Tony Blair when he was prime minister. And he recalled recently the most stressful day of his career. And unsurprisingly, perhaps it was 9-11 as the U.S. came under attack from Islamic extremists. And it is his responsibility to ensure that the U.K. and the British government in particular was prepared in case of a similar attack here.

Well, unfortunately, he discovered that the civil contingencies unit was away on a staff outing in Yorkshire, that the entire overseas defense secretariat was on a bonding exercise in Hertfordshire, that the newly upgraded government telephone switchboard had crashed. And to cap it all, he then discovered that the underground secret escape tunnel from 10 Downing Street was locked.

And the guy who has the key and knows where the key is was away on holiday and hadn't told anyone at all where he had left the key. In other words, they weren't ready. Or we might be ready. We weren't ready, you might say. Well, this is the second of two talks this week on finding certainty in an uncertain world and supremely finding certainty with God in an uncertain world. Because at the end of the day, it is certainty with God that really matters. And Jesus tells this parable in Luke chapter 16 to make sure we are prepared for eternity, to make sure we are ready. Because being ready is the key to being certain. It's a parable about two men. The first is a rich man. Let me read verse 19 again.

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. Life is good. He lives in a lovely house. He enjoys the best food, a designer clothing. He has made it in life.

The other man couldn't be more different. Verse 20. 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.

[5 : 06] Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. Here is a man who is poor, desperately so. But unlike the rich man, he has a name.

In fact, of all the characters in Jesus' parables and stories that he told, this is the only man to have a name. And to have a name is to be significant, isn't it?

To have a name is to be valued. Lazarus is known by God. In fact, the name Lazarus means he who God helps. Whereas the rich man, well, he's rich.

But he's just a rich, well, he's a faceless person. A man without a name. I guess it begs the question, doesn't it? Would you rather be a nobody who is known by God?

Or would you be a somebody who isn't? Well, it's a story about two destinies and one decision. First of all, two destinies, because both men die, and they have totally different destinies.

[6 : 11] Have a look at verse 22. 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.

Perhaps you can imagine the rich man's funeral. The best coffin, beautiful flowers, a glowing tribute, a wonderful reception afterwards. They had obituaries in the newspaper, which would have been full of his achievements and business successes.

But now, despite all the esteem with which others held him, he finds himself in hell. Whereas Lazarus, in heaven with Abraham, the founder figure of God's people.

Now, notice, really, this is a parable. We can't take all the details as a literal description of heaven and hell. But, of course, Jesus wouldn't have told the story, would he, if he didn't intend to endorse the picture it gives of our destiny.

If these things weren't at least true in broad outline, then the whole point would be lost. And when it comes from the lips of Jesus himself, who in this life so loved to show compassion and tenderness and care and kindness, then is this not very striking that he speaks with such clarity about these things?

[7 : 45] Notice Jesus teaches that death is not the end. Lots of people, of course, say, don't they, that it is the end. But Jesus says it isn't the end. In our world of fake news and alternative facts, it begs the question, doesn't it, who are we going to believe?

You see, if I was simply to stand up here this morning and say to you, death isn't the end, well, why on earth should you listen to me? Or if an archbishop or if a pope were to stand up and say, death isn't the end, why on earth should you listen to them?

It wouldn't make it true. But Jesus, as we've already been reminded this morning, is the one person who has ever come into the world, both fully man and fully God.

And therefore, when he speaks, can we see he speaks with a completely unique authority? He is the expert that we need.

He himself raised the dead to life. He himself would go through death and out the other side. He says death is not the end.

[8 : 51] You may know that the author P.G. Woodhouse lived just around the corner in Croxted Road for a while. And he sometimes used Dulwich as the setting for some of his novels under the name Valley Fields.

And this is how he described Dulwich writing in 1925 with reference to one house in particular. Like all the gardens in the neighborhood, it was a credit to its owner.

On the small side, but very green and neat and soothing. The fact that so widely built over, Valley Fields has not altogether lost its ancient air of rusticity is due entirely to the zeal and devotion of its amateur horticulturalists.

More seeds are sold each spring in Valley Fields. More lawnmowers pushed. More garden rollers borrowed. More snails destroyed. More green flies squirted with patent mixtures than in any other suburb on the Surrey size of the river.

Brixton may have its bon marché and Sydenham its crystal palace. But when it comes to pansies, roses, tulips, hollyhocks, nasturtiums, Valley Field points with pride.

[10 : 06] It's rather idyllic, isn't it? And I guess that's the main reason why people still live here. But the problem is, of course, when life is so very good, it's actually very difficult, isn't it, to think about eternity.

It's very difficult to engage with eternity. And yet so vital that we do, because Jesus says that death is not the end.

But notice, will you, that Jesus also says that there are two destinations. There's a place of great security, and there's a place of great regret. And again, it's very different, isn't it, from what our culture says, which I think is something like this, that there may in theory be two destinations, but in practice, apart from someone like Stalin or Hitler, then actually we're all going to be okay, because we're all nice, reasonable people.

I guess it's the kind of thing you often hear at a funeral, isn't it? Actually, everything is fine. And yet again and again, Jesus contradicts it. No doubt for the rich man, the very idea that God would send him or any of his culture's successful friends to hell was preposterous.

After all, who believes in this kind of thing? And yet it's where he ends up. And therefore, you see, Jesus tells this parable as a warning.

[11 : 34] And like every warning, it is an act of kindness. It's an act of kindness to be warned and told in advance.

When I was 10, my father went to work in Sydney, Australia for several months. He didn't go for long, so we didn't all have to move there, but we did go and visit. And we visited in December. And one of the things, age 10, I was really looking forward to was spending Christmas in the sunshine and the heat rather than the cold and the gray. And in particular, I'd been promised Christmas Day on the beach.

But I was very disappointed come Christmas Day because the particular beach we went to had big signs up. If you've been to Sydney, I guess you may have seen some of them saying, beware of the sharks.

And my parents very gently, I think, had to let me down and say, actually, there would be no swimming that day. Now, I guess they could have complained to the authorities and said, look here, what on earth are you doing putting up signs like this?

[12 : 35] You might frighten 10-year-olds and their families. But I take it they didn't complain to the authorities because actually they knew that signs like that, warning signs like that, are an act of kindness.

Just as Jesus tells this parable as an act of kindness, to warn us of these two destinies. They do exist. And there will be people in both, real people in both.

It's a parable about two destinies. But secondly, it's a parable about one decision. Have a look at verses 24 to 26. And the rich man 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 in your lifetime you 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 have passed from here to you may not do so, and none may cross from there to us.

[13 : 52] The point is, you see, for this rich man, it is now too late. Notice, really, that Jesus clearly doesn't teach that there is any such place as purgatory.

There's nowhere, in other words, we can go after death to make amends. And notice, too, in verse 25, that Abraham addresses this rich man as child.

Now, there's something very significant about that, because this man was a child of Abraham. He was a Jew, at least by birth, and yet he is in hell. Now, that would have been completely unthinkable to the listeners of Jesus' day.

I guess the equivalent for us would be someone who had been baptized, confirmed, and was a regular churchgoer. And you see, it's designed to beg the question, why?

What did he do to end up there? Well, we're not told, are we, he committed any terrible crimes, he wasn't a rebel as a teenager, he's not a thief, a murderer, he doesn't rank as a war criminal.

[14 : 52] Nor was it that he was rich, because Abraham was rich. And therefore, if that automatically excluded you from heaven, then Abraham wouldn't be there either.

So what did this man do that meant that he ended up in hell? Well, strikingly, it's not what he did, it's what he didn't do.

Look on to verse 30, because it's the one thing he knows he should have done, it's the one thing he now sees his brothers need to do. He didn't repent, verse 30.

No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. What is repentance? Well, it's a change of direction.

And it's a hard thing to do, because it is so very humbling. It is saying to God, the whole way in which I've led my life has been wrong. It's what we heard Emily and Warren saying earlier on.
[15:55] I've been living my way, I've been the one who's been deciding what is right and what is wrong, what I will do and what I won't do, how I'm going to live my life, and I'm sorry.

And repentance is about saying sorry, and turning around to follow Jesus as Lord and King. And we saw in the midweek talks, those of us who were in the midweek talks this week at the golf club and the pub, that Jesus Christ died on the cross so we can be forgiven by God and right with God, both in this life and in the next.

But it's humbling. Just picture the scene two weeks ago at the end of half term, as we landed as a family at Gatwick Airport, we cleared immigration, and I led the family, confident that I knew precisely the way to get to the train station, all very straightforward, I thought.

That is, until two voices spoke up simultaneously and said, Daddy, we're going the wrong way. I, of course, kept going, absolutely convinced that I was going in the right direction until I could avoid those voices no longer.

It was humbling, even to execute a fairly straightforward, kind of relatively small U-turn in the big scale of things like that. But tragically, the man in the story didn't repent.

[17:15] He failed to take the one decision that would have changed his eternity, and the moment of choice has now passed. It's a terrible thing, isn't it, when you just have that terrible feeling that you've missed something.

Perhaps you rush, rush, rush, rush to get to a train, and you get there, and it's gone. Just too late. Or perhaps you rush to get a job deadline in.

Too late. You missed the deadline. And this is the moment, you see, when for this man, reality strikes home, because he has finally arrived in the place of certainty, and he has discovered that actually in heaven, there are no atheists, and there are no agnostics.

Which shows, of course, how much is at stake this side of the grave. It shows, of course, it's the decision that we make this side of the grave that determines the destiny on the other side of the grave.

And Jesus tells the parable so that other people don't make the same mistake that this man made. Now, it is, of course, that realization that then explains his great concern for his brothers.

[18:31] Verse 27, 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 into this place of torment.

Here's a man, you see, who was totally indifferent to God this side of the grave, but the other side of the grave, there is suddenly a great sense of urgency. He is faced with reality.

It's why I've called this talk a reality you can't ignore. And he's passionately concerned, desperate, that his brothers are warned. And what does he think is the best way to help them?

To help them to grasp reality. Why? It's to send Lazarus back to warn them in the hope that they will then repent. In the same way, I guess, it's possible, isn't it, for us to end up thinking, you know, if only God would do something really impressive, if only he would reveal himself in some way that was completely unmistakable, or even send someone back from the dead.

I remember thinking that as a sort of, you know, 10, 11, 12-year-olds. Then I'd believe. Well, how does Abraham respond? Verse 29, they have Moses and the prophets.

[19:46] Let them hear them. Well, the rich man's reply is one of exasperation. Verse 30, no, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.

You can almost hear him thinking, can't you, the Bible, you can't expect them to listen to the Bible. The Bible is hundreds of years old. No, you don't understand if someone actually goes back in person, someone actually goes back in person and tells them, tells them that God is real, tells them that heaven and hell really exist, tells them that it's the decisions we make in this life that will affect eternity, then surely they will listen.

But the reply, verse 31, he said to him, if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

In other words, the brothers have all they need. Jesus is telling us, you see, that we seal our eternal destiny by our response to the message of the Bible.

If we won't listen to the Bible and heed its teaching, then we won't listen to anything else, not even if someone were to rise from the dead.

[21 : 00] And clearly at this point, Jesus is alluding to his own resurrection from the dead for which there is plenty of evidence. The point, of course, is that for this rich man, his problem has never been a lack of evidence, rather an unwillingness to repent.

There was an article in the Spectator a while back, I don't normally read the Spectator, but it was written by Martin Roussen with a very honest title, If God really, if God existed, I still wouldn't believe in him.

It's the honest title, isn't it, for an article? If God existed, I still wouldn't believe in him. I guess it illustrates exactly what Jesus is saying in this parable. People don't end up in hell because of lack of evidence, rather because they won't believe it.

In other words, there are two sorts of people in this world. There are those who don't want to know God, and even if someone were to be raised from the dead, that is not going to change them. But there are also those who do want to know God, and for them, the Bible and the message of the Bible is absolutely electric. They recognize that it is all they need as they read it and as they discover the God who made us, as they learn about our rejection of him, of the judgment to come, of Jesus who died on the cross in our place for our forgiveness, who was raised from the dead, never to die again, of the joy of receiving God's forgiveness, and of the possibility of experiencing in this life peace with God, a peace which nothing else can ever provide, and then in eternity to be in the very presence of God himself.

[22 : 57] Well, in a moment we're going to break for coffee and for question time as Rupert said, but before we do that, let me ask, have you ever done the one thing that the rich man failed to do?

In other words, to use the language of the parable, have you ever repented and put your trust in Jesus? Or for those of us who are at the pub and the golf club, have you ever RSVP'd to the invitation that we were thinking about there?

And if you never have, is there any reason why you shouldn't do it today? Now, I'm very conscious there'll be a whole range of us here this morning, but there may well be some, and you're thinking, actually, there is no reason why I shouldn't do that today and you'd like to do it.

So what I'm going to do in just a moment is to read a prayer, a prayer which gives you an opportunity to do that. Let me just read the prayer out first of all so you can just think as I do so whether this is the kind of prayer which you'd like to pray, and then I shall read it through a second time for those who would like to do so.

But this is the prayer which I'm going to pray in just a moment. Lord God, I am so sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength.

[24 : 10] I understand now who Jesus is and why he died. I know that I do not deserve it, but because of Jesus' death on the cross for me, I ask you to forgive me. From now on, please give me the desire to obey you and to help me to follow Jesus whatever the cost.

Now, if that's a prayer that you aren't ready to pray, let me read it again and do pray it in the quiet of your own heart.

Lord God, I am so sorry that I have not loved you with all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. I understand now who Jesus is and why he died.

I know that I do not deserve it, but because of Jesus' death on the cross for me, I ask you to forgive me. From now on, please give me the desire to obey you and to help me to follow Jesus whatever the cost.

Amen. Now, if you prayed that prayer for the first time, I'd love you to come and tell me. I'd love to give you a copy of this booklet and be assured if you prayed that prayer for the first time today, then like Lazarus, you have a name in God's family and in eternity you will be in the very presence of God.

[25 : 33] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.