

(3) All the evidence you'll ever need

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: 16 March 2008

Preacher: Simon Dowdy

- [0 : 0 0] The reading is Luke chapter 16 starting at verse 19. 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 whatever 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.
- [1 : 1 0] 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 then 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 then. 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. Thanks, Nancy, very much for reading for us.
- I would be grateful if we could keep our Bibles open on page 1055. As we heard earlier, we're continuing our series of talks, Who Gets to Heaven?
- [2 : 2 6] And I want to begin by asking a question. Does it matter what we believe? Judging by what we often hear people saying, it doesn't matter.
- How many times have you heard someone say something like, Well, I don't want to impose my beliefs on them. I want them to make up their own minds. If that's what works for you, if you want to believe in that, then so be it.
- But please don't force your beliefs on me. People often talk, don't they, as if the issue of what we believe is rather like choosing your breakfast cereal.
- There's a whole range of choice when you go into Tesco's or Asda or wherever it is. And it really doesn't matter at the end of the day which one you happen to choose. But the strange thing is that that is not the basis, is it, on which the rest of life works.
- I mean, if, well, during coffee, we were chatting. If you told me that you believe that gravity actually works in reverse, that rather than pulling us downwards, it actually pushes us upwards.

[3 : 34] And if you said that you were going to prove your theory by climbing on top of this building, onto the top of the roof, and jump off so that you could start flying, well, you'd be glad to know that I don't think I would reply, well, if that's what you want to believe, that's just fine.

Who am I to impose my understanding of gravity on what you happen to think? Because, of course, what you believe matters. And no more so than with this question, who gets to heaven?

It's why Jesus told this parable. It's a parable about two men. The first is a rich man. Have a look at verse 19. There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

For him, life is good. He wears the latest designer labels and he enjoys himself brilliantly. He is Mr. Successful. But notice, will you, the other man couldn't be more different.

Verse 22. 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.

[4 : 50] Here is a man who is poor, desperately so, in fact. But unlike the rich man, he has a name. In fact, of all the stories that Jesus told, of all the parables that Jesus told, he's the only character that Jesus gives a name to.

Because, of course, to have a name is to be significant. It is to be valued. As Lazarus is, because he is known by God. In fact, his name means he who God helps.

Whereas the rich man, of course, why, he is just a faceless millionaire. There. What you'll see on the outline, if you turn to the outline on the back of the service sheet, that this is a story about two destinies, one decision, and five brothers.

Let's look at each of those in turn. First of all, two destinies. Because both men die, and they have totally different destinies. Let's have a look at verses 22 and 23.

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.

[6 : 18] Or perhaps you can imagine the rich man's funeral. He has the best coffin, the most beautiful flowers, a glowing tribute, a reception afterwards at the very best hotel.

And no doubt the obituaries were full of his financial achievements and listed all the FTSE 100 companies of which he had been a director. But now he is in hell, despite the esteem with which he was held by others.

Whereas Lazarus, while he is in heaven with Abraham, the founder figure of God's people. After death, there are two destinies.

There is a heaven, and there is a hell. Now notice, will you, this is a parable. I take it we can't take all the details as literal descriptions of heaven and hell.

The language here is symbolic. But of course, Jesus wouldn't have told the parable, would he? If he didn't intend to endorse the picture it gives us of human destiny.

[7 : 21] If these things weren't at least true in outline, then the whole point of Jesus' parable would be lost. As such, Jesus tells the parable to warn us that heaven and hell exist, and that there will be people in hell just as much as there will be people in heaven.

Now, no doubt for the rich man, the very idea that God would send either him or any of his cultured, sophisticated, polished friends to hell was quite preposterous.

After all, no one believes in that kind of thing. But it's precisely the place he ends up. It's a shocking story, isn't it?

But it's not my story. It's not my opinion about the future. It's Jesus' story. It's not something the church has made up.

This comes from the lips of Jesus Christ himself. And I take it this horrifying description of hell is all the more striking, isn't it, when it's Jesus speaking, God in the flesh, the one who speaks with all the authority of God himself.

[8 : 29] And when it's from the very lips of Jesus, who in his life so loved to show compassion and kindness and love and tenderness. You see, Jesus tells us this parable as a warning.

And as such, it is a wonderful act of kindness. When I was 10, my father went to work in Sydney, Australia, for nine months.

And because it's such a short period of time, we didn't go there as a family for the whole nine months, but we did go and visit. We went out in December. And one of the things I was looking forward to hugely was going for a swim in the sea on Christmas Day and then be able to come back to school here and boast to all my friends about it, that I'd been to the beach and been for a swim on Christmas Day.

But I was to be disappointed because the particular beach that we went to on Christmas Day had the most enormous signs up saying, Beware the sharks. And if you couldn't read, then there was a sort of huge picture underneath of a sort of shark, its sort of mouth wide open, demonstrating for all to see its teeth.

Now, I remember being pretty upset at the time because I knew I wouldn't be able to swim. I suppose my parents could have complained to the authorities and said that, frankly, you shouldn't be allowed to put up signs like that because they might scare 10-year-old boys.

[9 : 50] But to my knowledge, they didn't complain because they worked out those signs were there as acts of kindness. As is this parable.

Jesus is warning us of the physical reality of heaven and hell. He wants us to be in no doubt that there are two destinies when we die.

So then why is it? I mean, it's a funny thing, isn't it? Why do we so often speak as if it doesn't really matter what we believe about God when we know that it does matter what we believe about gravity? Well, let me suggest this because most people have what we might call the cruise liner view of religion.

They think that every single one of us is on the boat, the cruise liner of life, and the boat is heading off to some wonderful destination, even though no one is precisely sure where that is.

Now, a few nasty characters like Adolf Hitler and Saddam Hussein have been thrown overboard already. But the majority of the passengers on HMS Eternity, for them, there is nothing to worry about as they sail off into the sunset.

[11 : 01] And so the only question is, well, how are we going to spend our time before we get there? The choices are numerous. You can be a Buddhist, a Muslim, a Christian, or you can just create your own religion, whatever it is that works best for you.

After all, everyone will arrive at the same destination. Or at least, that's what most people in this country would like to think.

But of course, the crucial question is whether such a view of the future is true. According to Jesus, it's just as out of touch with reality as thinking that gravity pushes you upwards.

Two destinies. Secondly, let's look at the one decision. And have a look, will you, at 24, verses 24 to 26, and see how the conversation between the rich man and Abraham develops.

The rich man called out, verse 24, 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.

[12 : 19] 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 had passed from here to you may not do so, and none may cross from there to us.

Now, I take it it's abundantly clear, isn't it, that for the rich man, it is now too late. Notice, will you, in passing, that Jesus teaches there is no such place as purgatory.

There's nowhere we can go after death to make amends. And notice too, significantly, that in verse 25, Abraham addresses the man as child, or son, in some translations.

Now, there's something very significant about that, because you see, this man was a child of Abraham. He was a Jew, at least by birth. He was a child of Abraham, and yet, in hell.

[13 : 29] Now, that would have been totally unthinkable to Jesus' hearers, in the first century. I guess the equivalent for us would be someone who was baptised, confirmed, and a regular churchgoer.

It's very shocking, isn't it? And Jesus deliberately shocks, because he wants us to ask the question, why? How on earth could someone like this end up in hell?

What on earth did he do? Well, we're not told he committed any terrible crimes. He's not a thief. He's not a murderer. He's not an adulterer. He doesn't rank as a war criminal. And it wasn't that he was rich, either.

You see, this is not a parable in which Jesus is saying that the rich go to hell and the poor go to heaven. Because Abraham himself was rich. Abraham was fabulously wealthy, fabulously powerful.

And so if the rich were automatically excluded from heaven, then there's no way Abraham would be there. So what did this man do that meant he ended up in hell?

[14 : 38] Well, it's not what he did. It's what he didn't do. He didn't repent.

You see, look on, will you, to verse 30, because he realizes it's the one thing he should have done and it's the one thing he now sees his brothers need to do.

Verse 30, he said, no, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. It's the one thing he realizes he should have done and which he is now so desperate that his brothers do.

What is repentance? It is a change of direction. We heard something, didn't we, of that from Harry earlier on. It is a change of direction.

The story is told of a commander of a British warship who saw another object on his radar as his ship traveled through the night. So he radioed ahead, moved 10 degrees to the right, and the message came back over the radio, move 10 degrees to the left.

[15 : 48] Well, the commander, feeling slightly irritated, radioed back, I order you to move 10 degrees to the right. And again, the reply came back over the radio, I order you to move 10 degrees to the left.

Well, the commander, barely unable to disguise his frustration, called out, I'm a commander in Her Majesty's Royal Navy, I'm telling you to move 10 degrees to the right. The reply, I'm a private, and I order you to move 10 degrees to the left.

Well, now losing his temper, I am the captain of one of Her Majesty's largest warships, I'm telling you to change direction. I'm in charge of a lighthouse, and I am telling you to change direction.

Well, that is repentance. It is about a change of direction. It's not just about feeling sorry for the way in which we've treated God in the past, it is a personal decision to allow God to be king and Jesus Christ to be Lord.

It's what we've been singing about this morning, isn't it, that Jesus Christ is Lord. And therefore, when someone repents, they stop acting as if they are in charge of their lives, and they hand over their lives to Jesus, they hand over control of their lives to Jesus Christ.

[17 : 00] It is a change of direction. And so, what is a Christian? Well, it's not someone who goes to church regularly or who sees themselves as a decent person.

It is someone who has asked Jesus Christ to be king and asked for forgiveness for their previous rejection of him. Forgiveness that is possible because of Jesus' death on the cross in our place.

And it's when a person has done that that they can be assured of spending eternity with God and with his people. But it's the one thing this rich man didn't do.

And the evidence, will you notice, is in the way he treated Lazarus. Because you see, in the Old Testament, in the first part of the Bible, God had said that his people should care for the poor, but he totally ignores Lazarus.

This rich man, he may well have been well regarded and respected, but of course, those things are no tests of where we stand with God. Because the fact is, he ignored God.

[18 : 08] and the way in which he used his money demonstrated it. He didn't repent. In other words, he failed to take the one decision that would have changed his entire eternity.

Which I take, it shows us how much is at stake this side of the grave. It demonstrates, doesn't it, it's the decision we make about Jesus in this life that determines our destiny in the next.

And sadly for this rich man, the moment of choice has now passed by. You see, everything he does is too late. Did you notice that? He pays attention to Lazarus too late.

He sees the unbridgeable gap between heaven and hell too late. He worries about his brothers too late. And he heeds the warning of the law and the prophets too late. And Jesus tells his parable so that we won't make the same mistake.

So let me ask you, have you ever made that decision to repent? Now, it may well be that this is all totally new and you're sort of sitting, feeling rather befuddled and thinking, well, frankly, I really haven't got a clue what I believe.

[19 : 29] In which case, I'd love you to join us on this Christianity Explore course that Matt mentioned earlier. It starts on the 20th of April. It's a course which runs for six weeks. It's a national course which is run up and down the country.

We run it on a Sunday morning here in Paranel with the main service. But actually, it may well be that there's no reason why you shouldn't repent today.

In which case, when you take a copy of this booklet, there are plenty of them just by the door on the welcome table over there. It very simply goes over the heart of the Christian message again, and then there's a prayer you can pray at the back and do the one thing that this rich man never ever did.

Two destinies, one decision, thirdly, five brothers. Let's pick up, shall we, on where we left off that conversation between the rich man and Abraham.

Have a look at verse 27. The rich man 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.

[20 : 43] It's very striking, this isn't it? You see, here is a man who is totally indifferent to God this side of the grave. But as soon as he reaches the other side of the grave, all skepticism vanishes and he is passionately concerned that his brothers be warned.

And what does he think is the best way to help his brothers? To send Lazarus back to warn them in the hope that they will repent. Rather like the figure of Scrooge in Charles Dickens' A Christmas Carol who sees that apparition, doesn't he, if you're familiar with the book or the film, and a remarkable transformation takes place in his life.

And in the same way we can end up thinking, well, if only God would do something dramatic, if only he would reveal himself to me in some unmistakable way, then I would believe.

I wonder if you ever caught yourself thinking something like that. Well, how does Abraham reply, verse 29? Abraham said, they have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them.

They have the written word of God, they have Moses and the prophets, they have the Old Testament. Well, the rich man's reply is one of barely disguised exasperation, verse 30.

[22 : 04] And he said, no, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. Now, you can almost hear what he's thinking, can't you? The Bible, you can't expect them to listen to that, it's hundreds of years old.

No, you don't understand, if someone actually goes in person and explains that God is real, that heaven and hell exist, that the decisions we make now in this life affect our eternity then, don't you see, if someone actually goes to them, they will listen.

The reply, verse 31, one, if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.

How can we know God is there? How can we know what he's like? How can we know how we should relate to him? Read the Bible. Jesus is telling us that we seal our eternal destiny by our response to the Bible.

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

[23 : 16] I take it that Jesus is clearly alluding to his own resurrection, for which, of course, there is plenty of evidence, yet people still turn a blind eye. You see, this man's problem had never been his lack of evidence.

Now, the issue for him was that he simply wouldn't accept the word of God, the Bible. Did you notice how in verse 30 he is just as dismissive of the Bible after his death as no doubt he was before his death?

You see, the issue wasn't a lack of evidence, it was simply an unwillingness to repent. Now, I wouldn't normally read The Spectator, but I did catch one of the leading articles in it this week, written by Martin Rousen, I'm not quite sure how to pronounce his name.

The title of the article was this, Even if God existed, I wouldn't believe in him. But it illustrates precisely what Jesus is saying in this parable, that people don't end up in hell because of a lack of evidence, but because however good the evidence, they simply won't believe it.

why not? Well, remember that Jesus doesn't tell these parables in a vacuum. He's deliberately telling them to unmask the attitude of his listeners.

[24 : 41] In this case, if you look up to verse 14, in this case, his listeners were the Pharisees, the respectable religious establishment of the day, and what are we told in verse 14?

They love money. And the problem is you can't love money and love God at the same time. Verse 13, Jesus has said, no servant can serve two masters for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he'll be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and money. And Jesus tells this parable to warn them. Because remember we said that repentance involves a change of direction.

It's the decision that from now on Jesus will be Lord. And of course, for as long as there's something else that's more important to us than Jesus, why we'll never repent, will we?

It may be money, but it may be a whole host of other things. It may be what my friends or colleagues or family would think of me, or anything else.

[25 : 45] And if that's us this morning, then Jesus tells this parable as a great act of kindness, to warn us. one of the things I notice is that we're not told anything about those five brothers.

Amongst them, no doubt, some were rich, some were poor, some were able, some were incompetent, some were lucky, some were unlucky in life. But all were equally responsible before God for how they respond to the warnings of the Bible.

And Jesus tells this parable to make the point that we are equally responsible as they. Well, why don't we have a pause?

I'm going to pray, and then we're going to have a break for coffee. And during coffee, if you have questions, as Matt said, do scribble them down there on the question sheet.

As I said last Sunday, if you get your question in early, you get a more informed answer. So you might want to write your question before you go and grab coffee, and then we'll take a break for five minutes, and then come back for question time.

[27 : 05] But why did I pray first? 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.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that you haven't left this world without a record of who you are and how to relate to you. Thank you for the Bible.

Thank you that it is your word, God speaking to us, and we pray that we would be those who heed it and who take it to heart.

And we ask it for Jesus sake. Amen.