

The Rich Man and Lazarus

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Preacher: Dean Baldwin

[0:00] Let your hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen! Please be seated. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

It's a difficult passage to hear, and an even more difficult one to preach on. I just want to acknowledge that from the beginning. I also want to acknowledge that it will be impossible for me to say everything there is to say about this passage in the time allotted.

And so inevitably, I'm not going to cover everything, or I answer every question that this text raises. We could be tempted by the difficulties of this passage to distance ourselves from it, but I'd like to invite you to approach this text with me in a different way this morning.

Because I believe this text demands our attention. It has something to say to each one of us here this morning. So by God's grace and the help of the Holy Spirit, I pray that we'll all learn something from it.

The first portion of this parable, Jesus paints a picture for us of two men in very, very different situations.

[1:22] It's a picture of two men who could not be farther from one another in economic or social terms. The rich man is clothed in purple and fine linen, while Lazarus, on the other hand, is covered in sores.

The rich man sumptuously feasted every day, while Lazarus longed for mere scraps or crumbs that fell from the rich man's table.

The rich man lived within the comfortable gates of his earthly estate, while Lazarus was laid outside of the rich man's gate, presumably on the street.

While the rich man had servants to prepare his daily meals, Lazarus had only street dogs to tend to his wounds. In broad strokes, Lazarus could not have been in any worse of a situation, and the rich man could not have been in any better of a situation.

Lazarus' earthly life was characterized by derision or sneering, scorn. The rich man's earthly life was luxurious, even enviable.

[2:44] In verse 22 of our passage, we start to see a dramatic reversal in the two men's respective situations. Jesus says that Lazarus, despite the indignity of his life, and probably lack of a funeral, was carried by angels to Abraham's side.

Now, Abraham's side is an idiom that symbolizes the paradise that Old Testament believers would have been hoping for. The implication in this story is that Lazarus, his pain and his suffering, his hunger, they're over.

And he's now feasting in a place of honor at Abraham's side. He's in the highest place he could be. Heaven, in other words. With Abraham, the friend of God, the father of all who believe.

But what about the rich man? Verse 23 simply says that in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and he saw Abraham and Lazarus far off.

Immediately after dying, the rich man finds himself shockingly, shockingly aware that his situation has dramatically changed.

[4:03] He wakes up and he's where he doesn't expect to be. All of his earthly wealth is gone. He finds himself in the lowest place he could be in, Hades.

He's described in the passage as experiencing torment. And as bad as Lazarus' earthly life was, Jesus never described it with that word, torment.

This is as dramatic a reversal story as any rags to riches or fall from grace story. Is it not? There's a few lessons to be learned from this.

It's a good reminder to us here today that there will be an end to all of our earthly suffering.

Likewise, there will be an end to all of our earthly wealth.

We're told there's two guarantees in life, right? Death and taxes. Especially in New York State. To those who experience suffering in the faith, this is a comfort to us, is it not?

[5:13] But it's also a stern warning to us who possess any kind of worldly wealth. It's not going to last. It's the second half of the parable, verses 24 to 31, where the real meat of Jesus' teaching is found, I think.

The first half of the story, which we just recounted, sets the stage and it grabs our attention. The second half of the parable, that is the dialogue between the rich man and Abraham, tells us the real reasons why Lazarus ends up in comfort and the rich man ends up in torment.

You see, it's not just a mere reversal. In other words, poor Lazarus doesn't earn comfort just because he had a rough time in the life, in his earthly life.

And the rich man doesn't suffer just because he was rich in this life. There are other reasons for this to happen, and that's what Jesus is telling us in the second half of the parable. So, throughout verses 24 to 31, Jesus progressively, stage by stage of the dialogue, reveals to us the reason why this dramatic reversal has taken place.

This dialogue occurs in three parts. First, the rich man addresses Abraham. Then Abraham gives a response. And I want to suggest this morning that this dialogue, this conversation, reveals the heart of the rich man.

[6:46] And what we find in his heart is that it is lack of love that condemns the rich man and not his wealth. His first request comes in verse 24.

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

Now, on the surface, the rich man just seems to be merely begging for a little bit of relief from his suffering. On the surface. But at the same time, I think his request reveals that he is completely without remorse for the way that he treated Lazarus during their lives.

It reveals that he is only capable of self-pity. See, the rich man fails to see the parallel between his current situation and the situation that Lazarus had been in during their earthly lives.

He sees and recognizes Lazarus, now in a place of honor and respect, but he doesn't even afford Lazarus the dignity of a direct address. Instead, he speaks only to Abraham.

[8:01] He treats Lazarus as if he's a servant or a slave while speaking to Abraham as if he's his equal. This is consistent with the way that the rich man treated Lazarus during their lives.

During their lives, the rich man could have easily provided relief for Lazarus' suffering. Certainly scraps from the table, the occasional glass of cold water, were well within the rich man's means. In life, Lazarus longed for mere crumbs from the rich man's table. In the afterlife, the rich man just wanted a mere drop of water from Lazarus' finger.

Back in verse 21, Jesus gives us a little bit of a clue to how we understand this passage. He says that dogs came and licked Lazarus' sores.

Why does he include that detail in the story? I think he puts it in the story to show us that the dogs, the brute beasts, had more compassion for Lazarus and his suffering than the rich man did.

[9:16] I know maybe some of you here today are dog people. Who here is a dog owner? Let me tell you something.

In Ethiopia, where my family lives, there are two kinds of dogs. There are stray or street wild dogs, and there's working guard and shepherd dogs.

I think the context that Jesus was speaking in is probably similar to modern-day Ethiopia than it is to modern-day, the modern-day United States. The dogs that we are, that we're showing compassion to Lazarus, in other words, are not pedigree labradoodles, and they're not golden retriever puppies. We're meant to think of either flea-ridden street dogs that live off of garbage that they scavenge, or aggressive security guard dogs that live off the scraps from their master's table.

Neither of these two types of dogs are known for their compassionate and nurturing behavior. But it's these scavengers and these aggressive guard dogs that show more compassion for Lazarus than the rich man.

[10:33] The rich man, now seeing Lazarus at Abraham's side, wouldn't this be an appropriate time to recognize his lack of compassion for Lazarus?

Instead, he treats Lazarus like a slave, and Abraham is the master of his servants. Send Lazarus to meet my needs, he insists.

The rich man's remorseless heart is revealed. Now Abraham's first response to this rich man and his request is found in verses 25 and 26.

He explains somewhat bluntly that what the rich man is asking for is just impossible. It can't happen. And so after hearing that a great chasm separates himself and Lazarus, and recognizing that Lazarus won't actually be coming to relieve any of his personal suffering, the rich man makes a second request, or even a demand from Abraham.

Send Lazarus once again as an errand boy to my brothers. We can probably guess that the rich man during his life was probably used to getting his own way, probably the kind of man who was used to getting what he wanted and when he wanted it.

[11 : 53] So he's actually not content to take no for an answer even from Abraham. Once again, the rich man's request shows his lack of remorse.

He still sees Lazarus as a means to an end and not as a person who deserves to be loved. But how are we to take the rich man's apparent concern for his kindred, his brothers, in verse 27?

Could we say that this is a possible sign that he has some love for someone, even if it's not Lazarus? After all, he has five brothers, and he wants to avoid them experiencing the same suffering that he's experiencing.

Isn't he loving his brothers? I don't think so. The love that he has for his brothers is not the kind of love that Jesus commends.

If you flip over to Luke chapter 6, verses 32 to 33, Jesus asks this question. If you love those who love you, of what benefit is that to you?

[13 : 10] For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you?

For even sinners do the same. See, the problem with the rich man's love for his brothers is that it is based on how others relate to himself.

It's the love of the clan. It's the love of the gang. It's solidarity among thieves. It's a false love that says, if they share my blood, if they share my political views, if they share my nationality, my ethnicity, my religion, then they're worthy of my charity.

This is another form of self-love, is it not? It's not the kind of love that God expects from us. It's not the kind of love that God shows to us.

In Luke chapter 6, Jesus goes on to say that God is kind to who? To the ungrateful and the evil. Who is he kind to?

[14 : 28] The ungrateful and the evil. It's easy to love likable people, but that's not God's way of love. The rich man's loveless heart is revealed.

Now Abraham responds again in verse 29, and this time I think it's a little bit more curt and direct. They have Moses and they have the prophets.

Let them hear them, he says. Now Abraham is not referring to Moses the individual or Ezekiel, Daniel, Elijah. He's referring to Moses and the prophets and referencing the entire written scriptures.

It's a reference for the Old Testament, the Word of God. In other words, Abraham is saying that the holy scriptures of the Old Testament contain everything that this rich man had needed and that his brothers need for their salvation.

They have access to the words of salvation. They have the warning in the book. They don't need someone to come from the dead. They don't need Lazarus. Let them go to the synagogue and hear the words.

[15 : 42] But how does the rich man respond? His third and final response to Abraham, I believe, is his most damning.

It makes explicit his lack of understanding, his pride, and his self-love. The rich man actually disagrees with Abraham. Do you see that? He contradicts Abraham, the father of all who believe. No, Father Abraham, but... Now, if any of you have children, you may have heard this kind of contradiction before. But, Dad...

But... But... But... But... But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent. The audacity of the rich man's request is that it claims that the written word of God is not good enough, is not clear enough to understand salvation.

It's not a good enough revelation. The scriptures are not sufficient. But if my brothers see a miracle, then they'll believe.

[16:58] If they see someone raised from the dead, they'll repent. And so the rich man's faithless heart is revealed.

See, he's not condemned just because of his material wealth. That would be a pure Marxist reading in the passage. He's condemned because of his spiritual poverty.

His heart, his soul, and his mind were remorseless, loveless, and faithless. He cannot accept the truth of God's revelation.

And because he cannot accept God's truth, he refuses to accept the dignity of his fellow man. He cannot be moved to show even an ounce, a crumb, of compassion toward miserable Lazarus.

Do you see the connection there between love of God and love of our fellow man? The world, the flesh, and the devil all tell us that people are not important and that they have no value.

[18:04] God's revelation tells us that everyone is to be loved. It even commands us to love our enemies. It tells us to love ungrateful and evil people.

Now the parable ends with Abraham's final judgment on the rich man, which I think is crystal clear in its implications and its condemnation.

If his brothers, or anyone for that matter, if they don't believe the old covenant revelation, if they don't believe the scriptures, they won't believe a miracle, even one as powerful as someone being raised from the dead.

See, our sinful state is such that someone who is convinced in their unbelief cannot be convinced even by a miracle.

Someone who is convinced in their unbelief cannot be convinced even by a miracle. Faith comes by means of the grace of God, and it's a gift to us by the Holy Spirit.

[19:21] We read Jesus' summary of the law at the beginning of today's service. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment.

And the second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets. Love of God and love of our neighbors are tied together.

This was reiterated to us in the lesson we heard from today's epistle reading in 1 John 4. Beginning in verse 19, John tells us, If anyone says, I love God, but hates his brother, he's a liar.

For he who does not love his brother, who he can see, cannot love God who he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, whoever loves God must also love his brother.

It's the lack of love that condemns the rich man, not his wealth. He had no love for Lazarus, who suffered horrible afflictions.

[20:29] The love he claims for his clan is simply a form of self-love. And most damning, he shows us that he has no love for God because he has no esteem for God's revelation in the scriptures.

Ultimately, he's condemned because he has failed to keep God's law. Now, in some ways, Jesus gives us a picture of the rich man as the sort of caricature of a pure narcissist.

And if we were to measure ourselves against this rich man, we might be tempted to think that we're doing okay. I'm not a bad person. I try my best. I'm not a racist, a thief, a murderer.

Hopefully, at least, very few of us would be as outwardly pitiless as the rich man if someone were starving to death at the end of our driveway.

But when we begin to measure ourselves against St. John's description of love found in today's epistle reading, or Jesus' own description of love in Luke chapter 6, I don't know about you, but I start to feel a little bit nervous.

[21:38] Anyone who does not love God, anyone who does not love, does not know God because God is love. You can ask her, she's here, how many times have I failed to love my spouse, my parents, my siblings, my child, this week?

How many times have I failed to love ungrateful and evil people? When I measure myself against God's standard of love, I realize that I have far more in common with the rich man than I would like to admit.

Who among us can say that our hearts, our souls, and our minds are never guilty of lovelessness, remorselessness, unfaithfulness.

This passage has taken on added weight to me as my family and I live in Ethiopia. See, living in Ethiopia, we have beggars come to our door almost daily, to our gate, just like the rich man.

I walk by beggars every day when I walk to my office. Some of them are in hauntingly similar situations to that of Lazarus.

[23:04] Their only meal for the day might be a discarded scrap of food, a piece of bread that someone buys for them. So I have to daily wrestle with this question.

Am I a priest of Christ's church? Am I ignoring the needs of the people around me? Am I hoarding the wealth that God has given me?

Or am I using my wealth to love God and to love my neighbor? Even when I do give something small to a beggar that I pass by, it's a painful reminder of the monumental financial gap between us. You see, compared to many of the people that I pass, many of the people lying on the sidewalks that I walk down, I am living in extravagant and flamboyant wealth, just like the rich man was in this story.

And I have to tell you guys something too. You living here in North America are probably in the same situation. You're probably living in comparative, extravagant, and flamboyant wealth to much of the world.

[24:25] I think those of us who are living in the U.S. have a different challenge by this parable. We can be tempted to say to ourselves we don't have that kind of poverty in our country. We don't have beggars like Lazarus in our neighborhoods.

And it's true, we rarely find a dying man at the end of our driveway longing for food. food. But I want to suggest to you that there are suffering people all around us.

Beneath the veneer of American wealth, which will be gone someday in the same way the rich man's wealth was, beneath that veneer there are people wasting away physically, mentally, and spiritually all around us.

some are experiencing the physical decay that comes from aging, cancer, dementia, terminal illnesses. Often they're isolated from their friends and family, placed in nursing homes, hospice care, tucked away and ignored, hidden from view so that society can ignore that they are even there.

still others are wasting away through drug and alcohol addiction. There are young people, teenagers, middle schoolers, struggling with depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts and ideation, gender dysphoria, and so on.

[25:57] And they're all around us. they may not be at our literal gates or our literal driveways, but they might be at the desk next to you at school.

They might be in line with us when we're buying our groceries. They might even be sitting here today in the pew next to you. How will we respond to the suffering around us?

Will we tell ourselves that they are not our responsibility? Will we tell ourselves that we can't meet their needs anyway? Will we accept some kind of fatalism and simply say that that is the lot that God has given them?

Each of those statements are half-truths. They have some truth in them. But we can't use those half-truths to absolve ourselves of our responsibility to love the people around us.

You see, our chief violations of God's law are in our lack of love, our lack of charity, our lack of love toward God, and our lack of love toward our neighbors.

[27:07] The Bible is full of countless examples of ways in which people have failed to love. The parable of the rich man just gives us another example of that.

The parable provides clear evidence for why the rich man received the eternal punishment that he did in the afterlife. But the parable tells us much more about the rich man than it does Lazarus.

Why is Lazarus blessed with comfort? Do we have any signs of faith or charity from poor Lazarus? Are we left to simply assume that he had a different heart, an opposite heart to that of the rich man? Did he somehow deserve God's comfort just because he suffered in this life? There's another clue that Jesus has left us in this parable.

And the fact that this poor man Lazarus is given a name, and a specific name, Lazarus. I don't know how many times I heard this passage before realizing that Lazarus is the only person in any of Jesus' parables to be given a name.

[28:23] Did you know that? All the other parables have a father, a manager, a son, a farmer, a rich man, a poor man. But there's no one in any of Jesus' parables besides Lazarus that has a name.

And Lazarus is a Greek form of the Hebrew name Eleazar. When we translate it into English, it means something like the one who is helped by God.

The scriptures which the rich man and his brothers ignored remind us of our inability to love God and to love one another apart from his grace working in us and assisting us every day.
[29:38] Each of us deserves the torment, the agony that the rich man experienced in this parable. And like Lazarus, each of us must come to God recognizing our spiritual poverty, our need to beg to God for crumbs from his table.

[30 : 52] The greatest material wealth in this life cannot compare to the blessed life prepared for those who die in Christ Jesus.

And finally, this passage reminds all of us that there was another man who once suffered, who died, and who came back from the dead as a witness.

[32:09] He bore our suffering on his cross. He died the death on the cross that we deserved. And he alone can cross that chasm, ensuring that we will live in comfort and not in torment.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Let us pray. O God, the strength of all who put their trust in you, mercifully accept...