

Lessons from Deficient Social Security

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Preacher: Paul Barker

- [0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 20th of January 2002.
- The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Lessons from Deficient Social Security. It is based on Luke chapter 16 verses 19 to 31.
- A Jamaican man dies and is sent to hell. He was a nasty and horrible man throughout his life. And the devil decided that he was really going to punish him quite severely in hell.
- So he puts him to work breaking up rocks with a sledgehammer. And to make it worse, he cranks up the temperature and the humidity. It's a bit like Brisbane.
- After a couple of days, the devil checks in on this new victim in hell to see if he is suffering adequately.
- [1 : 07] But he's aghast when he sees this Jamaican man happily swinging his sledgehammer and whistling a happy tune. So the devil walks up to him and says, I don't understand this.
- I've turned the heat way up. It's humid. You're crushing rocks. Why are you so happy? And the Jamaican who smiles at the devil says, well, this is great.
- It reminds me of August in Jamaica. It's hot. It's humid. There's a good piece of work to do. It reminds me of home. This is fantastic. Well, the devil's a bit perplexed by this.
- Walks away and he ponders it and he decides to change things a bit. He drops the temperature. He sends down driving rain and torrential wind. And soon hell is a wet and muddy mess.
- But again, the Jamaican is happily slogging through the mud, pushing his wheelbarrow full of crushed rocks. And again, the devil asks, why is he so happy in such conditions?
- [2 : 11] And the Jamaican replied, well, this is great. It's just like April in Jamaica. Reminds me of working out in the fields with spring planting. Well, now the devil is completely baffled.
- So in desperation, he tries one last ditch effort. He makes the temperature plummet. Hell is blanketed in snow and ice.
- Confident that he will have succeeded in making hell like hell for this Jamaican, the devil checks in on him. And again, he's aghast because he sees the Jamaican dancing, singing, twirling his sledgehammer around as he cavorts in glee.
- How can you be so happy? It's like you're celebrating, don't you know it's 40 degrees below zero? And the Jamaican replies, hell's frozen over.
- That must mean that the West Indies have won a match. We joke about heaven and hell.
- [3 : 23] We joke about who might be in hell and what fun they're having. We joke about arriving at the pearly gates and who might get in and who might get out. We joke about hell being the place of beer and sex and fun and golf.
- We joke about heaven being full of harps and hymns, pearly gates and boredom. But when Jesus told the parable here that we heard read, he was not being jokey or being flippant.

Hell's a serious business. It's not something for our jokes, really. And because hell is a serious business, more importantly, it means that this life is a serious business too.

Jesus told a story. He said there was a rich man. And this rich man was dressed in purple. In Jesus' day, purple was the most expensive color you could get from a murex shellfish.

Its dye was very expensive. So if you wore purple, it didn't mean that you were a bishop. It meant that you were very wealthy indeed. He had fine linen to wear as well.

[4 : 31] Probably imported Egyptian linen. And he feasted sumptuously every day. Every day was a banquet. Maybe there were lots of people, maybe not.

But it was certainly living like a king. He's the sort of person that the world admires and looks up to. He's the sort of person that the world will carry the favor of.

To gain the favor, the patronage of such a wealthy person. And in very stark contrast, drawn as starkly as you can imagine from the wealth and sumptuous nature of this rich man's life, there was a poor man.

A poor man who lay at the gate. The fact that the rich man had a gate for his house tells us that it was a very grand house indeed. Almost like a palace to have such a gate.

And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores. Maybe leprous, but maybe all sorts of skin diseases and sores. The fact that he's lying there, the word suggests that he'd been placed there as though he couldn't walk.

[5 : 37] Perhaps lame and leprous, covered with disease and illness. And he lay at the gate of this man so that every time the rich man went out or went in, unavoidably he would pass by this poor, lame, sick man called Lazarus.

The only person in any of Jesus' parables actually who's given a first name. In contrast to the rich man feasting sumptuously, Lazarus is hungry, even starving.

So the story goes on to say that he longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table. That is, he didn't even get the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, but he longed even for them.

Just to get a little morsel of something to eat. So desperate and hungry was he at this rich man's gate. Completely disregarded and completely ignored.

Why, even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The dogs paid him more attention than the rich man, but the licking of his sores would probably aggravate the wounds and the infection.

[6 : 51] It's hard to imagine a greater contrast between two people in life. Even in our city, by and large, whilst we might have beggars, they tend not to be in the suburbs where you get rich people with their palaces and their gates.

But here they're together on the same bit of property, rich and poor, thrown together. And the contrast in life continues as a contrast in death.

So the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. There's no mention of a burial.

He probably died unnoticed, more or less. Though perhaps some authority tossed him in a grave. You wouldn't want to leave a corpse out too long in that society.

But now at last there is somebody to show him care. Now, the angels have carried him off to be literally in the bosom of Abraham.

[7 : 52] This is where we get the expression from that old spiritual song, Rock my soul in the bosom of Abraham. I remember when I was a little child singing that song, thinking somehow it was a bit odd that Abraham would have a bosom, and somehow a bit naughty that we should even sing of his bosom.

But probably the expression denotes a closeness or intimacy, that he's been welcomed closely to Abraham's side.

But also to be, in a sense, in the bosom or by the bosom of somebody, suggests that they're actually now eating a meal. The man who's been starving at the gate for crumbs and morsels now is at table fellowship with Abraham.

Because in those days, if you had a formal meal, you would recline at the meal, like at the Last Supper with Jesus and his 12 disciples. You wouldn't sit at a table like Leonardo da Vinci painted.

And there you would recline on your left elbow usually. It's, again, anti-left-handed people like me. And you would eat with your right while you recline on cushions with your legs poking out.

[9 : 01] And there's a sense in which, for the person behind, you're lying back on their chest or their bosom. And you would be in the favoured position if you were lying at the bosom or chest of the person who was the host of the meal.

So probably the connotation here is that not just is he welcomed into intimacy, but now even to a meal, to a heavenly feast, right in the privileged place next to Abraham.

Abraham, of course, is the great patriarch of the Israelite and Jewish people, the one who began the race, in a sense, when called by God and given promises right near the beginning of the Bible.

So here is a privilege given to this poor beggar Lazarus, indeed. Now at last, not only in heaven, but able to feast. But the contrast in death is then made when we realise that the rich man also died and was buried.

No mention of angels or going to be with Abraham for him, but there is mention of a burial. That is, when he died, people took note. There was a ceremony. People probably cried and mourned for 30 days.

[10 : 10] There might have been a wake and a feast afterwards, and so on. Here is a person who's died and been noticed in death, compared to this poor man Lazarus, who dies unattended, apart from the angels.

But the contrast continues after death as well. A contrast in life, a contrast in death, and a contrast after death. Because after death, the poor man Lazarus is at Abraham's side in heaven.

But the rich man is not there. Jesus continues the story in verse 23. He said, In Hades, where the rich man was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

This man's not in heaven. He's in Hades or hell. And it's no fun. He's not whistling a tune while he's crushing rocks.

He's not delighting in the fun of BSX golf and whatever else is in hell. He's being tormented, we're told. He's in agony, we're told, later on. And from there he sees far away into heaven and sees there Abraham, and by his side this poor beggar who he's paid no attention to for however long, who lay by his gate and is now dead.

[11 : 35] And he calls out across the distance to Abraham in heaven. Father Abraham. He's claiming to belong to Abraham because he's Jewish or Israelite.

I really belong to you, he's saying. I shouldn't be here. I'm in the wrong place. Something's gone wrong with my application for heaven. The bureaucracy's mucked it up. Father Abraham.

He calls out. And then he says in verse 24, have mercy on me. Help me, literally. It probably doesn't denote a repentance, but if it does, it's too late.

He's really just crying out for some relief from his torment and agony in hell. Have mercy on me. And then he says, send Lazarus.

Lazarus, the beggar who's been at his gate, who he's paid no attention to and showed no mercy to, he now expects to run his errands and provide him with mercy in his torment in hell.

[12 : 38] And he asks for Lazarus to be sent to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. That shows how desperate he is. Not a glass, but just a few drops of water will provide some relief from this torment and agony that he's undergoing in hell.

Just as Lazarus had craved just the crumbs from the table, now this rich man craves just a few drops of water on the tip of his finger to go onto his tongue, the same tongue that is delighted in feasting sumptuously every day is now crying out just a drop of water.

He's in agony in the flames of hell. Hell's not often described in the Bible, but it is mentioned several times. This is a parable, if you like, a made-up story by Jesus to make a point.

Perhaps the description here of heaven and hell is not too literal in the sense that it may not be that from hell you can look into heaven or vice versa and throw off messages to Abraham or someone else.

But for the point of the parable, that's what Jesus says. However, whenever hell is described in the Bible, it fits the general pattern of what we see here.

[14 : 03] A real place, not just made up, a place of fire and flames and torment, a place where there's weeping and gnashing of teeth, a place once in, it's too late to get out of.

You've missed your opportunity. It's certainly not a place to visit. And whenever hell is described, its purpose is clear.

Avoid this place at all costs. Abraham's reply to the man shows us a great reversal has occurred.

He says to this rich man, child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things. But now he is comforted here, implication by God, and you are in agony.

That is, you've had everything you wanted and he was in agony with evil things and now the reverse has occurred. He's being comforted with what he needs and you're the one in agony.

[15 : 16] That's an astonishing reversal, but one that the Bible consistently tells us God is on about. He's on about in particular exalting the humble and lowly and bringing down the proud.

Sometimes it's expressed in terms of an economic reversal of rich and poor but always in the bigger context of a spiritual reversal. Those who are proud, who are self-sufficient and self-righteous, those who think that they can earn or work their way to heaven and its rewards, they'll be brought down by God.

But he'll lift up the humble, the lowly, the gentle, the outcast, those who trust in God and rely on him rather than on themselves. That's the reversal that even at the beginning of this Gospel of Luke we're told that Jesus came to do.

When Mary sang her song when it was announced to her that she was to give birth to the Saviour, she said he'll come and bring down the proud in their conceit and lift up the humble and the lowly.

God is a God of reversals, a God who will lift up the humble, those who depend on him, but those who depend on themselves who bring them down in their pride and in their conceit.

[16 : 32] The first shall be last and the last shall be first, Jesus said. Abraham is unable to relieve the rich man of his agony. He says to him in verse 26, besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed.

That is by God. It is firm, it cannot be bridged, it cannot be removed. So that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, though it's hard to imagine anyone wanting to do that, but also for no one can cross from there to us.

At death, the divide is fixed and unbridgeable. A final separation of humanity into two groups. Not what we might think, the good and the bad, but those who rely on God in faith and those who do not.

The sheep and the goats, they're called elsewhere, the believers, the unbelievers. Here it is the rich man on one side and Lazarus on the other. Well, the rich man realizes now from Abraham's reply it's too late for him.

So he asks and pleads for the sake of his family still alive back on earth. He says then to Abraham, Father, I beg you to send Lazarus to my father's house for I have five brothers that he may warn them so that they will not also come into this place of torment.

[18 : 07] The brothers are alive, maybe still living on the same place, maybe tilling the same family property. He urges and pleads with Father Abraham to send Lazarus again, treating Lazarus as just a mere servant to run his errands, to go to earth to speak to his five living brothers so that they receive a warning that they don't end up where this rich man has ended up.

And again though, there is no positive reply from Abraham to this rich man's request. Abraham instead says to him, they have Moses and the prophets, they should listen to them.

Now that replies the crux of this parable. It is why Jesus taught it. Not to teach us about rich and poor per se, not to teach us about what hell's temperature will be like.

He taught this parable for this line. They have Moses and the prophets, they should listen to them. That is, they've got all the warnings they need.

Moses and the prophets is a way of describing what we call the Old Testament part of the Bible. In Jesus' day it was all the Bible there was. The New Testament of course, about Jesus, had yet to be written and added to the Old to make our Bibles.

[19 : 26] But Jesus is saying here that the Old Testament itself, without the New Testament, is sufficient warning for avoiding hell. It gives us sufficient information to make sure that we will arrive in heaven.

That is, the Old Testament, even without the New, is sufficient for our salvation. Now for us who live 2,000 years after Jesus and have the whole of the Bible, it is even clearer for us.

Because the clarity of salvation is even more obvious in the New Testament than the Old. If it was true in Jesus' day that his scriptures were sufficient for salvation, how much more is it the case for us that salvation is clearly seen and described in the scriptures of the Bible that we have in front of us.

Our response then is to listen to it. And that doesn't just mean be hearers of it so that we know what verse comes next and all that sort of stuff. Not an intellectual exercise, a memory test.

But in Jewish thought to hear something, to listen to something means pay attention to it. Heed it. Not just hear it even.

[20 : 39] And so for us and for what Abraham was saying to this rich man means pay attention to the scriptures, to the Bible. Obey its commands and trust its promises.

See that the God of the Bible is a God of grace and mercy who will lift up the lowly and bring down the proud. So heed the warning not to be proud and self-sufficient.

Not to be outwardly pious and religious, noble, respectable and so on in society. But submit yourself to the word of God. Repent of your sins.

Trust in the Savior and obey his commands. No doubt for this rich man and his five living brothers as it is the case for many in our world today in effect they think heaven is their right.

They're good people, noble people, religious people, pious people, respectable citizens of society. The people that others will look up to. Oh heaven is mine by right.

[21 : 49] I'm good enough. I'm self-sufficient. But no, Jesus says, that's not what the Bible teaches. Submitting to the word of God means not relying on ourselves and our goodness but rather on the salvation God offers us as a gift in Christ.

The entry criterion to heaven is very clear. There is only one ticket. It is the ticket of faith in Jesus and repentance of our sins.

It is freely given. We don't have to pay for it. We can take it in faith and present it at heaven's gate so to speak and the doors will open wide and the red carpet rolled out to greet us.

But think we'll be there for anything that we have done, any contribution we make and we'll end up with the rich man in agony in Hades and hell.

See, this rich man may have been pious and religious. We don't know much about him. But his contempt for Lazarus who was at his very gate shows his contempt for the scriptures and therefore his contempt for God.

[23 : 05] For the scriptures make very clear what sort of life we're to live. A life that loves God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength not just a bit, not just Sunday mornings, not with just the leftovers of our life, but with everything in our life.

And loving our neighbour as ourself. And if that's too vague to say, rich man, you should be caring for the poor Lazarus at your gate. There are very clear and specific commands through the Old Testament that this man should have known.

To care for those who are sick and ill, those who are suffering, those who are beggars, who are fellow Israelites in your community. But by doing none of that, he showed his contempt not only for Lazarus, but his contempt for God's commands and scriptures.

And therefore, his contempt for God. And hence, he ends up where he does. Well, the rich man objects to this Abraham saying that they've got enough in scriptures.

He knows his brothers. He knows they don't pay attention to the scriptures. He says, no, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they'll repent. That is, they need more than the Bible.

[24 : 16] The Bible's not enough, he's saying. Send someone from the dead. That'll make them take notice. Then they'll repent of their sins. It might have worked for Scrooge in Christmas Carol when he saw a ghost to change his life.

But it doesn't work in real life. You see, the problem we have is not that we need more evidence to make us repent and trust God.

Our lack is a lack of willingness to submit to God. Not more evidence, but more willingness to submit to God's word.

Abraham replies in the last line of this chapter and passage, if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced, even if someone rises from the dead.

This parable was told by Jesus some months before he died and he rose from the dead. Prophetic indeed, though probably his audience did not realize that. But even when Jesus did rise from the dead and the tomb was empty, people didn't believe, by and large, some did of course, but most didn't.

[25 : 34] Most remained stubborn in their refusal to accept Jesus as the Messiah, as they refused him beforehand, so they did after his resurrection. See, from time to time people say to me, if they're not believers or they're trying to find out about the Christian faith, that they need more.

They want God to come again, God to appear again, God to do a miracle in their life. Then they'll believe, they say, as though they need more evidence. But it didn't convince people in Jesus' day.

The people who ate the bread from the miracle of feeding the 5,000, they weren't all suddenly followers of Jesus. Maybe for a little while they wondered what was going on. The people who saw and knew people who'd been healed and cured of lameness or whatever, some of them may have become followers, but not all.

The miracle doesn't necessarily convince people. The miracles of the Exodus time, in the time of Moses, didn't easily convince Pharaoh and the Egyptians. Thomas at the resurrection took some convincing.

You see, the point is, we have all we need in the scriptures that God has given us, sufficient for salvation, sufficient to warn us about hell and to assure us about heaven.

[26 : 51] Sufficient to tell us that salvation is through faith in Christ and repentance of our sins. the reason why people don't believe is not an intellectual problem.

It's not because they lack evidence to believe in God. The problem why people don't believe is a moral one. That is, people want to live their own life.

They want to do the equivalent of dressing in fine linen and purple and feasting sumptuously. They want to accumulate for themselves their wealth on earth. They want to live a comfortable, fun life.

They want to be top of the rung. They want to do what they want in their terms and rely on themselves and no one else least of all God. No amount of evidence will convince such people unless in their heart they change and submit to the word that God has already given us.

This parable comes at the end of a chapter that began with a parable and on the whole has the theme of wealth running through it. Jesus is not attacking rich people per se but there is a very clear warning here for those who are rich and we all are in that category.

[28 : 09] In the first parable which we saw last week here in church we saw the person being commended who uses his wealth to secure eternal friends in heaven.

That is one who looks to heaven and uses his wealth for that purpose, not for the here and now. This rich man didn't do that. When he died Lazarus was not at the gates of heaven to welcome him in, he was going down another track altogether.

After that parable Jesus said to those who are there you cannot serve God and wealth. There is a danger in wealth because it becomes our master and we seek to accumulate it whether it's for noble things like our family or our security or whether it's just for fun or for power.

Wealth is dangerous. You cannot serve both God and wealth. Then he said in the next verse, verse 14 to the Pharisees that he described them as lovers of money. Clearly a dig at them saying yes for all their show about being lovers of God, very religious people of his day, they're actually lovers of money.

They're not serving God, they're serving wealth. And then he said of these Pharisees, you are those who justify yourselves in the sight of others just like the rich man in this parable we've seen today.

[29 : 30] God knows your hearts though. For what is prized by human beings, fine linen, purple, sumptuous feasting, is an abomination in the sight of God.

This rich man was looked up to by the world. He would have been today if he'd been alive today. No doubt people tried to carry his favour to have hospitality at his feasts to win his patronage.

But his complete contempt and disdain for the poor beggar at his gate shows that for all his wealth he was an abomination to God. Justified perhaps in the sight of others but not in the sight of God.

He loved his money, he didn't serve God, he served his money. He loved to show off his wealth in his clothing and his feasts. He loved what was prized by humans but showed therefore contempt for God.

The sombre and sober warning of this parable is very clear to us and there is no way around it unless we submit to God's plan of salvation revealed all too clearly in the scriptures to us about Jesus Christ.

[30 : 48] We also would face the heat of hell. humaneness ruling of nation.

But yeah, there was something we all know been tolerable. I and I have heard of somebody going to cause that that we made through