

Who Is The Lazarus At Your Gate

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[0 : 00] I want you to turn to Luke chapter 16, verse 19, which was read as the gospel for the day, and it's found in your blue pew Bible on page 75 of the New Testament section.

And having been away for two Sundays, I want you to know that I have missed you all, very much, much more than I should have, and I say that to you corporately and individually, but it's just the basis to tell you that I'm very happy to be back, and look forward to having opportunity to renew my acquaintance with many of you.

It seems a long time that I've been away, but it's only really two weeks. In this parable this morning, and it's a parable of Jesus coming in this 16th chapter, there is certain things that you ought to remember.

First, that it is a parable, and a parable generally has only one point that it wants to make, and if you try and make 17 consecutive points out of it, you are in trouble.

The second thing I want you to know is that it's told by Jesus, and you are to listen to the story in order to learn something about the storyteller.

[1 : 34] He's telling you something about himself in the story that he tells you, so you are to listen carefully to him. The third thing about it, and you may be interested to look at this, it looks like it's something of a response to certain questions that have already come up in the chapter.

If you look in chapter 16, verse 14, you find the Pharisees were lovers of money, and they heard all this, and they scoffed at him.

But 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.

And in a sense, that point is taken by the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Another point that is taken by the parable is, in a sense, the answer to that question, or that statement, an explanation of the statement in verse 9, chapter 16.

I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of righteous mammon, so that when it fails, they may receive you into eternal habitations.

[2 : 57] And again, it's the answer to, or explanation of, verse 13. No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and mammon. So, these are the conditions that Jesus lays down in telling this parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Now, if you look at the text of the story itself, you will find that the rich man was indeed very rich. And it says of him, not only did he have abundant material resources, and the Latin word for a rich man is apparently divase.

That's why he's called divase, the rich man. And though that name doesn't appear here, but that describes his circumstance. He was a rich man.

He was clothed in purple. And purple was an extremely expensive dye. And therefore, anybody you saw clothed in purple, you know was a man of great distinction, of power and of authority, and of great wealth.

[4 : 29] And not only was he clothed in purple, but he also had fine linen. The fine linen was at the cost of twice its weight in gold.

So, he was extremely well dressed. He probably had the names of the best tailors sewn into his garments. And it was obvious to see that he was a man of great wealth and great power.

And then it goes on to say of him that he feasted sumptuously every day. And the feasting sumptuously is what's interpreted in Luke 15 as making merry.

That is, the prodigal son came home, so they made merry on this very special occasion. And the older brother's complaint was, you never gave me opportunity to make merry with my friends.

So, this man, Dives, in Luke chapter 16, lived as though it was a festival day after day after day.

[5 : 40] It was absolutely unending. And it went on, and he was totally occupied in it. Then Jesus gives, in stark contrast to this man, the picture of the beggar lying at his gate, whose body was full of ulcers.

And in order to fix your attention, said, that the dogs came and licked the ulcers. That was the medical treatment that he had under the circumstance.

One of the happy incidents of this story is that Lazarus means helped by God. And lots of us in our cynical unfaith might look at him and say, that's what it means to be helped by God.

To lie a beggar full of sores at the gate of a rich man's house. And so, we conclude, rather than being helped by God, I will determine to help myself.

And of course, that's what the rich man presumably had done. There is another part of the story, and that is that when he's described as a poor man, it means that he is a man that is all bent over and slinking around so that nobody can see him.

[7 : 08] Or, in a way, to suggest through body language that he doesn't want to be seen. He is a person who cowers from being seen by other people.

And it's a very strange thing that, if you examine the words, the poor was a term of shame, a term of infamy, until the New Testament, which turns it around, like it turns many other words around, and poor becomes an honorable estate because of its usage in the New Testament.

So, he was a poor man, and he was laid there, desiring to eat from the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table.

So, what happened in the story was that the purpose of the parable was to teach what happens when you totally reverse your circumstances, what would happen to your beliefs.

Jesus suddenly reverses their circumstances. The rich man is in torment. The poor man is in the bosom of Abraham.

[8 : 33] Such is the rich man's torment that that filthy, ulcerated hand of Lazarus, he long should dip in water that it might touch the tip of his tongue and relieve him of his torment.

So, completely have their positions been reversed. You can see the terrible reversal when you think of the bosom of Abraham, which must be a lovely picture of where and how we are to be received, as was expressed in one of the Negro spirituals, which longs to be found in the bosom of Abraham.

Well, that's where Lazarus found himself. And having found himself there, Dives found himself in exactly the opposite situation and suffered terrible remorse.

You know how, I don't know if any of you are old enough, but when you get to be older, you can look back at the years that you have been completely insensitive, completely unaware of what was happening in your life, completely unaware of the processes that were going on in your life, and that becomes, for all of us, a moment of remorse.

And that moment of remorse had come to divide the rich man. He had now to deal with all the thoughtless, careless years of his life.

[10 : 11] And the picture is a picture of powerful reversal. The rich man now in torment and the poor man in the bosom of Abraham.

Now, it's not a story about the rich and the poor, essentially. There are several interesting rich men, two of them in this story.

There was rich men on both sides of the gulf. One of them was Abraham, and on the other side was Dives. So it's not essentially a story about rich and poor.

The rich men in Luke's gospel are the prodigal son when he had received his inheritance. The rich young ruler who came and asked what he must do to have eternal life.

The steward in earlier part of chapter 16 who had been entrusted with great wealth. Zacchaeus, whom you may have been here to hear about last week.

[11 : 12] Luke also mentions a rich neighbor which you might have, and you're to be careful not to invite him for lunch because there's so many people that need lunch more than he does.

And then there is Abraham, referred to in this story as a rich man. So that riches and poverty are not what the story is about.

The difficulty with riches and poverty, as one commentator says, that we regard wealth as our own doing and poverty as imposed on us.

And isn't it a fortunate thing that we come to this passage of scripture on the very day in which you have to finish your income tax returns. And how deeply you can feel the circumstances of your own life as you look at the final return and say either, well, that proves that I'm as good or better than I thought I was, or it proves that I am the victim of unjust circumstances.

The wealthy regarding their wealth as their own doing and the poor regarding their condition as that imposed on them by other circumstances.

[12 : 34] And he suggests that one of the things we should try sometime is that the rich should learn to regard wealth as an unfair imposition and the poor should learn to regard poverty as their own responsibility.

I don't know how that would get along in our modern world, but it certainly has a lot to do with our own hearts and our relationship to our material circumstances.

That our wealth is very often an unfair imposition which may blind us to the reality of the kingdom and our poverty we don't take responsibility for as we should because we believe that it's all something that's been imposed on us.

So you have this contrasting story. And in the contrast, it comes to this focus. It forces us to look at three things.

First, it reminds us that the way God deals with us is to put a Lazarus at our gate and to see what we do with him. I don't know who your Lazarus is, but I'm sure that he or she is there and their need is apparent to you and your heart's condition is determined by how you deal with that person, how you deal with the Lazarus in your life.

[14 : 13] If you don't see him, it's probable that, it's not likely that he's not there, it's probable that you simply don't see him and he is there. So would you be bold enough to pray that you might recognize the Lazarus at your gate?

The second thing that the rich man was blind to and wasted all his life without recognizing it was he was blind to the teaching of Moses and the prophets.

Most of us like to live our lives without knowing what is good or what is bad, without searching too deeply into the very purpose of life itself, without coming to grips with the basic questions which every life has to confront.

And we have opportunity to confront those basic questions in the teaching of Moses and the prophets. If Moses and the prophets teach tithing, as I believe they do, then that's a good place for us to come to grips with the question.

If Moses and the prophets teach us what it is to have faith in God, then that's a good place for us to learn. And we can't ultimately plead ignorance.

[15 : 42] Daivis wasn't allowed to plead ignorance because he knew it, nor were his brothers allowed to plead ignorance because they also knew of Moses and the prophets.

The third thing that we're asked to remember here is when Daivis says to Father Abraham, could you send Lazarus back from the dead?

And Father Abraham refuses to do it. A lot of people think that if people are scared badly enough, they will repent.

And nothing like a familiar ghost to confront you to change your mind about the way you're living. And so Daivis proposed that this ghost of Lazarus go back to haunt his brothers and hope that he would terrify them into looking at the kingdom.

Well, Abraham says there's an even better cure than that or a better response than that, and even that wouldn't be good enough under the circumstance.

[16 : 58] The better response, he suggests to them, is even if someone should rise from among the dead, they wouldn't hear.

And that's the big difficulty. And the purpose, I think, of the parable is to tell you to, at least in your imagination, as the story does in imagination, is to totally reverse your position and see what your beliefs would be.

And sometimes God, in his wisdom, has to totally reverse our positions in order that we can find out what the true value of things really is.

Our position has to be totally reversed in order that we can begin to determine what it is we, in fact, believe in.

Now, presumably, we can come to this reversal of our own will. But we have to come, as Jesus indicates, to this awareness that if you are rich, be as though you were poor.

[18 : 14] And if you are eating sumptuously every day, try starvation. And if you are living in the lap of luxury, try examining what would happen if all that was taken away.

What then would you believe? Well, that seems to me to be terribly important. And I suppose it's the reason why Christians all down through the centuries have forsaken all those things that have stood in the way of them coming to grips with the reality of the grace of God in their own lives to totally reverse their position.

And in reversing their position, to discover what it is that they really believe. You have the opportunity this morning to reverse your position, to come as a beggar full of sores, desiring to eat the crumbs which fall from the rich man's table.

Because all your wealth is as rags before the resources of the God with whom we have to do and who has made himself known to us in Jesus Christ.

And this God wants to share with you the priceless wealth which he has for you. Not the transitory wealth of this world, but a wealth which is of inestimable value.

[20 : 00] and so I invite you in Christ's name to come as a beggar, perhaps somewhat ashamed of your poverty, as we all have reason to be ashamed and yet find it hard to acknowledge.

And to desire the crumbs which fall from the rich man's table, to kneel and put out our hands as a beggar that we might receive the bread of heaven and that royal wine which is the blood of Christ.

To come as a beggar to receive what God has provided for us to reverse our position. and if you have spent this week in contentment with all that God has provided you with, how much more important is it for you that in this hour you come as a beggar to acknowledge your poverty and to receive as from God himself the inestimable riches of the body and blood of Christ and that you might further identify yourself with this man.

Remember that you will be invited to join and say we do not presume to come to this thy table trusting in the purple and linen and the fact that we fare sumptuously every day trusting in our own righteousness but in thy manifold and great mercies because our true condition in comparison to your wealth is that we need to be fed with the food which you alone can give.

We need neither to be defensive about our poverty nor proud about our wealth but dependent totally on your grace and to receive and to receive the body and blood of Christ as God's provision for us and thereby to totally reverse your circumstances.

[22 : 27] you may feel in your proud self-sufficiency that it's somewhat demeaning to have to join in the confession. That it's somewhat demeaning to be invited to truly and earnestly repent you of your sins.

That it's unworthy to be asked whether you are living in love and charity with your neighbor. But it's in order to reverse the proud position which our minds and hearts take about our own self-sufficiency and to come into the place where we recognize that provision which God has made for us which we are blind to which our ears are deaf so that we cannot hear it.

That's what my experience of being away for two weeks has really meant to me that the true wealth is to belong to Jesus Christ and to belong to those who belong to Jesus Christ.

My life is wrapped up with you and with one another because together we receive that which Christ alone can provide.

We're not here to prove to anybody that we can do it alone. We're not here to demonstrate that I can get along without you. We're here to demonstrate our dependence on one another and our dependence on that provision which God has made for us in Christ.

[24 : 12] So can we in our minds and hearts consider that throne of grace and come boldly to it in all our poverty reversing all our worldly pride and human self-sufficiency and being willing to receive as the beggars that we are the royal food of heaven.

God grant that by his Holy Spirit we may come into this sense of dependency more and more and that we might recognize our true wealth to be that which God has given us in Christ.

Amen. Amen. Our offertory hymn is a communion hymn number 246.

246. God wants to get on Christ his great joy Thank you.

Thank you.

[26 : 58] Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.

[29 : 26] Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Our loving Father, receive these gifts and with them receive ourselves.

Grant us to serve both yourself and one another. In the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.