

## THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

Luke 16:19–31

Key Verses: 16:20–21

“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.”

How do you view wealth and poverty? Most people see riches as a sign of blessing, and poverty as a sign of curse. If we’re being honest, we all tend to envy rich people. We try to escape being poor as fast as possible. But in today’s passage Jesus tells a parable of a rich man who ends up in hell, and a poor man who ends up in heaven. What’s he teaching? What does he want us to learn? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living words today.

In this travel section Luke stresses Jesus’ teaching on wealth and poverty. He repeatedly mentions selling or renouncing possessions and giving to the needy (12:33; 14:33; 18:22; 19:8). And he records unique parables of Jesus that all speak in some way to the subject of wealth: the good Samaritan (10:29–37); the rich fool (12:13–21); the great banquet (14:12–24); the shrewd manager (16:1–15), and now, the rich man and Lazarus (16:19–31). Clearly, Jesus wants us, as his disciples, to learn how to use our possessions properly. Today’s parable shows us how serious a matter it is.

At the beginning of the chapter Jesus tells a parable of a man who was accused of wasting possessions (1b). Then Jesus rebukes the Pharisees who were lovers of money (14–15). Now he adds another parable. In today’s parable, Luke uses such vivid language. Look at verse 19. “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.” What a life! The guy is so carefree. He can enjoy whatever he wants. Money’s no object. And he has such a flair for living. He’s dressed in expensive purple, fine linen underwear, and celebrating every day. Everything is “first class,” “premium,” “gourmet,” “five star,” “nothing but the best!” In Greek, the word “sumptuously” actually means he’s showing off. In every age, only a small percentage of the population can afford to live like this, and they always think they’re superior to everyone else.

Read verse 20. “And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores...” The Greek word for “gate” suggests the rich man’s house was a palace. And it was at this gate that people “laid” or “tossed” this poor man

named Lazarus. In fact, they dumped him there like a load of smelly garbage. Luke the medical doctor uses a unique Greek word to tell us that Lazarus is “covered with sores.” What a contrast to the rich man’s clothes! Lazarus is not only poor, but really sick, in so much suffering, and totally humiliated. To ordinary people, he’s so burdensome, nobody wants to deal with him. Probably, they put him at the rich man’s gate, thinking that at least there, he could get some help. But it’s not happening. The rich man and his servants are passing him by at that gate daily, but to them, this poor beggar doesn’t even exist.

And there’s more sad details. Read verse 21. “...who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.” Lazarus is actually starving, dreaming of the crumbs falling from the rich man’s table, hoping that someday, somehow, somebody might give him even a bit. No doubt there were plenty of leftovers from all those lavish daily meals, but none of it ever made it out to Lazarus. The rich man is too full of himself to think of doing that. As he passes him each day, out of the corner of his eye he can see Lazarus and his sores, but his heart is callous. This rich man is really merciless. Luke adds, “Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.” Even the stray hungry dogs are more compassionate than this rich man. We should note that his name “Lazarus” means “God is my help.” Lazarus truly has no one but God to help him.

In our world, rich and poor are often living right next to each other. One neighborhood in Chicago famous for this is the Gold Coast. People with lots of money have lived there in elegant highrises and ate at the fanciest restaurants, all just a few blocks away from a notorious neighborhood called “Little Hell,” where despised people were caught in a vicious circle of poverty, drugs, violence and prostitution. All the world’s most beautiful cities, where rich tourists flock, have this same subculture they’re trying to hide, where human poverty and suffering go unnoticed. People ignore it, but God doesn’t. Still, in this parable Jesus isn’t really teaching to bring economic justice to the world. What’s his point?

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...” This verse reminds us of how death is “the Great Leveler.” Rich and poor alike experience death. When we do, all our differences evaporate. Rich or poor, at death we’re equally helpless and vulnerable. Job famously said, “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked shall I return” (Job 1:21). All of us have this same destiny with death. The real distinction is in what happens to us afterwards. It says the poor man “was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side.” It tells us that despite his condition, Lazarus is not just poor; he’s a man of faith, so precious and valuable

to God. Though despised in life, now he's brought by God to the highest place in heaven!

And what happens to the rich man? Read verse 23. "...and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side." What a shock! The rich man, whom everybody envied, suddenly finds himself in torment in hell! What's more, he can see Abraham in heaven and Lazarus at his side, far off and unattainable, forever reminding him of his own humiliation. It's called "the Great Reversal," a theme in Luke's Gospel (e.g. 1:51–53; 10:15; 14:11; 16:15; 18:14). Read verse 24. "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.'" His words are haunting. This rich man had ignored Lazarus; now he's the one crying for mercy. The tiny drops of water he's begging for are similar to the table scraps Lazarus had dreamed of. But he's ordering Abraham to send Lazarus. He still thinks of Lazarus as his servant, permanently less than him. Most of all, he says, "I am in anguish in this flame." We can only imagine the intensity of his pain and torment. Though it's a parable, these words are pointing to the future state of all those who never repented. It's not a myth; it's very real. What answer does the rich man get? Read verse 25. "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.'" Abraham calls him "Child" and explains why he's suffering, but he declines to show him mercy. Why? As the Bible says, "For judgment is without mercy to the one who has shown no mercy" (James 2:13a). It's not only punishment for this cruel rich man; it's God's ultimate justice, and God's comfort to Lazarus.

In the vindication of Lazarus, who suffered so much, what is Jesus teaching? In a sense, he's inviting us to embrace our suffering in this life. We should not allow "the cares and riches and pleasures of life" to choke out his word from our hearts and make us selfish (8:14). Luke repeats how Jesus himself suffered to do God's will (9:22; 17:25; 22:15; 24:26,46). Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (9:23). He's calling us not to live in luxurious self-indulgence, but to daily suffering, self-denial and the cross of doing God's will. We can't just talk about it; we need to make it our lifestyle. It's not the pattern of this world; it's the way of our Lord Jesus Christ. Paul says we are "fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him" (Rom.8:17). God is calling us to this life (1Pe2:21), not to suffer for our sins, but to "suffer with" Jesus (Php1:29). This suffering still feels very real, but it's the suffering that leads to the glory of his kingdom (2Th1:5). Every day, God sees our suffering for Jesus; God remembers it; and God himself will reward it. The Bible says that

through his grace, when we suffer with Christ, God gives us eternal comfort (2Th2:16).

Even more, Jesus is teaching us here what to do with our possessions. Just as he taught in his parable of the Good Samaritan, he wants us to stop and take care of wounded people, and pay out of our own pockets to nurse them back to health. Just as he taught in his parable of the rich fool, he wants us not to lay up treasure for ourselves but become rich toward God by sharing our possessions. Just as he taught in his parable of the great banquet, he wants us to give a feast and invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Just as he taught in his parable of the shrewd manager, he wants us to seize the opportunity to use unrighteous wealth to make friends for Jesus. His parable of the rich man and Lazarus warns us to repent of self-indulgence, take notice of those in great pain, and start using what we have to bring them God's comfort. It's a timeless warning: earthly wealth can make us so selfish and heartless. We need to be actively putting our possessions to good use, to show Christ's compassion for the needy.

But who are the needy? To be sure, it's those in financial and physical pain. But it's more than that. In the Bible, the Risen Christ rebukes a rich church: "For you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing, not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked" (Rev3:17). He's describing their spiritual condition. Spiritually, people can be starving and totally powerless. Their souls can become covered with sores. People can be so inwardly wounded, crippled, and not even know it; it's all invisible. What should we do for spiritually needy people? Ignore them because outwardly they seem fine? Judge them? No. In one of his parables Jesus said, "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me" (Mt25:35–36). He wasn't just describing literal human suffering; he was talking about "the least of these, my brothers and sisters" (Mt25:40). The hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick, the imprisoned—they are all those living apart from God, suffering from the symptoms of their sin. We encounter them every day, everywhere we go. Do we see them? Do we care? Do we stop and do anything for them? Or are we full of ourselves like the rich man?

Verse 26 is a warning: once we've crossed the threshold of death, there's no more chance to repent, no more second chances, no more reversals. Our state is permanent, eternal. We'll either be in the bliss of heaven, or in the torment of hell. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers about "this place of torment" (27–28). But his request is again refused. Even miraculous resurrections won't help anyone repent; only Moses and the

Prophets, the Bible, the living word of God, can bring people to repentance (29–31).

Read verses 20–21 again. “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.” May God open our eyes to see those near us who are sick and starving spiritually. May he help us use our resources to show them the compassion and mercy of Jesus and feed and nurse them back to health. May God help us all to repent based on his word and embrace a life of suffering with Jesus, believing the hope of his eternal comfort.