

The Rich Man and Lazarus **Luke 16:19-31**

If you cast your minds back a couple of weeks, Jesus told the parable of the dishonest manager. And through that parable Jesus was saying, you can learn something from this man: that you and I are to use money now, in this life, for our eternal future.

But when the Pharisees heard that, Luke tells us that they just ridiculed Jesus. They ridiculed the idea that the way you view and use money now might somehow be connected with your eternal destiny. And they responded like that, Luke tells us in v14, because they were 'lovers of money'.

So Jesus tells them another parable – a parable about how things turn out for a man who loves money; how things turn out, after death, eternally, for someone who thinks that there is no connection between his bank account and heaven and hell, that his wealth is for him to do with as he wants, with no eternal consequences; and it's this parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Rich or Poor?

If you had known these two men, the two central characters of this parable, you wouldn't have had any problems spotting who was who. If you lived on their street and someone asked you who was the rich man and who was the poor man it wouldn't have been exactly difficult to tell them apart.

The rich man had everything he could possibly want. The poor man had nothing. The rich man was dressed like a king – in purple and fine linen – which given that purple dye was incredibly expensive, is like saying that he was wearing only the best designer gear. But whilst he was covered in fine clothing, the poor man was covered with sores. The rich man feasted sumptuously every day; the poor man was starving and would have been happy just to eat the crumbs under the table – the scraps thrown to the dogs. Instead the dogs came and licked his sores. And whilst the rich man lived in a house big enough to have a gate, the poor man lay in the street outside that gate.

These two men are poles apart. They inhabit seemingly different worlds. The one thing they have in common is that they both die. As you and I will all one day die. Death is no respecter of persons or of bank accounts. As we saw in the parable of the dishonest manager, the day came when money failed this rich man. But even in death, they differ. Luke tells us simply, v22, that 'the poor man died' whilst 'the rich man also died *and was buried*.' The rich man gets a decent burial. But there's no mention of a burial for the poor man. He probably just dies in the street, and his corpse is either tossed into a paupers' grave, or thrown on the bonfire in the Valley of Hinnom.

They are about as different as you can get. The rich man would have been everything the Pharisees, and maybe you and I would consider blessed. The poor man, was a sick, starving, homeless beggar – unclean and unwanted.

But interestingly, though their wealth and position and standing in society were so different, those things aren't the biggest difference between them. Did you notice what the greatest contrast between them is in this story? The greatest

contrast between them is that the poor man, Lazarus, has a name; and the rich man doesn't.

Now, in every other of Jesus' parables none of the characters have names – not one: The good Samaritan is just a good Samaritan; the sower who sows seed is just a sower; the shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep is just a shepherd; a nameless woman hunts for her lost coin; there's an anonymous father with two sons, the older brother and the younger brother, but we're never told their names; there's a dishonest manager, and we don't know his name either. This is the only parable where Jesus gives a character a name, which tells you that He's doing it for a reason. Which of course begs the question: What's He trying to tell you? Why does Jesus give the poor man a name and not the rich man? What's in a name? Well, you'll find the answer in the meaning of the name.

And Lazarus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means, 'God is my help.' God is my help – my refuge, my security, my treasure, not money. So what Jesus has done through this parable is set up a contrast – not simply between the rich, who live for their own pleasure, and the poor who are starving in the very shadow of that wealth; but between an individual – the rich man, on the one hand – who gets his very identity from what he has, and on the other hand, an individual who finds his identity in God, even when stripped of everything else.

The rich man has no name, because he has no other identity – Jesus describes him in terms of his clothes and food and house and possessions. His identity is tied up with what he has, what he earns, what he wears, where he lives; but strip all those away – remove his riches, and he's nothing. But the poor man – Lazarus – *God is my help* – when he is stripped of everything is still Lazarus, because he gets his identity, not from what he has, but from God, his Helper. The rich man's identity is totally tied up with possessions. The poor man's identity is built on God.

Now, that might seem a bit esoteric to you – but if how you see yourself, and how you see others, who you are, is tied up with money and what you have – then like this rich man, you are going to struggle to live the life of self-sacrificing generosity that Jesus calls you to, because that's where you get your security from, or your sense of worth from, and so the prospect of letting go and giving away that which gives you security, or that from which you get your self worth, may very well fill you with fear. And as a consequence of holding on, the poor and the needy starve at the gate.

But if your identity, who you are, is built not on what you have, but on God, and Christ is your greatest treasure, then you'll be happy to give of your time and your resources in caring for the needy at your gate because your self-worth or your sense of security does not depend on a certain life-style, or on what you spend on yourself – but on Him who spent Himself for you.

So as you look at these two men – ask yourself, who was the real rich man? The anonymous man who loved riches, or the man who looked to God as his helper?

Who possessed the true riches? The man whose identity was so tied up with what he had and strip that away and he had nothing, or the poor man who even though he had nothing had put his security and got his identity from that which will last forever?

You see, as both these men discovered, and as everyone of us will discover seconds after we die, wealth now is no indication of eternal wealth.

The Road to Hell

Having introduced us to these two men, Jesus switches scenes to the next life. Both the men die – but funnily enough, death isn't the end of the story.

And what the rich man discovers is that now his wealth and social standing count for nothing, and their earthly situations are entirely reversed. The poor man, Lazarus, who had nothing but who trusted God as his helper – is welcomed into heaven, while the rich man who loved money more than God, finds himself in torment, separated from God and all that is good by a great and unbridgeable, chasm.

And Jesus tells us, v23, that the rich man 'lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.' What a turn around! Before he would have looked down on Lazarus as an unclean beggar, cluttering his sidewalk, now he has to look up and far away to see him beside Abraham. And this once rich man who showed no mercy to Lazarus when he lay at his gate now seeks mercy. But just as there were no crumbs for Lazarus, so there are no drops of water for the rich man. Their reversal is complete.

But how has all this happened? How has this rich man ended up in hell? Because it's not just because he's rich, is it? After all, by any accounting, Abraham was a rich man. So he doesn't go to hell because of his wealth. It's not like Abraham or St Peter stand at the gates of heaven, and demand to see your latest salary slip, and if you're poor you're ok, but woe betide you if you got a bonus this year! And there's no suggestion that he got rich illegally or illicitly. There's no whiff of Ponzi schemes or fraud here.

No, he doesn't go to hell because he was rich, he goes to hell because of his heart. It was what he did with his riches, and what that tells us about his heart that paved his way to hell.

In 1 Timothy 6:10, the apostle Paul says that, 'the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil.' And by listening to this rich man as he interacts with Abraham, I want you to see how loving money more than God is at the root of this man's woes: How his road to hell has been paved with gold.

Firstly, he thought that money, and the status his money brought him, gave him the right to lord it over others. In the parable of the sower, Jesus says that the weeds that sprang up and strangled some of the seed that was sown, and so stop the word of God bearing fruit in someone's life, include the 'deceitfulness of riches' (Matt 13:22). Now, why does Jesus say riches are deceitful? Because when

you have them they can deceive you into believing things that aren't true. And that's what happens with this man. Here he is in torment, and he still thinks he can click his fingers and have Abraham order Lazarus to do his bidding: v24, '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.' V27, 'send him, [that's Lazarus again] to my father's house – for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them'.

It's amazing isn't it? He's in torment, in hell, and he still thinks Lazarus is his servant and errand boy. It's the insidious effects of pride, that loving money more than God, and building your identity on what you have rather than on God, can have upon the human heart. It's the pride that can suck you in to think you are more important or of greater value than those who have less. It's why a man or woman can live in luxury and in total disregard for another human starving at the gate. It's why an individual can be given every opportunity to use his or her life and wealth for something good, and yet spends it on his or her own pleasure.

The second effect loving money more than God has worked upon his heart, is that his compassion only extends to those who are like him. He's in torment, in hell, and the ones he is thinking about are his brothers – who no doubt are rich and living in luxury as he was - he *still* doesn't think about the poor – he's only thinking about his own. Like the rest of us, he had been entrusted as a steward of God's wealth, and he could have used those resources to care for the likes of Lazarus, for people who were different from himself, but he didn't. Because the danger of judging your worth and others worth on what you or they possess, and loving money more than God, is that you won't be able to look past those who *are* like you to love the ones who are *unlike* you - the stranger, the foreigner, the widow, the orphan, the poor, the very ones whom Christ calls us to love.

But the third effect that loving money more than God has had upon his heart, and ultimately the one that secures his eternal separation from God, is that he has developed the habit of saying 'no' to heaven.

The rich man wants Abraham to send Lazarus back – maybe in a dream or a vision or something – to warn his brothers to repent. But Abraham's response to that is 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them' (v29). They don't need any ghostly apparitions to tell them what they need to do, Abraham says, the Old Testament – Moses and the Prophets - speak constantly of the need to care for the poor. If they don't listen to the word of God, a ghost won't do it. But notice how the rich man responds: v30 'And he said, 'no, father Abraham.'

This guy has said 'no' to heaven too many times. As he sat in the synagogue, Sabbath after Sabbath, hearing the Old Testament being read, week in week out, when he was prompted, by the Holy Spirit through the word of God, to care for the needy – he got practiced in saying, 'no'. When day in and day out he saw Lazarus sick and starving at his gate, and his conscience whispered to him that he could help him, he learned to firmly silence that inner voice. He has said 'no' once too often to heaven; his every 'no' was one step nearer to hell. Why? Because he loved money more than God. He has learned to resist and squash and

silence the call of God to repent and change. So when you are tempted to resist Jesus' call to steward His wealth for His glory and others' good, just remember this man.

But that 'no' to Father Abraham reveals something else about him as well. And that is that in his opinion the word of God, Moses and the Prophets, isn't enough. Abraham and heaven say it is, and he says it's not, because 'it wasn't enough for me'. 'I needed and my brothers need more evidence. It's not my fault I'm here in torment – it's your fault God. I didn't get sufficient information.' He's shifting the blame from himself to God. He doesn't think he's guilty – he thinks God's guilty. He hasn't given him enough info, because if he had he wouldn't be here. You see, one of the dangers of wealth is that it makes you think you're not accountable to anyone. But you are, we are all accountable to God. And yet, despite being in torment, he never once asks for forgiveness. Sure he asks for mercy, for his suffering to be alleviated, but not once for forgiveness and not once to get out.

And the ultimate pride is that we choose hell for ourselves. This man's hell was of his own making. In saying 'no' to heaven he was saying 'yes' to hell. In Romans 1 Paul tells us that when man chooses something else other than God as the ultimate thing in their life, God gives them up to that which they have chosen. He gives them over to their desires. And this anonymous rich man has sealed his own fate. He has reaped what he has sown. Because loving something other than God corrupts, and it corrupts eternally.

Now how do you avoid that outcome for yourself?

Taking a different path

In Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*, the central character is a man called Scrooge, who is a graphic portrayal of what the love of money can do to a man, negatively: Dickens describes Scrooge as a 'squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner'. But Scrooge's story begins to turn around when he is visited one night by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley. And Marley comes with the sole intention of warning Scrooge to change his ways lest he end up as Marley has ended up, tormented by forever-lost opportunities to do good with his wealth.

And it's exactly that kind of visit from the dead that the rich man wants Abraham to pull off for his brothers. V30 again, 'If someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' But Abraham makes it clear, that's not going to happen: v31 'He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'

And what Jesus has done there is to flip the rich man talking about someone *going* from the dead, a ghostly apparition, to Abraham talking about someone *rising* from the dead. And Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, and to anyone else who is tempted to love money more than God, that the key to understanding why that is so wrong, and why it misses the point of what money is for, and how instead we can take a different path from this rich man, lies in Jesus' own death and resurrection. And that can only be properly understood in the light of Moses and

the Prophets - the Old Testament Scriptures.

And what Moses and the Prophets tell us is that God himself would come, and suffer and die – and that in doing so He would take upon Himself all our sin and failings. In the words of Isaiah the prophet (Is 53), He would be ‘despised and rejected by men... he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed.’

You see, Jesus was rejected by men, and at the cross He was separated from His Father, that you and I need never experience the chasm of alienation from God that the rich man faced. At the cross, Jesus was pierced, and crushed, and broken so that rather than face eternal torment, we might be healed. And He did it, Moses and the Prophets tell us, because of His steadfast, never ending love for us. *The Rich Man – Jesus - became poor, that He might save rich and poor alike.*

Now, when you understand that, when in the words of Abraham in this parable, you ‘hear Moses and the Prophets’ and you see what Jesus’ death and resurrection is all about, and you grasp just how much He has loved you, despite the fact that you are so different from Him, it will open your heart and hands to love those who are so different from you.

Because, ultimately, what is needed to avoid the same outcome as the rich man is not having or not having money, or giving or not giving to charity, it is having a heart that says ‘yes’ to Jesus, not ‘no’; a heart that puts its trust not in money, or in itself, or how good and generous it is, but in Him. You see, in talking to the Pharisees in v15, Jesus said, ‘you are those who justify yourselves before men.’ They just defended themselves and convinced themselves and others they were right. But the implication of Jesus saying that is that it is both possible, and far better, to be justified, to be vindicated, to be declared not guilty by God – and not just by ourselves. And when it dawns on you that that is just what Jesus accomplished for you by His death and resurrection, that you can be declared not guilty before Him, and that it’s all by His free gift and grace, you’ll want to show that same grace to others. Including the alleviation of suffering and poverty with your money.