

THE PARABLE OF LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN  
LUKE 16:19-31

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Talking about hell and fire and brimstone is unfashionable in our modern day. It conjures up images in many people's minds of a bygone era, of the nineteenth century perhaps, of semiliterate preachers who focused on the subject because they had some kind of psychological problem or because they wanted to get money out of an audience.

If there is no literal hell with fire and brimstone, it is a cruel thing to frighten people by trying to convince them that it is something that they need to worry about. Robert Schuller from Crystal Cathedral fame stopped preaching about hell decades ago. He decided that it was better to focus on the benefits of Christianity and the possibilities of a positive attitude. He told an interviewer from the *Los Angeles Times*, "**I don't ever want people to become Christians to escape hell.**" (*LA Times*, 6/19/2002)

On the other hand, if there is such a place, it would be a cruel thing not to warn people about it. Suppose that I went to my doctor and had a checkup. Afterwards the doctor said to me, "Hedlund, I've got this great new drug, and I'm convinced that it will make you feel at least 10% better than you do now. The only thing is that it is expensive. It will cost you \$500 a month."

I would have some reservations about that. I feel pretty good as it is. Why would I want to spend \$500 a month to maybe feel 10% better? Well, suppose that the doctor neglected to tell me that I had this disease that would kill me in a year if I didn't take the drug. That would put matters in an entirely different light, wouldn't it? In fact the doctor would be guilty of serious malpractice for not giving me the whole picture in encouraging me to take this drug.

As we consider our own direction in life, we need to have a complete picture of the stakes that are involved in the decisions which we make about the things to which we commit our lives. Being religious people, we want to make sure that we are properly connected to God and that we understand what the stakes are in our relationship to Him.

One of the factors that we need to take into consideration is what Jesus and the Bible have to say about hell. A Pew Research Center Survey conducted last year found that 73% of American adults have some kind of belief in heaven. But only 62% of Americans have a belief in hell. Someone who reads through the New Testament gospels cannot help but notice that Jesus and the Bible have a lot to say about heaven and hell. In fact Jesus tells us more about what hell is like than what heaven is like.

Last week in our study of the parables we looked at the Parable of the Good Samaritan and what loving our neighbor means. Today we are going to consider a parable that deals with the importance of how we live our lives and what that might mean for life in the hereafter.

I.

Let's look again at THE PARABLE. (PROJECTOR ON--- THE PARABLE) It is found in Luke. Verse 1 of Luke 16 tells us that Jesus was speaking to His disciples. He tells them first a parable involving money and debt. A lot of the parables of Jesus involve money in some way. Unlike modern preachers, however, Jesus never seemed to follow up these parables with a plea for money for Himself or His band of disciples. Rather His concern seemed to be with the danger that money poses for the human heart. How people deal with money seems to reveal a lot about their spiritual condition. This first parable in #16 concludes with the statement of Jesus in v. 13, **"You cannot serve God and money."**

Then in v. 14 we are told that the Pharisees were also listening to Jesus. Luke inserts the editorial comment that the Pharisees were "lovers of money" and that they were ridiculing Jesus. The Pharisees were a religious party that promoted traditionalism and strict observance of Biblical and non-Biblical rules. Most of the rabbis were Pharisees. In many cases the rules that they came up with out of an attempt to apply the Old Testament law to situations of life in their day were put on a plane higher than the Bible itself. At one point Jesus criticized the Pharisees for coming up with rules that let them get around the basic commandment to honor one's parents.

That is one reason why Jesus was often criticizing them. The Pharisees also taught that material wealth was evidence of God's approval and blessing whereas poverty was a sign of God's disapproval and curse. If you are rich, God likes you. If you are poor, God doesn't like you. That was the thinking of the Pharisees. There are a few modern preachers who come close to that kind of thinking today.

It is in this context of addressing the sinful attitude of the Pharisees that Jesus tells this parable. In v. 19 He says, **"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day..."** Purple cloth and fine linen were worn only by the wealthy. The Bible does not indicate that material wealth is inherently evil. There are a number of godly people in the Bible who were wealthy. We just saw that in our study of Ruth with Boaz. He was a wealthy guy, but he was also godly. It is the love of money which is the problem. Jesus said, "You can't serve both God and money." You ought to choose God. If you do, He might bless you materially. He might not.

Verses 20 & 21 tell us that there was also a poor man in the picture: **"And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. His name was Lazarus."** None of the other parables of Jesus have names for their characters. For this reason some have suggested that this is not a made-up

story, but that it actually happened. That is possible, but I am more inclined to think that Jesus gave him a name because of purposes that He was trying to accomplish in the story. Usually people remember the names of the wealthy and don't know the names of the homeless. Here we remember the name of the poor beggar and are not told the name of the rich man. Also the name "Lazarus" means literally "God has helped" or "God is helper." So right at the beginning of the story the listeners would recognize that Lazarus is the good guy.

This Lazarus was laid at the rich man's gate. Apparently he was crippled. He was covered with sores, and he was hungry. He had some kind of skin problem. It was probably not leprosy. For a leper would not have been tolerated at the gate of a rich man's house. He would render everyone who came near ceremonially unclean.

The dogs were coming and licking the sores on Lazarus. Jewish religious tradition about dogs was mixed at best. The Apostle Paul used the term in a derogatory sense to refer to Judaizers in Philippians #3. The point in the parable seems to be that the dogs showed more compassion toward Lazarus than did the rich man.

Lazarus was longing to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. The rich man was not necessarily a bad guy. He may have had a decent family. Probably he was respected in the community. Perhaps he was a Republican. It was just that he was self-centered and loved money. He had succeeded in his goal of making a lot of money, and now he was enjoying the fruits of his success.

This rich man didn't mistreat the poor. He just didn't go out of his way to help them. They weren't his concern. Most of them were poor because of their own bad choices. They were alcoholics or drug addicts or lazy or just foolish. After all, the Pharisees taught that poverty was a sign of God's curse. If God was mad at them, why should he go out of his way to help them?

Verse 22 tells us that both men eventually died. Jesus tells us specifically that the rich man was buried. We know from the customs of the times that the death of a rich Jew would have meant a big funeral followed by a procession to the site of the cemetery. At the front of this procession would have been paid musicians and mourners making a lot of noise. Then would have come the family and immediate relatives. Then would have come the stretcher, or litter, carrying the body. Then would have come the other mourners. In the cemetery he would have been placed in a tomb carved from the rock.

Lazarus would have had no such funeral. When the bodies of beggars were found laying in the streets, they were typically hauled off to the garbage dump outside of the city. But notice that v. 22 says that there was a heavenly procession that awaited Lazarus. He **"was carried by the angels to Abraham's side."** Apparently the difficulties which Lazarus had in life were not a sign of God's disapproval. Lazarus gets a great reception on the other side of the grave.

Abraham was the ancestor of all of the Jewish people. He was known as the father of the faith. Jewish literature outside of the Bible spoke of Jews at death going to be with Abraham.

The rich man, however, went to hades, or hell. Jesus in v. 23 says that he was in torment. He could see Abraham far away with Lazarus at his side. The fact that the rich man recognized Lazarus implies that the beggar was not a faceless, nameless man to the rich man. He knew who he was. But he had apparently done little or nothing to help Lazarus in his earthly life.

According to v. 24 the rich man was also able to communicate. He called out to Abraham saying, **“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.”** The plea for mercy came from one who had been unmerciful. Whether people in hell can actually communicate with those at Abraham’s side is a little uncertain. It may be that Jesus was saying this simply for purposes of the story. Maybe not. It does seem clear that this hades is a place of torment and fire and conscious existence.

In vv. 25 & 26 Abraham replies to the rich man’s request: **“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. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.”** The positions of the two men in the afterlife have been reversed. Now Lazarus is being comforted, and the rich man is in agony. He also says that a great chasm has been fixed between the abode of the ungodly dead and the abode of the godly dead. It is not possible for people to pass between them.

The significance of this is that prayers uttered for those who have already died will never be able to cause those in hades to pass over into the realm of the godly dead. There is no mention of purgatory either. It also means that baptism of the dead, which the Mormons practice, will not be able to change the state of the deceased either.

Then in vv. 27 & 28 the rich man changes the focus of his concern from himself to his family. **“Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— 28 for I have five brothers— so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.”** At least this man has some concern for the status of his extended family. Perhaps in this request the rich man is implying that he didn’t have enough warning about what lay beyond the grave.

In v. 29 Abraham says, **“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.”** That is, they have the writings of the Scriptures--- what we call today the Old Testament. Those Scriptures provide them with sufficient warnings about the dangers of hades for those who do not turn to God.

The rich man, thinking of his own experience perhaps, argues that the Bible does not provide sufficient warning to those in the land of the living. If someone could just come back to them from the dead, then surely people would believe. But Jesus says in v. 31, **“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”**

Keep in mind that the Pharisees as well as the disciples were listening to Jesus. The Pharisees opposed Jesus. They were always asking questions in a vain attempt to trap Him and trick Him. In Matthew #12 v. 38 (MATTHEW 12:38) we are told, **“Then some of the scribes and Pharisees answered him, saying, ‘Teacher, we wish to see a sign from you.’”** This was after Jesus had already done many miracles. The miraculous signs were never sufficient to convince the Pharisees.

Sometime after Jesus told this parable He did raise someone from the dead. Ironically the name of this resurrected man was also Lazarus--- it was a common name back in that time. The incident is recorded in John #11. Some believed in Jesus because of that. But when the chief priests and Pharisees heard about it, they still wouldn't believe in Jesus. (JOHN 11:53) In fact in John #11 v. 53 we are told, **“So from that day on they made plans to put him to death.”** A short time after that Jesus Himself rose from the dead. But still most of the Pharisees and most of the Jews would not believe that Jesus was their Messiah.

IIA.

(II. THE LESSONS) Consider then THE LESSONS from this parable. What are the applications that we can make from this story?

A.

The first lesson has to do with the question: “Why do people not believe in Jesus?” The lesson is that THE ROOT OF UNBELIEF IS MORAL NOT INTELLECTUAL. (I. THE LESSONS A. THE ROOT OF UNBELIEF...) God has given people sufficient evidence to point them toward faith in Jesus. The ultimate problem is that people don't want to believe in Jesus.

Bertrand Russell (BERNARD RUSSELL) was a famous mathematician and philosopher. He was born in Britain but spent much of his life in the US. One of the many books that he wrote was entitled *Why I Am Not a Christian*. In reviewing the book his former student and famous poet T. S. Eliot wrote that Russell **“didn't bring reason into the case.”** He failed to present a reasoned argument against the claims of Christianity. He simply promoted the virtues of unrestrained freedom. Indeed Russell's promiscuous and unrestrained lifestyle demonstrated that he had made a moral choice against being subject to Jesus or any god other than himself. (PROJECTOR OFF)

Atheists often promote the notion that they have arrived at their position as the result of logical thinking and scientific analysis. Thomas Nagel was Professor of Philosophy and Law at New York University. He once wrote, **“I want atheism to be true... It isn't just**

**that I don't believe in God, and naturally, hope that I'm right about my belief. It's that I hope that there is no God! I don't want there to be a God; I don't want the universe to be like that."** (*The Last Word*, pp. 130-131)

Atheists, those who not only reject Jesus but also any other god, have traditionally argued that religious belief arises from psychological factors in human beings rather than from any basis in reality. Paul Vitz, a New York University psychology professor, conducted a study of the childhoods of more than a dozen prominent atheists from recent western history. He found that in each case there were psychological factors in their background that predisposed them to reject God. In each case they had a defective relationship with their father.

Sigmund Freud hated his weak father. Jean Paul Sartre's father died when he was a baby, and he came to dislike his stepfather intensely. Joseph Stalin's father beat him. So did Adolf Hitler's father. They both hated their dads. Madelyn Murray O'Hair also disliked her father. Paul Vitz concludes, **"...we find a weak, dead or abusive father in every case."** (*Faith of the Fatherless*) Rather than religious belief arising from psychological problems in people, it is religious disbelief that arises from psychological problems in individuals.

Why do people not believe in God and in Jesus specifically? It is not primarily an intellectual problem. It is a moral problem. We humans were created in the image of God. We are made to be connected with Him. The created universe and the Bible and the history of Christianity and the lives of transformed individuals give evidence to the truth claims of the gospel of Christ.

B.

The second lesson is that THE REALITY OF HELL SHOULD PROMPT US TO SEEK GOD. (I. A. B. THE REALITY OF HELL...) In the parables Jesus used stories based upon the culture and understanding of the people to teach spiritual truths. I find it hard to believe that Jesus would take a story based upon the common understanding of the afterlife that was not also true to reality. So it seems to me that we can be confident that this parable does add to our understanding about hell and life after death.

In the Old Testament a place called "Sheol" was associated with the grave and the abode of the dead. There is not a great deal of information given about this place. At least one scholar argues that Sheol is never described as the destination of the righteous. (Cf. Kyle Dunham, *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Jan.-March 2021) Daniel #12 v. 2 (DANIEL 12:2) says, **"And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."** So the abode of the dead in the Old Testament seems to be a temporary place.

The Greek word "hades" in the New Testament seems to be similar in meaning to the Old Testament Hebrew word "sheol." (PROJECTOR OFF) "Hades" is used in the New Testament only of the bad part of of the abode of the dead. The parable that we are

looking at also assumes that there are two places where dead people go. One is described as “Abraham’s side, or bosom,” and the other as “hades.”

Verse 25 describes this place where Abraham is as a place of comfort. Elsewhere in the New Testament it is called “paradise.” When Jesus was dying on the cross, (PROJECTOR ON--- LUKE 23:43) he told the one criminal beside Him, **“Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.”**

This parable tells us more about hades, or what we commonly call “hell,” than it does about paradise. This hades is a place where unbelievers go. (PROJECTOR OFF) The people there are conscious. They can see. But hades is a place of torment. The rich man says that he is in agony. He is plagued by a flame. There is sensation of pain. Jesus also says that there is a great chasm fixed which prevents its occupants from leaving it.

Other Scriptures indicate that hades is not the final resting place of the unbelieving dead. Revelation #20 describes the place where unbelievers will spend eternity. (PROJECTOR ON--- REVELATION 20:14) Beginning in v. 14, the text says, **“Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. (REVELATION 20:15) And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”**

Everyone who does not trust in Jesus will end up in this place called the lake of fire. This does not mean that people will burn up and their conscious existence comes to an end. They will live on in this place of torment. (MATTHEW 25:46) In Matthew 25 v. 46 Jesus says, **“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”**

Eternity spent in a lake of fire. What a horrible fate! How could a loving God send people to hell? Perhaps a better question to ask would be: How can a righteous God send sinful people to heaven? (PROJECTOR OFF) *New York Times* columnist Ross Douthat, a Roman Catholic, says that doing away with eternal punishment **“is a natural way for pastors and theologians to make their God seem more humane.”** But he also adds, **“to believe in God and not in hell is ultimately to disbelieve in the reality of human choices.”** (NYT, 4/24/2011) In other words, to disbelieve in a place called hell is to mean that our choices in life don’t really have much eternal significance.

A Georgetown University professor by the name of James Schall expands on this idea (*On the Unseriousness of Human Affairs*, 2001), writing, **“...lives are not insignificant. They are risks... We like to be optimistic and suggest that no one loses his soul. But if this is so, it is hard to see how anything is of much importance. If nothing we do, say, or believe can really make any difference, what is [the source] of our dignity? We may do what we want with impunity. Surely this is not the order of God for our good.”** Jesus says that there is a hell, and what we do with our earthly lives has eternal consequences.

C.

This leads to our third lesson: SEEKING GOD AND AVOIDING HELL MEANS TRUSTING IN JESUS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. A. B. SEEKING GOD AND...) Belief in Jesus, or the lack thereof, determines our eternal destiny. The rich man did not have a personal faith in God. That was reflected in the way that he lived on earth. He sought only to please himself. He had little concern for others, especially for the poor.

The beggar Lazarus did have a faith in God. Though he was poor in this life, he went to Abraham's side, or paradise, or what we usually call "heaven." The point is not that we should try to be poor and avoid being rich. The point is that we should place our trust in God and Jesus. That will make a difference in the way that we live now and in the way that we live in eternity.

With such crucial issues at stake we need to make sure that we have trusted in Jesus as our Savior. Peter Hitchens (PETER HITCHENS) grew up in Malta in the family of a British army officer. He chose to follow atheism and a socialist political philosophy as a young man. He became a journalist and a writer. His brother Christopher Hitchens, who died of cancer several years ago, wrote the book *God Is Not Great*.

In the 1990s, on a trip to Burgundy in France in search of fine wine, Peter took a detour and ended up looking at a famous painting (THE LAST JUDGMENT) created by Rogier van der Weyden. The picture of people fleeing the pit of hell--- naked, suffering, mournful, and terrified--- grabbed him. **"I had a sudden, strong sense of religion being a thing of the present day, not imprisoned under thick layers of time. A large catalogue of misdeeds, ranging from the embarrassing to the appalling, replayed themselves rapidly in my head. I had absolutely no doubt that I was among the damned, if there were any damned."**

The sudden fear of hell eventually drove him to faith in Christ. (PROJECTOR OFF) As C. S. Lewis suggested in *The Screwtape Letters*, such ideas can become a means of grace, for they can awaken a man's reason, as well as his conscience. **"And once it is awake,"** asks the demon Screwtape in Lewis's book, **"who can foresee the result?"**

Our responsibility is clear. We need to make sure that we have come to the point in life where we have acknowledged that we are sinners separated from a holy God and incapable on our own of saving ourselves. We need to place our trust in the Son of God who died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. When we truly accept Him as our Savior, then we can be assured of going to heaven some day. We will never have to worry about hell.