

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Part 1)

Introduction

The Text

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ 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. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 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.’ 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. 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.’ ²⁷ And he said, ‘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.’ ²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰ And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹ 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.’” (Luke 16:19–31)

Next Week and This

- A. Just so you’re aware, next week I plan to spend the entire time discussing the idea of Hell as it is presented to us here in this parable and in the rest of Scripture. I recognize the trouble that idea can often bring to some of us and I wanted to set aside time to engage it more fully.
 - 1. I’m sure that has you all especially excited. I actually think, strangely enough, that, when we are through, you may find it not a little bit encouraging.
- B. This week I am going to take a bit of a different approach to the text than I normally do. Often I proceed verse by verse in order along with the text itself. But this morning, while I’m still rooting my thoughts in the text, I wanted to be a bit more free with it.
 - 1. Having read the parable now, I simply want to make 3 observations and reflect on them a bit with you.
- C. Before I get to these observations, we should at least quickly recall where we are in Luke’s gospel here.
 - 1. We are in [ch. 16](#), and back up in [vv. 1-9](#) or so Jesus had just shared yet another parable—what we’ve been calling the parable of the Shrewd Manager. The point in the parable we saw was something like this: in view of eternity and the coming judgment, use your money and possessions now in such a way that you will be prepared then.

- a. In other words, don't merely accumulate more and more for yourselves now, but rather release your stuff in love for God and others to the advance of His kingdom and you shall find, as Jesus would say elsewhere, that you are storing up for yourself treasure in heaven (cf. [Luke 12:33; 18:22](#)).
2. Well, the Pharisees hear Him speaking in such a manner to His disciples and they are not pleased. in [v. 14](#) we are actually told why: "[The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed him.](#)"
 - a. Even though these men were ever busy in all their religious duties, at the bottom, they loved, not God and others, but money. And, therefore, when Jesus is here calling His followers to release their money in love for God and others—and saying that such a thing is critical preparation for heaven and eternal life—these men will not have it!
3. The discussion between Jesus and these Pharisees continues and it ultimately carries into the telling of the parable we have before us this morning in [vv. 19-30](#). It's the parable often referred to as that of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

(1) We Must Beware the Pitfall of Present-Tense Thinking

- A. Now I recognize that, at first, that is a mouthful, but I'm sure you will soon see what I mean by it. The big issue in our parable, it seems to me, is brought out by the fact that one man is living for the present tense, the here and now, only. And the other, by inference at least, is living in light of the future, in view of the age to come. Let me show you what I mean.

The Rich Man

- A. If you noticed, the rich man's opulence is described in vivid detail. It begins there in [v. 19](#): "[There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen . . .](#)"
 1. His being "[clothed in purple](#)" is meant to portray more than this man's fashion sense or whatever. Purple was, and still is in many places, of course, the color of the ruling caste. And this is because of its extreme rarity in the ancient world. The color for this purple dye came from the secretions of a certain sea snail. It sounds gross to us, perhaps, but, because the process was so difficult, purple cloth was easily the most valuable cloth a person could get ahold of—and, of course, only certain upper-crust sort of people could ever dream of doing so.
 - a. I daresay, though, that a purple shirt will keep a man no more covered and warm than a shirt of any other color. So the cost involved is utterly unnecessary except for the fact that it sets this man apart from others as something special. And that is the point. It's not that I must have purple garments, but that I can have them . . . and you can't.

- B. But the description of this man goes on and we're told in that latter part of the same verse that he "feasted sumptuously every day" (v. 19b).
1. Now, to be clear, God is not opposed to extravagant feasting. Indeed, He commands His people at times to do so. But, what you'll notice is He always binds it to certain seasons and occasions. It has a start-point and an end-point. It's not a way of life.
 - a. But for this man it is! The feast never stops: he "feasted sumptuously every day."
- C. Now I should say here that it is a feature, I think, of our modern age (and really of all ages, for it seems to be something lodged deeply in the human heart) that we tend to maximize the present tense. The here and now is what we feel, what we live for, what we are about.
- D. You can see this quite simply, for example, in the way we can't bear to wait . . . for anything.
1. That old Queen song that I recently heard on a television ad says it best: "I want it all. I want it all. I want it all. And I want it now."
 2. I'm trying to teach my two year old boy patience right now. Patience for a kid is like absolute torture. If it takes me longer than a few seconds to act on his request he thinks Daddy's forgotten him and the world is going to end. So I'm saying: "Okay buddy, I know you want me to get your water, but let's be patient. Take my hand. I'm here. Let's count to ten together and then I'll go get it." "One, two, three . . . daddy get my water!"
 3. But that's how we are as well, right? It's why all are technology caters to this insane craving for pleasure in the present moment. Does anybody remember MS-DOS and dial-up internet and stuff? It was horrible. You actually had to wait for things. Now, it's like instantaneous—and, if it's not, I'm sure they're working around the clock to make it so. Pretty soon, I won't be surprised if they offer to put a chip in our brain so we can just think about a site or a question or an app or whatever and it just pulls up.
 - a. "The here and now, the present tense. That's where I want my comfort and pleasure. That's what I'm living for. Don't make me wait for it, or postpone some of it now to get it later. No! I want it all and I want it now!"

The Poor Man

- A. Well, there's another man in our parable, isn't there? And his present-tense is not going so well. His destitution is described by Jesus here with just as much vividness as was the opulence of the rich man. It's a heartbreaking sight, really. " ²⁰ And at his [the rich man's] 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" (vv. 20-21).
1. This guy is laid just outside the rich man's gate and he's just looking in at the wealth and the feasts and he's just saying: "Give me the crumbs, man. Just the stuff that falls from your table that you sweep up and throw away. I'll take that."

- B. And we need to be clear about something on this point. By “dogs” here we are not to imagine something like the cute, cuddly little companions that we have today. These are not Emotional Support Animals coming in to comfort this man.
 - 1. These are scavengers that would roam the streets there in Israel and things. Their licks are not licks of affection. The idea is that it’s almost as if this guy is getting eaten alive. He longs for the food of dogs (cf. [Matt 15:27](#)), but instead he is the food of dogs.
 - a. For our modern ears, it would be like saying that, while this man is lying there in the gutter outside the rich man’s gate, rats are crawling up and nibbling on his scabs.
 - i. It’s a picture of complete and total abandonment. No one is caring for this man. As far as the present tense goes, it could be argued that no one has it worse than Lazarus.
- C. And the tragic irony of course is that he is right out in front of the gate of this rich man. Surely this rich man, with his flowing purple garments, passes by the poor man every time he heads out on business or comes back to feast.
 - 1. And yet, the clear implication, is that he does nothing to help. “If I open my heart and hand to him, I will lose a bit of this luxury and lifestyle. I cannot. I will not.”

The Future Tense

- A. Now pause. If this present moment is everything, if this life is all there is, then this rich man wins, he is the wiser, right? But suddenly in [v. 22](#) of our text the future tense breaks in, and, as we’ll see, everything changes! “[22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.](#)”
- B. The reality of both men’s death here is stated in an almost unfeeling and matter-of-fact way. And I think, in some sense, that’s probably the point. Death is a cold, hard fact. It is an impending reality. There is nothing we can do to prevent or escape it.
 - 1. It is, as the old poet James Shirley wrote, the great “leveler”: “[The glories of our blood and state / Are shadows, not substantial things; / There is no armour against Fate; / Death lays his icy hand on kings: / Sceptre and Crown / Must tumble down, / And in the dust be equal made / With the poor crookèd scythe and spade.](#)”
 - a. It doesn’t matter if you were royalty while alive, once death gets a hold of you, you may as well have been with the poor common laborers using scythe and spade in the dirt. Your crown and scepter amount to nothing in the end.
- C. Here is why I say there is a pitfall with present-tense thinking. We get so caught up with things in the present moment that we fail to take into consideration the whole timeline. We act as if what is right in front of us is the ultimate, and we fail to prepare ourselves for what is coming, for what truly endures.

1. We forget that we have a soul—that we are not mere animals, but the Spirit of God has been breathed into us, and we are eternal beings who will pass on from here into forever.
- D. And this what we see play out next in our parable. In these verses, we come to find that death not only levels everyone down to size, it puts everyone in their proper place. God will make what has been wrong right.
1. In this case, the merciless one is shown no mercy. He made his life on the back of others with concern only for himself, so that shall be fixed now for him after death.
 2. The poor, neglected man, on the other hand, must have had his hope set on God, and God does not disappoint him in the end. We're told that, upon this man's death, though he seems to have not had a proper burial as the rich man clearly did, God was there. In particular, the angels, we're told, carry him to "[Abraham's side](#)" or in the Greek and in the older translations: "Abraham's bosom."
- E. Now, maybe I'm just too immature for such a notion, but am I the only one for whom the idea of heaven as an eternity spent resting on another man's chest just sounds a bit of a letdown, not to mention terribly awkward? I always struggled with the sound of this.
1. But then I came to understand what is being insinuated here. The idea is not that we are snuggling up with Abraham, but that we are sitting with him at table.
 - a. That's why, in [John 13:23](#), we're told that during the Last Supper "[o]ne of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side [Gk. kolpos = bosom]." The way they would sit at table together would have them leaning towards the chest of the person next to them.
- F. The idea here, then, is that this brother is no longer being left hungry in gutter, he's been elevated to the seat of honor around the banquet table of heaven with the covenant faithful of God.
1. What we're reading of here is what Jesus spoke of in [Matt 8:11](#): "[I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.](#)"
- G. So, returning to some of what I said in the introduction, what we learn here is that the whole matter of your future and eternity hinges on where you stand with God and Jesus here and now and, in particular, how your relationship with Him causes you to handle your stuff.
1. Bringing together the Parable of the Shrewd Manager with the parable we are looking at now, one commentator sums it up like this: "[‘The Dishonest Steward’ and \[‘The Rich Man and Lazarus’\] both concern the life of the world to come; \[and\] they both teach . . . that our destiny in that world depends on what we do with the ‘here and now’. It is a challenge to the far-sighted use of the things of this world, the things we shall not be able to take with us, but which nonetheless constitute the raw material out of which our inner character is built](#)" (TBST).

2. Another commentator puts the matter like this: “The shrewd manager used wealth to gain eternal friendships (16:9), but the rich man fails to use his wealth to help a poor man at his gate—and thus has no eternal ‘friend’ to advocate for him” (PNTC).
3. I love what John Piper says, commenting on v. 25 in particular: “If you use your money in this life to pad yourself with luxuries and are indifferent to the advancement of the gospel and the meeting of needs, then earth will be the length of your heaven and eternity will be the length of your hell. But if on earth you use your money not to increase your luxuries but to do works of love then no matter how many sores are on your body earth will be the extent of your hell and eternity will be the extent of your heaven.”

H. O brothers and sisters, we mustn’t fall into the pitfall of present-tense thinking. Let the future break in and inform how you handle yourself and your stuff in the here and now!

(2) We Must Not Read God’s Countenance Off of Our Earthly Circumstances

He’s For Me . . . He’s Against Me

- A. You know what a countenance is don’t you? It’s the look on a person’s face. What I’m saying here is that sometimes, as Christians, we infer from our earthly circumstances what God must be feeling about us. If things are going well, God must be for me. But if things are going badly, God must be against me.
1. I see this at work in my own heart all the time. The most recent example was actually just shopping with my kids in Costco. So I have this big old list that Megan writes up for me and we’re going through it and I kid you not as we’re going one by one by one, here’s what I find, there was this string of like five items where everything we went to get was on sale. I went to grab the floss, \$5 off, okay. Then we needed some paper towels, \$3 off, yeah man. Then yogurt, \$4 off, this is amazing. And, as this was happening, I found myself thinking: “God is for me. He’s just parting the waters and I’m just walking right through.”
- B. This is kind of humorous, kind of funny, but it’s not so funny when it’s going the opposite direction, is it? Have you had those days—not where everything is going right, but where everything is going wrong? You say, “Nick, days? Try weeks, try months, try years. That’s been my life!” One hard thing after the other.
1. And you’re tempted to read from your earthly circumstances the countenance of your heavenly Father. “He hates me. He’s against me. He’s trying to hurt me.” Am I the only one who’s felt that way at times?
- C. I bring this up because if we’re trying to read God’s countenance towards these two men in our parable on the basis of their earthly circumstances, I mean, is it not that we get it totally upside-down? We’re thinking this rich man is clearly favored and this guy on the ground with the sores, he’s been cursed, forgotten by God, and probably for good reason.

1. If Job's friends were to walk up on the scene, they'd be asking what the rich man did right to get God's favor like that, and they'd be assuming there must be some sin in Lazarus for him to be experiencing the wrath of God in such a way.
 2. If Jesus' disciples were to walk up on this poor man, they'd probably ask Jesus what they asked with regard to the man born blind: "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2).
 - a. It was taken for granted by them that God's countenance towards a person could be read off of their earthly circumstances.
- D. But we cannot fall to the same logic. Indeed, this parable, and so much of the Scriptures, actually militate against it. It is never so clear as this.
1. Sometimes, to be sure, God's wrath is expressed as Him bringing upon a person earthly punishment, but at other times, as in [Rom 1](#), it is expressed in Him handing you over to everything you desire. (Life going really well for you while you are on your way to hell is not a sign of God's favor but of His abandoning of you to your doomed fate.)
 2. On the flip, sometimes, to be sure, God's favor is expressed in His bringing material and circumstantial blessing upon you for your faithfulness, but other times, as in [Rom 5](#), it is expressed in His bringing trials that purify and refine and build in you the character befitting of one of His children. (Life going really hard for you can be a sign of God's fatherly care and discipline, though I know you might not feel it as such in the moment!)
- E. One the places where this mixed, grayscale reality comes out clearest is in [Heb 11](#). There the author is giving us a long list of people through redemptive history that pleased God by their faith. And near the end of this chapter we come to [vv. 32-38](#) and read: " ³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. ³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. [To this point, all wonderful circumstances, but then we read. . .] Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. ³⁶ Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— ³⁸ of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth."
1. And he goes on to say these people, all of them, were "commended through their faith" ([v. 39](#)). His face was glowing with affection for them, even as, for some of them, their circumstances were the stuff of nightmares.

He's Fully and Forever For Me!

- A. You see it has never been a failsafe endeavor to try to read off of your circumstances how God is feeling about you. That is not the sort of practice the Scripture would condone. Instead, if we really are to know what God is feeling about us, we are told, not to look at our we are currently faring in an earthly sense, but rather to look at the cross.

1. Here is where we come to a magnificent text like [Rom 8:31-39](#) and read: “³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God’s elect? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written, “For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.” ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”
- B. The bottom line is this: If you turned from your sin and fled to Christ by faith for forgiveness and freedom . . . well then God is fully and forever for you. Your sin has already been dealt with and God is now only and always working for your good in whatever comes your way—however wonderful and however horrible.
1. If you are in Christ then it can be said to you what William Cowper put so eloquently in his old hymn: “*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take; / The clouds ye so much dread / Are big with mercy and shall break / In blessings on your head. / Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, / But trust Him for His grace; / Behind a frowning providence / He hides a smiling face.*”
 - a. No doubt this poor man in our parable could sing of such truths as he reclined around the banquet table of heaven. But have we the faith to sing of it even now in the midst of our present suffering? I pray to God it is so!

(3) Even When All the World Has Forgotten You, God Still Knows Your Name

A Poor Man Named Lazarus

- A. I suppose this now third observation is closely related to the second. Commentators have long pointed out the glaring oddity in this parable. I wonder if you realize that in all the parables Jesus tells throughout the gospels, this is the only parable in which we are given one of the character’s names. “[And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus . . .](#)” (v. 20a).
- B. Think of all the great parables of Jesus. We don’t know the name of the prodigal son. We don’t know name of the guy who sold everything he had to get the treasure in the field. We don’t know the name of the good Samaritan or the tax collector that goes home justified. And on we could go.
 1. There are so many compelling characters in these parables . . . and we don’t know the names of any of them.
 - a. But, O brothers and sisters, we know this poor man’s name. And that is deeply significant! And of course the point is not that we know this man’s name but that

God does. God knows Him. God has known Him all along. Even when all the world has forgotten him, God still knows his name.

- C. And the meaning of this poor man's name is incredible too. "Lazarus" is a rabbinic abbreviation of Eleazar [El = God + azar = to help. It means "God has helped" or "the one God helps."
- D. And that is the point here isn't it? God is with us in the pain, he is with us in the gutter, He will help, He will not forget, He will make it right in His time.
 - 1. The Scripture has said of you Christian, that your name is written in heaven (Luke 10:20);
 - 2. that your name is in the Lamb's book of life (Phil 4:3) and has been from before the foundation of the world (Rev 13:8).
 - 3. In Isa 49:15-16, God reasons with us: " ¹⁵ Can a woman forget her nursing child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you. ¹⁶ Behold, I have engraved [your name NET] on the palms of my hands."
 - a. He knows, you have not been forgotten. Help is on the way. Even if it doesn't come quite the way you'd want until heaven. Even when all the world has forgotten you, God still knows your name.

What Are You Going to Attach Your Name to?

- A. There is, of course, another side to all of this and I suppose this is what I should bring out here as we close.
 - 1. It is quite interesting. Some scribes, copying the manuscripts and things down through years, thought this to be a sort of mix up in the text, and attempted to give the rich man a name as well. Some called him Dives, others Nineveh, still others Phineas.
- B. But all of this would be to miss Jesus' point. He didn't give the man a name. He didn't intend to. And therein lies the meaning:
 - 1. One man entrusts his name to God, He finds His identity in God, He attaches His hope to God, He builds His life upon God in Christ, and that man's name is now known and will be known through all eternity. God secured Him, God helped Him, God saved Him.
 - 2. But this other man, this rich man (that is all we can really call him), he opted to attach his name to perishable pursuits and possessions. His hope, his security, his identity were all found in his earthly stuff. And he can't take that with him. And so when he passes from this life into eternity, it's as if he has no name, no identity, no security, no satisfaction, no life.
- C. So, at the end here, we must really come to face the question Jesus has really been driving at all along: What are you going to attach your name to? What are you going to build your identity on?
 - 1. Are you going to attach it to God, to entrust Him with your safekeeping, with your identity, with your name—even if it means momentarily you're in the dirt here and you face all manner of trials and hardships? Are you going call it quits on the pursuit of stuff and resolve

to pursue Him instead? Are you going to lay hold of Christ—His offer of forgiveness, His offer of security, His offer of eternal life?

2. Or are you going to attach your name to temporal things, to vain endeavors, to things that will leave you nameless and empty and in anguish in the end? The choice is yours.