

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Part 2)

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)

A Sermon on Hell

- A. This is now our second week on this parable and I told you, as much as I’m sure it excited you to hear it, that this week we would be focusing in on this idea of hell in particular.
 - 1. It’s not exactly one of the most popular notions found in the catalog of Christian teaching. Indeed, it may very well be the least palatable of all. If ever there was a doctrine that people find themselves wanting to wiggle out of, and, even as Christians, a bit ashamed of, surely it would be this one.
- B. C.S. Lewis once said: “There is no doctrine which I would more willingly remove from Christianity than this, if it lay in my power. But it has the full support of Scripture and, specially, of our Lord’s own words; it has always been held by Christendom; and it has the support of reason” (The Problem of Pain, pp. 119-120).
 - 1. I wonder if you’ve ever been with Lewis here? “I wish I could remove this idea. I don’t like the thought of God’s judgment and wrath and an eternity of suffering for all who reject and stand against Him. This is not pleasant morning devotional material.” Yet still we must deal with it biblically and rationally.
- C. When we read carefully through the gospels, as we have been doing here in Luke for some time now, we come to find that Jesus, the great Servant of grace, no doubt, still has much to say about

wrath and hell. Indeed, He says more on the subject than anyone else in all the Bible. And in our text, He's at it once more.

1. Three things regarding the idea of hell that we shall bring out from this parable and reflect upon together: (1) The Reality of It; (2) The Understanding of It; and (3) The Good News of It.

(1) The Reality of It

Three Observations

A. What I simply want to do here at the beginning is make sure we see hell for what it is—that we listen to what the Bible in general and, what Jesus in particular in our text here, has to say about it.

1. I have three observations for us at this point, all deriving from this parable Jesus tells:

Observation #1: It Is Dreadfully Painful

A. The first thing we notice straight away is that this place called Hades or hell, is depicted as being dreadfully painful.

1. We are forced to see this straightaway there in v. 23. Picking it up in the latter part of v. 22 we read: “^{22b}The rich man also died and was buried,²³ and in Hades, being in torment . . .” There is something torturous about it.
2. Another aspect of this dreadful pain is captured in what the man says there in v. 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.’” There is the idea of anguish. And the imagery of fire.

Observation #2: It Is Eternally Fixed

A. This comes from what Jesus has Abraham saying there in v. 26 in response to the rich man's plea for Lazarus to be sent over to him with water. It cannot happen, Abraham says, for “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.” There is a sort of inescapable finality to it.

Observation #3: It Is Divinely Superintended

A. This is perhaps where matters get especially troubling for us. We can infer from what Jesus says in this parable that hell is superintended, or overseen, by someone.

1. The man is tormented because there is a tormentor.
2. The chasm is there because someone has put it there.

B. Well, who is that someone? We might like to think that it is Satan or some other wicked being, but the clear conclusion when once we consider all the rest of Scripture is that it's God.

1. And with this the modern man rises up in objection: “How could a loving God do such a thing to anyone?! Torment? Fix their fate in agony forever? What kind of a backwoods, medieval, superstitious, load of garbage is this? This is a fanciful doctrine dreamed up to scare people into your religion. Well, it’s not going to work on me.”

(2) The Understanding of It

- A. So from our text it is quite clear: hell is: (1) dreadfully painful, (2) eternally fixed, and (3) divinely superintended. Now, what in the world are we to make of this? Is the modern man’s objection valid here, or is there more to it than that?
- B. In thinking about these things it seems to me that the doctrine of hell as it here stands often sits so wrongly with us because we have such a deficient view both of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man.
 1. I was relieved to see that J.I. Packer in his book *Concise Theology* seems to agree with me on this. He writes: “The revelation of hell in Scripture assumes a depth of insight into divine holiness and human . . . sinfulness that most of us do not have” (p. 261).
 - a. In other words: When once these two things (God’s holiness and man’s sinfulness) become a bit clearer to us, the notion of hell starts to seem far more reasonable and even appropriate.
- C. So I should like to consider these one at a time here now with you.

(1) The Holiness of God

- A. I cannot say much on this one because I have too much I want to say on the next. But let me at least say this: It seems quite plain from our objection to the idea of hell that we have no clear understanding of God’s holiness.
 1. We imagine Him a sort being kind of like us. We don’t understand what it means for Him to be thoroughly set apart—perfectly pure, unswervingly righteous, inescapably just.
 - a. We assume He could bend the rules a bit here or there if He really wanted to and the fact that so many end up in hell is due more to His being cantankerous and crabby than to His being holy—like the grumpy parent who could and probably should bring the child out from timeout but just simply doesn’t want to.
- B. Perhaps one of the best ways to come at the idea of the holiness of God is to watch how men respond when they really come to face Him. Even the best of man, when brought into the presence of this holy God find themselves reduced to rags as it were.
 1. We might think of the prophet Isaiah, who seems at first to have prided himself as God’s instrument for rebuke there in Judah. Much of the early chapters in his book are dedicated to declaring woes upon the people out there for their sin, but suddenly in [ch. 6](#), when once he himself catches a view of the divine majesty in heaven, and hears the angels calling to

one another, “Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts . . .” (v. 3), he turns in on himself and declares at once: “Woe is me, for I am ruined! Because I am a man of unclean lips, And I live among a people of unclean lips; For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts” (v. 5). In view of the holiness of God, we’re all in trouble here.

2. The same sort of thing happens with the Apostle Paul. He clearly prided himself in his own righteousness until one day Jesus shows up to him in glory, brighter than the noonday sun, and Paul just drops to the ground: “I’ve been so blind thinking I’m awesome, but now in the light of your holiness I can finally see. Even my righteous deeds are shot through with sin and my only hope of ever being able to stand before God is the righteousness of Christ.”
- C. Listen, isn’t this the same sort of thing that happens with us in a physical sense. It’s why, if we’re going out on a date or something and we’re trying to look our best, we all prefer dim lighting, right?
1. In dim light I look like a million bucks. But if suddenly you were to throw that light up, well now you’re seeing: “Man there’s a pimple right there, I can see your hairs thinning, what’s that a stain on your shirt?”
 - a. I look good in dim light, but when you turn up the wattage, that whole masquerade is over. Every blemish is on full display.
- D. That’s what it’s like to stand in the presence of a holy God. He’s not mean, He’s not crabby, He’s not trying to expose or hurt you. He’s just holy, pure, bright, a consuming fire. That’s what it means to be God.

(2) The Sinfulness of Man

- A. Now, we’ve got to do some work on that second piece—the sinfulness of man. I think there are two things that we don’t yet see rightly concerning the sinfulness of natural man: (1) We don’t see the depth of it; and (2) We don’t see the trajectory of it.

(1) We Don’t See the Depth of It (the fundamental antithesis)

- A. The first issue, I think, when it comes to our understanding of sin is that we really have no idea just how deep it goes. Here I am going to begin to paint perhaps the bleakest portrait of human nature that you’ve ever seen, but I think it is what we must see if hell is going to make sense.
1. These are the sorts of dark and bat-infested caverns that most dare not enter, but I am saying, we must go down into it now together. We need to know who we are in and of ourselves, what human nature is really like at the bottom.
- B. I should like to propose that at the core of fallen man is something altogether monstrous. This is essentially what the Scriptures are everywhere pointing us towards:
1. Eph 2 says that all men are “by nature children of wrath” and “following the prince of the power of the air [a reference to Satan]” (vv. 2-3).
 2. In Eph 4:18 we read that we are “darkened in [our] understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in [us], due to [our] hardness of heart.”

3. We are “alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (Col 1:21).
 4. We are “dead in [our] trespasses” (Col 2:13).
 5. What Jesus says to some there in Israel could truly be said to all men as they stand by nature: “You are of your father the devil, and your will is to do your father’s desires” (John 8:44a).
 6. This is why John would say in his first letter that any who have not been born from above are “children of the devil” (1 John 3:10).
- C. The idea is that, since the fall in [Gen 3](#), at the core of natural man’s being now, there is a fundamental antithesis, a deep-seated resentment of and rebellion against God and an unrelenting devotion to self.

(2) We Don’t See the Trajectory of It (the final monstrosity)

- A. Now, I know some of you at this point are thinking: “Wow Nick, lighten up man. I don’t see that. I look out and, sure I see some bad folks, there are the murderers and the rapists and things, but I also see a lot of good people too—good people that don’t believe in Jesus. So no, I’m not thinking the idea of hell is appropriate for them at all.”
- B. To this I would respond with the fact that we don’t yet fully see the trajectory of human sinfulness. We don’t see the track that it is on. We don’t see where it is going, what humanity is truly becoming and will become when finally, at the end, left to itself.
- C. To help you make sense of this let me come at it from the perspective of what theologians have called common grace. Common grace is that grace of God that is common to all people, given by Him to all people.
1. There is special grace, that grace in Christ which saves from sin, and then there is common grace, and what I should like to say here is that this grace is the grace that currently is restraining sin. It is not the grace that saves, regenerates, changes us from the inside out. It is the grace that keeps the fire of sin in man from erupting into total madness. It’s grace that keeps the monster on a chain so to speak.
- D. Perhaps, if you’re confused, the best thing for me to do is just go on and illustrate and I think you’ll see what I mean. Let me show you four common grace restraints—restraints that will be removed on the last day as sin becomes in full what it is now only in seed form.

Common Grace Restraint #1: The Conscience

- A. With this I have in mind the idea that we have all been made in the image of God and, though that image has been marred in the fall due to sin, there’s still something of it there. And because of this, the Scriptures say that everyone still has His law written on their hearts ([Rom 2:14-15](#)). This is what we often refer to as conscience.
- B. Here is the sort of thing Megs and I just saw the other night when a character in the show we were watching was talking about that “little voice” in her head. “I was doing this, but I just kind of sense that it’s wrong, that it’s not fully cool, that maybe I shouldn’t.”

1. That's this idea of the conscience, of remaining creational goodness. Something of the goodness of God still stamped upon the souls of men. We know right from wrong in many ways and this does serve to restrain the full expression of our sinful nature.

Common Grace Restraint #2: The Holy Spirit

- A. Here I'm thinking of the fact that Jesus says the Holy Spirit has currently been dispatched by Him and the Father to ["convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment"](#) (John 16:8).
- B. This restraint is related to the first. The law is written on man's heart and the Spirit of God has been sent into the world to actually leverage that—to draw our attention to it, to persuade us of its validity, to raise awareness in us of our own sin and need of grace in Christ. And in so doing, the Spirit is also clearly, again, helping to restrain the full expression of our sinful nature.

Common Grace Restraint #3: The Civil Authority

- A. This is what Paul is talking about in [Rom 13](#) when he says governing authorities have been appointed by God and: ["3 rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. . . . 4 . . . \[I\]f you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer"](#) (vv. 3–4).
 1. I get that there are wicked governments in the world, but government when properly functioning is designed by God to restrain the full expression of man's sinful nature.
- B. If you want to see how this is at work even in you, just be real with me for a moment. Am I the only one who's heart kind of skips a beat when I'm driving on freeway or whatever and I look in my rear view and suddenly realize a cop is coming up on the road behind me? Your eyes quickly dart to the speedometer, with your right foot you start to tap on the brakes (not too much because you don't want it to be obvious), the cell phone you've been texting on you let slide nonchalantly into the passenger seat next to you.
 1. Suddenly, you're the most upstanding citizen on the road. You get in the right lane so the cop can pass, and as he comes on by, you smile and wave and maybe even give him one of those little hearts and mouth the words like: "Thank you"—as if you're just so grateful for his service and things.
 - a. Then, a few miles up, when the cop has exited to answer some call or whatever, what do you do? You get that lead foot again, don't you? After all, you've got somewhere to be.

Common Grace Restraint #4: God's Good Gifts

- A. Here I'm thinking in particular of what Jesus says in the Sermon on the Mount—that God ["makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust"](#) (Matt 5:45).
 1. He gives good gifts to the children of men. All of them. Not just Christians but everyone. His sun shines on the evil, His rain falls on the evil. And do you know what? Such common grace, in many ways, helps to restrain their evil.

- a. Think of what comes out of a person when common grace good gifts have been taken away. When your pleasure and enjoyment of earthly things is threatened. How do you respond?
- B. For this, somewhat humorously, you might think of that experience that has come to be referred to as being “hangry.” Have you heard of this? It means, I’m hungry and because of that I’m angry. Hence, “hangry.”
1. The idea is, when some of the common grace good gifts like food and drink are not provided, we get a little beastly. I’m not exactly pleasant to be around when my stomach is growling.
- C. Less funny is an illustration that comes from a book I’ve heard many reference entitled *Shantung Compound* by Langdon Gilkey. Tim Keller referenced it in a talk he gave at Google actually back in 2016 and I just simply want to read you a bit of what he said there: “Langdon Gilkey was a young man who graduated from Harvard with a philosophy degree with honors in the 1930s and went to China to teach at a university there. And [during WWII] when the Japanese overran that part of China, he was put into a detention camp. It was a really . . . difficult place. 2,000 people in less than a city block. There [were something like] 20 toilets for [all of them]. It was a very, very difficult situation. . . . [G]rowing up, [Gilkey] had lost his church faith. He had actually believed in the goodness of human beings, and [that] rationality is the way to overcome our problems, and that religion actually wouldn’t help much. When he was there, he . . . came to see that there is absolutely no way. Human beings are basically selfish. He actually says at one point . . . [that] he came to believe what the bible said about sin. He said self-interest seemed almost omnipotent next to the weak claims of logic and fair play. As the months went by, he constantly faced intractable self-centeredness. And he actually said . . . the fundamental bent of the whole human self in all of us [is] inward toward our own welfare. And we’re so immersed in it that we hardly are ever able to see this in ourselves, much less extricate ourselves from our dilemma.”
1. So he entered the compound thinking man is inherently good and he left the compound concluding that man is inescapably selfish and evil. Common grace restraints had been somewhat loosened, we could say, and what came out was not goodness but depravity.

Off the Chain

- A. Now, the upshot in all of this is that, in the end, on the last day, all of these common grace restraints shall be removed and fallen human nature shall be shown to be the monstrosity it truly is.
1. All that has laid somewhat dormant in seed form shall fully flower. The fundamental antithesis, the fundamental opposition to God, that lies in the heart of fallen human nature will emerge or, perhaps better put, will erupt with the full and ferocious energy of something like an atom bomb.
- B. Imagine when the fallen heart of man is cut loose from its chains—when the voice of conscience no longer speaks; when the Holy Spirit has at last packed up shop and left man to himself as he has long wanted; when there is no civil authority bearing the sword for God anymore and keeping things in

check; when all common grace good gifts cease—the sun no longer shines, the rain no longer falls. What do you think will come out of man’s heart then? I’ll tell you.

1. That little flicker of lust now in a man’s heart will without restraint immediately become something of rape. There will be no sense of: “I want it but I really shouldn’t.” There will just simply be: “I want it!”
 2. Those passing flashes of envy we know now will then quickly and without thought become thievery. “Give it to me!”
 3. The grumbling now against someone who annoys you or the bitterness you nurse towards someone who has hurt you, will, when all restraints have been cut loose, swiftly become murderous. “I can’t stand you. Get out of my life.”
- C. In one sense, you’d barely even have to have God inflicting punishment on people in hell, do you see? They will devour each other.
1. Forget this nonsense about the inherent goodness that lies in you. A monster lies in you and that monster will one day break off the chain unless you now, today, nail it to the cross with Christ and let Him raise you to new life by His Spirit—giving you a new heart and a new set of desires and a love relationship with God and others.

Following the Rich Man

- A. We see the sort of devolving of the human soul, the trajectory of human sinfulness, as we follow along with the rich man in our parable. It has long been pointed out that this man is not any better in hell, in fact he is quite clearly worse.
1. And this comes out in two different ways:
- B. We first see this in the way that he is still beckoning Lazarus to serve him. You saw that didn’t you? “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” (v. 24). “Clearly that poor man exists to serve me.”
1. I say such a thing indicates he’s even worse, because here now the man is in hell. Here would be the time for some sort of repentance. And yet he just doubles down on his own self-centeredness. It’s just as Gilkey says.
- C. But it gets worse. For this rich man is not only attempting to beckon Lazarus to do his will, we see he also has the nerve to blame God for his undesirable fate. We see this implied in the closing discussion Jesus pictures for us there in vv. 27-31. Look at this again. After hearing that Lazarus can’t come to serve him, he responds: “²⁷ 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.’”

1. The plea seems at first an honest, even heartfelt, concern for his brothers. Maybe we are getting somewhere! But at second glance, we see something of a more sinister nature lurking beneath.
 - a. He is quite clearly insinuating with his words here that God had not provided him with enough information to escape such a dreaded fate. Moses and the Prophets, were, quite emphatically, according to him, not enough. “I had them. Look where they got me. My kinsmen have them. Surely they won’t be enough for them either. We needed more. How unfair of you God not to provide what we needed here. I offer you a chance to make it right. Let Lazarus rise from the dead and return to warn them. Surely a miracle-sign such as that shall suffice.”
- D. With that last line from Abraham, Jesus is signaling, no doubt, to what we’ve been saying all along about the depths of man’s sinfulness.
 1. We like to think that we are objective and if given the proper evidence we would make the decision for God. But Jesus is saying, no, you are fundamentally opposed and you will twist whatever evidence is put forward to serve your selfish desires.
- E. Indeed, as He is clearly hinting at here, He Himself will soon rise from the dead and, rather than repent and believe, what do these men do?
 1. We read it throughout the book of [Acts](#), don’t we? They don’t come around to the evidence of Jesus’ resurrection. They try to kill any who claim to be a witness to it or a believer in it.
 - a. It was never about objective truth. It was always about the sovereignty of self, and Jesus threatens that. So they want to kill Him and any who would follow Him.

(3) The Good News of It

Heaven Would No Longer Be Heaven

- A. Now, as we move towards the good news of hell as I’ve said, we must begin by asking: What do you do with such people, such monsters, as this?
 1. Well, the answer, on the one hand, is quite clear: you have to get rid of them.
- B. Let’s put it this way: heaven would no longer be heaven if such evil were permitted to roam free. So God, if He is God at all—indeed, if He is good at all—must judge. Hell must be real, or heaven isn’t either. Do you see?
 1. If the rich man were permitted to march into paradise and ball and chain Lazarus into his service, it would no longer be paradise. Such self-worshipping evil must be done away with or all is lost.
- C. When the holiness of God is seen for what it is and the sinfulness of man is seen for what it is, there will be no denying it: judgment, the wrath of God, hell . . . it’s right, it’s good.

Calvary's Hell

- A. But there is more to this, isn't there? And here is where we really come to the surprise of the gospel. You see, all we've really done up to this point is condemn ourselves. After all, it is our human nature that we have been talking about. It's not just out there somewhere. It's in me. It's in you.
1. So where's the hope for heaven now?
- B. This, of course, is where we come to talk about the cross of Jesus. For there we witness wide-eyed that God would put Himself in the place of hell to make a way for us back to Him in heaven. Though Jesus was holy and righteous, He was treated in our place as the monster.
1. Everything we see the rich man having to face for his own sin, we see that Jesus resolves to face Himself for us.
 - a. On that cross He takes the torment and the torture.
 - b. Like the rich man, there He cries out: ["I thirst" \(John 19:28\)](#)—desperate for water to cool His tongue.
 - c. He experienced the chasm separating Him from the presence of His Father: ["My God, my God, why have you forsaken me" \(Matt 27:46\)](#).
 - d. And, of course, we realize that all of this is coming to Him from the Father's hand. This wrath is poured out on the Son by the Father for the sake of sinners like you and I.
 - i. So that our hearts could be changed, our nature changed, and our eternal destinations changed.
- C. All that is left for us is to turn and to trust. And I invite you to do that now.