

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

This parable about the rich man and Lazarus is directed to the Pharisees. Just before this passage, Jesus had been teaching his disciples about money. He has just finished with the famous line “you can’t serve both God and wealth.”

Then Luke writes, <sup>4</sup>The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all this, and they ridiculed him.

In response, Jesus launched into this uncomfortable parable.

Before we get going on the meat of the passage, I do want to say one thing. This passage is not primarily about the afterlife. I personally have serious doubts about the existence of a place of eternal torment.

Most of what even church people believe about the afterlife has more to do with mythology and misinterpretation of biblical metaphors than what Jesus actually taught.

This is a parable – a story that helps make a point. In his teaching, Jesus spent way more time on this life and about grounding it in the source of eternal life than he ever did about life after death.

Whatever we might think about hell in eternity, we humans have done a pretty good job creating it here and now. The relationship between the rich man and Lazarus is a good image of hell long before either of them dies.

The parable does not leave a lot of wiggle room to feel comfortable if you’re not poor. On the other hand, if you are poor, the parable has a whole different ring to it. What could life be like if Christians took this parable to heart?

Albert Schweitzer was born into a long line of pastors and musicians. He attended university at the University of Strasbourg and received a PhD in philosophy and also trained as a pastor. He was also a concert level organist.

He started his career preaching in St. Nicholas Church in Strasbourg and then acquired an academic position at the Theological College of St. Thomas. He began rising through the academic ranks.

But in 1905 he began medical school and upon completion he spent the better part of the rest of his life working in a hospital he founded in what was then called French Equatorial Africa. He would go on to win the Nobel Peace Prize.

This parable was apparently his inspiration...he likened the African people to Lazarus, begging at the door of Europe.

Now, the colonialism with which he approached Africa has its own problems. But the point is that this parable packs a punch...a potentially life-changing one.

When both Lazarus and the rich man are dead, the rich man is told that there is a deep chasm between where Lazarus and Abraham are, and where the rich man ended up...a chasm that cannot be bridged.

But really, that deep chasm was there all along. It was just reversed – Lazarus was in torment and the rich man lived a life of lavish comfort.

The chasm was so great, the rich man never even much noticed Lazarus. The chasm was taken for granted – it's just the way things worked. The chasm can't be bridged...or so the rich man may have believed. It's just the way things are, he thought – there are always poor people. I can't be responsible for them.

That chasm has never been closed. In a country where the gap between rich and poor is obscene, there are plenty even now who would say, well that's the way it works. The chasm can't be bridged.

This parable makes very clear that it is not the way it's supposed to work.

A little over 65 years ago, Martin Luther King, Jr. preached on this parable. I'm going to quote a part of it, because nothing I say can put it any better:

"The rich man is the white man who refuses to cross the gulf of segregation and lift his Negro brother to the position of first-class citizenship, because he thinks segregation is a part of the fixed structure of the universe. The rich man is the India Brahman who refuses to bridge the gulf between himself and his brother, because he feels that the gulf which is set forth by the caste system is a final principle of the universe. The rich man is the American capitalist who never seeks to bridge the economic gulf between himself and the laborer, because he feels that it is the natural order for some to live in inordinate luxury while others live in abject poverty."

This parable calls into question our belief that a world divided into the obscenely wealthy and crushingly poor is part of the natural order.

You'll notice that the parable does not indicate that there's anything particularly evil about wealth itself. But it does invite us to imagine a world in which wealth occupies a different position...a position of service.

Jesus' teachings all invite us to imagine the world as God wills it to be. Jesus called that world the Kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God does intersect with eternity, but it's not limited to the time after we die. We can never use a parable like this to assure the poor that they should just suck it up here because they'll get their reward in heaven later.

If we do that, then we also have to accept the warning to the rich in the parable.

So let's imagine a different ending.

One nice morning, the rich man leaves his gated home to go for a stroll. He's heard that exercise is good for you.

There, lying at his gate is a huddled mess of a man...eyes pleading, hands outstretched, clothes dirty and in shreds. His skin is broken down in places and the infected sores are oozing.

The rich man is moved with compassion. He helps the man up and takes him into his house. He calls a doctor to come and the doctor cleans the wounds and applies a salve.

Lazarus is given cool water to drink and the rich man's servants bring some stew and bread out for him to eat.

Slowly, with care and good nutrition, Lazarus heals and regains his strength. He is able to find work on the rich man's estate. Eventually, he's able to get his own house and live his life.

The rich man and Lazarus remain friends. As the rich man listens to Lazarus and learns more about him and the plight of people like him, he is profoundly changed. He commits to building and financing a shelter that provides a place to stay, meals, and health care for the homeless. He hires Lazarus to oversee it.

And hell is transformed to something that looks more like the kingdom of God.

Maybe we'll say, with the Pharisees, that's just not realistic. And we'll come up with a whole bunch of reasons why. But the parable doesn't really leave us a way out.

Maybe it will help us to remember that Jesus wasn't afraid to enter into the hell we created here on earth. He came to bridge the chasms human sin has created.

Jesus didn't shy away from the poor, wounded beggars. In fact, he seemed to gravitate toward them.

But he also didn't shy away from the self-absorbed rich and powerful. His words to them were more painful.

But they were nonetheless words meant to heal them as well...words that would draw the rich and haughty into the kingdom of God, too. That's harder when you're rich – it's like a camel being drawn through the eye of a needle.

When we talk about lifting up the poor and downtrodden, the rich and powerful worry they'll lose too much.

But what did the rich man lose in our revised ending? He spent some of his money...maybe even a lot. But he gained something greater...he gained a friend...he gained a life shaped by the kingdom of God...he tapped into that power of eternal life and love, long before he died.

Jesus came to close the chasm between us and heaven. But he also came to close the chasm between rich and poor. Jesus began the work to bridge the chasm. That bridging is completed in our lives lived out as we work to bridge the chasm between us and the Lazaruses of our day.

That kind of life involves giving something up. Jesus invites us into a life that goes against the structures and systems we take for granted as the natural order of things. It can feel like we're losing something.

But what we gain, is the kingdom of God.