

## Luke 16:19-31

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***"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup> And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup> who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. <sup>22</sup> The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, <sup>23</sup> and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. <sup>24</sup> 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.' <sup>25</sup> 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. <sup>26</sup> 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.' <sup>27</sup> And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house-- <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers-- so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' <sup>29</sup> But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' <sup>30</sup> And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' <sup>31</sup> 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.'"***

### The Poor Man and Rich Lazarus

We naturally love a story that involves a great reversal of fortunes. Think of Aladdin, the street rat becoming the prince, or the 1980 US Men's "Miracle on Ice" Hockey team winning the gold medal. And what makes these stories even better is that it's not only the little guy that wins, but the big bad guy also loses. The evil royal vizier Jafar becomes trapped in a lamp, the best hockey team in the world from the evil Soviet Union skates off the ice in shame. And of course, we like these stories even *more* when those outcomes appeal to our sense of social justice, of what's right. And certainly, the fates of the rich man and poor Lazarus seem to fit the bill. The one who lived a life of extravagance ends up in Hades, whereas the poor fellow sitting by that rich man's front door ends up with the Lord. It's only right that the poor man received glory and the rich man got what was coming to him!

Except, money is not the dividing point between these two men. God isn't telling us here that if we have been given much, then we'd better give it all up for a life of poverty lest we end up like the rich man. He's also not saying that every poor person is going to heaven. In this parable, Jesus is addressing a deeper issue. You might remember last week's sermon from earlier in this chapter, the parable of the Unjust Steward ending with Jesus' warning that you cannot serve God and Mammon. In the verses between that text and this one, the Pharisees ridiculed Jesus for that notion.

You see, one of the main teachings of the Pharisees was that if you were rich, it was because God loved you and would ultimately bring you to heaven, and if you were poor, it was because God despised you and would send you to hell. So, they scoffed at the idea that they could not love the stuff of this world and God at the same time. Because, as we know, theirs was a life that greatly revolved around serving both God and themselves. When they prayed to God, they did so out in the streets so that all would see their devotion. They were generally very wealthy, but they always gave their 10% to the Lord, yet it was done so with the thought that people would see and recognize their zeal. And so, people thought very highly of them, and they figured God did too!

God did not. No, a few verses before our text, He says, ***“You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God.”*** (Luke 16:12) That last phrase is then the focus of our text this morning. The things that are exalted among men are detestable to God. We also know that what is detestable and foolish in the sight of men is *exalted* before God. And so, power and money and fame and success and influence, these mean nothing before the Lord’s throne. But as the Apostle Paul writes, ***“Since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.”*** (1 Corinthians 1:21-24)

Yes, in the sight of the world that exalts wealth and success, the unnamed man in this parable was the rich man. But in the eyes of God who knows hearts, the real wealth belonged to Lazarus. For Lazarus held Christ in his heart, the power of God and the wisdom of God. And the unnamed man did not.

Consider that rich man with me. Clearly, he thought he was pretty special. Everyday he dressed in purple and fine linen, which might not sound that special to us today, but this *was* the wardrobe of kings. Purple dye in those days was harvested from a certain kind of sea snail; thousands of snails had to be harvested for just a little amount of dye. So expensive was this dye, purple clothing was typically only worn by the wealthiest kings and used to adorn the temples of idols. The fine linen which he wore, known as the *Bissus*, was also quite costly; of the finest quality and dazzlingly white, this type of linen was sold for its weight in gold. *These* were the clothes that the rich man wore every day. And every night, the most sumptuous of feasts were being held at his table, no special occasion necessary. For this man, there was no cost too high that he would not be worthy of it regularly.

And that’s all the introduction Jesus gives us of the rich man, because that’s all we need. The first few words literally translated say, *“A certain man was rich.”* And that’s all he was. *Rich* is all he cared about. Having the things which were exalted in the sight of men and *being* exalted in the sight of men was his sole focus. So, he couldn’t have any time for Lazarus. He had no interest in showing Lazarus any sort of mercy. After all, he hadn’t been shown any mercy! He *worked* for everything he got! He woke up early, stayed at work late, he’d *earned* his status in life! (Or so he thought.) And he got what he worked for; he was exalted in the sight of men! But he was detestable in the sight of God—and not because he was rich! Later, we’ll see Abraham introduced, Lazarus ***“in his bosom”*** indicating this close communion between them together with the Lord. And Abraham, we know, was very wealthy!

It wasn’t the fact that this man was *rich* that separated him from the Lord, it was that “rich” was all he was. At his death, he was buried. And the word used there suggests that it was an extravagant affair. Hundreds of people likely showed up to talk about how great and wealthy and successful this man was. Years would go on and people would still remember him and his accomplishments—but God did not even know his name.

You know, in many churches the rich man in this story is called Dives. That’s simply a Latin word which means “rich man.” Evidently, some theologians thought that if Lazarus was given a name by Jesus that the rich man should have one too, so they settled on Dives. But Jesus choosing to name Lazarus and

then purposely not naming the rich man was part of the point of this story. When that rich man died, God, the Judge who sees the heart, said to him, ***“I never knew you; depart from me, you [worker] of lawlessness.”*** (Matthew 7:23)

And then, that man departed to Hades, separated for eternity from the grace of God which he had taken for granted his entire life. And that was it for him. And that’s another point in this story—the time we have *right now* is the time we’re given to ***“seek the LORD while He may be found, [to] call upon Him while He is near.”*** (Isaiah 55:6) After we die, that opportunity is behind us. We see that with the rich man who seems to now have a change of heart. It *looks* like the one who always only thought of himself is now thinking of others, namely his brothers. And yet, nothing has changed. He still values the things that are exalted in the sight of men and detests the things that are exalted in the eyes of God.

Notice how he treats Lazarus as some sort of servant—as his water boy, his messenger boy. He responds to Abraham in a very arrogant and ignorant manner! And far worse, the rich man still despises the Word of God. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus back to warn his brothers. Abraham says, ***“They have Moses and the prophets.”*** And the rich man indicates that he doesn’t think that’s enough. You see, what the rich man is really implying is that it’s God’s fault that he’s there in torment. God hadn’t done enough to warn him, and He also hadn’t done enough to warn his brothers either, is the thought. If God did something really great, something that would be exalted in the eyes of men, like bringing someone back from the dead, then they’d be sufficiently warned! Abraham says again, ***“They have Moses and the Prophets,”*** and the man says, ***“NO!”*** You see, just as the rich man had despised God’s Word in his life, so he still thought so little of it.

Let us learn the lesson of the rich man, because we too can easily struggle with all the same thoughts. We might often get swept up in the idea that if things are going well in our lives, then clearly God loves us, and if things are going poorly that God is punishing us! But that’s just not true, as Jesus says, ***“In the world, you will have tribulation.”*** (John 16:33) The pains of this life are designed by God to bring us closer to Him; they’re not the vessels of God’s wrath. We might also sometimes get swept up in the idea that all of our good things come from our own hard work, forgetting about God’s grace in our lives. And even though we’re Christians, we might even sometimes despise the Word of God, thinking that it is not enough. Thinking that if we just did more of those things that are exalted in the eyes of this world, then our church would be bursting at the seams! But look at where that thinking got the rich man. And the truth is, we deserve the same outcome, for we also love to exalt those things that are exalted in the eyes of men but are detestable in the eyes of God.

But the opposite is also true—what is detestable in the eyes of men is exalted in the eyes of God. And *that* is really good news. You see, Lazarus in this parable embodies the good news for you. Jesus uses him to teach us that God is our help. He exalts the poor and the downtrodden, and He does so through that which is exalted in His sight—His Word, and faith through that Word in His Son. The key to this is the name that Lazarus is given. Both the fact that Lazarus is given a name, in contrast to the rich man whom God did not know, and the name that Lazarus is given are the keys to understanding the story. You see, Lazarus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Eleazar.” And Eleazar means “God will help.” Unlike the rich man, Lazarus doesn’t say anything in this whole parable, because he doesn’t

need to. His name is his confession. "God will help." And this is the real difference between the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man is rich, and that's all he is! But Lazarus, who is poor and destitute, trusts in God alone as his helper.

Lazarus is not just poor in earthly things, he is poor in spirit. He knows that the sores that cover his body are the least of his troubles. Far worse are the sores of sins that cover his soul. And he also knows that he is clothed in the best robes of all time—the white robes of righteousness paid for in Christ's own blood. He was detestable as could be in the eyes of men, but God knew him. And that's the other reason we're told his name! Remember, God was indicating, "I don't know this rich man, he's not one of mine. But I know Lazarus. I know his name. His name is written in the book of life."

Every day of his life was known to God, every hair of his head was numbered. God knew all of his sorrows and troubles and pains and heard all of his cries for help. While the rich man paid no heed to Lazarus, God did. While no one in the world blinked an eye when Lazarus was found dead and thrown into some unmarked grave, the angels of God carried Lazarus to heaven. What a tender picture illustrating what we're told in the Psalms: **"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints."** (Psalm 116:15)

And then, Lazarus is taken to Abraham's bosom, which indicates the real difference between the rich man and Lazarus. The rich man *claims* Abraham as his father, but he does so without any right. He's thinking of the fact that he's descended *physically* from Abraham, as he calls him father. But God's Word frequently testifies that biological descent from Abraham has nothing to do with salvation. As Paul writes to the Romans: **"Not all who are descended from Israel belong to Israel, <sup>7</sup> and not all are children of Abraham because they are his offspring, but "Through Isaac shall your offspring be named."<sup>8</sup> This means that it is not the children of the flesh who are the children of God, but the children of the promise are counted as offspring."** (Romans 9:6-8) So, Lazarus who was so poor and destitute in this world is exalted—not *because* he was poor, not *because* he suffered, but because He believed that God was his help—that with the exalted Lord, he also would be exalted.

And where does that leave you? How does God look at you? Are you despised, a stranger to the Lord? Or is your name written in the Book of Life? You know the answer. Because today, here and now, God has decided to give the good things of Christ to you. In the body and blood of Christ that you are about to receive, God has decided to give you His forgiveness. God has decided that the inheritance of His Son is to be yours also. As Christ was despised and rejected by man, yet then exalted in the resurrection to glory, God declares that His death and resurrection are yours also, because where there is forgiveness, there is life and salvation. The drop of water that the rich man so desperately wanted has been poured over you in baptism until you have drowned in it and been raised to new life. Though you are poor and destitute, with nothing to offer to God, here, God gives you a certain future, now and for all time. God will send the angels of heaven to bring you to His side, because salvation is yours, God's gift to you in His Son. So, your confession can be the same as Lazarus', "God will help." God is *my* help. Because of this, *you* are as rich as Lazarus. Thanks be to God, in Jesus' name. Amen.

**"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.