

The Rich Man and Lazarus – Luke 16:19-31

By Dr. Dave Neale

In recognition of the second Truth and Reconciliation Day on this coming Friday, Sept 30, *We acknowledge that the Victoria Church of the Nazarene lies within the territories of the peoples represented by the Songhees, Esquimalt and W_SÁNEĆ Nations.*

Behind the Text

Jesus isn't the originator of the basis of this lively story. He draws on evocative images of the time to capture his hearers' interest.¹

Jesus tells a story about the afterlife based on popular conceptions of the time in which damnation is defined in terms of the pursuit of self-interest and the refusal to repent in life. Salvation is defined the son of Abraham who suffered (unjustly) in earthly life and is so comforted in the bosom of Abraham in the next.

No where does Jesus teach that wealth merits hell and poverty merits salvation. The point here is that Hades is "the great equalizer which obliterates all distinction between king and pauper."²

We are deep into biblical truth in this passage. There is an absolute consonance with the OT theme of responsible use of material goods. As we said in the parable of the Rich Fool who just built more barns (July 31), what we do with our excess in society matters. As we noted last week in the Parable of the Dishonest Manager, the acquisition of "mere mammon" for the sake of self-interest is the sin in view in all of these stories.

The origins of Jewish theology on heaven and hell are fascinating and complex. The development runs from Judaism's sojourn in Babylonian captivity, to the pulp fiction of the two centuries prior to Jesus' day, and finally to the extreme popularity of apocalyptic in Jesus' day.

But suffice it to say that what we don't have here is information that is a prescriptive theology on heaven and hell.

What does the Creed say about final judgment? "He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end." Beyond that I'm not sure it is important to know a lot more about life after death.

Col 3:4 ... ***your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory.***

In the Text

Let's enjoy some of the colourful details of the story and then go on to the application, or the moral of the story, in Jesus' summation.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

...There was a rich man...³

In this time it wasn't so terribly different from our economic situation today. You had the rich, the middle and the poor. The "1%" had, by far, the lion's share of the wealth. It was hereditary and those in possession ultimately ruled the country politically – through various means. Next was significant number of people who served the elite, we call them "retainers."

These were comprised of a myriad of government, military, tax officials. There was the working class of shop keepers and trades who lived a reasonable life. And there was the peasantry, the impoverished rural population farming the lands of others, who lived on a subsistence basis. And there were the outcasts, such as our dear Lazarus.

So we have this broad juxtaposition of the two ends of the economic scale.

...purple and fine linen...

Scarlet, blue and purple were the colours of royalty and wealth. Purple dye was particularly expensive and therefore worn only by the rich.⁴ Lydia in Acts was a "dealer in purple cloth" (16:14). Some times used in an ironic sense, the "great harlot" Babylon, in Revelation, is dressed in... purple. In mockery, a purple robe was put on Jesus' shoulders (John 19:2, 5).

... feasted sumptuously...

We don't think twice about running to the store for a pound of hamburger. In this Hello Fresh world dinner ingredients appear on our doorstep if we so choose. But in Jesus' day, the cost of putting a pound of meat on the table every day was equal to the annual salary of thirty workers. And this man ***feasted sumptuously every day.***

And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus... We move from the table of the rich man to the gate of his house. The name Lazarus means "God helps." In honour of Truth and Reconciliation I note publication of the new *First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament* (InterVarsity Press, 2021) put it this way: ***Every day a beggar named Creator Helps Him was laid at the gate of his lodge.***⁵ Jesus (Heb Joshua/Yeshua, God saves) is rendered ***Creator Sets Free.*** Interesting fact: The Province of Manitoba derives its name from the Anishinaabe name for God – Kitchi Manitou (Creator, Great Spirit, Great Mystery).

...even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

In biblical parlance dogs are unclean and associated with squalor. There is a revulsion about the dog in the culture of the time, one you can appreciate if you are on the back streets of Jerusalem today, or in the more impoverished areas of the city (east Jerusalem) where street dogs and cats are everywhere.

Poor Lazarus dies and is ushered into the bosom of Abraham. But...

There was a rich man who also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side.

In Greek mythology Hades is a state of gloom. The Old Testament *sheol* is translated as Hades (see Psalm 16:8-11, quoted in Acts 2) – both are states of gloomy half-light. Somewhere along the way,

from the Babylonian captivity to the time of Jesus, the idea of hell as a place of eternal **torment** seems to arise. And here we find that concept as well... the rich man was "being tormented."

From the Text

Now we move to the teaching part of the story really. The rich man asks for *two* things.⁶

He called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames" (v 24).

Send Lazarus to get me some water! The rich man's attitude was unaltered by his passage through death. Neither in life nor in death does the rich man display the attitudes and actions Jesus/Luke finds in repentant sinners.⁷ The rich man still thinks that Lazarus should serve him in the afterlife!

Even consignment to Hades doesn't humble the rich man or teach him the error of his ways. He still thinks the poor man should serve him by bringing him water.

There is a cautionary note here about the incorrigibility of pride and entitlement. The Christian view of human sin, optimistic as we are of God's grace, is that of a deep incapacitating lostness, redeemed only by God in Christ, through repentance.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children (Gal 4:3-4).

C.S. Lewis' vision of the afterlife is compelling. The "lost" continue in their pride and lack of humility in the afterlife. The traits that we nourish in this dispensation will be the traits that will be carried with us into the next.

In the second request poor Lazarus is still being asked to run the rich man's errands.

He said, "Then, father [Abraham], I beg you to send him [Lazarus] to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment." Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." He said, "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." "

Even in death the rich man can only think about his own kin. The man has learned nothing about compassion for all people in life.

The point of the parable is extremely practical. This parable teaches us about the absolute importance of being attentive to the prophetic call to live up to our responsibilities to our disadvantaged fellow human beings, *in the here and now*. And it teaches that we have no other time of opportunity than now.

I can't help but see here a reference to his own death and resurrection. If we are waiting for a miracle to convince us to take a step of faith toward God, I doubt that even a resurrected soul could convince us.

As we said last week, it doesn't matter what we don't have, it just matters what we do with what we do have!

And finally, and this takes us into the liturgy of Baptism which we now enter. The moment of salvation is now. In Christ there is no past, it is covered by his blood. The future is in His hands and we have only to trust in His grace. But in the present we see God through the eyes of faith and action.

¹ Jeremias is of the opinion that the precursor of this story of Jesus is as follows: "This is the Egyptian folk-tale of the journey of Si-Osirus, the son of Setme Chamois to the underworld, which concludes with the words: 'He who has been good on earth, will be blessed in the kingdom of the dead, and he who has been evil on earth, will suffer in the kingdom of the dead'" Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, p. 183. In the Jannes and Jambre story, Jannes returns from the underworld to exhort his brother to good works, "Now then, brother Jambres, make sure you do good in your life to your children and friends; for in the netherworld no good exists, only gloom and darkness. After you will have died and have come to the netherworld, among the dead, your abode will be two cubits wide and four cubits long." Charlesworth, *Psuedepigrapha*, Vol. II, p. 441.

² From the notes on Jannes and Jambre in Charlesworth, *Psuedepigrapha*, Vol. II, p. 434.

³ The rich man's kinship to Abraham does not entitle him to salvation. This expresses the radical idea of the prophets, to which Jesus alludes at the summation of the parable – meaning all nations will have access to salvation. The rich man is not portrayed as a sinner or as wicked. He is profligate, yes. But in that lifestyle he has failed in his obligation to help the poor. And ultimately, the rich must repent of this and change their ways (16:30).

⁴ *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, p. 158.

⁵ The FNV seeks to translate the English Bible, "...in a culturally relevant way, to the traditional heart languages of the over six million English-speaking First Nations people of North America."

⁶ 'It is a late-Jewish conception that the righteous and the wicked can see one another in the intermediate state.' Jeremias, *Parables*, p. 185.

⁷ Neale, *Luke 9-24*, p. 154