

Sermon – 09/25/22

Text – Luke 16:19-31

Theme – “Rich Man and Lazarus”

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

You just heard the familiar story of The Rich Man and Lazarus. It’s one of those parables that sticks in our heads – most of us having heard it from childhood onward. I remember, as a youngster, hearing it and feeling sorry for Lazarus. Poor and sick. Suffering and alone. With no friends to care for him except the dogs, who licked his running sores. I remember feeling some sort of satisfaction at the punishment of the rich man, who had done nothing to help poor Lazarus. I remember how the description of the torments of hell impacted me: the vivid imagery of the rich man begging even for a few drops of water for his parched and burning tongue – and being refused even that tiny bit of relief.

Let’s face it – this is a GOOD story, delivered by a GOOD Storyteller. But, is that all that it is? Well, of course not. And that is why we are covering it here and now. So, what does this parable have to say to us? After all, there MUST be some point Jesus is making. (pause)

Well, the beginning of the parable sets up what follows. We are told of two men: a rich man (with no name) and a poor beggar man (Lazarus). But even more important than their status (rich or poor) is how that affected them. The rich man appears to revel in his wealth: wearing purple and linen (only allowed to the most wealthy and privileged), eating – feasting, really – daily on delicacies and gourmet meals. The poor man, though, literally has nothing. He cannot even walk, apparently, as Jesus says he was “laid” at the rich man’s gate, hoping for even crumbs to eat. Which, we should note, the rich man refused to provide. The contrast could not be any more stark and plain.

Eventually both die and are buried. The poor man goes to "*Abraham's bosom*" — a term for heaven. The rich man, though, is damned and experiences the torments of hell. Why? Was it because the rich man was rich? Did Lazarus go to heaven because he was poor? That is, does Jesus mean to teach in this parable that wealth, in and of itself, is evil and consigns a person to damnation? Or that, on the other hand, that poverty is a ticket straight to heaven? Well, of course not. The Bible is full of wealthy people of faith. And poor people of NO faith. And THERE is the answer: faith.

You see, the rich man put his faith, not in God or His promises, but rather in his wealth. He looked to IT to make him happy, to provide for his needs, to give him hope and life and joy. But it could not. Wealth is only a tool, a gift, from God to be used according to His purposes. In the case of this parable, certainly God would have wanted the rich man to use some of his vast riches to help the starving, sick, dying man literally lying on his doorstep. But he did not, did he? Wealth — and all its pleasures — had become his idol and god. And, in the end, it could not save him but only condemn him.

The poor man, Lazarus, though apparently DID have faith in God. Maybe it was because he had nowhere else to turn, but he apparently put his trust and hope in the Lord. And not just for this world and life, but for eternity. His earthly suffering drove him to the promises of the Gospel, to the hope of future joy, because he had none here. And he was not disappointed. When he died, he received the reward of faith: eternal life. (pause)

The middle section of the parable gives us a picture of heaven and hell. Obviously, after hearing it, no one would want to share Hades with the rich man but would want to be like Lazarus, in Abraham's bosom. There, he had perfect peace and joy, bliss beyond compare. There, he was welcomed and given all that was denied him in this life — and more. There, he was home. With Father Abraham, but even more, with his heavenly Father.

The rich man, though, knows none of that. His suffering there in hell is infinitely worse than that of Lazarus in this world. The pain he knew was beyond that of dying Lazarus. Where Lazarus had dogs licking his oozing sores, the rich man in hell has flames licking all over his body. Where Lazarus wanted a morsel of food, the rich man dreams for a drop of water. And just as he had denied Lazarus here, so he finds his plea is denied there. There is to be no relief, not even for a moment. His agony is eternal. Not just physical pain, but the pain of separation from God and His love.

And when he finally comes to terms with that – when Abraham tells him that it is too late, that nothing can be done for him now – the rich man finally thinks of others. Of his brothers, who apparently are just like him. If Lazarus cannot come to help ME, then send him back to save THEM! To which Abraham responds: *“If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.”* And it is that sentence upon which I want to spend the rest of our time today. (pause)

Moses and the Prophets. That would be the Old Testament Scriptures. “Moses” was a reference to the first books of the Old Testament, written by Moses. And “the Prophets” would be the rest of the Old Testament books. THOSE are what the rich man’s brothers needed to hear, not someone raised from the dead. But why? What is Jesus saying here?

Think back, if you will, to the Mount of Transfiguration. Who was there, along with Jesus and Peter/James/John? It was Moses and Elijah (whom the Jews considered to be the chief Old Testament prophet). So, those two men represent the Old Testament and its message. And what is that message? Of what did Moses, Elijah, and Jesus speak that day on the mountain? Well, St. Luke (in his account of the Transfiguration) tells us: they spoke of Jesus’ *“departure, which He was about to complete at Jerusalem”*. That is, they spoke about Christ’s

death at the cross. THAT is the message of the Old Testament (just as it is the message of the New Testament). THAT is the message those brothers of the rich man needed to hear.

From its beginning in Genesis, to its end in Revelation, that message is the constant theme. The Bible starts with the perfection of Eden, and it ends with the perfection of the new/restored heaven and earth. But in between, it is all about sin – and how God deals with it. In just the third chapter of that rather long book (the Bible), we hear of the fall into sin. Of how Adam chose to follow Satan rather than God. How he was not content with the exalted place God had given him, but wanted to be *“like God”*. And we hear of the result: utter ruin. Adam’s sin destroys everything. Gone is the perfect peace between Adam and Eve, replaced by recrimination and blame and hatred. Gone is the perfect harmony of creation, replaced by fear and loss. Gone is the perfect life they had, replaced with death.

That is the world in which we now live, isn’t it? While there is still much good and beauty here, there is also so much more bad. Crime. Violence. Hatred. Suffering. Death. You know exactly what I mean. But that is NOT what Good intends. And it is not what He will allow. And so, He comes to Adam and Eve, and He promises to fix it. He promises a Savior.

But, as the Old Testament unfolds, God tells more and more of HOW He will do that. The Savior will come, as Man. To do what we cannot and do not. He will love God perfectly. He will love His neighbor as Himself. He will take our part – even to the point of enduring the hell that WE deserve. Moses and the Prophets speak of that. One of those prophets (Isaiah) writes:

Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned – every one, of us – to his own way; and the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all.

Another prophet (David) writes almost as one standing at the foot of the cross on Good Friday, prophesying of that promised Savior's suffering there for us:

My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me? Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning?...All those who see Me ridicule Me; they shoot out the lip, they shake the head, saying, "He trusted in the Lord, let Him rescue Him; let Him deliver Him, since He delights in Him!"...I am poured out like water, and all My bones are out of joint; My heart is like wax; it has melted within Me. My strength is dried up like a potsherd, and My tongue clings to My jaws; You have brought Me to the dust of death. For dogs have surrounded Me; the congregation of the wicked has enclosed Me. They pierced My hands and My feet; I can count all My bones. They look and stare at Me. They divide My garments among them, and for My clothing they cast lots.

It's all there, in the Old Testament: the Gospel. The Good News of sin being forgiven. But only at a cost. A tremendous cost. That of God dying in our place. God condemning Himself to our hellish suffering. God giving EVERYTHING for His beloved children – you and me, as wicked and rebellious and lost as we are.

And it is that Gospel which the rich man's brothers need to hear. Because only that Gospel, only Jesus Christ for them, can save them from the torments of hell. (pause)

You see, this parable then is really about the Gospel – and OUR need to hear it. Because, like that rich man and his brothers, we too are sinners. God has given us much. Even the poor among us are rich beyond compare, in the eyes of virtually other people. Look at what He has given us: warm homes, plenty to eat, doctors and medicines, peace and security. Even though we do live in a fallen world, God is gracious and good to us.

And how do we respond? Sadly, all too often we are like that rich man in the parable: enjoying the good things we have, while ignoring the needs of others lying on our doorstep. All too often, we put our hope in the things given, rather than in the Giver. All too often, we ignore Moses and the Prophets; we let the Gospel go in one ear and out the other.

That is why we need the Law and its call to repentance. To acknowledge our sin, our idolatry, our lack of love. To recognize that we really are beggars, who must cry out to God for salvation, for forgiveness, for life.

And the Good News is that He hears and answers. Jesus HAS come. He HAS done everything for you: He has kept the Law, He has died your death, He has paid for all your sin. In Him, you have everything. In baptism, you were washed clean and claimed as God's own again. In the Lord's Supper, you are fed – not with crumbs, but the very Bread of Life. In His Word, you are told again and again of this Gift. (pause)

This parable, like so many others, is meant to impress upon us what is the TRUE treasure. The riches we ought to desire. The wealth that God lavishes upon all who will be receive it. The Gospel. That rich man in our story was fooled and misled and blinded by the earthly blessings he had in abundance. He trusted in THEM. He worshipped THEM. He rejoiced in THEM. But they could not save him. Lazarus, however, knew what was the real prize. The forgiveness of sins and eternal life which only come through faith in Christ. May God grant us the sight and faith of Lazarus – to look to the Gospel – to Jesus – and live. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.

OS – Offertory/Offering
FE – Offertory/Offering