

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL AND LAZARUS (2)

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### Luke 16:19-31

This lesson forms the second part of a study on the parable of the rich fool and Lazarus. We mentioned in the first part that the kingdom of God is the central theme of Jesus' parables. This kingdom refers to God's rule or reign. We used the word 'kingship', the kingship of God, and we explained why it is important to understand it well. Without the kingship of God in a person's life, salvation is unavailable.

Today we return to the parable of the rich fool and Lazarus, and we will try to explain its main points. The account may be viewed as a drama in two acts. The first scene is a presentation of life and death on earth. The second one portrays heaven and hell.

### A startling contrast

The story shows a powerful contrast between two men who are worlds apart from each other in everything. Remarkably, the distance that separates them is symbolized first by the gate (v. 20), then by the words 'far away' (v. 23) and finally by the 'great chasm' fixed between them (v. 26). This style of teaching, putting one person in contrast to another, allows the Lord Jesus to point out certain spiritual truths. We will discuss them in a moment.

Where do we see this contrast? The first contrast concerns the clothing.

*Luke 16:19. There was a certain rich man who was **clothed in purple and fine linen** and fared sumptuously every day.*

*20 "But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, **full of sores**, who was laid at his gate.*

Here is this very rich man dressed in purple and fine linen. Purple clothes came from dye extracted from the shellfish murex and were extremely expensive. Only kings and nobles could afford them. The fine linen refers to the undergarments. This kind of linen was particularly soft and white, and was therefore much sought as an article of luxury. The combination of white garments underneath a purple robe was the sign of the highest opulence. In contrast with the rich man, the clothes Lazarus wore received no mention. Instead, we are told that he was covered with sores.

Then food is mentioned. Another mark of great wealth was the fact that the man feasted constantly. His table was furnished with delicious food of all types and he spent his days enjoying them. On the other hand, Lazarus had nothing to eat. He was so hungry that he would have been thankful for the scraps of food that fell from the rich man's table.

Finally, mention is made of their home. The wealthy man had a gate, signifying his possession of an estate. It is reasonable to think that he lived in a beautiful mansion. Lazarus, in contrast, had no home. He has been placed at the gate, probably because he was crippled. The use of the passive tense, 'was laid', suggests that he was too sick to move or at least so hungry that he was immobilized. That explains why he couldn't even avoid the dogs that licked his sores.

The diseased and disabled were a burden on that society. And because there was then no public provision for these people, they were often left sitting or lying in public places or at the gates of the rich, asking for charity.

Throughout the parable, the rich man is an active agent, engaging in dialogue and making requests. Lazarus, however, is entirely passive. He does not say one word.

### **The rich man in hell**

After introducing the two contrasting characters, the parable moves from this life to the next. Lazarus and the rich man die, and that is when their lots are completely reversed. Nothing has been said about the religious state of either. But Lazarus is evidently a faithful servant of God because when he died, he was carried by angels to 'Abraham's bosom'. This expression refers to the patriarch's reception of the faithful into heaven. The poor man went from being a lonely sufferer at the rich man's gate to an accepted, blessed saint at the side of Abraham.

The wealthy man received a burial, no doubt a splendid one. Flute players and mourners came, and all his friends were in attendance. They spoke of him in glowing words of praise and commendation. But this was the last good thing to come his way, since he is then seen in agony in hell.

Why does the rich man end up in hell? It is not because he has lived wickedly on earth. Jesus brings the whole force of the rebuke to bear on one point: his attitude to material possessions, which demonstrated an improper relationship with God. He could have been a rich benefactor, but instead he used his money for his own enjoyment. Every day he feasted sumptuously. He lived neither for God nor for his fellowman, but for himself only.

You see that the rich man did not deserve the torment of hell for what he had done in his life on earth, but for what he had failed to do. When a needy person was at his doorstep, he had no concern for him and took no care about him. He could have so easily arranged to have the scraps of food falling from his table sent out to the hungry man. But he didn't do it because he didn't care about Lazarus. That was his sin.

This rich was condemned because of the callousness of his heart, a condition that wealth often produces. He became consumed with his own joy, leisure and celebration, and failed to respond to the suffering and need of others around him. Notice that on this point, the parable illustrates Jesus' teaching in Luke 16:9 about using wealth generously. There the Lord says, *And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by means of the mammon of unrighteousness (i.e., money); that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.*

### **The poor man in paradise**

Now, what about Lazarus? What can we say about him that explains why he went to heaven and was given the privilege of enjoying Abraham's company? We should not interpret his extraordinary fortune as the automatic outcome of poverty and suffering on earth.

There is one thing, one important observation that we need to point out about Lazarus. Let me ask you this question. If you were placed in his Lazarus' position, sitting out there on the street, hungry, gazing through the gates of this magnificent property, and you see people laughing, chit-chatting, eating and feasting upon the best food, licking their fingers, ignoring your presence, what would have been your reaction? I would not be surprised that some of us would begin to curse. 'You selfish rich people! You rotten criminals! You give food to your dogs but you have nothing for the poor'. Or maybe even worse. Some might begin to curse God. 'Oh God, why did You bring me into this situation? What have I done that I must suffer all this? Is there any justice in heaven and on earth'? There are people who have suffered a lot less than Lazarus who are filled with self-pity, full of blame for other people, blame for God.

But did you notice that not one word of murmuring comes out of Lazarus' lips? The silence of Lazarus is impressive. There is no grumbling, no sign of bitterness, though he is the most wretched of all men. Sick, penniless, no home to go to, nothing to eat, with only the dogs as his companions. And yet, no murmuring escapes from his mouth.

Another important clue about Lazarus is found in his name. In this parable, the Lord Jesus shows that Lazarus was a godly man by hinting at his name. He is the only person in any of Jesus' stories who is given a name. Lazarus means 'God is my help', indicating someone dependent on God.

More specifically, where do we see godliness in this man? In other words, where do we see the kingship of God in this parable? Remember what we said in the previous lesson. The central theme uniting all the teaching of the parables is the kingdom of God, or the kingship of God. So where do we find it in this case?

## **The kingdom of God**

Here is a man in this state, in this poverty, in the midst of such suffering, and he has not one word of complaint coming from his lips. Lazarus. When we read his name, we can almost hear him say, 'God is my help. He is my King and my God. One day, He will set all things right. In Him I trust. I will commit my cause to Him (as we read in Job 5:8). I shall not make my complaint in a bitter way'. There is the kingship of God.

You see the kingship of God in a Christian's life when you observe how he behaves in the face of difficulties. The kingship of God is about the way you live and the quality of your life. It is not enough just to say, 'Jesus is the King of my life'. Anybody can say that. We see what the kingship of God means to a disciple when the fire begins to burn around him. When his health is gone, when his money is gone, when his job is gone, when his friends have left him and yet he says, 'My God is my help'. That is how the kingship of God is made manifest.

You know, it seems that Jesus wants to compare in this picture Lazarus with Job. The only other person spoken of in the Bible with sores all over his body was Job. Once a well-to-do man, Job was sitting in the dust, after losing all he had. You remember that his children died. His possession was lost. His health was lost. Everything was gone. There is when you see the kingship of God in a man's life. What was Job's response? His wife told him, 'If that's the way God treats you, curse Him and die'! Lazarus could have said the same thing. But he didn't. Neither did Job. Instead, he said, 'The Lord has given and the Lord has taken. Blessed be the name of the Lord'. And we read in the following verse that *through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God* (Job 1:22). That is the kingship of God in practice.

There you see the comparison of Job to this poor man. Lazarus has lost everything. He sat there as a beggar and like Job, he was in the dust, full of sores and he refused to complain. 'The Lord has given, the Lord has taken. Blessed be the name of the Lord'.

## The consequence of one's choice

The comparison of the rich man and Lazarus continues on the other side of the grave. The rich man's behavior again stands in stark contrast to Lazarus' attitude. From his position of torment, the rich man can see Abraham far away and Lazarus with him. He then shouts across the distance to Abraham, asking that Lazarus be sent to dip his finger in water and cool his tongue. 'I am in agony in this flame', he says in v. 24. There is a note of arrogance in his request for he assumes that he can have Lazarus sent across to do him service. He seemed not to notice Lazarus on earth, but now he appeals through Abraham for the poor man's aid. The thought that his request may be inappropriate never occurred to him. He should have thought, 'I have never done anything for this man. What right do I have to ask a favor of him'? He acts as if nothing has changed despite his present situation. And the fact that he uses Lazarus' name in his appeal suggests that he knew about Lazarus all along, making his neglect of the poor man that much worse.

Abraham refuses the request and he explains the reason. V. 25: *Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.* Here is another contrast. The fate of the two men in the afterlife stands opposite what each experienced in his earthly life. The rich man had received all manners of 'good things' during his lifetime. Jesus called them 'your good things' to mean that they had been the rich man's choice. And now, in the afterlife, he is destitute and tormented. In contrast, Lazarus receives eternal life even though he had only 'evil things' while on earth.

Basically, what Abraham is saying is this. 'Your roles are now reversed. What Lazarus was in the old life, you have become. What Lazarus lacked, you now lack. What you did not provide him then, he cannot provide you now. You are reaping what you sowed. Your present agony is the just consequence of your lack of compassion on earth.' This reply reminds us of Jesus' declaration in Luke 6:20, 24. '*Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God ... But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation.*' The rich man, having generously rewarded himself during his lifetime, has been paid in full already and now, in the afterlife, he can expect no more.

But there is another factor. Abraham says in Luke 16:26, *Between us and you there is a great chasm fixed...* Lazarus entered heaven and the rich man entered hell. And between the two places, God has fixed a great chasm to make it impossible to pass from one state to the other. He has set up the afterlife in such a way that the righteous and the unrighteous do not mix.

This means that how we respond in this life is decisive for where we will reside in the next. We cannot wait until eternity to make our relationship right with God. For it will be too late. There is no possibility of being saved after death. It is now, in this life, or never.

## The problem: an unresponsive heart

The rich man then makes another request. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers about the place of torment. He speaks as a person who made a fatal mistake in his life and he wishes to help them avoid doing the same thing. Abraham simply explains that they could read the words of 'Moses and the prophets' (the OT) and there find the warnings about the place of torment. That is all they need.

But the rich man has a different opinion. He argues that someone like Lazarus returning from the dead would have a much greater effect than the OT. He is of course speaking from his own past experience. He had the OT but it did him no good. He believes that, had there been visible proof of the world to come in the form of a dead person rising from the dead, he would have done otherwise. This focus on a specific type of sign is something that Jesus had already warned against in Luke 11:29. 'No sign will be given to this generation', He said, 'except the sign of Jonah'.

Abraham again disagrees. He says in the last verse of the parable, v. 31, *If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.* Abraham does not accept that the problem of the rich man and his brothers is a lack of evidence. ‘If they do not listen to God’s word, they will not be convinced even if somebody rises from the dead’. Their problem is their own unwillingness to hear the word of God. Notice that the parable ends with a reference to people who do not want to listen to Moses and the prophets. It is they who will not be convinced even if somebody rises from the dead’.

Evidence does not necessarily lead to belief. As the readers of Luke would have known, Jesus had already raised a man from the dead (7:14-15), would raise a man named Lazarus from the dead (John 11:41-43), and would Himself rise from the dead. There was enough evidence for the Jews to believe. Did they believe? No. They rejected Him, seeking not only His death but Lazarus’ as well (John 12:9-10). What is needed is a heart that responds to God. This kind of heart does not seek heavenly signs. To see God’s work and hear His call, the heart must be open and the eyes must be looking for Him.

## **Summary**

Luke 16:19-31 is one of the most complex of Jesus’ parables. It teaches at least four points:

- (1) There is a call to the rich to examine how they use their wealth. They have to know that God is displeased with those who live in a self-indulgent way, unconcerned about people in need. The warning also calls for all of us to consider the kind of values that God desires for His people.
- (2) This passage is against any form of purgatory or any form of second chance. Nothing can change one’s fate in the afterlife beyond the factors present in this life.
- (3) It is an affirmation of the law and the prophets. Through it, God reveals His will so that none who neglect it can legitimately protest their subsequent fate.
- (4) It shows that signs in themselves are of no value if the heart is not right. The heart that is unwilling to be challenged by God’s demand for righteousness will not listen to His message. This kind of person will never accept to recognize his need to repent and to let God change him.