

The Rich Man's Dilemma

Three Things in Hell We Need on Earth

¹⁹ *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

²² *“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.*

Luke 16:19-23 NIV

It’s easy to wonder if the account of the rich man and Lazarus is a parable or a true story. If a parable, it is meant to enlighten us to a spiritual truth. If a story, it is told to inform us of a reality. Either way, it seems we should take special note of it.

If viewed as a parable, it is the only one in the Gospels where character names are mentioned (**Abraham** and **Lazarus**). The rich man is not identified by Jesus. Perhaps he is not named because the rich man was already known to those listening. Maybe the rich man’s name is absent because he was not a part of the Kingdom of God. If so, he was a rich man who lived but whose life accounted for nothing of lasting value in the light of eternity.

The account begins with these words: *“There was a rich man...”* Jesus didn’t say the rich man “was a sinner because he was rich” nor that “he was rich because he was a sinner.” It isn’t a sin to be either rich or poor; the two have co-existed in society since the beginning of recorded time. At a dinner in Bethany given in his honor, Jesus told the disciples, *“You will always have the poor among you...”* (John 12:8 NIV).

*“At his gate was **laid** a beggar...”* There is no reason for us to

believe Lazarus went and hung out with friends at the rich man’s place every day. Jesus said Lazarus was *“laid”* at the rich man’s gate. The Greek word (*ballō*) leads us to believe he was taken there by someone. More literally, he was cast off without caring where he landed. It may also indicate he was purposefully put there by someone. There may have been an assumption that the rich man was better able to provide for Lazarus than those who were considered his primary caregivers. Maybe they saw the rich man’s home as an “adult daycare,” enabling them to go to work with the hopes Lazarus would at least get something to eat.

There are some clear differences between the rich man and Lazarus:

- The rich man was covered in purple and fine linen; Lazarus was covered in sores.
- The rich man had food to eat; Lazarus begged for leftovers.
- Lazarus died and *“angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried”* (Luke 16:22 NIV).
- The rich man was *“in torment”* while Lazarus was at *“Abraham’s side.”*

Through this account Jesus teaches that Heaven and Hell are real places; Hell is agonizingly hot while Heaven is not.

Three very important lessons stand-out from the account Jesus told of the rich man and Lazarus.

1. There is a Vision of Heaven in Hell

- Like many of us, the rich man may never have considered the **inevitability** of death and his appointment with it may have been unexpected. In the end, he seems both surprised and completely unprepared for his outcome.
- Death can seem **frightening**; it may be **painful**, and we can’t fully understand it since death generally does not provide a trial period. Heaven is a place **prepared for us** and we need to **be prepared for it**. Not only how we get there, but we also need to prepare for the process that most often takes us there.

- Some people are afraid of the end of life because they don't understand it. Those who will find their home in Heaven realize **joy** for the benefactor means **grief** and **loss** for the bereaved. When we focus on the reward of Heaven for those who die before us, it's possible we may find our grief lessened, if even a bit.
- Heaven and Eternity are beyond **death** which is simply the doorway we must pass through between **this life** and **that life**; between **mortality** and **immortality**. As Paul wrote in 2 Corinthians 5:4, "...that which is mortal is swallowed up by life." We move from here to there in the amount of required to take a deep breath.
- In the **storms of life**, when there is **more month than money**, when you feel **lonely** and **abandoned** by God, when you **don't know how you can go on**, those are the times we need to get a vision of Heaven. This world is not our ultimate destination. We're still on **this side of the doorway** and we need to gain a vision of what is on the other side. We need to focus less on the **passageway** we go through and more on **paradise** we are going to.
- Jesus **described** it in John 14.
Stephen **saw** it in Acts 7.
John had a **vision** of it in Revelation 21.
But by the time the rich man got a look at it, **it was too late**. If he would have had a vision of Heaven just one day earlier, it may have made a difference. **But by the time he saw it, he could not get there**.
- We can be assured of this: **there are multitudes of souls today in Hell who have had a vision of Heaven**. NOW they believe in God. NOW they believe God's Word. NOW it all makes sense. NOW they have a vision of Heaven. And NOW it is too late.

2. There is Sincere Prayer in Hell

- The rich man "*called to him...Father Abraham, have pity on me...I am in agony in this fire*" (Luke 16:24). Too often we

wait to call out to God until our problems overwhelm us. When there is not an instantaneous response we may say, "God isn't listening!" But, **God is listening, though most of what He hears is our silence**.

- Had the rich man been...
 - A man of prayer rather than a man of luxury;
 - Had he spent time praying for others rather than ignoring them;
 - Had the rich man believed prayer made a difference in this life, he wouldn't have been praying in the afterlife. Instead, he would have been in the presence of God and adding his voice to the multitudes of those worshipping Him.
- Our prayers don't have to be filled with descriptive words; they just need to come from our heart with sincerity. Scripture tells us, "*The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective*" (James 5:16). The emphasis is not on **volume**, **rapidity**, proper **syntax**, or **descriptive** words. The key word is: **PRAYER**.
- The most fervent, heart-wrenching, desperate **prayers won't make a difference if prayed from Hell**.

3. There is a Missionary Vision in Hell

- "*I beg you, send Lazarus to my family...Let him warn them so they will not come to this place of torment*" (Luke 16:27-28).
- When the voice of the Lord came to Isaiah (chapter 6), the question for the prophet was not rhetorical: "*Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?*" The Lord's question became Isaiah's calling and he readily agreed. "*Here I am,*" he said, "*Send me!*"
That same sense of personal commitment to the lost never occurred to the rich man. From his place of torment, he cried out, "*Send Lazarus!*" He had a vision for outreach and evangelism but wanted someone else to fulfill it; he still believed it was anyone else's duty to point others to the

Kingdom of God.

There is a purpose for our lives and a responsibility to use that purpose to glorify God and point others to Him.

No one else can take our place or fulfill our purpose.

- There are family members and friends in Hell who **have a missionary vision for us**. They passionately want to one day look across the great chasm between Heaven and Hell and see us in Heaven rather than join them in Hell.
- The rich man never told his brothers about serving God and **now he hopes someone else will do it for him**. But his very specific request that Lazarus be sent to tell his five brothers is not even considered. *“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”*

The rich man had a **spectator’s view** of Heaven, he **prayed like he had never prayed** before, and he suddenly **adopted a vision of missions and evangelism**. But it was all too late and none of it could change the course of his dilemma.

Would it make a difference if the account Jesus shared of the rich man and Lazarus was a parable or a story? Probably not. Jesus either revealed the truth or he reported it. The account was recorded by Luke and has been given to us. We can be challenged or changed by it. If we are changed, the eternal destinies of others may be changed, too.

Three Take-Aways for Today

- We need to **catch a glimpse of Heaven** where God is exalted and praised with people from every tribe, tongue, nation and social class. It will help to change our view from what is temporary to that which is eternal.
- We need to **seek God and pray with sincerity** for our families and those around us. We need to pray that God

would use us, in what may even seem an insignificant way, so His glory could be revealed through us to others.

- **We need to capture a renewed vision for reaching our families, friends, and community**. We don’t need it tomorrow; we need it today. It will be too late for us to reach people who slip into eternity without receiving the saving power of a risen Christ who can forgive their sin. Once in Hell it will be too late to send someone to them with a message of salvation.

PRAYER:

Thank you, LORD, for your Word that illuminates our path and guides us in the way we should go. Help us to become the people you have called us to be. May your will be done in us and through us as we share your grace, love, and joy to others in our sphere of relationship and beyond. We ask, Holy Spirit, that you would work through us to draw those outside of the Kingdom of God into your presence and care.

Amen.

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