

**Luke 16:19-31**

The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is not going to win any popularity contests. Many other parables of Jesus are much more loved than this one...the Prodigal Son, the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin...they tell of a loving God in search of sinners; this one hits us hard with the reality of hell and its torments. Mothers aren't going to read the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus as a bed-time story to their young children. It could cause a few nightmares. But we will look at it today; not for the purpose of causing us grief and consternation, but to lead us to repent of our sins and believe the good news of Jesus.

This is the only parable of our Lord in which a character is given a name. "Lazarus" is the poor, sickly man in the story. Lazarus means "God is my help." And so even though Jesus tells us that his existence here on earth was miserable, He wants us to know that this poor, dying man trusted in the Lord. The Rich Man has no such name. God knows who His children are. He names them as His own in their baptism. But the unbelievers are not known to God. "I never knew you," He will say to those who will be cast into the outer darkness.

Yet, everyone in the community knew the name of the Rich Man. We've all heard of Ted Turner, Donald Trump, Oprah Winfrey, and others in our American community who have money, power, and influence. In the parable, the Rich Man would have had that same name recognition. Jesus makes it very clear to us that this man was living the good life. He had everything going his way—no debts, no financial troubles at all; just the best of what life had to offer. He dressed himself in the finest clothing money could buy. He ate the tastiest foods and drank the best wines available—and this was a daily habit for him. He was wealthy beyond our wildest dreams. And Lazarus was on the complete opposite end of the scale. He was covered, not in fine clothing, but with painful sores. His companions were not friends in high places, but the scavenger dogs. His lips longed to taste even a tiny morsel of food that fell from the Rich Man's plate.

There was nothing about these two men that was alike, except that they both left this world in death. And we can just imagine the funeral which was given for the Rich Man. No expense would have been spared. The eulogies said about him would have been many and glowing. His casket would have been covered in gold. His funeral procession, long. But Lazarus was probably tossed into a grave without even a word being said.

Friend, do not let your eyes deceive you. What this world honors and glorifies means nothing to God. But those whom the world despises, if they trust in the Lord, mean everything to Him. Lazarus was taken by the angels into heaven. The Rich Man went to hell. Now the tables are turned. Now it is Lazarus who fares sumptuously everyday, and it is the Rich man who endures a miserable existence.

It may be difficult for us to identify ourselves with either one of the characters in the parable. Certainly we don't want to see ourselves as the Rich Man for he ended up in hell. But on the other hand, even though Lazarus went to heaven, his life on earth was just plain miserable, and we may want to avoid seeing ourselves in his shoes as well.

Why did Jesus have to give us such extremes in the parable? Why couldn't He have mentioned a third character—perhaps a middle-class citizen; not filthy rich, but not poor

and miserable either; one who had his name on the church membership roster and who ended up in heaven. Now that's someone we could relate to. And it would make us feel a whole lot better about the parable as well, because as it stands, with only the two characters, either we become poor Lazarus now and go to heaven, or we hang on to our wealth and end up in hell.

But if that's how we're thinking then we're missing something. The key phrase in the entire parable is "Moses and the Prophets." This phrase refers to the Word of God, and it is this phrase which clarifies for us these two men. Lazarus didn't go to heaven because he was dirt poor. He was not comforted in eternity because he suffered much in this life. Lazarus went to heaven because, as his name tells us, he trusted in the Lord—and that faith and trust can come only by hearing the Word of God. The Rich Man had no such love for God's Word. When it was read week after week in church, he had better things to do. He did not perish in hell because he was rich; he perished because he ignored Moses and the Prophets; he had no use for the living and faith-giving Word of God.

If you were the Rich Man in this parable, you would not have the desire to come here to God's House. You would not care that Jesus gives you here His living Word and His body and blood for you. Rich or poor, you just would not care. But because you are Lazarus, you desire to hear Moses and the Prophets. You long to feast upon the Bread given at this Table and the wine poured out for you here. You are Lazarus, not if you are poor and sickly, but because you desire, hear, and receive Jesus' Word and Sacrament. As extremely different as these two men were in what they had, they were even more different when it came to their love for God's Word.

One thing we dare not overlook—Jesus became Lazarus for you. He, who was rich, became poor for your sake. He was despised and rejected of men, a Man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and one from whom men hide their face. As Lazarus, Jesus was thrown outside the gate of the rich where He was forced to lay down upon a wooden cross. They covered His back with sores by lashing Him with the whip. As Lazarus, Jesus cried out in distress, "I thirst!" And as Lazarus, Jesus suffered until He died.

Jesus became Lazarus for you so that you might become rich in Him. Whether you have much money or not, in Christ you have the riches of eternal life. Whether you have debt up to your neck or not, in Christ your debt of sin is completely forgiven. In your baptism, God gave you the riches of His grace, not so you can live out your life sumptuously everyday, but so you can live in the peace and joy that belongs to all of God's children; so you, as God's Lazarus, will be comforted in heaven forever.

This parable may be pretty frightening to some. It makes it quite clear to us that hell is very real and that it awaits all those who are not "Lazarus." But no one, absolutely no one can ever be scared into heaven; scared into believing in Jesus; scared into becoming one of God's Lazarus'. The Rich Man thought otherwise. He wanted Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them, to scare them into turning to the Lord. "No," Abraham said, "Unless they hear Moses and the Prophets, they will not repent."

No one can be saved apart from the Word of God—the very Word you are hearing today. It's not that God is pleased that we take the time to hear His Word, and so He weighs that in our favor. Rather, through the hearing of Moses and the Prophets; through the feasting on

the Word made Flesh in the Sacrament, God is at work in us to bring us to Christ and keep us in Christ. Through His Word, God makes Lazarus' out of us.

If you have been living more like the Rich Man than like Lazarus, repent. If you have been turning a deaf ear to Moses and the Prophets, repent now before it's too late. And if you have loved ones living like the Rich Man, now is the time to bring them to the faith-giving Word of God. As Jesus' parable clearly teaches, even the richest man in all the world has nothing if he does not have and hear the Word of Christ; but even the poorest, sickest man in the world has everything when he trusts in that Word of Christ.

And because you are God's Lazarus', you can be sure that He gives you more than what the Rich Man gave to Lazarus. You may be a beggar, but you are a beggar outside of God's gate; and He does not withhold from you the food on His plate. He gives you, in His Word right now, the Bread of Life—Jesus Christ. He gives you the cup of salvation to drink. He pours the soothing oil of gladness on your sores. He dresses you in the royal robe of Christ's holiness.

The Rich Man may have ignored Lazarus outside his gate, but God knows just what you need and He freely gives you His bountiful gifts. He forgives you. He gives you His Holy Spirit. He sends His angels to care for you, and when death approaches, those very angels will carry you to your home in heaven. Why? Because you are not just Lazarus—you are, in Christ, God's Lazarus. Amen.