

## Luke 16:19-31

If you could choose between being the Rich Man or Lazarus in the parable, which one would be your choice? Sitting here in church in the presence of God and other Christians, this one is a "no-brainer." We choose to be Lazarus, of course. After all he ended up in heaven. But deep within the recesses of our minds and hearts a different choice is lurking. We are attracted very much to the lifestyle of that Rich Man. We're tired of being poor, of struggling to make ends meet. Why can't we choose to be the Rich Man here on earth and Lazarus in heaven? Yeah! Now there's a choice that would be easy to live with. But it's not that simple, for there is more to both men than meets the eye. We must look at these men regarding both what they had and what they did not have.

It's easy to see what Lazarus did not have...he had nothing. He was poor. He had no family to take care of him. He had no clothing to wear - the sores on his body were exposed to the dogs; he was too weak to drive them off. He had no food to eat. He was shown no pity by anyone. He was considered unclean, being licked by street dogs. He had no sanitation or hygiene; his sores were painful skin ulcers caused by such unhealthy conditions. He was destitute! He had absolutely nothing.

But on the other hand, Lazarus had everything. The dogs were not his only companions; he was in the presence of God, and His angels, and all the saints. He had a faith which looked beyond his sufferings and knew that everything that belonged to God, belonged also to him. He had the hope of eternal life. He had the confidence that no matter what this life could do to him, he had a home in heaven waiting for him.

We know this because Jesus gave him a name. The only parable in which He gives a character a name is this one. Jesus called the poor man Lazarus, and this is significant, for the name Lazarus means, "God is my help." And so Lazarus, who looked like he had nothing, truly had everything because God was his help.

The Rich Man, from how it looked, had everything. He wore purple and fine linen, clothing so expensive only royalty could afford it. He feasted sumptuously day after day. Not a day went by where he was seen to be in need. Every day was the best day of his life. He would have had friends by the scores. He would have been the toast of every party. He would have slept like a baby on the finest bed in all the land. This man had everything.

But in truth he had nothing. He had no real love in his heart; no concern at all for his fellow man. Lazarus longed to eat just the scraps of food that fell from his table and which were tossed into the trash, but the Rich Man was unwilling to give him even these. The Rich Man had no love of God in his heart. "For how can one love God whom he has not seen," writes the Apostle, "yet despise his brother whom he has seen?" The Rich Man had no faith, no trust in the promises of God; he had no home in heaven waiting for him. And so the Rich Man, who looked like he had everything, truly had nothing.

But you would not be able to tell from his funeral when he died. It would have been spectacular! Flowers everywhere, a banquet of food for all the mourners, and the eulogies...he would have had lots of those. "What a great man!" they would have said, "How he will be missed!" His coffin would have been second to none, the finest money can buy. And Lazarus, when he died...was there even a funeral? His body would simply have been tossed into an unmarked grave somewhere. No mourners, no flowers, no eulogies. "Finally," the people would have said instead, "that eyesore is gone for good!"

And yet when Lazarus died, he was welcomed by the saints in heaven. When the Rich Man died, he was yanked by Satan into hell. Now the tables have been turned. Now Lazarus is in bliss and the Rich Man in misery. He's so miserable that even a drop of water on his tongue would be welcome relief. But no water is given to him. No comforts whatsoever. He who refused to show even a speck of mercy toward Lazarus when he was alive, will now himself be given not even a drop of mercy forever.

Is that why the Rich Man went to hell? Is it because he did not show hospitality to those in need? Some may think he went to hell because he was rich. Yet Abraham was rich and he was in heaven with Lazarus. If you are not rich, then do not beg God for riches. If your eye is on wealth, it will not be on God. If you have riches, then beg God to show mercy to you now and not let your wealth come between you and Jesus.

The Rich Man went to hell not because he was rich, not because he showed no mercy to others, but because he had no regard for the Word of God. Even in hell he argued with Abraham about Moses and the Prophets. He did not see any benefit in what they had written, just as when he was alive he had no use for the written and spoken Word of God. What the Rich Man valued in life is obvious, and what he did not value is just as obvious. Apart from his possessions and reputation, he saw nothing else as being worthwhile.

The warning for us is clear. Although many deny it exists, hell is very real, and it is permanent. There is no second chance. And those who do not live by the Word of God, trusting in what God wrote through Moses and the Prophets, clinging by faith to the Christ of the Holy Scriptures and Holy Sacraments, whether they are rich or poor, they will join the Rich Man in hell. Anyone, whether they have their names written on the roster of a Christian church or not, if they do not count the hearing of the Word of God and the receiving of Christ's Sacrament as worthwhile, are just like the Rich Man.

And if you know someone like this, if you love someone like this, may God lay it upon your heart to pray for them, and to ask Him for an open door into their heart. There is a great chasm between heaven and hell. Lazarus could not have gone over to aid the Rich Man even if he had wanted to. Now is the time to reach the lost. Now that chasm is not in place...here. Now there is still hope. Tomorrow that hope may be gone. That's why church Elders here, and in every congregation, work with their pastor to reach those who are ignoring Moses and the Prophets, who are living like the Rich Man and his five brothers, living as though the worship of God in Word and Sacrament is not worthwhile.

The only joy in the entire parable is that Lazarus went to heaven. Why did he go to heaven? Not because he was poor. Not because he suffered here on earth. But because God was his help. Lazarus trusted in the mercy of his Savior. In heaven all his misery was totally forgotten. Now he would live only in joy and peace forever.

Friend, you are Lazarus...not because you struggle in life, not because others may ignore your needs and ridicule you. You are Lazarus as you see God as your help. You value as worthwhile the worship of the Lord. Isn't that why you come here to His House? You value as worthwhile His words of mercy coming to your ears, His Sacrament of the Altar - His own flesh and blood coming into your mouth. You value your baptism into Him. You value as worthwhile the reading and study of His words of life. You are Lazarus not because you are so perfect that you never treat your neighbor wrongly. You're not so holy that you can look down on others. You're Lazarus because you

are a wretched sinner and you believe this, but God is your help. You cling by faith to His forgiveness given to you here in Word and Sacrament.

Understand this above all...Jesus, who told the parable about Lazarus, in a very real way became Lazarus. He was laid outside the gate of Jerusalem to die. He was stripped of His clothing. The whips of the Roman dogs licked his flesh. He was despised by all. He was the poorest of the poor, for He laid aside His riches and majesty, and He did it for you. Christ became Lazarus for you. He suffered everything in your place. He endured contempt and ridicule. He suffered even the misery of hell. Jesus became Lazarus for your sake, friend, so that you would be rich beyond compare in heaven with Him.

So you see, going back to our original question, you really cannot choose between being the Rich Man or Lazarus. The choice is not yours, but God's. And He chose to love you. He chooses, day after day, to forgive you by grace for Christ's sake. He chooses always to come to your aid no matter how forsaken or destitute you may feel. You are Lazarus, my friend, because God calls you Lazarus. He is your help, and He is your eternal home. Amen.