

The Rich Man and Lazarus, Part 4

Luke 16:22-31

I want to ask you to turn in your Bibles to Luke 16, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, which has to be one of the most sobering portrayals in all of Scripture of divine judgment. The parable, as we've seen, provides a warning. It's a warning about future judgment, the certainty of future judgment. And the occasion for the parable, as we've been seeing, is the response of the Pharisees to Jesus when he taught about money.

And so Jesus tells this parable to show them that they had the world flipped completely upside down. Everything in their thinking was reversed from biblical truth. Everything was inverted in their minds, and they were headed for a rude and terrifying awakening one minute after their death.

Take a look at verse 19, Luke 16. "There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen, and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and

licked his sores. Poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, in, in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side."

Total reversal. Everything that the Pharisee had built his life on, every expectation he had about life and future glory, gone. In just a few short sentences, Jesus shows us that, indeed, what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. God, in these very short, few sentences, abominates everything that men highly esteem by casting it into the flames of torment.

All that appears to be healthy, wealthy, and prosperous in this world, so much of that is an illusion. It's like a, a mirage that masks a wasting desert. And God saw all of this plainly, all through the life of the rich man and Lazarus. He saw in the rich man what no one else seemed to notice and what no one else cared to confront. That is, he had a heart of unbelief. He had a heart that was in love with money. He didn't love God. He loved his stuff. He loved his reputation. He loved his prominence. He had a heart of unbelief.

Conversely, God saw in Lazarus what no one else could see. But there, lying at the gate of the rich man, was a heart of

obedient faith. And how do we know that? Because we see the final outcome. Look at the justice. Divine justice has spoken, and it gives the imprimatur, the approval, of Lazarus by bringing him to Abraham's side.

We're going to get more insight into God's view of the rich man, though, as we go through the text today. But here, at this point in the parable, the rich man, in verse 23, he's in Hades, and he comes to realize where he is in a moment, in a harrowing, terrifying, sobering moment. He lifts up his eyes, sees Abraham there, far off. Lazarus is there at his side. That's totally unexpected. And Jesus portrays rich man there, suffering in torment. And there he sees an opportunity to make an appeal.

Here in the text that we're going to cover today, verses 24-31, we see the rich man making two appeals to Abraham. One comes in verse 24 and another in verse 27, and then, followed that second appeal, there's a rebuttal to what Abraham says. But two appeals, one in verse 24, one in verse 27, and in those appeals this rich man, suffering in torment, with all of his expectation ripped away, reality sets in, and he makes these appeals to Abraham, hoping to mitigate his suffering, hoping to mitigate not only his own suffering, but the potential suffering of his five brothers.

But as we see in the text, he makes these appeals to no avail. They're fruitless. They're futile. There's no way for him to avoid the just judgment of God. There's no way for him to escape this final sentence, the carrying out of this sentence for all of eternity. And with Abraham's words, as he makes appeal and Abraham shuts him down at every single point, we see that his last hope dissipates, just like a mirage in the desert. Nothing but desert is left. Nothing but isolation, nothing but the burning heat.

It's what we see in this parable for Christian and non-Christian alike, what's on display here, is the kindness and severity of God. And in the rich man's first appeal to Abraham in verse 24, we see the severity of God in response. In his second appeal, we see the kindness of divine mercy in the response, and we are wise to pay attention to what we read, what we hear today.

Number one, the severity of divine judgment. Let's go back to the middle of verse 22, where we see the rich man coming to clarity. That happens at death. It says, "The rich man," verse 22, "also died and was buried. And in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me and

send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I'm in anguish in this flame.'”

The rich man is no longer nestled in the comfort of his palatial mansion. He's no longer experiencing non-stop pleasure. He's no longer surrounded by all of his friends. He's in Hades, and he's feeling every bit of it. He's fully aware that the torment that he suffers is coming at the hand of God.

The rich man, in addition to all this, he's now alone. He's very alone. He sees at Abraham's side Lazarus there, so that's the enjoyment of fellowship. But he being very, very far away, he looks across this great chasm, and he feels the isolation. He feels the loneliness. Another pain visits him as well, and that's the pain of a fully activated conscience that now torments him with accusations of his own sin, makes him aware that what he's suffering, he's suffering justly. He experiences in this condition the internal torment of this unrelenting, inescapable truth, that he deserves to be here, and he experiences deep regret.

In this new state of being, the rich man, he realizes here that his entire world, the entire way he built his life, every pursuit, every ambition, everything he thought counted it was important, all of his worldview is completely undone in a

moment. His only thought now in this condition is to mitigate his suffering just a bit, just to get a little bit of relief.

As we see in verse 25, Abraham cuts off all hope of relief. There's no relief to be found and no hope of relief is coming. Look at verse 25. Abraham said, "'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things. But now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. Besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'"

Now when we read that, our first impulse might be to sympathize with the suffering man. Feeling sympathy, it's natural to us as human beings. It's normal. We are reactive creatures. We are not impassable as God is. We are passable, that is, we have passions, we react to stimuli, we react to knowledge, to information. We change. Our state of being goes from happy to sad, contented to ill-at-ease.

And we are ill-at-ease when we read about this. It's normal. For those who feel no sympathy here in seeing this horrible account, they got something wrong with them, don't they? When we read the rest of the account, we know that he doesn't get any water, here, not even a drop of water. We feel

the severity of the fact that there is no mercy at all, not even a hope of mercy for those who are under divine judgment.

And that can hit our human sentiment as a bit harsh. We can think thoughts like these, we say things like this, well, Lazarus' suffering, it was temporary. The rich man's pain, it's eternal. Would it hurt to give him just a little bit of water? Just a tiny little bit of relief on the tongue? Would it hurt? Maybe we look ahead at the next verse. We say a chasm. Yeah, I know, a chasm may separate them at the moment, but can't the almighty God of love cross this great divide?

If you think biblically, you know that God answers that last question, doesn't he? Speaks to the voice of conscience, informed by what we know to be true from Scripture, saying something like this, I have already crossed the great divide, sending my own Son in the likeness of human flesh to die for sinners. I've already crossed that divide. I've already been merciful. I've already been kind.

More on that later, but for now we should stop and consider this and think carefully about our own thinking about this. Since we have sympathy for the suffering man, and since Abraham doesn't seem to have any, are we more compassionate than Abraham? Take it a step further. Jesus is the one telling this

parable, isn't he? So do we presume that we are more merciful than Jesus?

Those are obviously the thoughts of sinful presumption. But it's important because these are the objections that come against this text and texts like this throughout Scripture about the doctrine of Hell. This is what the opponents of God and those who reject the Bible say. God is not just. If I would be merciful, how much more should God be merciful?

We need to address some of these objections about Hell, lest we treat the doctrine, a doctrine as serious as this one, this eternal, conscious suffering of unrepentant sinners, lest we talk about such serious doctrines flippantly, lest we respond by just delivering a superficial platitude and a clichéd one-liner about God is just.

God is just. Let's think about that. Some who ridicule the doctrine of Hell can be quite bold about it. They could even be quite blasphemous. You've probably seen some of this on the Internet, people saying things like this, listen, I would never torment somebody if I had the chance. I mean, not even my worst enemy. If I had my worst enemy, the one who did me the greatest harm in my life, and I had him locked up in my basement, and I



could torment to my heart's desire and get my pound of flesh, would I do it?

Maybe some who are really, really angry, some who've been really, really hurt, some who've been deeply offended, might say, yeah, I could do that. I could do that. How long could you do that? Who could say, you know what? There's an end to my anger. There's an end to my wrath; there's an end to the retribution that I would deliver. So, so goes the opponents of the Scripture. They say, I, therefore, am more merciful and more compassionate and more loving than this God of the Bible. That's what they say. They follow up with this, Why would I worship a God who is less merciful than I am?

Do you see the flaw in that thinking? It's category error, isn't it? It's people who fail to admit that there is a radical distinction between the creature and his Creator. They fail to acknowledge the essential difference between God and man. And they dare to answer back to God. The folly is to compare God to man as if man is the standard, as if his sentiment and his feelings are a litmus test for measuring God's goodness and God's mercy and God's love, as if human sentiment can condemn divine justice.

Listen, if God's justice is injustice, there is no justice. And it is a world that can tear itself apart. Listen, of course we're not more merciful than Jesus. Perish that thought. Banish it. And yet we need to realize, here he is. He's teaching us about the doctrine of Hell.

Jesus is the one who evangelizes us by offering Heaven and threatening Hell. He does both things. So how can God's judgement be so severe and yet remain just and warranted and, we need to add, necessary? God's judgment is so severe because human sin deserves it. Jesus shows us in verse 24, in the rich man's appeal, that sin is intractable, that it is stubborn, and sinners are obstinate and willful. The sinners are committed to their sins to the core of their being, and they will not repent. Sin has so overtaken their personality, their disposition, that it is their very nature. They will not repent, and they continue to sin from the very bowels of Hell itself.

Severity of Hell is justified, which we're going to see if we think carefully about the appeal of the damned. Look at verse 24. "He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip," the end of his finger, "the tip of his finger, in water, cool my tongue, for I'm in anguish in this flame.'" Several things to notice, here, about this man's sinfulness.

First, we see that his conscience has been fully activated. How do we know that?

How do we know his conscience is fully activated? I keep saying that. Let's prove it. Because we can see that in spite of the severity of this torment, notice that there is not one word of protest coming from this man. Not a peep. Not once does he say, well we hear from sinners all the time today, protesting this: That's not what? Fair! He never says that. If his conscience were clear, we could understand him protesting. But notice his conscience is accusing him. He's not ignorant of his sin; he's fully aware of his sin. If he were ignorant of his sin, if his conscience was not accusing him, we would expect him to say something like this: Ask Abraham to have the furnace shut off. Just turn down the heat, please. Check the thermostat. He'd say, have someone douse these flames, turn off the heat, spring me from this prison, get me out of here because I don't deserve this.

That's not what he says, is it? Jesus wants us to see this clearly. Those who go to Hell, they know they're guilty. They realize they deserve an eternity of torment. Listen, no one goes to Hell ignorant of his crimes against God, unaware of why he's

there. He'll suffer in the full knowledge of his sins, aware of his guilt, knowing that his sentence is just.

And yet, secondly, even though he's aware of his sin, notice there's still no humility whatsoever. His appeal begins by addressing Abraham as, father. It's kind of presumptuous, isn't it? If Abraham is his father, what's he doing there? If Abraham is his father, why is he not at the father's side?

If the man had a modicum of humility, the first words out of his mouth would be something like these: Abraham, I confess before God and before you, that I didn't follow your faith. All my life I didn't walk in the obedience that you showed when you believed God and it was reckoned to you as righteousness. I didn't do what God says, like you did. I'm so ashamed, and now I am getting what my deeds deserve. But please, Father Abraham, forgive me.

Notice, thirdly, that instead of humility we see the stubborn and abiding pride in his words. The rich man's appeal commands a certain action. Literally, there are two verbs there, mercy me and send Lazarus. Mercy me and send Lazarus. Notice that the rich man maintains his old, earthly, worldly minded distinctions of social status and social class. He discriminates based on class, based on wealth.

He considers himself and Abraham as basically on the same level. I mean, they are in the same social class, both wealthy men. Lazarus is beneath them both. He and Abraham, both wealthy men, and he thinks in his pride, without any spiritual sensitivity whatsoever, he thinks Abraham is going to be sympathetic to him as a social equal. Certainly Abraham will treat me like a fellow gentleman. Do me a solid here, Father Abraham, send that beggar on an errand for my personal benefit. After all, doesn't someone like Lazarus, doesn't he exist to serve the wealthy?

So we see so far the rich man has an active conscience, but he's got no humility. He's still filled with his pride. It's a stubborn, intractable pride that is not rooted out at all, which means, fourthly, see here, there's no remorse in how he treated Lazarus. It doesn't even register on his mind. Though his conscience has been awakened, though he knows he suffers justly for his sins, he's not remorseful about his sins in the slightest.

The fact that the rich man knows Lazarus' name, this shows that he knew who he was, even though he never tried to lift a finger to help him during his life on earth. It's hard to believe the rich man still has no compassion over what Lazarus

had to endure at his gate. Hard to understand why he wouldn't cry out, Lazarus, forgive me. Forgive me for ignoring you, for pretending like you don't exist, for treating you like human garbage, for treating you like dog food.

No remorse, and fifthly, notice here in the text, still there's no repentance. No repentance. He asked for relief from his physical suffering. And notice that his mind is still focused on his body. He's still focused on his comfort. He still stares at himself, if he had a mirror, stares at himself in a mirror. He's unconcerned to seek the true relief that he needs, which is relief from his spiritual suffering of guilt before God, of shame for his sins, to be delivered from an accusing conscience.

He cares nothing for forgiveness. He cares nothing about his guilt before God. There's no concern in him that he's offended a holy God. He knows he's suffering justly. He's getting exactly what he deserves. But rather than attending to this malignancy of his own soul, instead of seeking God's forgiveness, the rich man's only interest continues to be about his body, about his physical needs, about his physical sensations.

We can go on and on, making observations like this, but that's enough to show why God's judgment is severe, because human sin deserves it. We find example after example after example of that kind of severity and judgment because we're being taught all through Scripture, God is not a man. God is not a man. God is God. We need to fear him as a mighty and holy God, and beloved, we don't fear him as we ought to. Perfection of God's holiness is beyond our comprehension. It is impossible for us to fathom the depth and the breadth and the height of God's holiness.