

September 25, 2022—Luke 16:19-21

Luke 16: 19 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. **20** At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores **21** and 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. **23** In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. **24** So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ **25** “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. **26** And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ **27** “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, **28** for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

29 “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ **30** “No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ **31** “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Dear fellow children of God,

“If I were a rich man...” In the musical “Fiddler on the Roof” before the main character Tevya sings his famous song, the audience is treated to his conversation with God: *“Oh, Lord, you made many, many poor people. I realize, of course, it's no shame to be poor... But it's no great honor either! So, what would have been so terrible if I had a small fortune?”*

And then Tevya breaks into song. “If I were a rich man.” More than a few of us at times have thought to ourselves, “If I were a rich man, or woman, or child”, then I’d...and you can fill in your own blanks. And when you make out your hypothetical rich man to-do list, do you do what I do? Do you include on that list at least 5 different charities, homeless shelters, churches, schools and missions? And then do you say to yourself, “I really don’t think that being rich would change me a bit.”

In our text today we meet two men: one who from what we’re told probably never thought “if I were a rich man” because he was already rich, and another man who was so poor and destitute that he probably didn’t have the energy to dream of wealth: we’re told he simply longed for some table scraps to take the edge off his hunger.

If I were a rich man

- 1. Man’s treasures are often a threat**
- 2. Hell has no treasures**
- 3. Christ’s treasures always contain a promise**

1. Man’s treasures are often a threat: Previously in this same chapter Jesus taught the importance of being trustworthy in handling worldly wealth and reminded his listeners that we cannot serve God and money. Now he offers an example of how Satan can turn the earthly blessings into a spiritual trap. How wealthy was the rich man in our text? **“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day** He dressed—consistently dressed—in purple and fine linen, the very finest of clothes. He lived, ate & drank ‘in luxury every day.’ Literally: he lived

“sumptuously,” with every physical need met. Every day was a feast. He had stored up for himself so many treasures on earth that he had whatever he wanted that money could buy.

And this was the trap that Satan laid for this rich man. He was probably a respected man in his community, a man familiar with the Old Testament, a man who no doubt knew of Solomon’s many warnings about wealth: “Whoever loves money never has enough, whoever loves wealth is never satisfied” and the words of Job, another very wealthy man: “Naked I came from my mother’s womb, and naked I will depart,” but chose to ignore those warnings. His main purpose was to enjoy the good things that life has to offer. Unfortunately, that’s where his treasures ended: here on earth. His heart was so attached to his wealth that his heart had no room for anything or anyone else, including the beggar left at his gate or for God himself.

What are we told about Lazarus? **At the rich man’s gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.**

How could the rich man have been so oblivious to the desperate need of Lazarus? This wasn’t just a panhandler on the street that he could ignore by walking by on the other side. This was a man who was right at the end of his driveway. And it’s not as though he didn’t know Lazarus, because when he looked up from hell and saw Lazarus in heaven, he knew him by name. This was a blatant refusal to help a fellow man in need. Did he in arrogance deliberately dismiss any thought of helping Lazarus? Or did he rationalize his decision to ignore Lazarus by assuming that Lazarus’ poverty and homelessness was Lazarus’ own fault...that if God hadn’t blessed Lazarus with riches as he was blessed, then there was a reason for it, and Lazarus deserved his life of misery? Whatever his reasoning, we find not one word of kindness or compassion toward Lazarus.

“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. One lived in a mansion, the other on the street; one lived in comfort and luxury, the other in pain and poverty. One ate all he wanted of the best food available, the other longed for table scraps. What did they have in common? Death. Both men died. And what did the rich man discover? Not only are man’s treasures often a threat, but even worse, **hell has no treasures.**

2. Just as the rich man and Lazarus traveled markedly different paths in life, their paths were even more divergent in death. God’s angels carried Lazarus to heaven and the rich man finds himself suffering in hell. And how horrible his suffering. He is in torment. He is in agony because of the fires of hell, and it is constant. And to add to add to his misery, the rich man not only could see heaven, but could see the beggar he had ignored for so long now enjoying Paradise itself. Jesus doesn’t tell us if the rich man was shocked, but he must have recognized this ultimate reversal of fortunes. Lazarus’ suffering was temporary and his joy was eternal, but the rich man’s pleasure was temporary and suffering was eternal.

Satan’s lies may have convinced the rich man during his earthly life that his life of luxury would never end, but now that he was in hell, the devil must have made it very clear to him that there was no escape—that what he was experiencing was not short term pain. Listen to the rich man: **“Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.”**

The rich man doesn’t ask Abraham to rescue him from hell, but for Lazarus to bring him just one drop of cool water. Did he appreciate the irony of this request...a man who had enjoyed the very finest food

and wine for so many years while ignoring the basic needs of a fellow human being just yards away now expecting this same beggar to come and serve him. And while he doesn't voice it, it's not a stretch to say that as much physical pain as the rich man was enduring, it was even more agonizing for the rich man to see and be so very aware of what he didn't have: the never-ending joys and pleasures of heaven and the presence of the God he had ignored during his life of leisure. And how heart-breaking is Abraham's answers to his questions: "No, there will be no end to your suffering and no, Lazarus can't come help you."

What does this story teach us? That wealth can't buy us a ticket to Paradise and that a successful life on earth doesn't guarantee a successful life after death. Knowing that scriptural truth doesn't mean we aren't susceptible to greed and the ability of Satan to use earthly blessings against us. But maybe our greater struggle is that like the rich man, we are too absorbed by our own comfortable lives and tend to ignore those who are in need.

If Lazarus was left at the end of your driveway, what would you do? If you saw a Lazarus lying on the sidewalk by our main entrance this morning, how would you respond? 2000 years ago there wasn't a gov't sponsored safety net for the poor, so their care was the responsibility of individuals in the community. I wonder if today it isn't a little too easy for us to see those in need and absolve ourselves of any responsibility and say, "There are government programs for people like that." True, but do we complain bitterly knowing that this safety net is financed by our taxes? What is my first reaction when I see someone in need in our community? "How can they be in need? Taco Bell pays \$15.00/hour." Or, "I wonder how I can help?"

If 50 Lazarus's from Venezuela were flown into Appleton with no advance notice, how would our community respond? How would our congregation respond? If we could look past all of the political posturing on both sides of the aisle, I'd like to think we'd respond as some of the Martha's Vineyard churches did last week. We'd open our doors and provide food, shelter and clothing, and arrange for a Bible study conducted in Spanish. No matter the cause of somebody's plight, they are still a human being in need. That's what the rich man failed to understand.

If the only point of this story was "Money can keep you from heaven," then it would have ended with the rich man dying and landing in hell. If the main point is that there aren't second chances after you die, then it would have ended with Abraham saying, "There is a chasm between us." As problematic as his wealth was for the rich man, a far more deadly issue was his failure to understand why he was in hell. During his lifetime, why wasn't the rich man concerned about how to get to heaven?

3. Because he failed to recognize that **Christ's treasures always contain a promise:** Perhaps he assumed that if he was so richly blessed with earthly comforts, then he must certainly be entitled to heavenly luxury. Maybe he thought that since he was a child of Abraham God would welcome him into heaven with open arms. Why wouldn't God want someone like the rich man in heaven?

Of course, God did want him in heaven, but his own riches had no bearing on his final destination. The key to unlocking the treasures of heaven is found in the treasures of God's Word. In our text, the rich man shows a lack of understanding of why he's in hell and why Lazarus is in heaven. **"I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."** For the second time in a short conversation, Abraham bursts the rich man's bubble: **"Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'**

The rich man still doesn't understand that God gives us everything we need right here in his Word. The rich man wasn't content with Scripture during his life on earth, and in hell he still wasn't content with the Word of God. His life story begins and ends with a lack of appreciation and respect for God's Word. He says, **“No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ Abraham said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”**

6 months before his crucifixion, Jesus called a man who was dead for 4 days out of his grave. Some believed, others were hardened in their unbelief. On the first Easter evening the Emmaus disciples had heard about Jesus' resurrection, but lacked the faith to believe it. What convinced them? Not the empty tomb, but Jesus walking them through God's plan of salvation.

Lazarus was no less sinful than the rich man. Heaven is Lazarus' home because as God's forgiven child, Lazarus clung to God's promise of a Savior. To what does the aged Christian cling on her deathbed? Christ. And how does she do that since she can't physically grip Jesus' hand? She clings to those promises that she learned as a child: “Fear not, for I am with you, be not dismayed, for I am your God.” “In my Father's house are many mansion.” “The LORD is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear?” She sings the verses that contain those promises from hymns that she sung as a child: “I am Jesus' little lamb.” “Hold thou Thy cross before my closing eyes...in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.” “My heart for joy is springing, and can no more be sad.”

There are warnings for us in the life & behavior of the rich man, and if the mirror of God's law isn't fogged over with our own self-righteousness, those warnings may strike close to home. But find comfort and confidence in this: You are a child of God. We've never been laid at the gate of a rich man, penniless and in pain, but many of us have been brought in spiritual poverty to a font. Through God's Word and the cool waters of baptism you received the miracle of faith. We are rich for he was poor...is not this a wonder? Amen.

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