

Rich Man Poor Man
Luke 16:19-31
Pastor John Miller

Luke 16:19-21 says, “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously...”—or “lived luxuriously”—“...every day. But there was a certain beggar...”—here’s the contrast—“...named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.”

The Wall Street Journal once published an anonymous statement which defined money as “the article which may be used as a universal passport to everywhere except heaven and as a universal provider for everything except happiness.” Money can’t get you to heaven, and money can’t get you happiness.

So Jesus is warning us in Luke 16 about money and the dangers of money. Notice that at first in verse 9, it says that we should use our money for eternal purposes. Then in verse 14, Luke said that the Pharisees were covetous. They thought that if you were rich, you were godly, but if you were poor, you were a wicked sinner. In verse 15, Jesus points out that wealth is no proof of godliness. “And He said to them, ‘You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God.’” Notice the contrast.

In context, Jesus is speaking, in verse 15, about the Pharisees, which was the strictest religious sect of the Jews. No one was more religious than the Pharisees. They basically believed, like some people mistakenly believe today, that riches is a sign of God’s blessings. Riches is a blessing from God, but having them doesn’t mean you’re a godly person. There are a lot of wicked people who are rich, and there are a lot of righteous people who are poor. There’s no rhyme or reason to it; it’s not a sign of where you are with God. That’s why Jesus said, “You try to justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.” So the whole context, as Jesus moves into the story of the rich man and Lazarus, is money used for the right purposes; we shouldn’t covet, and wealth is no proof of godliness.

Then Jesus closes the chapter with a story or parable of the rich man and Lazarus. It is stunning and disturbing. Why? Because it is the only passage in the Bible which describes the actual thoughts, emotions and words of somebody who is in hell. We’re going to read about a guy who dies and goes to hell, and while in hell, what he saw, what he felt and what he thought and what he said—what he experienced when he was beyond the grave.

So in the story we see a rich man and we see a poor man, and they are contrasted in three areas. This is what we’re going to look at: the contrast in their lives, the contrast in their deaths and the contrast in eternity beyond the grave.

The first contrast, in verses 19-21, is a contrast in their lives. It’s obvious. Verse 19 says,

“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously...”—or “lived in luxury”—“...every day.” This is the guy who would be featured on Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous. If he were living today, he would be in that show and they would show you his multi-million-dollar house, his multi-million-dollar crib or crash pad and they would show his cars, the Lear jet he had and his fine clothing. In those days, purple was our modern version of designer clothes or custom-made suits. Purple was a very rare and very expensive dye, so purple cloth could only be afforded by the wealthiest people.

So this man was very flamboyant. Everybody knew him. He was in Who’s Who. He was on TV. He was on the front of Forbes magazine. He was a bigshot.

Then the contrast to this rich man is in verses 20-21. There was also a beggar, whose name was Lazarus. The name “Lazarus” is an abbreviation of the Old Testament name Eleazar. It means “God has helped.”

There are Bible students who believe that what Jesus is giving as a parable and the language He is using is symbolic or figurative. But all parables were based on real life: “A sower went out to sow.” Were there sowers who sowed seeds? Yes. Were there people who were beat up by robbers on their way to Jerusalem? Yes. So no parable is ever a phony, made-up or fictitious story; it’s always based on true life.

Another interesting fact—and you have to admit this—is that in no other parables do we find people given names. There are three people named in this parable: Lazarus, which is interesting. It means “God is my helper”—we see that God does help him. The second one is Abraham, and the third one is Moses. So my view is that it is a true story.

I don’t ever buy, I don’t ever read, I don’t ever pay any attention to people who write books about dying and coming back and telling about it. Don’t waste your money. They contradict themselves, and they’re not based on Scripture. The only authority that we know of beyond the grave is not your subjective experience. You might have eaten too many Snickers bars before you went to bed. “I died, I came back and this is what I saw.” I don’t need that to prove to me that there is heaven and that the afterlife is real. I have my Bible, and on the Word of God I stand. If anyone is the authority on what lies beyond the grave, it’s Jesus Christ. He gets my vote. So when Jesus describes what happens when we die, He knows about it, because He came from heaven, rose from the dead and went back to heaven. He would die, He would rise and He would go back to heaven.

I don’t believe that this is a fictitious story. I don’t believe it’s allegorical. I don’t believe it’s to be spiritualized. I believe it’s an actual true story. You can call it a parable, but it’s unique if it is, in that it names individuals who Jesus is describing here.

Now notice the pitiful condition of this poor man, who was laid at the rich man’s gate begging. He would actually ask for food or bread that would fall from the rich man’s table. In those days they didn’t have forks, knives and spoons. In many places in the Middle East today, they eat

with their fingers. They used the bread to swirl it in their food then pick it up and eat it. So there was a lot of bread in the meal, and a lot was left over. The crumbs would fall from the table, and Lazarus just wants some of these crumbs that would fall from this rich man's table.

Notice, too, that it says, "The dogs came and licked his sores." What a sad and tragic picture this is.

So we see two extremes: the contrast of flamboyant wealth with abject poverty. It's a true rags-and-riches picture.

Now Jesus is not teaching anywhere in this story that the rich man was condemned because he was rich or that the poor man was blessed because he was poor. Yet it is true that riches can be a problem. The Bible says, "How hard it is for a rich man to enter into the kingdom." Why? Very practically because, "Who needs God? I've got money." But you can't buy your way to heaven, and you can't buy happiness. You might be able to buy a nice car and a nice house and other things, but you can't buy the things that really matter in life. Nowhere in the Bible does it condemn wealth, as such.

An interesting point in this story is that this rich man is never condemned for lying or stealing or cheating or getting money by ill-gotten gains. There's no rebuke or chastisement. There's no word of condemnation about the rich man. I believe, as we're going to see, that he went to hell because he didn't believe in God. He didn't trust in God. He loved money more than he loved God. He didn't put his trust and faith in God. There is no intrinsic value or blessing in riches or poverty. Sometimes poverty does lend itself to being spiritual because, "I need God. I need help. I'm destitute," so we turn to God.

But the main point is that a person's earthly wealth is no test of his or her state before God. Sadly, that's not what the Pharisees were teaching. They were teaching that if you're rich, you must be godly. If you're poor, you must be ungodly. But that's not at all what the Bible teaches.

At this point in the story, which of the two would you rather be? The rich man or Lazarus? The response obviously would be the rich dude; right? Who wants to be poor? Who wants to be destitute, begging, have sores and sitting at the gate and begging for food from the rich man's table? We would all pick the rich man at this point.

But that's an important point to me, because we don't look beyond the grave. We only see this life. We only see the temporal. The Bible says that "Everything that is seen is temporal; everything that is not seen..."—and there's a whole unseen world out there—"...is eternal." Our problem is we're so earthly bound, we're living only for the temporal. "What can I eat?" "What can I drink?" "What can I wear?" "What can I buy?" The physical pleasures of our flesh. And we don't think about eternal matters.

So I ask you, "What are your values?" If your answer to the question was, "I want to be the rich dude," did you stop and ask if he knows God? Do you envy the rich? Do you envy the wicked? Do you say, "I wish I had that. I wish I had what they have," or do you pity them and say, "They

don't know God. They're on their way to hell. They're lost without Christ"?

Now the second contrast is interesting. It's death, verse 22. "So it was..."—we don't know how long it took to come to pass, we don't know, but we know that life is short—"...that the beggar died..."—no surprise—"...and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom." Now that was a surprise. The religious community listening to Jesus' story would have said, "Wow! What do you mean the beggar went to Abraham's bosom?" They would assume that the beggar was a wicked person and would go to hell.

When a poor person died, they would take the body and throw it in a garbage disposal or what today we would call a trash heap. There was a valley called Hinnom at the southeast corner of Jerusalem. There they threw all their garbage. It had a fire smoldering constantly. The bodies of the poor were thrown onto the rubbish heap and burned there. From the word "Hinnom," we get the word "da hinnom," and that's where we get our word "hell" from. It became a figure or picture of hell. They would put these bodies in the Valley of Hinnom, and they would burn with the rubbish there.

So the angels had carried Lazarus' soul unto Abraham's bosom, but notice the end of verse 22. "The rich man also died and was buried." There is no mention of his funeral, but I imagine that it was flamboyant. I imagine that CNN and Fox News and all the stations were watching it. They had a big procession. All the flowers and all the weeping and all the Hollywood people were there. All the politicians were there. It was all over the news. But there was no mention of an angel being his pallbearers.

So the poor man goes to Abraham's bosom. What's that all about? That's paradise. In verse 23, the rich man went to hell; "And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes." What a contrast this is in death. In life, one rich and one poor. In death, the angels carried Lazarus to Abraham's bosom, but the rich man went to hell.

I want to say some things about death. Do you know that the rich and the poor both die? You don't save your soul from death because you're rich. The Bible says two things: number one, that everyone will die. It speaks of death as universal. And it speaks of life as being brief. It teaches of the brevity of life and the universality of death; every soul living will die. No one can save their soul from the hand of the grave. We know that. That's true. You can avoid taxes, but you can't avoid death. Every one of us will die. Death is the great equalizer. Proverbs 22:2 says, "The rich and the poor have this in common: The Lord is the maker of them all."

It's interesting how we like to smooth over death in our culture today. We like to dress people up and put nice clothes on them. Do their hair and put flowers around them. We talk in very hushed tones, and when we do a funeral we say that he's not "dead," he's "deceased" or he "passed away."

We even have our "not dead" or "never died" jokes. I looked some of them up this week. "Old cooks never die; they just go to pot." "Old bankers never die; they just lose their interest." "Old

quilters never die; they just go to pieces.” “Old musicians never die; they just decompose.” This is my favorite: “Old fishermen never die; they just smell that way.” But the Bible says that it’s “appointed unto every man once to die and then the judgment.”

I want to explain to you that there are three kinds of death. The etymology of the word “die” or “death” means “separation.” Number one, there is spiritual death. Every human being is born spiritually dead or separated from God. That’s why we need to be born again and have a relationship with God. Our sin separates us from God.

The second death is physical death. That’s the death we understand. In James 2:26, it says, “For as the body without the spirit is dead...” So it actually defines death for us as being when the spirit leaves the body. Your body is just a tent or a house. One day you will move out of that house. And the older you get, the more that house starts to lean, the roof starts to leak, the doors fall off their hinges and the windows get foggy. That’s when you’re ready to move out; right? You’re ready to go to your home, which is eternal in heaven. We understand that physical death means that the soul and spirit, the immaterial part of you, leaves your body.

The third death is eternal death. So there is spiritual death—separation from God, physical death—separation from your body and there is eternal death. Eternal death occurs when you die and go to hell, and you are separated from God for all eternity. Now if you are a Christian, when you die, you go to heaven. “To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord,” 2 Corinthians 5:8. The Bible is very clear for a Christian; the moment you leave your body, you go to heaven.

What is “Abraham’s bosom” that Lazarus finds himself in? And the rich man is in hell, or what we know as “Hades” or the underworld. This location had two compartments at this time. Before the Cross and before the death of Christ, His Resurrection from the dead and Ascension into heaven, everyone who died went to one location that had two sides to it. There was the side of paradise or Abraham’s bosom. Remember that Jesus told the thief on the cross that “Today you will be with Me in paradise”? It’s also another expression for heaven. Then the other side—and we’ll see that there is a big gulf between the two—is what we call “Hades.” In the Old Testament, it was called “she’ol.” But both she’ol in the Old Testament and Hades in the Greek in the New Testament are translated in our English Bible as “hell” or “grave” or “death.” I believe that Jesus here is describing pre-Christ Resurrection of where the dead went. There was a place of comfort called paradise or Abraham’s Bosom and a place of torment or hell.

When Jesus died on the Cross, the Bible says that before He ascended, He descended into the lower parts of the earth. I believe this is a reference to His descent into Hades or into hell but not into the side of torment. He gives no second chance to people who have died in their sin. But He came for those who were waiting in faith, trusting in Him as their Savior, believing the promises of God. The Bible says in Ephesians 4:8, “He led captivity captive and gave gifts to men.”

So I believe that side of paradise was emptied at Jesus’ Resurrection and Ascension, and when

a Christian dies now, they don't go to Abraham's Bosom, but they go right into the presence of the Lord and are face to face with Jesus Christ. If you're a Christian when you die, you're going to wake up in heaven looking at Jesus. Pretty cool! What a glorious hope that is. The fact that death is universal and life is brief, I thank God for that blessed hope we have as believers. But if you're not a Christian, like the rich man, you're going to die, verse 23, and be in hell.

For a Christian, death is not the end but the beginning. For the Christian, it's a friend; it's not a foe. It's a coronation. For the unbeliever, it's a separation from God and eternal torment. Death for Lazarus was a blessing, but death for the rich man was a tragedy and a great awakening.

So we move from contrast in life to contrast in death. Thirdly and lastly, we have a contrast in eternity. Starting in verse 23, it says, "And being in torments in Hades, he..."—the rich man—"...lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom." Looking at this information, we see what it's like when we die and go to hell. The rich man could see and he had torment. "Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me'" indicating he was most likely a Jew.

By the way, the Pharisees believed rich people went to heaven and all Jews went to heaven. So this story was blowing them away. They couldn't believe what Jesus was saying.

Then he said, "And send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame." So we have this dialogue between the rich man and Abraham. "But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.' Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them lest they also come to this place of torment.'" Notice what Abraham said to the rich man: "Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets...'—in other words, they have God's Word—"...let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham...'—this rich man is arguing with Abraham—"...but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.'"

It's interesting that a lot of people say, "If I could see a miracle, I'd believe. If God would just stick His face through the clouds, I would believe." What's it going to take for you to believe in God, in heaven and in hell and in Jesus Christ? To trust Him as your Savior? Many times, our god becomes our wealth, our pleasures, our pursuits or pride, and it keeps us from coming to Jesus Christ.

This portion of the underworld, Hades, this place of torment, still exists now. When an unbeliever dies, they go immediately, with full consciousness, to hell. In Revelation 20, it says that Jesus Christ will return and sit on His great white throne, and the wicked dead will all be resurrected. So everyone in this compartment will be brought out of this compartment, will

stand before Christ before the great white throne judgment, the books will be opened, their names will not be found written in them and they will be thrown into the lake of fire, which the Bible describes as “the second death.” So they were dead spiritually, they died physically and now they’ll die eternally; they’ll be separated from God for all eternity. Only believers will remain standing before that great white throne. So the dead, as well, will be resurrected but will be thrown into the lake of fire.

Now Lazarus is in paradise. What a contrast!

Jesus said that there are two gates or two roads, and there are two destinies. One leads to life and the other one leads to destruction. Everyone in the world is on one of those two roads. You’re either on the broad road, going through the broad gate that leads to destruction, or you’re on the narrow road, going through the narrow gate that leads to life. Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.” So Jesus didn’t come just to tell us the way; Jesus is the way.

Sometimes people say, “Christianity is just a crutch.” No; it’s a stretcher. It’s an ambulance, and He takes us to a hospital. God gives us a new heart. It’s not a stairway to heaven; it’s an escalator to heaven.

Don’t you love escalators? The older I get, I praise God for escalators! You step on it and it just takes you up. Jesus takes you to heaven. But you must trust Him. You must put your faith in Him. You must reach out and receive Him as your Savior and as your Lord.

When the rich man got to hell, what a rude awakening, what a shock! He now knows that God is real and that heaven and hell are real. If you could bring people back from hell, they would be the most passionate, consumed evangelists in the world today. They would say that life is short, death is real, heaven is real, hell is real, God is real and Jesus is real. “Believe in Jesus Christ right now,” they would say. There are no atheists in hell. Now atheists go to hell, but the minute they get to hell, they’re not atheists anymore. They now believe in God.

It’s interesting that the rich man starts to pray in hell, verses 24-26. He first prays for himself. “Father Abraham...send Lazarus that he may dip...his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.” Notice that he had memory, and he was in torments. He prays in the wrong place at the wrong time to the wrong person.

The rich man now is the beggar and the beggar is the rich man. The Bible says, “For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul?” It profits you nothing. So you go to hell the richest person who ever lived; big deal! You’re the richest person in hell, but you’re separated from God for all eternity.

By the way, this story teaches us that there is no soul sleep. Some say that when you die, your soul goes to sleep and that God recreates you. No; there is consciousness after death.

Notice some facts about hell, verse 24. It’s a place of torment. “I am tormented in this flame.”

Secondly, this story teaches there is memory, verse 25. "Son, remember."

And thirdly, it teaches that there is a great gulf between heaven and hell. You can't change your destination. Death fixes your eternal state. Abraham said, "You can't come to us and we can't pass over to you." The Bible nowhere teaches there is a purgatory. The Bible nowhere teaches that you can go to hell for a short time, purge your sins, others pray for you and do things for you so that you can then get out of purgatory and go to heaven. The moment you die, your eternal destination is fixed. There is no way you can come back. There is no second chance. You don't get a do-over; you don't get a remake. That is the tragic part about this story.

Then the rich man said, "Would you send Lazarus to my family? I have five brothers and I know from the way they're living that they're on their way to hell too." I've met people who say, "I'm gonna go to hell and all my friends will be there, and it'll be fun and we're gonna have a party." No; there won't be any fun. No one in hell wants anyone else to go to hell.

Hell was not created for humans; it was created for Satan. But if you choose not to believe in Jesus Christ and you reject Him, the consequence of your own sin is that you'll go to hell. No one goes to hell because you're a bad person; you go to hell because you don't believe in Jesus. A lot of bad people are going to heaven because they trusted Jesus Christ and were forgiven of their sins. It's reaching out by faith and trusting in Jesus Christ.

The sad thing is that Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them" or "the Word of God." If they don't believe the Word of God, they're not going to believe the One Who came back from the dead. That's interesting, because even in the Scriptures, there were people who came back from the dead, and people still didn't believe. Jesus died and rose from the dead, but people still didn't believe. And people still don't believe today.

So what's it going to take to get you to believe? The Bible says, "Faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God." God brought you here today; it's no accident that you're reading this. You're hearing God's Word. You're hearing the truth about death and life and heaven and hell. In a moment I'm going to give you an opportunity to trust Jesus Christ and have your sins forgiven and to know that when you die, you're going to go to heaven. You can become a different person; you can be forgiven. You can have the hope that is eternal, to have eternal life. It begins the moment you trust Jesus, not when you die. You go from life to life.

Jesus said, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die." Do you believe this? Jesus Christ is our hope. We have to believe the Word of God. We have to believe the Scriptures. We're not going to believe, even if there is some kind of miracle.

It's sad that, last but not least, the rich man came to another understanding. He knew that God was real, that heaven was real and that hell was real. But he also came to the understanding that it was too late. He learned that it was hopeless for him. Nothing could be done; he missed his opportunity. God had spoken to him in so many ways. God had given him riches. The Bible

says, "The goodness of God is meant to lead you to repentance." God had given him a witness. I believe Lazarus was a witness. No doubt Lazarus told him the importance of being righteous before God.

Even Lazarus' death is a witness. I believe that when someone dies, God is saying to you, "Wake up! This is where you're headed. Remember that life is short, and death is sure." We don't like to go to funerals, but the Bible says, "It's better to go to a funeral than to a wedding," because it makes us think about eternal things, about life after death and whether I'm ready and prepared for this journey.

God had given the rich man the Scriptures. He called Father Abraham, so I believe he was a Jew. No doubt he went to synagogue. And no doubt he heard Moses and the prophets and the Scriptures being read every Sabbath day.

It was too late for him, but the good news is that it's not too late for you today. The Bible says, "Now is the acceptable time; now is the day of salvation." God brought you here today to hear this message. It's not by accident. I believe that God is speaking to some of you today about being right with God, about being ready to die, knowing that your sins are forgiven.

The rich man didn't go to hell because he was rich, and the poor man didn't go to heaven because he was poor. The poor man went to heaven because he believed, and the rich man went to hell because he didn't believe. John 3:36 says, "He who believes in the Son has everlasting life; and he who does not believe the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him." We all know John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him..."—or "trusts" or "clings to Him"—"...shall not perish..."—there it is; the rich man perished—"...but have everlasting life." The poor man, Lazarus, had everlasting life.

My question to you today is, are you rich or are you poor? Have you trusted God for salvation, have you believed in Jesus Christ? God made you and God loves you. Sin has separated you from God. Jesus came from heaven to die on the Cross. He took your place and paid for your sins to bridge the gap between you and God, so that you could come to God and be forgiven.

This story forces us to think seriously about our eternal destiny. I've heard of a gravestone in Windsor Chapel outside London with this inscription on the tombstone:

"Pause, my friend, as you pass by.

As you are now, so once was I.

As I am now, soon you will be.

Prepare, my friend, to follow me."

Someone saw that and added their own little epitaph, which said:

"To follow you is not my intent,

Until I know which way you went."

That's right. Someone said, "The first twenty years of your life, your mother's asking you, 'Where are you going?' For a man, the next forty years of his life his wife is asking him, 'Where have you been?' And for one hour at his funeral service, his friends are asking, 'Where did he go?'"

My question is, where will you go?

Jesus Christ conquered sin and death and the grave, and He lives right now to forgive your sins and give you the hope of heaven. I want to give you that opportunity right now to make sure that when you die, you'll go to heaven. I don't care if you're young or if you're old or if you're middle age; no one has a lease on life. No one knows when they will die. It could happen at any time. None of us can guarantee that we'll be here tomorrow. Every day we're putting salvation off, we're gambling with eternity, because the moment you die, your eternal destination is fixed.

So if you haven't given your heart to Jesus Christ, if you haven't trusting Him as Savior, He wants to forgive you and He wants to give you eternal life. He wants to give you His joy, His peace and His love. But best of all, when you die, you'll spend eternity with Him.