

Sermon: A Reversal of Fortunes

Text: Luke 16:14-31

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June 20, 2010

Introduction: Jesus again directs his remarks to the Pharisees about wealth and one's relationship to God. Jesus wants them, and everyone who will listen, to know how to be right with God and get to heaven.

The Pharisees had twisted and turned God's word to their advantage rather than for God's glory. God is not impressed by outward appearances - only our hearts. Despite what you hear even today, it is not God's desire that everyone be rich in material ways. God is not impressed by wealth. Compared to what God owns, everyone is a pauper. Affluence is not, in and of itself, a sign of righteousness or blessedness, in fact, Jesus says it is a competing god (v. 13).

Immediately following the *Parable of the Unjust Steward* are five verses of context and instruction that help us evaluate our next parable which is sometimes called the *Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus*.

Luke 16:14-18 (NIV) ¹⁴The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. ¹⁵He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight. ¹⁶"The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it. ¹⁷It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law. ¹⁸"Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

The reason the Pharisees *were sneering at Jesus* and showing disrespect was they felt they understood better than anyone how God viewed wealth. There certainly were many passages in the OT (**Deuteronomy 28**) that indicated that those who were righteous became rich. Abraham would have been one good example. They also assumed if a person was rich, he was also righteous. Yet, Jesus separated God and Money.

God is not opposed to rich people. Again, Abraham is a case in point. Maybe a better understanding of the phrase (v. 15) *What is highly valued among men* might be the idea of overvalued.

In fact, anything valued over God is talked about in terms of being *detestable*. “It originally meant something that offends on account of its stench (Ardnt).” - Rienecker, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, p. 189

Another point we must make, the Law is not being replaced, but fulfilled in Jesus. Even commitments between a husband and wife should not be put aside for man’s convenience. The Pharisees who claimed to be the custodians of the Law were twisting it and distorting its intent to suit their desires rather than God’s. Finally, outward conformity to the Law is no clear indication of a faithful heart toward God. The character of the human heart is all that matters after death.

I. Appearances Can Be Deceiving (vv. 19-23)

Luke 16:19-23 (NIV) ¹⁹“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and 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. ²³In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

There are two lives being talked about here on two different planes. The first shared existence is:

A. Earthly

1. The “rich” man sometimes called *Dives* (Vulgate or Latin Text, word means rich man) has it all. Every day is full of sunshine and he wants for nothing. He buys whatever he needs. People wait on him. Every meal is a sumptuous banquet. He dresses like royalty draped in purple cloth with the finest of Egyptian linen undergarments - no chaffing for him in the hot Palestine climate. There is no hint of need here! The rich man truly enjoys the “good life” everyday.

And then there is:

2. Lazarus, the beggar, who should not be confused with the man Jesus raised from the dead in **John 11**. Lazarus’ name means “God helps” from the Hebrew “Eliezer”). He is a man who needs everything. He has been literally thrown out by the rich man’s compound to plead for enough food to survive each day. He is clothed in ulcerated sores, and unclean dogs lap up the festering puss. He has the gaunt face and hollow-eyed look of death. In fact death is thought to be a blessing.

Here in the parable, Lazarus, the beggar, is mentioned first. Both men come to the end of their allotted days. Even their funerals are extremely different. Here we begin to notice “A Reversal of Fortunes.” Lazarus is carried off by angels to Abraham’s side (bosom) - a place of honor. The rich man’s story is much bleaker: he “died and was buried.”

Appearances Can Be Deceiving when it comes to the:

B. Spiritual

And here is where the parable takes an unexpected turn. Where would the Pharisees have thought any rich man would go after he died? Paradise, right? Their love of money had blinded them to God’s true message about the responsibility of wealth.

Neither man is commended or condemned necessarily, but it is obvious the rich man has not extended mercy. Jesus had said earlier to another audience:

Luke 6:36 (NIV) ³⁶Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

“What one does now with one’s life is done before God and as such has eternal implications.” - Howard Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 198

The rich man didn’t do good when opportunity presented itself. Not doing good is also sin. Everyday he walked by, stepped over this beggar, maybe to where he did not even notice or acknowledge him at all. And so the distance that was maintained on earth between the rich man and Lazarus would be kept in place throughout eternity.

Because nothing can be changed regarding reward or punishment **AFTER** death, we should focus on our **PRESENT** lives. And here is where we witness the realization that comes to many “too late.”

II. Conditions Change (vv. 24-26)

Luke 16:24-26 (NIV) ²⁴So 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. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

***Conditions Change* regarding:**

A. Authority

Even from the bad part of Hades, the rich man still thinks that he can command people to meet his needs. Still too good to talk directly to Lazarus, he has not figured out that he no longer has any authority or rights over anyone.

The Law has been transferred from stone to a Person. It was delivered by angels through a mediator (**Gal. 3:19**), yet it will be people like Lazarus who will judge these heavenly beings. Paul informs the church of as much:

I Corinthians 6:3 (NIV) ³Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life!

There is also a change of who has to deal with:

B. Agony

On earth it had been Lazarus who had suffered terribly both physically and emotionally. He was ostracized from family and faith. He was considered unclean because of his physical condition and the stray dogs around him. He was so hungry that bread that was used to wipe off a person's hands after a meal was discarded out of his reach.

Yet this was just a few moments compared to the rich man's sentence. Dives would spend *eternity* in conditions far worse than what Lazarus had endured on earth. There would be no water to relieve thirst and no respite from the eternal flames. The worse pain was the realization that his connection to Abraham was only flesh and not one of faith. Paul informs us:

Romans 2:28-29 (NIV) ²⁸A man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. ²⁹No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the Spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God.

The rich man's agony would never be relieved and was to last forever. *Conditions Change* regarding:

C. Comfort

You can have the very best of everything in this world, but if you don't have God in your life, you are doomed. The rich man will never be comfortable again. The man who once wore only the finest of clothing, now finds himself naked and quite separated from anything good.

The sage of Ecclesiastes understood:

Ecclesiastes 5:15 (NIV) ¹⁵ Naked a man comes from his mother's womb, and as he comes, so he departs. He takes nothing from his labor that he can carry in his hand.

Revelation 3:17-18 (NIV) ¹⁷ You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. ¹⁸ I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see.

Revelation 16:15 (NIV) ¹⁵ "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed."

The poor beggar, in his new life is clothed in righteousness. Lazarus is the very special guest of honor at the Messianic Banquet seated right beside Abraham the very person the rich man had ineffectively appealed to.

III. God's Word Needs Followed (vv. 27-31)

Luke 16:27-31 (NIV) ²⁷ "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, 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.'"

Jeremias (*The Parables of Jesus*, p. 186) says, "The parable is about the five brothers, and it should not be styled the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, but the parable of the Six Brothers." In other words if we are going to affect where we are going after we die, it must be now before it is too late - before our time on earth runs out!

A. To go to where God is.

It is a simple enough solution, Abraham says. Everyone must listen to Moses and the Prophets. Abraham was counted as a man of faith even before the Law. We have been utterly blessed by the addition of the N.T. canon. We have the very words of Jesus and his followers to aid us in our journey to be with God.

Yet, just having the words of life does nothing if we do not listen and obey them. Repentance is required. Faith must be put into practice. Mercy and grace must be extended. Caring about others is not a suggestion, but a necessity, if we wish to be in heaven some day. God's Word Needs Followed.

B. To go where torment is never-ending.

All you have to do is ignore the Bible.

Hebrews 2:1-4 (NIV) ¹We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. ²For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, ³how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. ⁴God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Many people try to explain away miracles and clear signs from God. Some people are hard-hearted to the point of becoming anti-God, anti-Church, and Antichrist. They will suffer the eternal consequences of such a poor decision.

Even a witness so powerful as a resurrection from the dead will not convince some of their sin and need of a Savior. It was after the raising from the dead of the other Lazarus in **John 11** by Jesus, the Jewish religious leaders do what seems incomprehensible in our ears: **John 11:53 (NIV)** ⁵³So from that day on they plotted to take his life.

Conclusion: Before a person dies there is the real option of moving from being spiritually dead to being found alive in Jesus Christ. After one dies his eternal condition and destiny is fixed. It is irrevocable!

If we are already Christians, Darrell Bock's counsel should be followed: "As ambassadors we represent Jesus not just in terms of our preached call to respond to the gospel, but also in the character and values he calls his church to have." - *Luke*, p. 430

Jesus says how we value God, and how we view money, will determine where we live in eternity.

A final word from the prophet Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 9:23-25 (NIV) ²³This is what the LORD says: “Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, ²⁴but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight,” declares the LORD. ²⁵“The days are coming,” declares the LORD, “when I will punish all who are circumcised only in the flesh—

The Hebrew writer gives wise counsel regarding the urgency of sound decisions now: **Hebrews 9:27 (NIV)** ²⁷... man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,

As someone has said, “there are no unbelievers in hell. They just believed too late!”

Don't wait to make a decision to follow Jesus. Do it today!