

Comfort, Anguish, and the Great Chasm
Luke 16:19-31
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Read Luke 16:19-31

"(Jesus) said, 'Blessed (rather) are those who hear the word of God and keep it!" (Luke 11:28)

Introduction

You may have seen the cruise industry's recent campaign labelled "The Great Cruise Comeback." The pandemic hit the industry hard over the past two years, but cruise companies are expecting a return to big business this summer as people make up for lost time. If you've been on a cruise before or even just vacationed in tropical areas, you are familiar with the phenomenon of being places where the wealthy enjoy luxury vacations mere blocks from areas of abject poverty. I have been to some of those places on vacation, but more often on mission trips. In high school, my youth group went to the Dominican Republic to help build a church and run a Vacation Bible School. We spent the first week in a very poor section where we did the ministry, but then we went to a resort area for our day off. And the differences were astounding. We enjoyed the beach there but also felt uneasy, even guilty knowing that we had spent time with people who lived close by who were so poor that they would never be able to enjoy living like the rich here.

More recently, I lead a mission team to partner with a church in Nassau, Bahamas; go ahead and think your sarcastic remark, "Oh yeah, suffering for Jesus in the Bahamas!" I've heard them all. Anyways, the church, St. Andrews Kirk, stands at the top of a hill that separates the tourist/cruise ship destination ships on one side of the hill from neighborhoods where people are dirt poor on the other side of the hill. If you've ever heard or been to the resort area Atlantic, most of the guests there would be surprised to know that it's so close to areas of absolute poverty, where extended families live in tiny houses that are falling down around them. There are many reasons for this poverty, and many will point to the tourism as a good thing to give the residents jobs. But the difference in the areas is still striking.

As we turn to the second half of Luke chapter 16, we read a parable where wealth and poverty lived side-by-side as well. One man was "*clothed in fine linen*," he wore the equivalent of Gucci and Louis Vutton, while another was "*covered in sores*." One man "*feasted sumptuously*," filet mignon and lobster tails, while the other only ate what fell from the table. One man could afford to buy anything that he wanted, the other had to depend on others for even his most fundamental needs. Jesus has set up this contrast into the parable to point out some of the spiritual truths involved in death and the afterlife. Our first section shows us that death brings

I. The Great Reversal (vv. 19-23)

¹⁹ *"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.*

Lazarus is the only character in any of Jesus' parables who has a name. The name Lazarus means "God is my help." While his name seems to have mocked him in life, it was proved right in death. The fabulously wealthy man whose gate Lazarus begged at was not given a name. He's sometimes

called “Dives” which is Latin for “rich man,” so I’ll call him that. Lazarus was dirt poor, his only chance at food was to eat what fell from Dives’ table. He was covered with sores, which indicates some kind of crippling disease that kept him from working and probably getting around well. Jesus included the detail that the dogs came and licked his sores. At first, I thought that maybe that meant that the dogs were the only ones who were kind to him, that their licking his sores gave him some relief, but I don’t think that’s the case. I think the word “moreover” to start that sentence means that his bad condition was being added to. These were wild dogs that Lazarus couldn’t fend off and made his sores worse. Though we find out later that Dives knew Lazarus’ name, it seems that he merely avoided him and did not let his misery spoil his day or interrupt his meal. Jesus described him as heartlessly indifferent.

Hebrews 9:27 says that God appoints a person to die once and after that comes judgment. And so this parable sees both men die, with Lazarus going to Abraham’s side, which every listener would have known meant heaven, and Dives going to Hades, which is just another name for hell. This was the opposite of conventional thinking at the time, which was that the rich were blessed by God and the poor were cursed by Him. So was Jesus reversing this and saying that all poor people automatically go to heaven and all rich people automatically do not? No. He doesn’t say on what basis Lazarus went to heaven and on what basis Dives went to hell. But it wasn’t based on the level of their wealth. How do I know that? Well, there’s a third person in this story, and he was rich while on earth but he made it to heaven. Genesis 13:2 – *“Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold.”* How did Abraham make it to heaven? Romans 4:3 – *“Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness.”*

It’s clear that there can be faithful, godly people that the Lord blesses with wealth, just as there are ungodly, wicked poor people. And wicked rich and godly poor. Your money does not mark your soul, you can choose wickedness or obedience in faith no matter what your net worth is. Proverbs 30:8-9 says, *“Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with the food that is needful for me, lest I be full and deny you and say, ‘Who is the Lord?’ or lest I be poor and steal and profane the name of my God.”* There are temptations to be unfaithful at every income level. Now, the Bible does say over and over to be careful if you are wealthy:

Luke 12:15, *“Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.”*

1 Timothy 6:9, *“But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.”*

Lazarus and Dives’ eternal destinies are truly a situation where the last has become first and the first has become last, as Jesus warned over and over would be the case. Suffering in this life can give way to glory in the afterlife. And comfort and luxury here can turn into agony and torment after death. Dives might have thought that “he who dies with the most toys wins,” but he realized how big a lie that was immediately after his death. And Lazarus was no longer begging for crumbs, he was feasting in Zion (as we just sang).

C.S. Lewis has a book called *The Great Divorce*, which confused me for a long time because it’s not about marriages breaking up. He meant “divorce” as “division” and was referring to the separation between heaven and hell, that’s what the book is about. Here in Luke, the division is called

II. The Great Chasm (vv. 24-26)

24 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 am in anguish in this flame.’ 25 But 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. ²⁶ And 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.'

In my last sermon, I preached on Jesus' teaching that we should use worldly wealth to make friends "so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings" (16:9). This is a parable of someone who absolutely failed to do that. Dives was a man who lived only for himself. Parts of Paul's description of sinful people in 2 Timothy 3 could have applied to him: "*lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant... heartless, unappeasable... lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God...*" Perhaps his biggest sins were ones of omission, things he didn't do like helping the poor. But ultimately, it seems that he was just like his brothers, not really taking the idea of eternity and the afterlife seriously. He went to hell because of his unbelief, as all do who end up there.

He addressed Father Abraham and made a request that Lazarus could give him some relief from his pain; just a drop of water to cool his tongue. After a lifetime of looking down on and past the disgusting beggar, Lazarus, Dives has become the beggar. Abraham pointed out that the situation was completely reversed in life, that Lazarus was in pain but is now comforted. I think he was implying that Dives never troubled himself to help Lazarus in his anguish, so he should not expect that now. But even if Abraham and Lazarus had decided to help, they would not have been able to with an unbridgeable divide/chasm separating heaven and hell.

Ligonier Ministries did a survey of spiritual views back in 2020,¹ and found that 44% of people don't believe in a literal hell (I was surprised it was that low). We see in this parable what Jesus knew about hell. Notice that I didn't say "what Jesus believed about hell" because Jesus is the Lord of the Universe and knows exactly what hell is:

1) There will be great torment. Life here on earth can be bad at times, but it's nowhere near as bad as it could be because God restrains evil here. There are some places in the world where evil is left unchecked, and we often call those places appropriately "hell on earth." But for the most part, God has instituted governments and laws to curb our violence and selfishness, and He gives common grace to all human beings, believers and unbelievers alike. Hell is a place where God removes both His presence and His restraining hand, and so there is every reason to think that hell is the worst place that we can imagine.

2) Being sent to hell is irreversible. I think Dives knew this, because he did not ask to be released, only to have his torment lessened. I preached a few weeks ago on Jesus' parable where the Master shuts the door and will not open it after a certain hour - that remind us that once we have gone before God in judgment, His decision will be irreversible. Either we will be given grace and be in heaven with Him or we will be given justice and spend eternity in hell away from Him. This parable doubles down on that idea that you will not be able to leave hell or heaven for the other place; there are boundaries and you will not be able to cross. Separation from God is eternal, that's why it's called the Last Judgment.

Our final verses take us back to those who are still alive, and show us

III. The Great Denial (vv. 27-31)

²⁷ And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—²⁸ for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' ²⁹ But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone

¹ <https://thestateoftheology.com/data-explorer/2020/24?AGE=30&MF=14®ION=30&DENSITY=62&EDUCATION=62&INCOME=254&MARITAL=126ÐNICITY=62&RELTRAD=62&EVB=6&ATTENDANCE=254>

goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’³¹ He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

Dives asked Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them about the place of torment. He apparently thought that if they saw someone come back from the dead with warnings that they would change their ways. This makes me think of *A Christmas Carol* where Ebenezer Scrooge gets visited by the ghost of Jacob Marley, who is wearing chains and warns him about being selfish. Abraham’s reply to the request is essentially, “Trust me, even that wouldn’t work. Your brothers have all the information they need to tell them what will happen to them in the afterlife. They have the Scriptures but they ignore them. And even someone who comes back from the dead will not break through their spiritual and intellectual commitments.”

That last phrase “*if someone should rise from the dead*” might not have meant too much at the time, might not have registered with Jesus’ listeners. But I imagine Luke and his early readers feeling that line like a thunderbolt, as should we. Because there would be a Lazarus who rose from the dead, recorded in John 11. But how did the Pharisees react to his rising? Did they repent and see the error of their ways? No, they plotted Jesus’ death with a renewed urgency. But even greater than that, Jesus was foreshadowing His own death and resurrection and declaring that many would hear of His rising from the dead and shrug. It would mean nothing to them, even though it is the event that changed everything. When Jesus, the God-Man lived a perfect life and died a sacrificial death, He died and was punished by God for the sins of His people. Because He took our curse and our penalty on the cross, we are freed from eternal punishment. But if death and the grave could have claimed victory over Jesus, all would have been lost. That’s why Jesus rising from the dead was the key to God’s plan of salvation, and the most important chain of events in human history. But many will hear the truth and not be convinced. They will explain it away and live comfortably in their denial.

Conclusion

Here’s one application question for this sermon: Do you care enough about your brothers to share the hope of the Gospel with them? I mean “brothers” in the much broader sense of family, friends, those within your circle and influence. Because after you die or after they die, it will be too late to share. If we truly believe Jesus’ picture of the afterlife that is irreversible, combined with Romans 10:14 - “*how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?*”, then we have all the motivation we need to share the hope of heaven with our family members, our neighbors, our co-workers, and any who will listen. It should bother us way more than it does that people we know will be spending eternity in torment. Pray that God will help you share the hope of your faith.

Let’s think through what we can learn from each person in this parable. It’s worth spending some time thinking about how we are like Dives. We can surround ourselves with every luxury - dining at the finest restaurants, belonging to the elite clubs, driving our dream car with a vacation home at the beach and all the disposable income we need to enjoy this world. But if we do not have faith in Jesus, our lives after death will be reversed, a torment. As Abraham said in the passage, we will have received our reward, lived for a very short time “the high life” but foolishly overlooked making sure that we were set up for eternity. If we died and there was nothing after death, of course, I would be encouraging you to live it up. “Get as much as you can while you can, maximize your pleasure, you do you... Don’t worry about consequences. YOLO!” But we don’t just live once. Every soul is eternal, it’s just a question of where they will spend eternity. J.C. Ryle said, “Truly it is a

waste of time to set our hearts on a dying world and its short-lived comforts... and for the sake of momentary pleasures to lose a glorious eternity in Heaven... Let us live for eternity.”²

Maybe we feel more like Lazarus. Life here on earth is hard, even miserable – we can lose a limb, we can have a crippling disease or chronic illness, we can be penniless or in jail, any other kind of dreadful scenario – but if we have faith in Jesus, all of that goes away the moment we die and enter eternity. Like Lazarus, we shed our natural bodies and all of their problems and we receive our spiritual bodies. In 2 Corinthians 4:17, Paul said, *“For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.”* You may be thinking, “Easy for you to say, Paul, that our afflictions are ‘light and momentary.’ How about someone who has been paralyzed by a car accident, or who is bed-ridden, or suffers constant, chronic pain? It’s not such light suffering.” But remember that Paul was stoned, whipped, beaten, shipwrecked, and imprisoned for Jesus. He was no stranger to pain and affliction. When he says that it is light and momentary, he’s saying that in comparison to eternity. You can endure anything for a short period of time as long as what comes after it is worth the suffering. And heaven is worth any suffering here. Heaven has no pain and no tears, we will live with resurrection bodies in perfect harmony and joy with our Creator.

If we are saved in Christ, we are Lazarus. But we are also another crippled man, Mephibosheth. Who? 2 Samuel 9 records the story of one of Jonathan’s sons. If you remember, Jonathan was the son of King Saul. After Saul and Jonathan both died and David had ascended to the throne, there was a question of what David would do to the remaining members of Saul’s descendants. Most new kings in the ancient world would put to death any descendants of the old king so that no one could rise up and challenge his throne. But David asked, *“Is there still anyone left of the house of Saul that I may show him kindness for Jonathan’s sake?”* (2 Samuel 9:1). Keep in mind that Saul had tried to kill David multiple times, but that Jonathan and David had been best friends. 2 Samuel tells us that Mephibosheth was crippled in both feet and was afraid that David would kill him. But instead David told him, *“Do not fear, for I will show you kindness for the sake of your father Jonathan, and I will restore to you all the land of Saul your father, and you shall eat at my table always”* (2 Samuel 9:7). That’s a picture of the grace of God in our lives. We are lame and crippled in our sin, deserving only of death. But Jesus says, “No, I want you to save you, not destroy you. You should not be my enemy, you should be part of my family. I invite you to eat at my table, to enjoy all the luxuries of my palace purely because of my grace and love.” Beloved, believe it and embrace it! Amen.

Benediction

Romans 16:25-27: *“Now to Him who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but has now been disclosed and through the prophetic writings has been made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith – to the only wise God be glory forevermore through Jesus Christ! Amen.”*

² J.C. Ryle’s sermon “Riches and Poverty” found at www.biblebb.com/files/ryle/pract13.htm