

2. Two neighbours

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[0 : 00] I Father we do pray that you'd speak to us, each one of us in the very depths of our being through your word. Amen.

My father spent 37 years in a tobacco multinational, so Cradle to Grave in the same company. And in that time as a family as I recall we had maybe only two or three conversations about the dangers of smoking and health.

We weren't a Christian family, but literally one conversation per decade. So basically we lived in total denial about what cigarettes can do. I remember for example in the early 80s when a close family friend died of lung cancer.

He was a heavy smoker, leaving sons of 14 and 16. And why he died was never discussed, he just died of cancer. And I've never challenged my father about his career.

I don't know why I haven't. I love him dearly. He's been a super father to me. But it could be said to be blunt, in his career he killed people and I buried them.

[1 : 32] That could be said I guess. Having said that, in recent years I have to say when it comes to my dad's job, I have felt less guilty about his career.

Not that I'm trying to justify it. I don't begin to do that. I just feel less guilty because of what appears on cigarette packets today. So here we are. Smoking kills. Smoking can cause a slow and painful death.

I think that's pretty clear. And I'd just like to thank Dr. Munro for buying this packet for me this morning. While apparently his wife kept guard outside the shop because he's never done that before.

And he's warned his patients not to do this for many years. So anyway, doctor, thank you for that. And I'll be returning these to you after the service. You see, it is a clear warning. And it's just whether this is a wise choice or not.

Do you think this is a trustworthy warning? Is this reality? Or is it not? That's the question. Are you on the Titanic with this? Or is it a lie? That's the question. Well, in today's passage, Luke 16, 19-31, Jesus is being as blunt as this cigarette packet warning.

[2 : 38] It is as blunt as this. Matthew Henry wrote, Millions are ruined by believing that God will not be so strict as his word says he will. By this lie, Satan ruins humanity. And the question is, is this warning here trying to save me or ruin my day?

That's the question. But it's an absolute red-hot parable as we look at these two neighbours here. So let's look at this parable together. And again, I just say, well, what do you think the warning is? Do you think it's trustworthy or not?

Do you think it's true or not? Now, a parable is a literary device for teaching spiritual truths. So I'm not going to try and go in for some medieval literalism here. This is not meant to be history. But nevertheless, there are some chilling realities in this parable which we ignore at our peril.

So let's look at these two neighbours. And can you see verse 19, first of all, that the first man in verse 19 is phenomenally wealthy. There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

Interesting he's in purple, isn't it? Like bishops. I'm sure the bishops should read that and not wear purple anyway. That's just a... That's why I'll remain a curate all my life, I think. Anyway, he's clothed in purple and fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day.

[3 : 49] And he has the best and most fashionable clothes that fashion can buy. And I guess not a day passed without some sumptuous banquet at his house. And I don't know what it would be in Glasgow terms.

Would he shop at Hugo Boss? And breakfast at Oshie's at Lang's, is that right? Lunch at the Willow Tea Rooms? Evening deal at Rugano's?

I've not been to any of these places, I'm told this. He lives at the West End? Anyone live at the West End here? If you do, see me afterwards. That's where he lives. His kids are at Glasgow High.

And his wife shops at Princess Square. Anyone been to Princess Square this morning? See me afterwards. So that's his life, you see. And his gate, the word for gate here, is not the gate at like my basement flat in London.

This is a huge ornamental portico. This is like the gates of Buckingham Palace. So material prosperity oozes from this fellow. His clothes, his food, his house. And all that we're told about him is that he was rich and that he died.

[4 : 48] And in the meantime, please have a look at verse 25. I think it's fascinating. But Abraham replied, Son, remember in your lifetime you received your good things. Can you see that he had not a problem in life, this guy, till the day he died?

In the card game of life, he gets dealt two aces and two kings. Very hard to play that hand badly. Some people talk about Christian preachers and they say, well, actually wait for something to go wrong in someone's life, then they'll listen.

Well, this bloke had not a problem by the look of it till the day he died. Received so many good gifts from God, one after the other, that it all went well. Till he found himself in eternity.

Now the second man could not have been more different. Jesus paints a picture here of abject poverty as extreme as the rich man's opulence. Verse 20, can we see, At his gate was laid a poor man 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. Now the word laid is far too gentle. It's more like sprawled. As you see with the sort of dear homeless people in London where I work, just sprawled sometimes in front of shops or whatever.

[5 : 55] And there to face the sneering contempt of passers-by, he has no fine clothes. In fact, can you see what the only thing that covers his back are? Can you have a look? Sores, perhaps resulting from chronic malnutrition.

And dinner time, of course, was the black bin liners would come out and he'd rip them open from the rich man's table. That was dinner time. Ripping open the black bin liners, hoping to get some food. And the only compassion he receives is from mangy mongrel dogs who we see here licked his sores.

But there is, and I wonder if you can see it as we look down in verse 20, something which the poor man had, the rich man did not have. And it's so common, its profundity can be easily missed.

Can you see verse 20? Have a look. Can you see this poor man has a name, Lazarus? And in Hebrew that's Eleazar, and it means, he whom God helps.

That's his name. He has significance. God knows him. He's known to God. He knew God. And amazingly, you know, in the midst of his bitterness, he doesn't blame God in the midst of his peril.

[6 : 59] No, he whom God helps, he looked patiently to God in the midst of it. Didn't result in resentment. Didn't sever his relationship with God. No, in the midst of it, he looked to God and trusted in him.

And I asked myself if I could trust God like this, if I was in this situation, and the answer is probably not, which is probably why I've had an easy life. I can't be trusted with suffering. But the question which emerges as we look at these two neighbours, one incredibly wealthy, but with no identity, the other utterly destitute, but known to God, the question is, of course, whom would you rather be?

Of these two men. Which one would you rather be? And I guess we can only answer that question as we look at their two destinies. Who would you rather be? So let's have a look at their destinies.

Verse 22. The time came when the beggar died, the angels carried into Abraham's side, the rich man also died and was buried. Can I just say, don't raise this parable at a dinner party if you're out to dinner tonight.

Because everyone's dead by the third verse. You'll soon get crossed off the Christmas card list if you raise this one. Lazarus is dead, Abraham's dead, the rich man dies. And I guess that little phrase there, verse 22, is very striking.

[8 : 11] The time came because it speaks of the brevity of life. The time came. Then it's gone. And the Bible's amazing on the brevity of life, you know. It's like a mist, we're told, that appears in the early morning, but as soon as the sun gets up, it dissolves.

Our life is like chaff that is thrown into the air and blows away. Our life is like water that is spilt into the ground and you can't get it back. Life is like a dream in the night, and in the morning it's forgotten at the breakfast table.

We are like grass that flourishes. In fact, as an Anglican clergyman, I say at the gravesite, as for man his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field, but the wind blows and its place remembers it no more.

Like moan grass blowing away. Or perhaps most striking of all, life is like a sigh. A puff and it's gone. Psalm 90, verse 12 says, teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

And it's striking in the film *Gladiator* that Proximus Oliver Reed keeps saying during the film, we're shadows and dust, and he died during filming. Life is incredibly short.

[9 : 21] I've been at the graveside of six of my school friends. Six. Jesus crucially is teaching here, though, not just that death is not the end, but that our personalities do survive death in a conscious state.

So there is life after death. The coffin is not an exodus box. And to think that we can live life without consequence is, according to Jesus, a fantasy. And what we've got to see here is that these two men encounter two very different destinies and they are sustained in two very different states. And you may say, well, prove that, Rico. How do you know that? And I'm saying it's because of Easter Sunday. Because, you see, Christ just didn't die. He rose on Easter Day and that is proof that the coffin is not an exitless box and that, as he got through death himself, he will get us through.

It's the promise that actually there is a world to come. The world to come has broken into this world. That's what the resurrection promises. And for those of you investigating the Christian faith, it's great there's this little Christianity Explained course coming up, but I want to say, Christianity rests on basic historical facts.

On the third day, dateable, Christ rose from the dead. It's in the Creed. He was crucified under Pontius Pilate. There are historical events that can be checked and upon which the Christian faith hangs.

[10 : 46] Have you checked them out? Because if they're true, the promise is that there is a world to come after this world. And can you see Lazarus' destiny here? Can you see it in verse 22?

It's very striking. The time came when the beggar died. The angels carried him to Abraham's side. So for a Jew, he is united with his father Abraham.

That is heaven indeed. And I suppose the question is, what does it feel like to be at Abraham's side? What does it feel like to be in heaven, in the new creation? And I think a great verse from Paul the Apostle is, 1 Corinthians 2 verse 9, No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him.

So please think if you would. I wonder if you could do this now for me. Could you think please, of the best moment you've had in your life? What has been the best moment you've ever had?

The best moment as you look back. For some of you of course, it'll be when Tony Stanger reached up and took that ball with Gavin Hastings' chip in 1990. It was a terrible moment.

[11 : 54] Sorry, if you can't remember that, you should. But what's been the best moment? The most intimate relationship ever shared, the giddy elation of falling in love, maybe a moment of achievement after years of work.

I spoke to a couple recently and they said, you know, we were both looking as our baby smiled for the first time. He just smiled up and up. They said it was an amazing moment. Well, take that moment, can you please, and hear the verse.

No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him. So multiply that moment's intensity by infinity and its duration by eternity and that is what heaven feels like.

Now that's such a relief to me, you know, to think upon that. Because in this life, my feelings go up and down, normally depending on whether I've had a Mars bar or not. But they go up and down. But not in the new creation.

And here is Lazarus, he's at home. And he's valued and loved and he's not sprawled in the gutter and he's utterly secure, not at the mercy of mongrel dogs. And it's all guaranteed by the resurrection.

[12 : 58] Revelation 21, 22, it's that heaven is a place of security and intimacy and community. And the new creation will be this place that we go to, where my feelings and what I see will be perfection.

That's a great relief, of course. And it's the reason, of course, there's no point being a materialist here. No point building heaven here. You'll get it all then. If you're a Christian here, just invest in Christ.

Because he's the one that will take you there. I'm not a materialist for this reason. Do you know, the first funeral I ever took of a young person was a guy called Stuart Spencer. PhD, died in his mid-30s.

And he asked me to speak at his funeral and I'd visit him most days. He's dying of leukemia. And I had one of these ridiculous comments that you make when you say it and you can't believe you've said it.

Do you ever do that? I mean, I just couldn't believe I said it. About three days before he died, literally, I visited him and I suddenly said to him, blurted out, Stuart, what's it like to die?

[14 : 01] Good comment, don't you think? Very helpful pastorally. Get me by your bedside if you're knocking off. I'm just the one you need. Stuart, what's it like to die? And I'll always remember, he looked at me thinking, I can be thinking, how have I asked this ape to speak at my funeral?

But he said, he said to me, Rico, Christ has risen. I said, Stuart, what's it like to die? He said, Rico, Christ has risen. It's amazing, you see.

As I asked him what it was like to die, all his faith and hope and mindset was latched onto Jesus Christ rising from the dead. I'll never forget that moment. He also said to me, Rico, you've no idea how precious the cross is to me when I know that I'll be standing at judgment in a week.

And I guess the question is, as we look at the wonder of heaven and the new Christian and what's ahead is, are you giving thanks for this? Do you wake up in the morning and give thanks for this?

About five or six years ago, I was having a bit of a tough time and I went and saw this Australian clergyman called John Chapman and I went through all my woes, one thing after another.

And he was listening and gradually his sort of Australian lip curled and as I finished, after about going on for 10 or 15 minutes, he said, Rico, mate, I had a friend like you, single clergyman like you and I. He committed suicide and if I may say, you're not unlike him.

[15 : 18] I said, what? He said, it is quite obvious listening to you that there's no thanksgiving in your life. He said, it's obvious listening. He said, morning and night, I want you to kneel by your bed and give thanks to God and why don't you start with the cross and with the hope of heaven and then come back and we'll talk again.

And I'm saying, wouldn't that be a great thing to do? Morning and night, kneel by your bed and give thanks for the good things and otherwise our heart gets hard and I just meet people and their hearts are hard and it's because they're not thankful.

Are you thankful? Well, that's Lazarus' state and that's his future. He's at home. But what do we get as we conclude now of the rich man's destiny? What do we see here?

And can you see his fate in verse 23? In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up, saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. So he called to him, Father Abraham, have pity on me.

Send Lazarus to the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I'm in agony in this fire.

And please see here that Jesus, the most tender-hearted man that ever lived, the man who in the Sermon on the Mount said, love your enemies, pray for those who persecute you and then as he was being murdered, cried out of his executioners, Father, forgive them, they know what they do.

[16 : 33] The most loving man that ever lived is telling us here that there is a place called hell, in hell, where he was in torment. And you know, if I don't believe this, then there are times when Jesus was telling the truth and times when he was lying.

And as I, as a clergyman, stand at the graveside and look to give people hope for heaven, how can I do that if I'm ignoring what he says about hell? It lacks all credibility and integrity.

Now you see, Jesus here speaks of hell and without that truth this parable folds up. And the Christian faith is ultimately being saved from hell through the cross for heaven.

So you see, when it comes to the cross, we did the sinning and Jesus did the dying. That's what happens. For the offense of sin, the just punishment is death and Jesus takes that condemnation. The wages of sin is death and he took those wages in my place. He bore our sin, he paid our debt, he endured our penalty, he died our death to save us from hell.

[17 : 42] And we live among people who think, well it didn't really matter. As long as I've lived a good life, God will let me in. Why did God let his son die like that if living a good life was enough?

He sent his son to die on Good Friday. It must mean that my sin is serious. About, um, oh, 12, 13 years ago now I was playing rugby in Bristol against a club side called Ding's Crusaders and I arrived at the Ding's Ground which was known affectionately as the Killing Fields, not a nice place to play, and I saw my opposite number.

He was enormous. He was built like an outside toilet. I mean, the guy was massive. Do you know, you look at a bloke like that and you think, what does his mother look like? I mean, the bloke was huge.

And I thought, this is going to be a desperate afternoon. Anyway, I looked around a bit and he wasn't warming up and I thought, I wonder why. I looked around a bit and he was holding a tiny baby boy in his arms. And I thought, well, he's just babysitting, he's not playing.

Maybe his mother's playing, I didn't know. Just before kick-off, he handed this baby boy across and he walked onto the field and he ripped me limb from limb. Half time, he went straight back to the baby boy.

[18 : 50] Second half, he came back on and he threw me around like straw in the wind. It was terribly embarrassing. As the final whistle went, that baby boy was back in the man's arms. There was no question who the father was, there was no question who the son was.

I'd like to have seen anyone lay a finger on that little boy. It would have been amusing to behold the results. Now, here's the issue. Do you think God loved his son, Jesus Christ, any less than that? Yet he sent him to die that I be forgiven. And it must mean that sin is serious. And we see that again, you see, because we see that hell isn't just a place.

Can you see, it's a place of suffering in hell where he was in torment. He says, I'm in agony in this fire, end of verse 24. I mean, it's a terrible thing.

And the question is, why? Why is sin so serious? And I think partly here, it's in verse 25, the seriousness of sin. Can you see? But Abraham replied, son, remember.

[19 : 49] Remember how you established your reference points and your goals, your aims for self-fulfillment. Remember how you took the gifts and ignored the giver and walked through life just not bothering.

Remember how you mocked and violated my character. and remember that again and again you were warned that sin has got to be paid for. Either in hell or at the cross.

But it must be paid for. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give an account. And interestingly, the heart of sin is in verses 27 to 29.

Can you see as we look down? He answered, then I beg you, Father. Send Lazarus to my father's house for I have five brothers and him warn them so that they won't also come to this place of torment. Abraham replied, they have Moses and the prophets.

Let them listen to them. You see, he said, I've got five brothers. He said, we always used to play golf at Pollock on a Sunday morning. We never bothered going to church. Never did. Just went off and played golf.

[20 : 52] And he says, they should have listened to Moses and the prophets. And he says, well, they never bothered to read the Bible. I know they got given Bibles, they didn't bother. But can you see of what the heart of sin is here, Moses and the prophets let them listen to them, what they're all speaking about of is the death of Jesus, Moses and the prophets.

They're all saying sin is a problem, you need rescue. And the heart of sin is to ignore the rescue of Jesus on Good Friday. That's the very heart of it. The night before he died, Maundy Thursday, Jesus says, the Holy Spirit will come and convict men and women in regard to sin because they don't believe in me.

So to not believe in Jesus is not an intellectual decision, it is a sin. We've been given all the evidence we need. And to turn around and say, I don't need his death, I won't bother with it, is the very heart of sin, which is why you can have charming neighbours in Glasgow, charming people, delightful, and they're right at the heart of sin as they push Jesus away, very pleasantly.

I've got two little nephews, Dalton and Patrick. If they walked in here now, and you hurt them, or cut them dead, or ignored them, and I'm not even their father, I'm just their uncle, but I'm so emotionally linked up with those little boys, if you did that to them, we would be enemies.

God has sent his son to die, and people, people think that they can just ignore him, and it makes them God's enemies.

[22 : 28] It's quite a word, isn't it? Remember, remember, remember. And you know, one of the things about hell is, it's the agony of realising, as this man has here, that it was an opportunity forfeited.

Over the gates of hell are written the words too late, and who are we in this parable, of course? We are the five brothers whose destinies are still to be determined, and our destinies are determined on what we do with Moses and the prophets and the way they all speak of Jesus.

Whether we will actually say, now I need the cross this Easter, I need to go to Good Friday, and then I need to trust in Easter Day for the new resurrection that Jesus gives me, the new creation, or whether I say, no, I don't need that.

I really don't need to bother with it, because actually, I've lived a good life. Let's pray together.