

4. The Rich Man and Lazarus

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[0 : 0 0] I'm going to pick up the reading in verse 9 and we're going to be focusing on verses 19 to the end later on.

Jesus' instruction at the end of the parable at the beginning of chapter 16, verse 9. I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth so that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.

One who's faithful in a very little is also faithful in much. And one who's dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. If then you've not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches?

And if you've not been faithful in that which is another's, who will give you that which is your own? No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and money. The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things and they ridiculed him. And he said to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.

[1 : 2 3] For what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were until John. Since then, the good news of the kingdom of God is preached and everyone forces his way into it.

But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one dot of the law to become void. Everyone who divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery.

And he who marries a woman divorced from her husband commits adultery. There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.

And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

[2 : 3 3] 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'm in anguish in this flame. 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. 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.

And he said, Then I beg you, Father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.

But Abraham said, They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them. And he said, No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.

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.

[3 : 45] This is the word of God. We thank him for it. And we're going to pray in a few moments that he would give us wisdom as we look at it together. Let's pray as we come to God's word.

Heavenly Father, we pray once again that you would please open our eyes to eternal realities. And we pray that they would grip our minds this evening, turn us in love towards you and help us to live for you as a result of what we hear.

We ask this in Jesus name. Amen. Neighbors. Neighbors. Everybody needs good neighbors. With a little understanding, you can find the perfect blend.

Neighbors should be there for one another. That's when good neighbors become good friends. Probably the best known theme tune in the whole world.

It may or may not encourage you to know that when I was a junior doctor in the 1980s, the only thing that held the medical profession together was neighbors in the doctor's mess at lunchtime.

[4 : 55] Those are the people who are looking after your heart problem or your digestive problem. What they really loved was neighbors. Well, we're looking at the story of neighbors this evening.

It's a story about two unusual neighbors and how their fortunes are reversed. It's a story of the biggest and sharpest contrasts.

And I want to point you first to, on one hand, a picture of health and happiness. Luke chapter 16, verse 19.

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. Just one sentence, but the picture it paints is an evocative one and in many ways highly desirable.

A rich man, a man dressed in beautiful and comfortable clothes, a man who feasted sumptuously every day. You're already probably picturing in your mind his villa, his extension, his decking, his barbecue, his swimming pool, his beamer, his Audi, his beautiful garden, his lovely wife and kids, his servants, his servants, all conjured up in that one sentence.

[6 : 11] A picture of health and happiness and contentment. But let your gaze run for a moment across the terrace and across the lawn and down the drive to the front gate and the dusty road beyond from the shadow of the cooling trees to the dust of the roadside.

And there we meet another man, a very different man. A man who far from being a picture of health and happiness is a picture of sickness and anguish. Verse 20.

And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

This is nothing like life on the other side of the fence. This is a poor man. A man not in control of his life.

He lies there begging. He's there every morning. No one knows if he's brought there to that favoured spot early on or if he just lies all the time, day and night. He's ill, covered with sores.

[7 : 25] He's humiliated. The dogs lick the ooze from his sores on the way past. He's hungry. He's seen the comings and goings at the gate.

He knows enough to be able to imagine life on the other side. He longs for a few scraps from that table. It must be amazing in there.

How good it would be just for a day to be in there rather than out here. On one side of the gate, a picture of health and happiness.

On the other, a picture of sickness and anguish. However, the story does not say much about their circumstances in life.

We're also aware that material differences between human beings in this age can be extreme. Such differences often preoccupy us unrightly.

[8 : 25] Either we're outraged that there should be such differences between people or we're glad we're not in the difficult position of life that others are, or both together. But this story doesn't focus on this age at any length at all.

Instead, it takes us to and focuses on much less usual and uncomfortable territory. Not the difference in their circumstances before death, but the difference in their circumstances in the life beyond.

That's where the rubber really hits the road in this story. Just look at your page and see the difference. This age gets three verses.

Verse 19 to 21. The age to come gets ten. Four times as much of this description is about the age to come. This is a parable about the age to come.

And a great exchange. Look at verse 22. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.

[9 : 33] Just let me hit the pause button here. And let's step back mentally for a moment. We read this and think, well, about time too. At last this person is getting something good.

At last things are being straightened out. But for the hearer, the first hearer, this would have been a slightly unexpected note. It's pretty clear that beggars were commonplace in those days.

As you read the pages of the New Testament, you do not get the feeling that they were paid much attention to. They appear to have been on the edge sorts of people.

But this sentence moves this man, Lazarus, from the edge. Right to the middle of what God is doing. The angels carried him to Abraham's side.

Abraham in the Bible. The man who was given a great promise by God. Who took God at his word. Who trusted that God would do what he had promised. Who became the father of the Israelite nation.

[10 : 37] It's a slightly unexpected note. This beggar is right there in the middle with Abraham. In the age to come.

Bit of a surprise that. You wouldn't have seen a man like Lazarus in the synagogue every Saturday. This would not be a man who was known publicly for his trust in God.

No one would really have known him at all. He's just a nameless beggar by the roadside. So that comes as a bit of a surprise. But nothing compared with the surprise of what comes next.

Verse 22 again. The rich man also died. And was buried. And in Hades being in torment. He lifted up his eyes.

And saw Abraham far off. And Lazarus at his side. Now this is a surprise. A big surprise. For no Jewish person.

[11 : 35] Would have thought. That the rich and upright. Could possibly end in torment. No one would have thought. That a rich person might end up.

A long way away from Abraham. For riches. Well. They were commonly viewed as being God's blessing. And of course. That's not just true in that age.

Is it in this age. Often religious people view riches. As God's blessing. On somebody's life. But in fact. The one who is blessed.

Eternally. Eternally. Is not. This rich and comfortable man. But the beggar at his gate. And it's not the beggar. Who is the unnamed.

Non person. In this story. It's the rich man. In this story. Who has no name. There's a big surprise here.

[12 : 30] Not only. Who's in Abraham's camp at the end. But who's. Not in Abraham's camp at the end. Before we go on to explore that a bit further.

Let's just remember why Jesus has told this story. Why is this parable told? Well. He's been teaching the crowds following him. Since the end of chapter 14.

And the subject matter has all been to do with what it will be like to follow Jesus. There have been a number of warnings. Some of them strong warnings. Because it looks easier to follow Jesus than it actually is.

It is deceptively easy actually to be a follower of Jesus in one sense. All you have to do is come to him and listen to him. And many people are doing that. If you're here today to listen to Jesus words.

That's really all you have to do. To come to him. And listen to him. And take his words on board. And obey them. And believe them. You don't have to jump through all sorts of hoops.

[13 : 30] Or climb through. Climb over all sorts of hurdles to please God. Because the message of Jesus is all about what he has done for you. To bring you to God.

Not what you can do for him. To bring yourself to God. Jesus is holding out to everyone. The free gift of forgiveness.

Won by his death on the cross. You do not have to go. You do not have to be a great performer in life. To go to heaven. Isn't that an enormous relief? Isn't that a relief? You do not have to be a great performer in life.

To go to heaven. Lazarus in the story is a good example of that. He's not a great performer. What can he do? Lying in the street. He's not suddenly going to take on the religious life.

Or become a pillar of religious society. Is he? He's a beggar. He just lies there. He can't do anything. Yes, he needs forgiveness.

[14 : 29] Like everybody else does. But the heaven he experiences in this story. Is not a reward. For his sufferings on earth.

Very important to realize that. And yes, there is a big change in circumstances. Verse 25 makes that all too plain. But it is not that. You get to be part of the good things in heaven.

Because of how this life has been. We have to plug this story into its context.

I'm going to spend just a couple of minutes doing that. It's very important. For if you take this story out of its context. It looks as though it's saying that God's big concern.

God's a socialist really. If you're a Lazarus, you'll get your reward in the end.

[15 : 27] If you're a rich man, you'll pay for it in the end. But not in the context. According to Jesus, no one deserves to be in the place of comfort in the end.

Not anyone of any sort. If you could get to heaven as a reward for poverty and misery experienced in this world. Well, why would Jesus need to come?

I mean, the vast bulk of the population of the world has lived life in poverty and misery. What would there be for him to do? If it was just automatic. That things would change in the end.

No, the truth is that God has done something for us. So that instead of experiencing death leading to hell.

We might experience comfort and eternal life beyond the grave. God has done something to make that possible. And all that you have to do to get it is come and listen to Jesus' words.

[16 : 26] And take him seriously. As Abraham did. As apparently Lazarus did. He's an Abraham friend. Now, Jesus has talked in the last few chapters about the surprising dynamics of that message.

Turn back, would you, to chapter 13, verse 28. Here's a surprise for the hearers. Talking about the end.

In that place, there'll be weeping and gnashing of teeth. When you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God. But you yourselves cast out.

He's talking to religious people here. There'll be big surprises in the end. There'll be people he would think would be in who are not. And people you wouldn't think will be in who are.

Big surprise. Or in chapter 14, there's the parable of the wedding banquet. And at the wedding banquet, the invitations are thrown out far and wide.

[17 : 30] And lots of people who get invitations put up surprising excuses for not coming along. And in the end, all sorts of people you wouldn't have expected to be invited at all.

Get invitations and come in from way, way over there. Unexpected people arrive. Expected people are left out. Or in chapter 15, the Pharisees and scribes are revolted at who Jesus is eating with.

Tax collectors and sinners. And he tells them a parable about how everybody needs to turn away from relating wrongly to God.

Not just disgraceful tax collectors, but also well-behaved religious people. Like the older son in the parable. In chapter 16, we're on the subject of money.

And one of the ways that religious people relate wrongly to God is that they use their religion as a cover for love of money.

[18 : 37] Look at chapter 16, verse 13. No servant can serve two masters. He'll hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

That's the way it is. You cannot serve God and money. The Pharisees, very religious people, sincerely religious people, who were lovers of money, heard all these things and they ridiculed him.

And he said to them, you are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. Religious people, apparently passionate about God and passionate about the scriptures, but lovers of money, who therefore ridicule the words of Jesus, God's rescuer and savior.

Friends, this story is not a story about how you get to heaven as a reward for bad things in this life. It's a story fundamentally about how material well-being gets in the way of submitting to God.

That's where the focus of this story is. The big message of this parable, the love of money, is a very, very dangerous thing.

[19 : 53] Let me say that you can have money and not love it. And you can love it without having it. If you've got it, it's ever so easy to love it.

But don't think because you haven't got it that you don't love it. It's a parable for everyone. I was at the crematorium one day. It comes with a job, really.

chatting to one of the guys who works there. We had about ten minutes before the funeral started. We got talking about his job.

He described how he liked his job. He liked being able to help people. It was actually quite a nice place to work. He threw in a line. Of course, I could do with more money.

Of course, at one level, that's a trueism, isn't it? We could all find something to do with a bit more money in life. At another level, how extraordinary for a person whose job is that job that a man faced day by day with this relentless parade of the dead, of those whose sameness proves that a bit more or less money makes absolutely no difference in the end, should have his mind on how a bit more money would make all the difference.

[21 : 15] The love of money is an everyday thing. Two things, then, from this parable about the love of money. They come from the detail of the story. They're the things this story majors on first.

The rich man ends in eternal anguish. Verse 23. In Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

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. I am in anguish in this flame.

Or verse 27. I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.

The picture is not a happy one. He's had many good things in life, but these do not last beyond the grave. I think this is not a blueprint of hell, but an impression of hell.

[22 : 20] There are many other dimensions to hell in the Bible. If anything, the whole picture is rather bleaker than it is here. I think this is an impression rather than a blueprint. I don't know that the dialogue between Abraham and the rich man is something that is anticipated in the Bible's picture of hell in detail.

Jesus is telling a story, and the details are here for the sake of the story. But of one thing I think we can be quite sure. This is not somewhere that anyone wants to go.

In his life, the rich man had everything he needed. Clothes, food, drink, shelter from the heat of the day. Now he can't even get a drop of water to relieve his anguish.

It's a picture of great distress. And it's there to convince the lover of money, the person whose horizons are no broader than this world, that though loving money brings many comforts, those can only last as long as this world.

In this life, money, which is a good gift from God, brings hope and many comforts. And it can be used for great good.

[23 : 44] And it can also be loved and therefore used for the supreme evil, the evil of rejecting the good giver and his life-giving words.

We are to be in no doubt from this story that though money is a good gift, the love of money brings eternal anguish, the loss of all comfort, the loss of all hope forever.

The rich man ends in eternal anguish. The second thing from this parable. He ends there because he has not listened to God.

His sad situation is not because things are somehow being balanced out in life. He had it good once but not anymore. No, his sad situation, I think, from the parable is because during his life he did not listen to God.

Two things in the story bring this out. First, the story begins and ends with the scriptures. Did you notice that? Look at verse 16.

[24 : 53] The law and the prophets were until John. Since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached and everyone forces his way into it. But it's easier for heaven and earth to pass away than one dot of the law to become void.

Not easy at first sight to see what these words mean. I think it means this. You have had the law and the prophets. God has spoken to you. Now God has a new message.

The good news of the kingdom. And lots of unusual people are being powerfully affected by it. But just because the message is new, don't think that the things God has said in the past are somehow irrelevant.

Don't think that God's words that he's already said can be ignored. But ignoring them is just what the man in the parable has done.

When asked elsewhere what is the most important thing God has said, Jesus replied, Love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself.

[25 : 59] That is not a new message to these people. The Pharisees knew that. But the story is of a man who knew it and didn't do it. Look at verse 27.

I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father's house. I have five brothers so that he may warn them lest they come into this place of torment. But Abraham said, They have Moses and the prophets.

Let them hear them. And he said, No, Father Abraham. In other words, they're not going to listen to that.

I didn't listen to that. Didn't make any difference to me. This man, and he knows his family, have not listened to God.

So when God has said, The most important things in life are love for me and love for others, that appears not to have been heeded. What God has said should be quite enough warning of what God requires.

[27 : 05] Quite enough warning of what's important. Just as a brief aside, you may wonder what on earth that bit about divorce and marriage is doing there. Did you wonder about that?

Well, I have to say the short answer to that is I'm not quite sure. The slightly longer answer to that is, only slightly longer, is that I wonder if this is put in here as just another topical example of an Old Testament teaching which was being ignored at the time of Jesus.

You might like to look up the number of times that Jesus has debates with people precisely about this issue. It appears to have been an issue of debate.

And Jesus is very clear about the answer and what the law and the prophets really say. It's not that unclear. They knew about it. God is not someone who says things lightly.

He's always said that love for him and love for people went together. But of course the truth is that love of money can stop people listening to God and obeying him.

[28 : 13] This is a man who seems to have chosen love of money rather than love of God and his neighbor.

And he knows that not only he, but his family members too are in the same way. Lovers of money rather than lovers of God. And that unless things end up change, it will end up like them for them the way it has ended up for him.

There's another thing that emphasizes this. And it's perhaps the greatest point of anguish and contrast in this story. Look at verse 20. At his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus covered with sores.

And now look at verse 26. Besides all this, between you and us, 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. This is the biggest contrast in this story. At his gate, once upon a time, was a beggar called Lazarus.

[29 : 31] Once these two were close. A world apart in some ways. But geographically, very close together.

So close that the rich man knows the other man's name. Lazarus. He knows who he is. Once he was a neighbor. He was, as the theme tune has it, only a footstep away.

Now, they're separated forever by a great gulf. Once there was ample opportunity to love him.

To share something with him. To rejoice that he was a child of Abraham, surprisingly. Once he had the opportunity, as 16.9 puts it, to make friends for himself by means of unrighteous wealth.

And be welcomed by Lazarus into the eternal dwellings. Now there is no opportunity for any communication whatever. He could have helped Lazarus.

[30 : 38] Lazarus cannot help him. Here is a man who had the opportunity to use his money out of love for God.

And love for God's people. And for God's work. But that has been crowded out, apparently, by the things that money produced. Comfort and material well-being.

Big point. There is opportunity. There is opportunity to use the stuff of this world in a way that reflects eternal realities.

The stuff of this world can be used for eternity. But it is only a temporary opportunity.

This story is the dark side of that. This is what happens when money is loved instead of God. When temporal things are valued over eternal things.

[31 : 47] It is a serious warning. And especially for the religious. For it is told to religious people. People who, despite their protestations, that they were serious about God and his word, seem not to have heard God's word.

And Jesus says, are lovers of money. Religion and money go very well together. Let me say three things to close.

By way of application. First. Our love for God is shown by our attitude to people. Not least the people who we see in front of our nose.

This is a very uncomfortable truth, brothers and sisters. It's everywhere in the Bible. I would like the comfort of thinking that I am a lover of God while remaining detached from people.

And I would also like to think that I am helping people while remaining aloof to the problems in front of my nose.

[32 : 57] The people at my gate. At my doorstep. The people who I actually meet. One writer has put it rather like this.

It is often said of idealists that they are in love with people far away. But don't actually love human beings close at hand.

Easy to be an idealist in terms of love. And the person who actually is at the gate is not really loved. Our love for God is shown by our attitude to people.

Not least the people we see. Second. Our loves will be shown in our finances. Not least our finances relating to God's people.

Now this is a difficult thing to talk about in church because everybody in church thinks. People come into church thinking, these people want my money. It's always very difficult to talk about money in church, isn't it?

[34 : 01] And we're so aware, aren't we, of the abuse of things financial under the name of religion. That just shows that money and religion go very well together, don't they? But you cannot look at this passage in the Bible seriously and not come away with the conclusion that our loves are shown by our finances.

I would like to think that I love God and people and God's people and that have no effect on my wallet.

And of course that's not possible. What we do with our money is one of the best signs of what we really love in life. Is that not true just in life in general?

The things you throw your money at are the things you're really interested in. If you're interested in golf, you pay for your golf club subscription and all that kind of stuff. Your interests are shown by what you do with your money.

And the same is true with God. And the same is true with eternity. What we do with our money is one of the best signs of what we really love.

[35 : 14] What really grabs us and motivates us and gets us up in the morning and energises us in our life, we'll be throwing money at that.

We always do. The only love that is not financially challenging is the love of money. Third, material comfort is no substitute whatever for eternal torment.

Material comfort is very reassuring, is it not? Material want is anxiety provoking in this life. Those who have no money lack many good things in life.

money does bring, does bring, good things in life. We have to work every day to supply our material needs in this world.

We can easily think that when our material needs are supplied, we have all we need. Nothing could be further from the truth. We do need, of course, to supply our needs and we do need to work for it.

[36 : 34] But what we need much more than material security is to hear the life-giving word of God. And is it not easy to be so preoccupied with material stuff and with the concerns of this age that the life-giving word of God just gets put on the back burner all the time?

And eternal things just get put on the back burner all the time. I'll think about that when I've got the mortgage sorted out or the insurance or the job or whatever it happens to be.

We do need to work to supply our needs. But there are much more important things in life than that. And if we ignore eternity, then, frankly, all our activity within this life will have been a total waste of time.

could it be that all the concerns of material existence have made us dull to the word of God? Dull to eternal things?

It could be. Could it not? And that's why Jesus tells this parable. Let's pray together. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

[38 : 11] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Just a few moments in the quiet to respond ourselves to what God has said.

Thank you.

We acknowledge that money and religion often go comfortably together. And we pray, therefore, that you would please help us to hear this word and to receive it with all seriousness.

We recognize that we have many responsibilities within this world and many of them tied up with things financial. We have to provide for ourselves and our families.

And yet we pray, please, that you would deliver us from thinking that the concerns of this present age are all important.

[39 : 42] We pray that you'd keep us, please, from having such low horizons that we only ever really think about the things going on in this world.

We pray, please, that you'd help us to use the resources you've given us with eternity in mind.

We pray that you would deliver us from loving the good gift of money. We pray that you'd help us rather to love you with a heart and soul and mind and strength.

We pray that you'd help us to respond in loving gratitude to the work of your son on our behalf, delivering us from death and hell. And we pray that you'd help us to work for the advance of that message within this world.

Hear us, we pray, in Jesus' name and for his sake. Amen.