

Luke 16:19–31: ¹⁹“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²²The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴And 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.’ ²⁵But 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. ²⁶And 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.’ ²⁷And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—²⁸for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ ³⁰And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ ³¹He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

You Have Your Reward

INTRODUCTION

In His Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, “Beware of practicing your righteousness before other people in order to be seen by them, for then you will have no reward from your Father who is in heaven. Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward. But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you” (Matt. 6:1–4).

Jesus said this about people who make a show of giving in order to receive the accolades of others, but their hearts are truly far from God. They don’t do such “charity” out of love, but out

of a selfish desire to be praised. They have their reward, Jesus points out, the praise of men, but not the praise of God.

4. A Word from Jesus.

The Parable the Rich Man and Lazarus illustrates this truth, but takes it up a notch.

The rich man didn't even care about appearances. He lived a sumptuous, selfish lifestyle—he deprived himself of nothing, while depriving a poor man of the simple food, drink and care that would keep him alive. Everyday, he had to practically step over Lazarus sitting at his gate—a man suffering to the point where he was too weak to keep the dogs from licking his sores—dogs that enjoyed more food and a better life than he did.

Well, the rich man had his reward. He was interested only in the temporary, earthly matters of his own selfish comfort, and not in the real life-and-death matters of a fellow human being. The treasures of this world mattered more to him than the treasures of heaven.

By the way, the name Lazarus comes from the Hebrew name Eliezer, and means, “one whom God helps.” While the rich man wouldn't lift a finger to help Lazarus, God did. Lazarus was obviously a man of faith. Though he suffered in this life, he remained faithful, and when he died, he received the reward for His faith in Jesus—rest in the bosom of Abraham.

Now, the rich man lived a sumptuous life—a life that on the surface we would call blessed. Here was a man who obviously didn't need God. And his reward for putting his trust in earthly things was temporary, just as earthly wealth and privilege are temporary. But when he died, the rich man, however, was rewarded an eternity in hell—he earned it, after all, by his unbelief—which was evident in his selfishness. Like Jesus said earlier in the Gospel of Luke (6:43–45), “For no good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit, for each tree is known by its own fruit. For figs are not gathered from thornbushes, nor are grapes picked from a

bramble bush. The good person out of the good treasure of his heart produces good, and the evil person out of his evil treasure produces evil, for out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks.”

The rich man didn’t do the good that he was put on earth to do because his heart was far from God and far from his fellow human beings. And why was that? It’s pretty obvious from the conclusion of the parable—he rejected Moses and the Prophets; in other words, He rejected the Word of God that gives life to the sinful heart through repentance and faith.

So each was given his reward: Lazarus, heaven, for his undying faith. The rich man, hell, for his undying unbelief.

3. A Word of Warning

I use this parable at Lutheran High School to illustrate the existence of life after death—that all human beings have a soul that lives on after the body has died—a soul that will live in either heaven or hell, according to faith or unbelief. Then there’s also the nice picture of the angels carrying the soul of Lazarus to Abraham’s bosom. But if all you see is a nice picture of life after death, then you miss the point Jesus wants to make in the parable.

We all look at the hard-heartedness of the rich man and criticize him, if not condemn him altogether. But Jesus is preaching to His disciples. He is using a physical thing—like the rich man’s sumptuous lifestyle—to illustrate a spiritual problem: a heart that ignores the needs of its fellow human beings. Lazarus was a man who had physical needs that could easily have been met by the rich man without hurting his pocketbook. But the rich man, from the hardness of his heart, was unwilling even to give Lazarus the food that fell from his table.

The point of the parable is caring for your neighbor in need, especially your neighbor in

need who is part of the household of faith—whether that need is earthly or spiritual. Jesus anticipates that His followers will be persecuted with exile and imprisonment, as well as sickness and poverty—and they will need to be cared for by their fellow-believers by acts of love that come from faith. Remember what Jesus said in Matthew chapter 25 (v 40): “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.”

In His grace, God has lavished you not only with comfort and riches, but also with forgiveness and love—both to be given to your brother or sister in the faith just as generously and willingly as you receive them from God. But for some, it’s easier to give money to help the physical needs of flood victims than it is to give forgiveness to help the spiritual needs of a fellow-believer. Both have needs: one earthly, one spiritual. And you are blessed, both in things spiritual and in things earthly. But if you are stingy with either, then take this parable as a warning: your reward may be now but not later.

2. A Word of Comfort.

This parable is a warning to those who ignore the needs of their neighbor, especially to believers who ignore the needs of fellow believers. It’s a call to repent and put your faith to work.

But this parable is also a comfort to those in need. It’s a comfort because it points to God’s lavish comfort and care when you are in need.

Remember what the name Lazarus means? One whom God helps. We are all Lazaruses here at two levels: there are times when we have physical needs and there are times when we have spiritual needs. And God promises to help—and God does help.

As the Mediator between God and men, Jesus carries your prayers to God the Father, and God the Father promises to hear and answer every prayer that is spoken through Jesus. When

you are in need, you can be assured that God hears your prayers.

And God provides abundantly through this creation to care for your needs. And you don't need to be a believer to receive God's care—just look at the rich man's blessings.

But God also doesn't promise that He will bless you with health and wealth. The comforts of this world often come between God and His people—just look at the rich man! He didn't need God even though His blessings came from God. Lazarus had no one else but God, and though God didn't bless Him with earthly health and wealth, He blessed Him with life in Christ and eternal life in heaven.

You can take comfort in this, that God always promises His people care and healing—but sometimes that care and healing come in heaven, when you are finally resting in the bosom of Abraham.

1. A Word That Raises the Dead.

But our earthly needs are not our greatest needs. As we listen to this parable, we all have to confess that we're not always interested in caring for our neighbor in need. We're either too busy, the budget is too tight, or we're simply too stingy to care for our neighbor. Or we're too proud or too self-righteous to love and forgive them.

Once the rich man found himself in hell, then he became interested in the afterlife. He wanted Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them about hell. Though he is regretful he remains unrepentant—for there is no repentance or faith in hell. When Abraham tells him, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them," the rich man says, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." He still rejects Moses and the Prophets, which is simply the Old Testament Word of God.

And this is important, critically important, for it is the Word of God that raises human

beings from the deadness of their hard hearts and gives them life in Christ—the Word that warns of God’s judgment and calls sinners to repent, and declares God’s grace and forgiveness in Christ Jesus.

As sinners, we need both. We need to hear God’s warning about our sins and His rebuke of our sins—we need to heed His call to repent. And we need to hear His announcement of grace and forgiveness.

And by God’s grace and by the power of the Holy Spirit, you have ears that hear and a heart that believes the Word of God. The rich man rejected the Word—and his treatment of Lazarus was earthly proof of his unbelieving heart.

But you have been raised from the dead by the Word of God. You have been baptized—washed and regenerated by the Holy Spirit. And now you listen to Someone who has been raised from the dead—Jesus Christ, your Lord—and you believe in Him.

And because of God’s grace, you have your reward now. This isn’t a reward that you earned, like finding a lost pet and returning it. This is a reward that Jesus—by His life, death and resurrection—has earned for you.

And having this reward now means that you can live the resurrected life now. The resurrected life isn’t a life lived to self, but a life that crucifies self so it can live to Christ. And a life that is graciously lived to Jesus is a life lived in caring for your neighbor who needs you to be Christ for him or her.

You have your reward now in Christ Jesus—life and salvation. A reward that Jesus doesn’t want you to keep to yourself, but He wants you to spend it on your neighbor in need through your acts of love, care and forgiveness.

In Jesus’ Name. Amen.