

Are you listening to your wealth?

Text: Luke 16:19-31 for 10/20/2019 by Pastor Bolwerk

Theme: Are you listening to your wealth?

How many of you have read or heard this parable about the rich man and Lazarus before? This is a parable of Jesus that is very familiar to most Christians, yet it is often misunderstood. What causes the misunderstanding of this parable is how easy it can be to put our own ideas into this text. It is rather easy to think the text says things that it really doesn't say. So to help us in our understanding of what our Lord is trying to teach us here in Luke's gospel, let's take a closer look at Jesus' parable and the point he is trying to make.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury every day. A beggar named Lazarus had been laid at his gate. Lazarus was covered with sores and longed to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Besides this, the dogs also came and licked his sores. Eventually the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus at his side" (vs. 19-23).

If we stop reading right there and look at what Jesus has said so far, what conclusions do we come to? There's a rich man and a poor man. They both die. The poor man ends up in heaven and the rich man ends up in hell. Why is the poor man in heaven and the rich man in hell? It can be tempting to think: "Because the rich man was greedy and poor man wasn't," or "The rich man lived a great life while ignoring the poor man's suffering." Yet Jesus never says either one of these things. Look closely at what Jesus does say. The rich man lived in luxury, the poor man lived in poverty and hunger. Then they both died. That's it.

We might be tempted to argue, "But the rich man didn't do anything to help Lazarus!" Perhaps. Jesus doesn't tell us. While we don't hear of the rich man helping Lazarus, he does not chase Lazarus away either. Think about this: If you lived in a mansion in a wealthy neighborhood and a beggar started hanging out at your front gate wouldn't you call the police and have him removed? The rich man doesn't say to those bringing Lazarus, "Don't bring him back here anymore." The rich man allows him to stay there and beg.

We have to be careful when we read God's word not to put our own ideas into what God is saying, and that is especially true with parables. When we start applying our own thoughts and ideas to any part of God's word, we can end up misunderstanding what God says. We can miss the point. Jesus has not made his point yet; he is only setting the scene for us.

The parable continues. **"He (the rich man) called out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in misery in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus received bad things. But now**

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he is comforted here, and you are in misery. Besides all this, a great chasm has been set in place between us and you, so that those who want to cross from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us” (vs. 24-26).

While it is easy to get wrapped up in the details about heaven and hell, forget about those for now. Instead, look at the first words the rich man cries out from hell: **“Father Abraham”** (v. 24)! This man was a Jew. And not just a Jew; he had been born into a family that actually taught him about Abraham. That means he would have known the promise of the Savior God gave to the people of Israel. His family – even his brothers left on earth – knew about Moses and the prophets. They knew the message of the Bible and God’s promise of forgiveness through the coming Messiah. Through his word God promised this rich man the eternal wealth of heaven.

But the rich man wasn’t interested. The rich man goes on to say, **“Then I beg you, father, send him (Lazarus) to my father’s home, because I have five brothers—to warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ Abraham replied to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead’”** (vs. 27-31).

The rich man shows the thoughts of his heart even in hell. He begs Abraham to send Lazarus as a warning to his brothers. Instead, Abraham points them to Moses and the prophets, he points them to God’s word in the Bible. What was the rich man’s reaction? *“God’s loving promises of forgiveness isn’t enough for my brothers. God needs to give them something more!”* But nothing more is needed, and Abraham makes that clear by saying that if they don’t believe God’s word then not even a miracle will change their minds.

What was the rich man’s problem? He was listening to his wealth. The sinful greed in his heart had caused him to think that what God was giving him wasn’t enough, he still needed more. He had been listening to a world that told him he really wasn’t someone special until he had more than the next person. But there was always someone who had more than he did, so what he had never seemed like enough. Ultimately, this man had fallen into the sin of believing that what God had blessed him with was not enough.

This sinful attitude not only applied to his physical wealth, but also to his spiritual life. The rich man felt more was needed than just God’s word. We see this in his life. God blessed him with riches, yet the rich man does not use those riches to carry out what God says in his word. God tells his people **“I desire mercy, and not sacrifice”** (Hosea 6:6). And in the desire for mercy God commands his people to **“Love your neighbor as yourself”** (Matthew 22:39). But the rich man put his possessions ahead of God’s word. Listening to his wealth the rich man feels he deserves more: more riches, more luxury. He worked for it, he earned it. He won’t stop Lazarus from begging at his gate because that is one way

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Lazarus can provide for himself. But show mercy to someone who is clearly in need? Love Lazarus as he loves himself? Then the rich man might not have enough to care for his own “needs” (which are really his “wants”). The promises of God to provide for the rich man’s bodily needs are simply not enough in his mind. He would need more before he would put any trust in God because his wealth was more important than God’s promises.

So, which of these two men are you more like? At first glance it’s easier to see ourselves as Lazarus: We are not rich. We don’t have it all. But look at your life again: You are rich. I don’t just mean spiritually rich because of Jesus (even though that’s true). Even if your car is a clunker, and all your clothes are from the thrift store, and your meals often consist of beans and rice, and you carry a balance on your credit cards, you still have more wealth than 90% of the rest of the world. And along with all the physical blessings God has given you, just like the rich man you have heard the message about the Savior who promises you even more. Your generous God promises you forgiveness of your sins, peace with him, and a home in heaven.

There is nothing wrong with having worldly possessions or wealth, regardless of whether we see ourselves as having a little or a lot. The sin comes when we start acting like the rich man. The sin comes when we start listening to our wealth; when we look at our riches and say, “These are not enough.” The sin comes when we look at our Savior and his Word and say, “This isn’t enough.” When having food and clothing isn’t enough. The sin comes when having \$20,000 in the bank makes us feel safer than all of God’s promises. When we start listening to our worldly wealth, when we go from using money to loving money, our story ends up like the story of the rich man, and Jesus tells us that his story ended in hell.

But there is some good news: Your story hasn’t ended yet. You’re still here. That means you can start listening. Are you listening to your wealth? Not the wealth of this world. Instead, you can hear and listen to the spiritual and eternal wealth God gives you in his word! Unlike the rich man, you get to continue listening to Moses and the Prophets. You get to continue reading the promises God made to send a Savior who would crush the serpent’s power – the serpent who convinced Adam and Eve that not even paradise was enough. You get to hear Isaiah promise that God himself would leave heaven to rescue his people from sin and death. And you get even more than Moses and the prophets. You get the wealth of the New Testament which tells you how the Son of God left the riches of heaven to live for you and die for you, all to pay for your sin of loving the riches of this world. You get to hear how God has lovingly done all of this for you!

And there is a beauty in this parable that reveals to us the very heart of God. What was the rich man’s name? We don’t know. What was the poor man’s name? Jesus says it again and again: Lazarus. Do you see the point? Jesus knows those who are his, those who believe his Word and find their treasure in his forgiveness. So which one are you? For all of the times we’ve acted like the rich man, Jesus still knows you by name. At your baptism

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Christ showered his love to you, calling you by name and making you a part of his family. At the Lord's Supper he gives you his very own body and blood to assure you that you are forgiven. In the absolution, whose sins does he forgive? Who does he promise his love to? You! God loves you and knows you by name. He has made his wealth your wealth. You have it all!

So share that wealth. Even poor Lazarus had that wealth of God's promises. Maybe that why God had Lazarus set at the gate of the rich man. Not only to give the rich man an opportunity to share his wealth with Lazarus, but for Lazarus to share his wealth with the rich man. You also have the eternal wealth of God's precious promises. Who can you share that wealth with? Who do you know that is rich in worldly wealth but poor in spiritual blessings? Are there people at your job, or your school, or in your neighborhood with whom you could "hang around" with; people you could share your wealth with?

It's easy to look at ourselves as being "poor" and not having as much as others. But you have a wealth that goes beyond anything this world has to offer. Are you listening to your wealth? Listen to the wealth of God's word as he promises you the wealth of his forgiveness, and peace, and the eternal comfort of heaven. Amen.