

Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16: 19-31

INTRODUCTION

“Marley was dead, to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that.”

So begins the classic tale of a rich and miserly man by the name of Scrooge who encounters the ghost of Marley on Christmas Eve. His former partner is bound with chains that he made, “link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it.” Marley has appeared to Scrooge to tell him that he is destined to have the same fate, but that Marley has arranged for a chance and hope of escaping that fate. Before Scrooge can finish thanking him, Marley says that Scrooge will be haunted by Three Spirits, and that without their visits he has no hope at all. We all know the story after that; Scrooge is visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present and future. He eventually amends his ways and becomes a different man who embraces the Christmas Spirit.

Charles Dickens, the author, is thought to have been inspired by our parable this morning. It is a fascinating question to ponder: If someone “from the other side” suddenly appeared in front of you to warn of your impending doom, what kind of impact would that make? Dickens certainly thought even someone as hardened as Scrooge can eventually be redeemed. I think that many of us would want to be warned by a ghost, assuming it is possible, and assuming we were doomed, because we would want a chance to change our ways. But how sure are we that a ghostly visit would work? After all, A Christmas Carol is a story, so of course Scrooge will be redeemed in the end! If you think about it, in reality, there have probably been many times in the past where something dramatic brought about change in your life. And for a few months, years even, it probably stuck. Eventually though, let’s be honest, you get back into your routine. I’ll level with you, I do this all the time. I went to the doctor and saw my weight was going up. Warning sign. I go all Keto-Nazi and before you know it I’m telling everyone about Keto sticks. If you don’t know what keto sticks are they are these sticks you, well, just google it. But after a few weeks or even months it fades, and I’m right back to where I started. The warning sign that was so jarring has faded into the background. Diets may be an insignificant thing, but we do it with important stuff too. And, we have spiritual warnings just like physical ones.

This is reality rather than fiction. Jesus tells a story that addresses head on the disconnect between our day to day existence and the warnings we already have about what is waiting for us after we die. These Assumptions are those daily expectations we all have about our needs both now and in the future. They are balanced against certain REALITIES that we are told await us after we pass from this earth. Join me in prayer that we see the truth clearly this morning.

PRAYER - God open our eyes to the truth found in your word.

ASSUMPTIONS

This rich man, despite being nameless, makes quite an impression. He is flamboyantly *rich*. He's done well. He is the 1% of the 1%. He dresses like royalty; even his underwear is made of fine Egyptian linen. He doesn't have a care in the world, in fact every day is a holiday for him. One translation says that he was "gaily living in splendor every day". He doesn't just eat, he feasts. Everything about him is an extreme. This sounds like a pretty good deal. Wouldn't you want this if you could have it? Who wouldn't?

Austin, being a dynamic city full of smart people and startups, is no stranger to fabulous wealth. Try looking on Trulia sometime and don't filter out maximum price. Yeah. We don't go to chains, we go to farm-to-table. And don't get Austinites started about Starbucks. Sure, our progressive culture today may decry riches in general, but no one complains about what it affords... In fact, I imagine this rich man is someone we probably know. Notice, he is not described in negative terms; he is no miserly Scrooge. Instead he could easily be the life of the party; after all it is hard to feast every day by yourself. He's the guy with cool toys that hosts fancy galas on his sprawling estate! None of us want to be known as a Scrooge but we long for the ease that wealth brings: not having to work, or at least not having a boss. Traveling first class without looking at the budget. Being known as successful. The seductive *promises* of security, pleasure and an easy life are what this rich man represents. You don't even need to be rich to know that pull. And to be honest with you this morning, I identify strongly with that desire and I bet you do to. We may not be wealthy, although if you compare American standards of living to the rest of the world we are all extraordinarily wealthy. But more to the point, the way many of us are like the rich man is that we live to indulge in comfort. Christie has this running joke that comes up *occasionally*...she calls me a "man of convenience". It is more tongue in cheek but a kernel of truth is in that joke: The pattern in my life is often that my comfort will by default take precedence. Of course I have to work, put my kids to bed and clean up the house.

Even though I am outwardly doing what needs to be done, in my heart I am looking forward to “me time”. If I am annoyed by my kids it is because they are getting in the way of my relaxation, not because they should be asleep. I won’t spend time with God because this is the only time I can catch up on Netflix. I could go on. Sure, I can dress it up for the public easily by saying I work hard and only indulge when there’s nothing left to do, but that is a lie. With 4 kids there’s always something to do. The rich man could accurately be called a selfish man primarily, whose riches allow him to indulge freely without consequence. At least, that is what he assumes. Since he is a Jew, he considers his eternal destination to be secure since he is a child of Abraham. He is part of the chosen people of God. And obviously God has blessed him, has he not? Blessings in this life abound for him, and he is confident that the same awaits after he dies. So he continues in life living for himself and forgetting about God.

Lazarus, whose name is translated as ‘God is my Help’, makes a stark contrast to the rich man. As much as the rich man appears blessed, Lazarus looks to be cursed. He presumably cannot walk because he must be laid at the rich man’s gate. Not only is he destitute and crippled but also sick; he is covered in sores. As if this is not enough, he must lay there bleeding in the dirt, starving within sight of the rich man’s feasting. The final insult is that his only company are dogs who lick his sores.

Lazarus is much more than poor, he is hopeless. Poor, crippled, sick, starving and neglected. What kind of existence is that? Try placing yourself in *this* man’s shoes. I cannot even imagine. Maybe we could do it for a day but Lazarus spends his life in this hopeless situation. And by all earthly appearances he was NEVER rescued or relieved. Most of us would assume that to be the rich man is desirable, but we can all agree that to be Lazarus would be a nightmare. We wouldn’t wish it on a dog much less a fellow person. There doesn’t appear to be justice for Lazarus. No hope. No reason for living. In fact, his very existence probably offends our sense of fairness or goodness in the world. The cynic can point to Lazarus and ask, “Your name means God is my Help? Where is He? Some God...if He is good then he is *weak* and if he isn’t weak then he is *cruel*.”

Our offended sense of justice regarding this man Lazarus and the rich man, however, is totally saturated by our limited perspective here on earth. If we believe our culture’s assumption that there is nothing waiting for us after death, then the cynic is right. We have either a weak God or an unloving one. We need to be very careful about our assumptions, because by them we light our way through this world. If only oblivion awaits after death, then party now while you can. If there is life after death, then we must consider what it holds before we render judgement on God about the presence of evil and tragedy in our world.

Mercifully, Lazarus eventually dies. The rich man dies sometime later and is buried. Life here on earth holds such value because we know it will end. The Human Condition, after all, is being aware of our own mortality. But does that mean we cease to exist after death? Remember, our culture says yes, and that Life is a joyride (if you are lucky) that eventually stops. So get while the getting is good, you only get one time around. Subconsciously we both accept that and fear

it. At night we may allow ourselves a moment of clarity to ask if this is it. Is there truly nothing after we die? Are heaven and hell to be considered fanciful stories and wishful thinking?

The parable goes on to reveal, much like Dickens did earlier, that the wishful thinking is actually our culture's by believing in nonexistence after death. The reality, according to none other than Jesus himself, is that existence does not end at death. There's a story of C S Lewis visiting a graveyard in Maryland, and coming upon a headstone that read, "Here lies an atheist, all dressed up and no place to go", Lewis commented, "I bet he wishes that were so." You see, death is only just the beginning of an entirely new existence. Lazarus doesn't just die, he is carried by the angels to be by Abraham's side in Paradise. And the rich man is not just buried, but rather finds himself for the first time in torment in a place called Hades. All the assumptions of the rich man have literally gone up in smoke. What is left is Eternal Reality.

ETERNAL REALITY

My children have this book they love titled, "There's No Such Thing as a Dragon". In it a boy named Billy Bixbee wakes up to find sitting on his bed a cute dragon about the size of a cat. As you can imagine, he runs downstairs to excitedly tell his mother about it. She informs him that there is no such thing as a dragon. So Billy, being a sensible boy, goes back upstairs to dress and does his best to ignore the persistent little dragon, which has now grown to be the size of a dog. The dragon follows the boy to breakfast and sits on top of the table, stealing pancakes. Billy's mom sees the dragon, but as she already told Billy that dragons don't exist, she very well cannot tell it to get off of the table. The more they ignore the dragon, the bigger it gets. Quite inconveniently the dragon grows and grows to fill up the whole house. Chaos ensues as the dragon runs off with the house on his back, all the while with the mother insisting that DRAGONS DO NOT EXIST! Billy has finally had enough. He yells, "There is a dragon! A very BIG dragon!" and pats its head. Suddenly the dragon shrinks back down to the size of a kitten, and Billy's mother says rather sheepishly that she doesn't mind dragons this size. Why did he have to get so big? "I'm not sure," Billy said, "but I think he just wanted to be noticed".

That story is silly but raises a very good point. Sometimes we ignore what is right in front of us because we don't want to admit it exists. We will tie ourselves in knots trying to avoid it.

We act a lot like Billy's mom when it comes to God's Wrath. We do our best to live our lives like it doesn't exist. Yet ignoring it doesn't make it go away, it only makes it more likely to consume us.

Hell is not a pleasant topic, but a necessary one to talk about this morning. My intent is not to be dramatic or to manipulate your fears. Jesus himself warns about what awaits those who reject God, and not only in this parable. In fact, Jesus has more to say about Hell than he

does about Heaven. In place of the rich man's assumptions about a consequence free existence are the Eternal Realities of God's Wrath being poured out on him in Hell. In verse 23 the formerly rich man is in torment and alone. Not only is he in torment but he can never leave as there is a great chasm fixed between Paradise and Hell, and no one can cross from either way. The man doesn't want his brothers to join him in Hell (verse 28). There is no party of sinners finally having a great time apart from that cosmic killjoy. In other parts of the bible Jesus describes Hell as an 'unquenchable fire' in Mark 9:43, 'a place of gnashing of teeth in anguish and regret' in Matt 13:42, 'outer darkness' in Matt 25:30. Jesus doesn't consider Hell to be figurative but deadly real. And if it's real, we need to know more about it. Why does Hell exist, who goes there, and what does the existence of Hell say about God?

First, why does Hell even exist? Hell is simply the absence of God's presence. By rejecting Him, we will be held accountable for our sins, as it says in Romans 2:5-6 "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to his deeds...". When we reject God we are judged, righteously, by God, and spend an eternity apart from him in Hell. But why eternal judgement? It is because we have sinned against an eternal and perfect God, and we are eternal creatures as well. We will eternally live or eternally die.

Not only is God just in His judgement, but the person who rejects God *chooses* Hell. J.I Packer says in *Knowing God*, "Before hell is an experience inflicted by God, it is a state for which a person himself opts by retreating from the light which God shines in his heart to lead him to himself." It is not hard to see the consequences of rejecting God, just look around. We are born separated from God, choose continued separation during lifetimes, and at death that separation becomes fixed forever. People choose Hell, and we are all heading in that direction apart from God. The tricky part is that, like the rich man, hell can also look a lot like heaven on earth.

Second, who goes to hell? Well, we all deserve Hell because we all have sinned against God. Romans 3:23 – "for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". Back to our parable, notice that it is not because the rich man was rich that he went to hell...after all Abraham himself was extraordinarily wealthy and he is in Heaven with Lazarus. Equally important is that Lazarus is not in Heaven because he was poor. No, if you look closely at the rich man's request to Abraham, you see persistent and permanent selfishness. Read verse 24 again, "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in the flame.'" Notice he does not repent but commands. There is no sorrow expressed about his complete neglect of Lazarus. His heart was selfish in life and remains so in death. Rather than seeking forgiveness, he expects Lazarus to come serve him in Hell much as he would have expected him to on earth. The man has learned nothing from his suffering and judgement. Hell is not meant to reform the lost but to judge the unrepentant, those unwilling to turn to Christ for forgiveness in belittling God's glory. Those who reject God's gracious offer in Christ, and his standards of righteousness, are those

that go to Hell. You don't have to be Hitler to go to Hell, you just have to disregard God and his glory. This is precisely what the rich man does. Not once does he mention God. There's not even a flicker of humility or penitence toward the most offended Party.

What does all of this say about God? It means that God is both WRATHFUL and JUST. This is hard to hear, I know. It is easier to talk of the Love of God, and His longsuffering. But make no mistake, our God is a Wrathful God. I probably don't have to tell you the OT is full of references to His Wrath: The Lord is a jealous God and avengeth; the Lord avengeth and is full of wrath; The Lord is slow to anger, and great in power, and will by no means clear the guilty..." But would you be surprised to find it in the NT? Paul writes that the Lord Jesus will one day appear in "blazing fire" and "will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

Why is he wrathful? Isn't that a bad thing? It is OK to have questions and to ask them of God. Wrath is an old word that is worth defining. It means a strong indignation directed at wrongdoing, w. focus on retribution. God's wrath is there for a reason; we wronged Him. God's wrath doesn't just start with our first sin; it begins before we were even able to commit any sin. Psalm 51:5 "Behold I was brought forth in iniquity, and in sin my mother conceived me." Moreover, we store up wrath when we commit sin, because all sin is committed against him, as This is our position: We are born sinners, we cannot commit sin in secret, and all sin results in death. Romans 6:23 - "For the wages of sin is death..."

It is *through* His wrath that God's JUSTICE is maintained. He is the Good Judge. He has not set up a place like Hell simply to be cruel, rather he is both impartial and fair. Justice demands consequences. If God is not just, then all our cries against injustice in this world fall on deaf ears. Justice is only ultimately achievable if there is such a thing as an eternally just God. He would not be good if he were not just. Because of His Justice, we all must answer for our sins, and we are all guilty. None of us measure up. When we die, we will face an Omnipotent, all knowing, eternal God Judge. He is who we have ultimately sinned against. There is no way for us to atone for our sin on our own. His justified wrath that is waiting to be poured over us should terrify us.

BLINDNESS TO THE SAVIOR

I have Good News. How can I claim to have Good News? It is precisely because God's wrath is so just and terrible that the Gospel is good news. The Gospel is simply this: Someone took your punishment for you! But it isn't without cost: He asks that you give him your life in return. That Someone is Jesus and he says in Luke 17:33, "Whoever seeks to preserve his life

will lose it, but whoever loses his life will keep it.” Do you consider yourself without need, like the rich man did? Remember, on earth it appeared he didn’t really need a savior. He’s not “evil”. He just sought to preserve his lavish lifestyle, selfishly, and rejected God. Ultimately, Lazarus was fortunate in that he was intimately familiar with his daily need. His very name reveals he knew he had no hope other than God. He did not seek to save his own life, but lost it and so gained eternal life.

There is a reason our entire faith hinges on the *person* of Jesus, rather than a teaching or set of rules. Jesus himself is our Savior from God’s Wrath. He is God and therefore was born truly sinless. He did not commit sin and therefore is the only one who did not deserve God’s wrath. If anyone *deserved* to live with God forever, it’s Him! Yet, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The innocent Son of God took upon Himself God’s wrath for us. God’s wrath has NOT been set aside; it was poured out in full, but on Christ Jesus rather than you and me. Consider that. He died. You can live. This is incredible mercy, that God provides a way to escape our judgement! But He doesn’t stop there; he is flamboyantly rich in grace. He has also accounted to us Jesus’ righteousness. Not only have you avoided God’s wrath, but you have gained a right relationship with the most perfect, good, lovely and infinite being. You went from eternally separated from God to never ending joyful direct relationship with God!!!! THAT is the GOSPEL friends. Amen?

Analogies fail, to be honest. Nothing compares to this Gospel. It’s so good that it is a little hard to believe. How could anyone turn it down? But we see it happen every day when someone rejects Jesus. How can this happen? Don’t they see what they are missing out on? The end of this parable provides us the incredible answer. Simply put, it is blindness.

The rich man remains blind, in death as he was in life. He is not blind to the reality of Hell, or to his brother’s need for repentance. No, he is blind to the way of salvation for his brothers. His heart remains hopelessly short sighted. Not only that, he is also convinced he knows best how to save his brothers. The guy in Hell! But we do the same thing, don’t we? Have you ever told God that a miracle would cause *you* to believe? “If only God spoke to me, I would believe him”. “If God would just heal my mom she would believe”. If God would just jump through this hoop for me...*but* that puts us in the place of God. Now we know best. Salvation on our terms. Rather, we are accountable to him, and frankly, we need something more reliable. Not a one-off miracle but an always reliable word, a promise. This, after all is what miracles point to--the always reliable, Word of God who dies and lives for us.

Friends, don’t be blind to the way of salvation. Don’t ask God to jump through hoops. Trust his Word. Trust his Son. When Jesus said the Pharisees would not be persuaded even by someone rising from the dead, he was foreshadowing his own death. This morning we are blessed to read this parable after Jesus had already accomplished his mighty work on the Cross. He didn’t just die for our sins, he rose again and is alive today. Don’t be blind to the resurrected Jesus beckoning you to follow him. If you try save your own life you will lose it. Isn’t

Jesus, who laid down his life for us freely and lovingly, worth ours? The life we gain in Christ makes the life we lost seem like nothing.

CONCLUSION

The Christmas Carol ends when the ghost of Christmas Yet-To-Come reveals to Scrooge that he is doomed to a fate just like his partner, Marley. Tragically, his heart has finally been changed by seeing that his greed has resulted in the death of Tiny Tim. He desperately pleads with the ghost to turn back time, to take him back to his room, so he can try to save poor Tim. But the ghost points toward the grave, indicating that there was no returning. Finally Scrooge cried, "Spirit, hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past hope?" The Spirit eventually relents, and Scrooge finds himself on his bed again, but not the same man as he was before. His heart had been changed.

We too should cry out to the Spirit, to plead with him for a new heart found by faith in Jesus.

The Christmas carol is a story of redemption told around a warning. Similarly, our parable is a warning but it is told to us by Jesus himself, our Redeemer. He loves you! Because he loves you, He warns you to not trust in yourself, but in Him. To be absorbed with him rather than your lifestyle.

I urge you this morning to let the grace of God overwhelm you. Be shaken by the depths that Jesus descended to save you so that you may be raised to the height of true life with Him forever. God didn't leave you to die. He loves you. It was not in wrath but in love that God sent Jesus to save you. Will you follow Him? I pray that you do, while you still can.