

**THE DEAD SPEAK**  
**Luke 16:19-31**

**Dr. Howard Batson**  
**First Baptist Church**  
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Before we begin with the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we must understand the verses that precede our parable. Jesus states plainly that the Pharisees were “lovers of money” (Luke 16:14). Earlier, the Pharisees grumbled about Jesus’ association with sinners (15:2), but now they shift their sights to his radical views about one’s use of resources. In summary, Jesus’ teaching about money focused on: (1) giving charitable gifts to the poor (Luke 3:10-14), (2) inviting the “down-and-outs” to your “up-and-ins” banquets and feasts (Luke 14:7-24), and (3) noticing the poor who are at your own front door (16:19-31).

To be clear, we must notice that Jesus is not condemning greed as one among many sins. On the contrary, he is presenting it as the ultimate sin of idolatry itself. As New Testament scholar David Garland observes, “The truth comes out when they [the Pharisees] not only do not heed Jesus’ warning about the dangers of mammon but mock it.” Much like the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers of our day, the Pharisees interpreted their financial favor as a barometer of God’s blessing.

In verse 15, Jesus makes clear that the Pharisees’ positive evaluation of their own piety is not to be equated with God’s righteous judgment against their greed (16:15). While the Pharisees appear high and holy to the Jewish crowds, God looks at their hearts (16:15).

Finally, Jesus sets the scene for his parable in Luke 16:16-17 as he upholds the law as a relevant guide to righteousness. In the parable itself, Jesus asserts that both Moses and the prophets (16:29) have already warned us that greed keeps one away from God—you can’t serve both! In these verses preceding the parable, therefore, Jesus wants it to be made known that his own presence as Messiah in no way nullifies the law (Moses) or the prophets. While we must now interpret the law and prophets in light of the arrival of the Messiah, the essence of their teachings remains relevant. Jesus says, “... it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the law to fail” (16:17).

Jesus instructs the Pharisees that they had better be sure to hear and heed what scripture (Old Testament) has to say about caring for the poor. The Pharisees’ own authority (the law and prophets), therefore, has condemned both their love of money and their stinginess with the poor.

**A Certain Rich Man (Luke 16:19)**

As we arrive at the parable itself, we are reminded of two principles which emerge from all which has preceded: (1) the kingdom is open to everyone, especially to poor men like Lazarus, and (2) the laws addressing the treatment of the poor are still intact. This parable, moreover, takes the

preceding principles a step further and even asserts that if we ignore the commands of Moses and the prophets regarding the treatment of the poor, it is a clear indication that we will be left out of the kingdom of God. Greed is clear evidence that the kingdom has not yet invaded our lives.

The introduction, “a certain rich man,” signals to the observant reader that Jesus is about to tell another parable. In the Parable of the Prodigal Son, he told us “a certain man” had two sons (Luke 15:11). In the parable just preceding, the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward, Jesus uses the familiar construction, “There was a certain rich man...” (16:1). Therefore, when we come to “a certain rich man” in verse 19, we are prepared to hear a parable.

Verse 19 embodies an ancient (and contemporary) theology which concludes that one’s level of wealth is a measure of one’s blessing from God. Heaven, therefore, shines upon those with much and frowns upon those with little. In an uncharacteristic fashion, Jesus describes the actual clothing of the rich man—“dressed in purple and fine linen.” With his kingly dress (Judges 8:26), the rich man stands in direct contrast to Lazarus, who has nothing but sores and rags. The reference to “fine linen” is a further indication that even the rich man’s “underwear” is made of the most expensive fabric known.

In antiquity, one would only experience a real feast on rare occasions like a wedding. The daily diet would be limited to soup, bread, and fruit. Unaccustomed to the common fare, however, the rich man makes a feast out of every meal, with his “living in splendor every day.”

Margaret Atwood, in *Alias Grace*, says, “For if the world treats you well, you come to believe you are deserving of it.” (p. 171)

### **A Certain Poor Man (Luke 16:20)**

Of all the parables that Jesus tells, Lazarus is the only character called by name. Contrast the nameless nature of the rich man with the personalized naming of the poor man. Perhaps by naming Lazarus, Jesus is giving him a certain measure of personhood. Interestingly, the name “Lazarus” means “God is my help” in Hebrew. Even his name, therefore, sets the poor man up for a helping hand from God, while the rich man will be forced to stand on his own deeds which he, mistakenly, thinks have rewarded him with riches.

Lazarus finds himself in a beggar’s posture each day as he is “laid” in front of the rich man’s gate. The word used here for gate, pylon, is used elsewhere to designate extremely ornate gates used at the entrances of temples or elaborate dwellings (Acts 12:10; 14:13). The gate, perhaps, serves two purposes: (1) it advertises the man’s wealth in comparison to his neighbors, and (2) it keeps unwelcomed guests, like the poor, from partaking in the rich man’s luxury and leisure.

Before we throw too many stones at “the rich man,” we should be reminded that “gated communities,” known as “privatopias,” are forming the future of “fortress America,” in which the private simply secedes from the public. Concerning gated communities, one author writes, “The number of these types of communities in the United States is rising each year, creating inequality and segregation for those who do not have the luxury of living in one.” The idea of the “big gate” has moved well beyond America, as countries like Turkey, Poland, England, China, West Africa,

Canada, and Australia are finding themselves “throwing up the walls” as well. Addressing the worldwide rise in gates, the Global Consilium remarks,

Thus, the problem is that these kind of communities—whether purposely or not—end up widening stratification and deepening social class divides. While it is understandable that people all over the world [resort] to this form of housing in order to feel more secure, we cannot lose sight that the proliferation of gated communities can end up dividing the social fabric into centers and peripheries where income disparities, inequality, and social stratification will be clearly demarcated by walls.

The gate in the parable, likewise, was a clear dividing line between the haves (the rich man and his family) and the have-nots (poor Lazarus and other beggars).

### **The Scraps (Luke 16:21)**

Echoing images from an earlier parable, Jesus tells us that the poor man was “longing to be fed with the crumbs.” Previously, in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, we learned that the runaway boy was “longing to fill his stomach with the pods that the pigs were eating” (Luke 15:16). Once again, a state of hunger is an indication that a character has hit rock bottom, beyond which there is no place to lower oneself other than death itself.

The poor man, Lazarus, obviously knows his “place” in the pecking order and has no hopes of being invited to the banquet. On the contrary, his only hope is to be allowed to eat the crumbs that fall from the rich man’s table. Put plainly, the poor man simply longs for the leftovers found in the rich man’s trash can.

While on a trip to Uganda to volunteer at the Uganda Baptist Seminary, our missions team and I signed up for whitewater rafting on the Nile. Uganda is the “birthplace” of the Nile, and the waters are rushing, with walls of waves. The whitewater tourist attraction was advertised to conclude with a steak dinner deep in the jungle. While the river proved to be rough, as it ejected us a dozen times from the safety of our boat into the crocodile-infested waters, the greatest lesson in humility came from the meal to follow. As the modest feast of a medium-grade steak, potato chips, and a soft drink was set before the hungry raft riders, I noticed Ugandan children gathering in the bush, safely beyond, but not unnoticed by, the Western tourists. I had no idea why they had gathered and thought they were simply gawking at the visitors from America. When we finished our steak dinner, however, and loaded onto the truck beds for the very bumpy ride out of the jungle, the children rushed the tables, devouring every scrap of fat or leftover meat, wolfing down broken bits of potato chips, and even guzzling the leftover cola in the cans. I was overwhelmed with sadness and guilt, wishing I had left the entirety of my meal for the hungry children. Lazarus was like those Ugandan children who simply craved the crumbs left by the upper-crust in the culture.

The dogs add to the portrait of Lazarus’ pain. These were not cuddly puppies, but, rather, wild packs of unclean animals that sometimes even eat the bodies of the dead (1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:19, 23-24; 22:38).

### **The Bosom of Abraham (Luke 16:22)**

Oddly enough, Luke reverses the order when it comes to the death of the characters. While we were introduced to the rich man first, Lazarus is presented as the first one at death's door. The greater point, however, is intimately clear: death strikes both the rich and the poor alike. One can only imagine that after his death, the rich man's life was celebrated with a lavish funeral, as would be expected for a man of his standing. Don't miss the message—Lazarus doesn't even get the mention of a burial, and a pauper's grave would be his only alternative. Lazarus, in a great role reversal, however, is ushered into the presence of Abraham's bosom, bringing complete confirmation to Luke's beatitude, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" (Luke 6:20).

### **The Agony of the Flame (Luke 16:23-24)**

In this particular parable, we find the common descriptions of Hades as a place of torment, a place of thirst, a place of flames, and a place divided by a great chasm. One of the clearest themes of the New Testament is "the great reversal" (see Luke 1:52-53; 4:18; 6:21, 24-25; 16:15). This common New Testament theme declares that the last shall be first, and the first shall be last (Luke 13:30).

While on earth, the rich man lived behind the big gates, while Lazarus was left outside. Following "the great reversal," Lazarus finds himself at paradise's banquet (implied by reclining on the bosom of Abraham), while the rich man is cut off from the portal of paradise by the great chasm. The beggar now belongs at the banquet of the kingdom for eternity, and the rich man is relegated to the place of poverty.

The conclusion of the story surprises no one who was familiar with the songs of the Psalter or the wisdom sayings, for there we learn that God will not ignore the affliction of the afflicted (Psalm 22:24-26) and that those who close their ears to the cries of the poor will themselves cry out and not be heard (Proverbs 21:13). Interestingly enough, the rich man still feels somewhat privileged as he thinks he can order Abraham to send Lazarus to his service. Yet, how many times did Lazarus cry out, only to be ignored, on the other side of the gate?

### **The Great Chasm (Luke 16:25-26)**

In these verses, the patriarch Abraham himself participates in the dialogue, making clear that the rich man should not be surprised by the role reversal. In the previous life, the rich man had all the "good things," and Lazarus the "bad things." But now that the roles have been reversed, Abraham makes clear that following death there is no negotiating concerning one's assignment. The word "great" describing the chasm is the Greek word *mega*, a word which carries meaning even without translation.

### **The Five Brothers (Luke 16:27-28)**

Realizing the hopelessness of his now permanent habitat in Hades, the rich man pleads with Abraham, begging that a word of warning be sent to his family of five brothers. The warning would go something like this: "Living in the self-centered height of luxury when you are in the land of the living will ensure your abject poverty on the other side." While some have argued that at least the rich man is now thinking about others, meaning his brothers, New Testament scholar David Garland argues, "...his family was regarded as an extension of himself. In looking out for his brothers, the rich man is still looking out for his own interests."

### **The Law and the Prophets (Luke 16:29-31)**

Abraham is perplexed by the rich man's request for an additional warning. The patriarch's position is that both the writings of Moses (the law) and the prophets have already given ample words of warning to those who might be deluded by the wayward path of riches. Think, for example, of Isaiah 58:7, where his brothers would have read, "Is it not to divide your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house, when you see the naked to cover him, and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" And Isaiah 58:10 states, "And if you give yourself to the hungry and satisfy the desire of the afflicted, then your light will rise in darkness and your gloom will become like midday."

The Jews have also been told by the prophets that the eternal future of the poor will be lifted. "But with righteousness he will judge the poor and decide with fairness for the afflicted of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked" (Isaiah 11:4; see also Isaiah 26:1-6; 61:1; Jeremiah 5:26-29; 22:13-19; Amos 2:6-7; 4:1-2; 5:11-15).

Knowing that the warnings had already been issued by both the law and the prophets, Abraham argues that no additional messenger is necessary. The tormented rich man replies, however, that if someone would rise from the dead and go to them, his brothers would repent. But Abraham confirms that if they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not even listen to someone who rises from the dead.

Was the rich man right? If someone had left the abode of the dead to return to the land of the living to issue a clarion call against luxurious living, would it have made a difference? I think not. Herod himself heard rumors that John or one of the prophets was raised from the dead. While it caused some curiosity, it did not lead Herod to repentance (Luke 9:7-9; 13:31). In fact, in John's Gospel, when Jesus raised a man from the dead—also named Lazarus—it did not realize any real repentance, but, on the contrary, precipitated a plot to kill Jesus (John 11:45-53). In Matthew's Gospel, moreover, when the guards testified concerning the resurrection of Jesus, the Jewish leaders were not led to remorse, but, rather, to both lying and bribery in order to squelch the truth (Matthew 28:11-15).

Certainly Luke is foreshadowing the fact that the resurrection of Jesus, which lies just ahead for his reader, sometimes makes no impact upon the hardened ears which have already heard the words of the law and the prophets. New Testament scholar John Nolland observes, "...they have, in their failure to attend to God's call upon them in the law, already hardened their hearts to the voice of God."

### **Conclusion**

We cannot brush off the idolatry of greed. To be sure, Jesus attracted both the rich and the poor with his radical message of the kingdom. He knew, however, the rich would have the harder time welcoming the new order. We must take care in how we treat both our riches and the poor who have none.