

Lazarus and the Rich Man

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning, St. Marks. I want to share with you a statistic that I recently came across. 10 out of 10 people die. Death is the ultimate statistic, isn't it? It is the ultimate certainty in life on earth. And yet what fascinates me is, despite how certain it is, how few people really take it into account when they're thinking about how they live their lives.

Because how we view death does affect how we live our life on earth. And yet so many people completely live as if they're not going to die. That's really the story that Jesus is telling us about Lazarus and the rich man. He talks about a man, this rich guy, who ignores death, doesn't think about it. And that is seen in the fact that he is living completely for this life. He's enjoying all his wealth and he's living it up. And yet his complete ignorance of death, his complete ignoring it and only living for this life affects how he lives in this world and how he treats other people. That's what the story this morning is about. And if we look at the context of this parable, it's in a section where Jesus is deliberately critiquing the Pharisees of his day, the religious leaders who thought that because of all their stringent law keeping, they were in God's good books, that they were on God's side and that they were following God's will. And what Jesus does bit by bit in each of these parables and these teachings in this section of Luke is that he shows them one by one how they are actually breaking God's law. They are far away from God's intent and God's will.

And that's what this parable is here to show. He uses it to show their conscience. And that's the unique thing about parables is that there are stories which actually cut deeper. They get through the defenses and get right to our consciences. And he's using this parable to show the consciences of those Pharisees, just how far they are from actually doing what God wants. And I think it's a parable that's going to prick our consciences as well. And so I'm going to pray now for all of us that we will also hear what Jesus has to say to us through it. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for this parable and many like it that are designed to bypass our defenses and our justifications and to get at the heart of the issues that we need to be challenged with. We pray, Lord, that you will challenge us with this parable now, that you will hear us, help us to hear your words, help us to hear and discern the will of God and not to ignore it, but to change as we need to change in response to it.

And we pray this in Jesus name. Amen. Okay, so let's look at the story. Turn with me to Luke 16. We learn about a man with loads of money, the rich man. He's not given a name so that he can represent many different people. And then we meet another character who is given a name, strangely enough, because in no other parables does Jesus actually give people names, but there's a significance to that, which we'll see in a bit. His name's Lazarus and he is rock bottom. He is in complete poverty.

He doesn't have a sense to his name. The thing though about both these men is that they're both Jews, which we realize a few verses later with their connection with Abraham. They both consider Abraham their father. And so they are of the Jewish nation. And immediately that should tell the hearers that there's a obligation that's not being met because Jews were explicitly commanded in God's law to look out for each other when one is in need to, to help them. So we see this in Deuteronomy 15 verse seven, uh, where we read, this is the Lord to the Israelites. If there is a poor person among you, one of your brothers within any of your city gates in the land, the Lord, your God has given you, do not be hard hearted or tight fisted towards your poor brother. But that is exactly what's going on in this story. Uh, this guy, uh, Lazarus is at the gate of this rich man and he sees him, but he doesn't see him. He passes him each day and yet no help comes from him. Not even we're told, can Lazarus have the bread that falls from his table. Lazarus is, is desperate just for the smallest thing this guy can give him. And yet he doesn't even do that. And the bread that falls from the table is commonly understood in that time to be the bread that, um, diners would have wiped their hands with and thrown on the floor that they weren't even going to eat anyway. So it would have absolutely been no cost to this rich man for Lazarus to eat that bread and not even that, uh, happens.

[5 : 11] And so what we discover here is that there is a complete blindness of this rich man to see and to empathize with the plight of Lazarus at his gate. And that really brings us to the first theme that comes out of this parable, which should challenge us, which we should think through. And that is the blinding effects of wealth. See, this guy is a very wealthy guy and Jesus speaks often in his teaching about the dangers of wealth. He says, it's harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven and the camel to go through an eye of a needle. Uh, he says in the parable of the sower, how one of the things that causes people to be distracted from the truth and taken away from the, the word and the kingdom is the deceitfulness of wealth, as he puts it, uh, in his conversation with the rich young ruler, we learn that while this guy wants to do everything, right, the one thing preventing him from following Jesus and finding life and salvation is his money. And so Jesus has a lot to say about the dangers of wealth, the spiritual dangers of wealth. But in this parable, we learn about another related effect of wealth. And that is how it can blind us to the need of those around us. Just like it did for this guy in the story. You see, when one has money and we see this, don't we, in our society, when one has money, we learn to train ourselves not to see certain things, not to see the plight of the poor that can be helped by our money because that'll make us feel too guilty and it'll lead to an obligation.

So what we do is we learn even subconsciously to avert our eyes from that guy at the robots. We, and, and think about something else and change the channel on the radio or just distract ourselves.

We, we don't consciously do that, but that is what we train ourselves to do. We train ourselves to, to not consider the plight of the poor and the needy in our community. And that is exactly what we see in this parable. A rich man who was blatantly blind to the need of Lazarus, his countryman at his gate. And what we also discover is that this blinding effect of wealth shows up the idol that wealth actually is for this man. And that, that is a good, uh, indicator of whether something in our lives is an idol is if we are unwilling to let go of even a small part of it in the service of God or others, then it's most likely an idol. And we should look out for any idols in our lives that, that stop us or prevent us from serving God or other people. Okay. So that's the first thing we see in this, the story, the danger of wealth, the danger of how it can so easily blind us and how we must guard against the idolatry of wealth. But right now I need to say, this is not a parable that is attacking rich people for being rich. It's not a parable against being rich. We actually need rich people in God's kingdom, in the church, people who make use of capitalism to gain money for God's work.

I recently heard a story of a guy called William Kiffin. He was an English minister in the 1600s. Uh, just after the reformation in England, and he was born as a very poor orphan, but he didn't just grow up relying on handouts. He resolved himself to work and to look for good business opportunities. He prayed to God for help and he became very rich. He invested in textile exports to the continent of Europe. Uh, the UK had special machines that they didn't have at the beginning of the industrial revolution. And he saw the gap in the market and he exploited it and became so rich that the King of England at one point even asked him for a loan, but he didn't keep his wealth to himself. What he did is he used it to help those in need in the country. And he used it to establish hundreds of churches, churches that would not have existed if he had not been successfully rich.

And so this parable isn't an attack on rich people for being rich. Abraham was rich. Uh, God's, God's children one day in the new creation are going to be rich. Uh, wealth itself is not a bad thing, but it does have dangers that we need to be warned about. But this parable be clear is not an attack on the rich. It's not a communist manifesto, but it's a warning to those who are rich, not to let their riches blind them to the needs of those who are not. And in South Africa, most of us watching this are the rich man in the story. If you have access to a screen that you can watch this in, most likely you are in the category of the richer proportion of our population. In fact, I was looking up statistics. If you earn more than 7,300 round a month for your monthly salary, you are in the top 10% of South African earners. If you earn more than 15,000 round, you are in the top 3% of the richest earners in South Africa. Just let that sink in. We are the rich man in the story. And so we need to take what Jesus says next seriously. Okay. So how does the story proceed? This man, as we've seen, is blind to the plight of Lazarus. But what we then discover is that God was not. God was on

[10:55] Lazarus' side. God helped Lazarus. And we are hinted at that even before we see what happens after they die by his name. This is where the significance of the name comes in. The name Lazarus is actually a Hellenization of the name Eliezer, which literally means God helps. And so God was on the side of the poor man in the story, not the rich man. And that was the big surprise of the story because Jesus' listeners of that day would have assumed if you're rich and successful, God is on your side. God is blessing you. And if you're poor, you are cursed by God. God is not on your side. And the fact that the dogs were licking this guy's wounds in the story, dogs were impure animals, they would have made him unclean, ceremonially unclean. So all the indicators on the surface were that God was against this guy and God was for the rich man. And yet his name gives us a clue that that's not the case. And once they both die, we realize actually the opposite is true. Because it's death that reveals that their roles and positions are dramatically reversed, that their standing with God is the opposite of what we think it is. Because now, afterwards, after they die, it's the rich man who's in desperate need of the smallest thing that Lazarus can do for him, merely to dip his finger in some water to ease this guy's torment in Hades, which is the Greek word for the afterlife. Now, it's worth mentioning at this point, this parable is not meant to be a literal description of what happens after people die. And there have been multitudes of misunderstandings of hell and bad, inaccurate teachings about hell because of this parable. But Jesus doesn't give this parable as a description of reality. Parables aren't descriptions of reality. It's a particular genre. He uses figurative language. He uses metaphors. And he's doing the same here. He's using a figurative, dramatic story to make a point. And part of the main point of the story that he's making is that once you die, you won't be able to change anything you did before that.

That's what dramatically and figuratively these two characters in the afterlife are having a conversation. And this rich man wants to now change a whole lot of situations which he brought himself into. And he's unable to do that. Once you die, it'll be too late to change anything, even if you want to, for yourself or for others. And that leads us to the second main theme of this story. And that is the irreversibility of death or how irretrievable this life is once we've lived it. You know, I, as a pastor, often come across people who, when I talk to them about death and I say, listen, you really need to consider where you're going and you really need to consider how your sins can be dealt with before you die, the response is often, ah, you know, I'll deal with that when I get there. Me and the big guy, we'll sit down and have a chat and we'll reason something out. It's a hugely arrogant and ignorant and dangerous attitude. And this parable reminds us of why that is.

Because once you die, you can't change anything. You can't negotiate with God. This rich man thought he could negotiate. And it turned out that he had no negotiation power after he died. He had no ability to change anything. Sorting out is why we've been given this life. We don't wait until we die to sort it out. That's why we're here now. And so it's important to do that. It's important to take stock of our lives. And it's parables like this that actually cause us to stop and consider how we're living and how we consider the needs of others and how we consider how we treat others.

You know, if the rich man had just done that, if he had just stopped and taken stock and looked out his window and seen Lazarus at the gate and gone, you know, maybe I should do something about that. Maybe this is not how God wants me to live. If he had merely just taken stock for a minute, this wouldn't have happened. But he was, he didn't do that because he was so caught up in his wealth and in living the best life he could. Your best life now, that's a book that he would have been, that would have been on his bookshelf. He was so caught up in this life that he never asked or cared whether his life reflects how God wants him to live. And I think so many people today are the same.

people who are so caught up in the busyness of this life and the priorities of this life and the pleasures of this life that they don't spare a thought for what God wants, their creator, who put them in this world, what he actually wants, how he wants them to live. They don't spare a thought for that. And sad to say, and shocking to say, even people who call themselves Christians are in that category. Some of the most sobering words in the Bible are Matthew 7 from 21. Listen to these words.

[16 : 21] Not everyone who says to me, Lord, Lord, will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my father in heaven. On that day, many will say to me, Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in your name?

Didn't we drive out demons in your name? Didn't we do many miracles in your name? Then I will announce to them, I never knew you. Depart from me, you lawbreakers. It's quite shocking, isn't it? People who are religious, super religious, and they do great religious works and deeds, and they call Jesus Lord. And he says that despite all that, they will not enter the kingdom of heaven. Why? Because they did not do the will of his father. You can be religious and be really far away from the will of God. Be really far away from what God wants and how God wants us to live. And so we've really got to take that on board. At the end of this parable, the guy wants Lazarus to go warn his brothers.

And the answer that he's given by Abraham is, well, they had God's law to warn them. God's law reveals what God wants. And they should have known that. Even if someone rises from the dead and tells them, the fact is, if they don't want what God wants, they'll stay that way. And that's really at the heart of the issue. They do not want what God wants. They could be Jews. They could be very religious. We could be very religious Christians, and we could still not want what God wants. And so that is where we find ourselves as we read this parable. That's where our consciences are pricked.

And that is, are we really wanting what God wants? And how do we know what does God want in this case, in the case of, um, the, the needs of others and the people around us in our lives, especially in, in a country as unequal as us? What does God want? What does true obedience to his law look like?

Well, that is the main point of this parable. And it is that true obedience to God is seen in how we treat our fellow human beings, especially those who are in need. And we know this, and we cannot deny it because scripture shows us time and time again, that God has a passionate and distinct concern for the poor and the vulnerable in society. Just look at some of these verses. Deuteronomy 15, verse 11, open your hand willingly to your poor and needy brother in your land. Isaiah 58.

[18 : 48] Uh, this was very interesting. The, the people who God was judging in Isaiah's time, the Jews, the Israelites, his own people basically came back and said, why are you judging us? We do all the right stuff. We do all the religious stuff you want us to do. Uh, in verse three, why have we fasted, but you have not seen we've denied ourselves, but you have not noticed God's response to them from verse six. Will you call this a fast and a day acceptable to the Lord? Isn't this the fast I choose to break the chains of wickedness, to untie the ropes of the yoke, to set the oppressed free and to tear off every yoke. Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, to bring the poor and homeless into your house, to clothe the naked when you see him and not to ignore your own flesh and blood? Amos two says similar things. It expresses again, God's distinct desire to see the poor helped and the needy uplifted. The Lord says, I will not relent from punishing Israel for three crimes, even four, because they sell a righteous person for silver and a needy person for a pair of sandals.

They trample the heads of the poor on the dust of the ground and obstruct the powers of the needy. God is concerned for the poor and he is angry when he sees them exploited or ignored. And that is why in Luke four, when Jesus kicks off his ministry, how does he describe it right from the beginning? He says this, the spirit of the Lord is on me because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. And so we see in scripture time and time again that God has a particular focus and concern for the poor. God is concerned for everything he's made. We're told that, but we see just how much God is mindful of the poor and is angry when the poor are neglected or exploited. Why is that? Why does God have this particular special concern for the poor in this world? Well, I'll tell you why. It's because God is passionate about fixing this world. God is passionate about reversing the effects of the fall that our sin has brought about and the poor are those in this world who are the most exposed to the effects of the fall, most exposed to the results of human sin and most exposed to the one thing God wants to fix. And that is why the gospel is good news, especially to the poor, because they're the ones who can't actually prevent any of the fallenness of this world affecting them like people with means can. And God is therefore particularly concerned for the poor and the vulnerable in society. Just as much as a fireman putting out a fire in a building is more focused on and concerned for those who are nearest the fire than those who are managing to sort it out themselves. Those are the ones that he's particularly concerned about. Well, in the same way, God is particularly concerned about those people who who have absolutely no means of limiting the effects of the fall in their lives. Because let's be honest, the more money you have, the more you can keep the fall away from you. You can't totally keep the curse away from you. Eventually, even the richest person is going to die. But you can, to a certain extent, live a more comfortable life. You can get medical care. We can even with money convince ourselves that life is not too bad. We train ourselves not to see it. We avert our eyes from the guy at the robot. We live in suburbs that are far enough away from the shooting at the Cape

Flats. And so we don't hear it. And we think, oh, this world's not too bad. We'll try to convince someone in Lange that life is peachy and nothing's wrong. And they'll laugh at you. And so you see how we all experience the effects of the fall. But those with money are able to experience or at least keep the fall away from them a bit more than poor people are. And seeing God wants to passionately is about, and the whole plan of the Bible is about God wanting to fix this world and undo the fall in our own lives and in this world. He is particularly concerned for those who are most affected by sin and by the fall, which is the poor and vulnerable. And he calls his people Christians, you and I, to be heralds of his plan to reverse the fall in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But how can we actually do that if we don't really care about the people who are most affected by the fall, which is the poor and vulnerable in our communities? If we don't have a real practical concern for them that reflects God's concern for them, our message will be hollow and ineffective.

You see, if God is particularly concerned for the needs of the poor, his people must reflect that in how we live and in what our concerns are. And we read this in James chapter one, pure and undefiled religion before God, the father is this to look after the orphans and widows in their distress.

[23 : 53] Religion. You want to be religious? Don't, you know, play with incense and go look at big churches and sing nice songs if you're not going to actually be concerned for the vulnerable and go out of the doors of the church and make a difference out there. That is what real religious people do, James says.

And then he goes on to say how evidence of true faith in God, evidence of truly being saved and being one of God's people is seen if we reflect God's concern in our lives. Look at 2 verse 15.

If a brother or sister is without clothes and likes daily food and one of you says to them, go in peace, stay warm and be well fed, but you don't give them what the body needs, what good is it?

In the same way, faith, if it doesn't have works, is dead by itself. And so if we take all that on board and we go back to this parable, what we realize is that this parable is simply challenging us not to be the rich man in the story. And they are imparting as we finish.

There are two things that I want us to think through. Two simple ways we can make sure we're not the rich man in the story. The first way is to train yourself not to be blind to the needs of those around you.

[25 : 12] Because subconsciously we train ourselves to not see the needs of those around us. And so we've got to unlearn that. We've got to train ourselves to see and really consider the needs of others.

Realize when you see people, when you see the poor at the traffic lights, don't try to think of something else. Look at that. Look at that person and how they're struggling.

Now they might be there because of their own stupidity, but either way they're there, whether it's because of their own fault or because of someone else's exploitation, they're there because of sin. They're there because this world is broken.

And they're reminders that this world needs to be fixed and that we're heralds of God fixing it. And so when you see those people, don't ignore them. Realize they're people made in God's image and share God's concern for them. Maybe every time you see someone in the street, just pray for them at least, but also then ask for practical ways that God will show us how we can make a difference with what we have. Now that doesn't mean open your window and give the person money.

Often that does more harm than good. But at least think about them. That's a start. At least see them and let them make you feel uncomfortable. The second thing we can do then is get eagerly involved in any Christian project that exists to help the poor and bring them the gospel. If we train ourselves to see the plight of the poor, then within us will grow a desire to actually do something to help.

[26 : 45] And then churches and Christian ministries will provide the means by which you can do that. We've got two at St. Mark's, two ways that you can make a direct impact on the lives of the needy and the vulnerable. The first is the Good Samaritan Feeding Project that helps those who just are totally down and out, homeless, and don't have any food. Just helps them to know that they're valued.

Helps them to get some food in their belly and also allows us to hear their stories. Very important ministry. And you can get involved in that. You can ask Dylan in ways that you might be able to get involved.

And there are different ways to get involved in that. But the second thing we're doing from 2021 is the Latimer House. And the Latimer House is designed to be a facility that we can use in the afternoons to help the most vulnerable in our community to boost themselves, to get counseling, to hear the gospel, and to find ways that they can get work and we can make a lasting change in their life.

We are putting these projects out, but they will fail without your help, without your financial help, without you offering your time and your expertise and your services. There's many ways that you can help. Contact Dylan and ask him what's needed.

Ask him what you can do. Make your time and money available to these so that the message of God reversing the fall, the message that we're called to proclaim through Jesus Christ will be real and tangible to people.

[28 : 14] and they will see us practically heralding the kingdom to come. As one commentator puts it, and with this I close, God forbid that we not see, not care, and not act to alleviate the plight of the poor.

Open your eyes to see Lazarus at the gate.