

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	Special Messages		Pastor/Teacher
Text:	Luke 16:19-31		Gary L. W. Johnson
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FINAL DESTINATION: AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH (Part II)

The late James Boice (1938-2000) rightly wrote, “In all the Bible I do not believe there is a story more stirring or more disturbing than that of the rich man and Lazarus. It is stirring for its description of two men, one rich and one poor. They are set in contrast, and the contrast is not only between their circumstances in this life but also between their destinies in the life to come. The latter contrast is sharp, absolute, and permanent. The parable is disturbing because of its portrayal of the rich man’s suffering. It is the only passage in the entire Bible that describes the actual thoughts, emotions, and words of somebody who is in hell. Hell itself it described elsewhere. There are warnings against it. But this is the only description of a person suffering in hell. Besides the rather obvious contrasts we have between the rich man and the poor man in life, in death, and in their attitudes and knowledge following death, there are some additional but more subtle contrasts to be observed along the way.”¹ The highly-acclaimed German New Testament scholar Joachim Jeremias has noted that this parable “is one of the four double-edged parables. The first point is concerned with the reversal of fortune in the after-life (vv. 19-26), the second (vv. 27-31) with the petition of the rich man that Abraham may send Lazarus to his five brethren. Since the first part is drawn from well-known folk-material, the emphasis lies on the new ‘epilogue’ which Jesus added to the first part. Like all other double-edged parables, this one also has its stress on the second point. That means that Jesus does not want to comment on a social problem, nor does he intend to give teaching about the after-life, but he relates the parable to warn men who resemble the brothers of the rich man of the impending danger. Hence the poor Lazarus is only a secondary figure, introduced by way of contrast. The parable is about the five brothers, and it should not be styled the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, but the parable of the Six Brothers. The surviving brothers, who have their counterpart in the men of the Flood generation, living a careless life, heedless of the rumble of the approaching flood (Matt. 24:37-39 par.), are men of this world, like their dead brother. Like him they live in selfish luxury, deaf to God’s word, in the belief that death ends all (v. 28). Scornfully, Jesus was asked by these skeptical worldlings for a valid proof of a life after death, if they were to be paying heed to his warning. Jesus wanted to open their eyes, but to grant their demand would not be the right way to do so. Why did Jesus refuse it? Because its fulfillment would have been meaningless; even the greatest wonder, a resurrection, would be in vain. He who will not submit to the Word of God will not be converted by a miracle. *Auditu salvamur, non apparitionibus* (Bengel). The demand for a sign is an evasion and a sign of impenitence. Hence the sentence is pronounced: ‘God will never give a sign to this generation’ (Mark 8:12).”²

I. FIVE WRONG ASSUMPTIONS (16:24-31).³

A. **THE FIRST WRONG ASSUMPTION: Abraham was the Rich Man’s father.** The Jews believed that because they were physically the descendants from Abraham, they were the chosen people of God. In Luke 3:7-9, John the Baptist warned the crowd not to rely on

their natural descent from Abraham, but to see to it that their repentance is genuine. Outward ceremonies and carnal descent will not save them from the coming wrath of God against sin – wrath which, because they rejected Jesus, came down upon Jews of Palestine in an unparalleled manner in A.D. 70, and which in the final instance will be poured out at the end of the age. In His promises to Abraham, John declares, God is not bound to his descendants in the flesh: unless they are true children of Abraham in a spiritual sense, the wrath will come upon them and God will show His salvation among other nations to true, spiritual children of Abraham.⁴

B. *THE SECOND WRONG ASSUMPTION: His earthly status still gave Him authority.*
Notice two things here:

(1) He recognized Lazarus and calls him by name.

(2) He's still giving orders. Morris points out that "there is a note of unconscious arrogance in his attitude to Lazarus, for he assumes that he can have the poor man sent across to do him a service (unless his words mean no more than that he was ready to accept the slightest alleviation from any source). He has not realized that earth's values no longer apply."⁵

C. *THE THIRD WRONG ASSUMPTION: The Great Gulf can be crossed.* Surpassing any considerations of equity is the fixed determination of the will of God: the topology of Hades objectifies the will and purpose of God, which no momentary surge of human sympathy can be allowed to dislocate.⁶ The Greek word for this uncrossable gulf is *chasma*, from which we get chasm, and this chasm is there on purpose to prevent *any* exchange.⁷

D. *THE FOURTH WRONG ASSUMPTION: Some people are entitled to special treatment.* "Incredibly, the man suddenly became interested in missions! He asked Abraham to warn his five brothers that they might not come to the same place of torment. And when Abraham said no, because they had Moses and the Prophets, this man replied, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' (verse 30). Unforgiven sin, the rich man knew, led quite logically to a place of agony. And if his brothers were to escape his distress, they would have to do something about their predicament while they were alive on earth. With heightened perception and a better understanding, he could see that his relationship with the Almighty should have been his highest priority. We might think this man would have preferred to have his brothers join him in hades for the sake of companionship. But he was more than willing to never see them again if only he knew that they would be on the other side of the gulf where Lazarus and Abraham were meeting for the first time."⁸

E. *THE FIFTH WRONG ASSUMPTION: A miracle will bring about repentance (16:29-31).* "But Moses and the prophets are not enough, argued the rich man. Let them have an exceptional sign that will compel their repentance. Abraham's response has special relevance to what was happening in the course of Jesus's ministry. People asked him to validate his claim that the kingdom of God had approached them in his ministry by showing them a sign from heaven – something spectacular that would compel them to acknowledge his authority to speak and act as he did. He refused to grant their request: if his works and words were not self-authenticating, then no external sign, however impressive, could be any more persuasive (see p. 96). Moses and the prophets, pleads the rich man, are not persuasive enough, 'but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' But Abraham has the last word: 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead' (Luke 16:31). Or, as James Denny

paraphrased it, 'If they can be inhuman with the Bible in their hands and Lazarus at their gate, no revelation of the splendours of heaven or the anguish of hell will ever make them anything else.' Is it a pure coincidence that another of the evangelists tells of a Lazarus who did come back from the dead? His restoration to life was certainly a very impressive sign, which strengthened the faith of those who already believed in Jesus, or were disposed to believe in him, but according to John it strengthened the determination of those who were convinced that the safety of the nation demanded Jesus's death – indeed, they 'planned to put Lazarus also to death, because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and believing in Jesus' (John 12:10-11). But by the time Luke wrote his Gospel a greater than Lazarus had risen from the dead. The proclamation that Christ had been raised 'in accordance with the scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:4) led many to believe in him, but it did not compel belief; even his resurrection did not convince those who had made up their minds not to believe."⁹

Heed the wisdom of the great Puritan preacher Thomas Manton, "I might take occasion hence to press you to bless God for transmitting such a doctrine to us, and to give you caution not to look after other revelations; there are none, or, if there were, none can be so certain and so sufficient as this. And whatever is pretended as a message from God, bring it to the scriptures: Isa. viii. 20, 'To the law and to the testimonies; if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.' Some cry up the church; some the Spirit, in contradiction to the scriptures. Do you take the middle course; go to the word opened and dispensed in the church, and wait for the Spirit's teaching; and whatever is pretended, if it be not according to this, there is no light in it; and if there be no light of knowledge, there will be no light of comfort, and no light of happiness."¹⁰

CONCLUSION: Trench adroitly observed, "We must never forget that the primary intention of the parable is not to teach the dreadful consequences which will follow on the abuse of wealth and on the hard-hearted contempt of the poor, -- this only subordinately, -- but the fearful consequences of unbelief, of a heart set on this world, and refusing to give credence to that invisible world here known only to faith, until by a miserable and too late experience the existence of such has been discovered. The sin of Dives in its root is unbelief: hard-hearted contempt of the poor, luxurious squandering on self, are only the forms which his sin assumes. The seat of the disease is within; these are but the running sores which witness for the inward plague. He who believes not in an invisible world of righteousness and truth and spiritual joy, must place his hope in things which he sees, which he can handle, and taste, and smell. It is not of the essence of the matter, whether he hoards or squanders: in either case he puts his trust in the world. He who believes not in a God delighting in mercy and loving-kindness, rewarding the merciful, punishing the unmerciful, will soon come to shut up his bowels of compassion from his brethren, whether that so he may put more money in his chest, or have more to spend upon his lusts. This was the sin of Dives, and source of all his other sins, that he believed not in this higher world which is apprehended by faith, -- a world not merely beyond the grave, -- but a kingdom of truth and love existing even in the midst of the cruel and selfish world; and this too was the sin of the worldly-minded Pharisees: and his punishment was, that he made discovery of that truer state of things only when the share in it, once within his reach, was irrecoverably gone."¹¹

ENDNOTES

¹ J. M. Boice, *The Parables of Jesus* (Moody Press, 1983), p. 210.

² J. Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), p. 188.

³ This outline is adapted from Brian Evans, available at <http://gccwaverly.net/2012/06/25/sermon-a-tale-of-two-men-luke-1619-31/>.

⁴ N. Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke: NICOT* (Eerdmans, 1979), p. 139.

⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel of Luke: Tyndale Commentaries* (Eerdmans, 1974), p. 253.

⁶ J. Nolland, *Word Biblical Commentary: Luke 9:21-18:34* (Word, 1993), p. 830.

⁷ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures In The New Testament: The Gospel According to Luke* (Broadman, 1936), p. 223.

⁸ Erwin Lutzer, *One Minute After You Die* (Moody Press, 1997), p. 39.

⁹ F. F. Bruce, *The Hard Sayings of Jesus* (IVP, 1983), p. 190.

¹⁰ *The Complete Works of Thomas Manton XVII* (rpt. Maranatha Press, 1972), p. 371.

¹¹ R. C. Trench, *Notes on The Miracles and Parables of Our Lord* (rpt. Revell, 1953), p. 450.