

# “Locked from the Inside Out”

Luke 16:19-31

A Sermon Delivered

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Holy Father, may the words of my mouth and the mediations of our hearts  
be acceptable in Your sight O Lord our Strength and Redeemer, Amen.

The parable of the Rich man and Lazarus is believed to be the most masterfully constructed parable Jesus ever taught; told with such skill and meaning that to read it one gets the sense that not a word is being wasted in its telling. It's simple enough for a child to understand, and yet deeply profound and arguably one of the most complex parables of all. It is the only parable that gives us the name of one of its chief characters (Lazarus)...more about that in a bit. And it is the only parable that depicts a scene from hell and the afterlife. While it is probably fair to say that it was not intended to give us formal instruction about heaven and hell, it does carry implications that we cannot avoid; namely, how the decisions we are making every day are either purifying us and readying us for the glory of heaven, or warping and withering us to be fit for a hell of our own making.

Jesus tells us that there was a certain wealthy man who dressed in purple and fine linen, who feasted on sumptuous meals every day. Now right at the outset this tells us much. We know that to wear purple robes of linen was a luxury enjoyed by only the most extravagantly wealthy. Because of the cost of the dye, an article of purple linen was worth 10 times a day's wage. We also know that to eat sumptuously implied eating the most finely prepared meats. In the ancient world, you were lucky if you got to eat meat once a week. This man ate meat every day, feeding himself on the very best, reclining in the midst of the ease and indulgence of the trappings he'd accumulated. He is a picture of the most extravagant and wealthy, indulgent kind of life.

And then there was a poor man whose name is identified as Lazarus. Unable to walk, covered in sores from lying down, he was carried to the rich man's gate everyday where it was thought there he might have the best chance of receiving food, some measure of alms or benevolence. In these days, there were no knives or forks; no napkins. My kids would've been right at home. ☺ But food was eaten with the hands, and in wealthy homes large chunks of bread were used to wipe one's hands during the meal. They were then thrown to the ground so that the dogs could eat them. This is what Lazarus waited for each day...the sopping, used pieces of

bread that the rich man and his guests would throw out. We're hard-pressed to find in all of the Scriptures a contrast like this: a man who had everything. And the other, nothing. And both in such proximity to one another.

We're told rather abruptly in the story that the two men died. Lazarus was carried away by the angels to heaven. The rich man died, was buried, and went to hell. In hell the rich man lay in torment and agony, unable to know a moment's relief. He looked up and saw Lazarus resting at the bosom of Abraham. Crying out he said, "Father Abraham, if you would just send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to come here and cool my tongue...for I am in agony here in these flames." Abraham answered, "My son, you received your good things in life, and Lazarus received his evil things. Now he is comforted here and you are in agony. Besides, there is a gulf so great and fixed between us, so that no one can pass." "I beg you then," the rich man cried out. "Send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have five brothers; let him warn them lest they come to this place of torment." "They have Moses and the prophets," Abraham replied. "Let your brothers hear them." "No Father Abraham...No! But if someone goes back to them from the dead, surely then they will repent." To which Abraham answered, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded even should someone rise from the dead!"

Two lives separated by only a few paces; two destinies separated by an impassible gulf. So immediate is the reversal of fortunes between these two men, so fixed and final the state of their eternal abode, we are driven to ask ourselves what was the sin of the rich man that he should be so forever shut out of the grace and glory of heaven? The Rich man had not ordered Lazarus moved. He'd made no objection to him being there, and even eating the bread that fell from his table. He didn't kick him in the passing each day as he went in and out of his house. He was not deliberately cruel to Lazarus, or spiteful. What was his great sin that he should find himself in such agony separated from God?

We're given a clue in the prayer of confession that we pray together almost every Sunday morning.

"Most merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and **by what we have left undone...**"

The sin of the rich man was simply that he had done nothing. He'd accepted Lazarus as part of the landscape of his life. He'd accepted without any question that he should move in purple and fine linen and feast sumptuously, while Lazarus should lie starving, covered in sores, at his gate. The rich man probably thought it

inevitable, part of the natural order of things that Lazarus should languish in desperation while he should live in plenty. It never dawned on him that any of it had anything to do with him. No sword of grief or sting of sorrow ever pierced his heart. He did nothing.

The story is told of a certain man who came to London in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. His name was Barnardo. Barnardo had heard God speaking to him, asking “Whom shall I send and who will go for me?” Barnardo’s mind was made-up. He would be a medical missionary in China, for he desired to care for men’s bodies as well as their souls. In his spare time, as he saved money and prepared himself to go, he would go down to east London and reach out to the poor, especially the boys who seemed to roam the streets. Just as Barnardo was getting ready to go back to his home one night, one of the young boys, Jim Jarvis, made the comment to him that he had nowhere to go. That night Barnardo followed Jim and learned a great deal about how the homeless orphans lived on the East End. But still his thoughts were set on China. A few days later Barnardo was having dinner with a respected man and Christian, Lord Shaftesbury. After Barnardo told him about the homeless in the East End, Shaftesbury demanded to see it for himself. The two went to a warehouse filled with great bales of hay. Barnardo put his hands between two bales and pulled out a boy. When the boy was sure that the two men were safe, he said he could produce another 20 young boys in a moment. In a matter of minutes, from the corners and crannies of the warehouse, no fewer than 73 boys were assembled all homeless and desperate. No many days later Shaftesbury saw Barnardo and said, “Are you sure that it is to China God is sending you?” Suddenly Barnardo knew that God was sending him to the homeless boys right on his own doorsteps. He never left for China, but spent the rest of his life ministering to their needs right there in East London.

It was not what the rich man did that sent him to hell; it was what he did not do. Barnardo saw need and suffering and did something about it - of such is the kingdom of heaven. The rich man saw need and did nothing. And that’s why he’s the man in all the New Testament who is the most uncompromisingly condemned. You’ve heard it said that the road to hell is paved with good intentions. Perhaps it more true to say the road to hell is paved with no intentions - no intentions, no sense of responsibility for those who suffer only paces away from us in our lives. They don’t all look like Lazarus. Some are people of great standing and position, some are your classmates, or friends, spouses or children, faculty or staff who for whatever reason silently suffer with no one noticing. Day after day, they lay at the gate of our lives waiting for someone to reach out to them. God forgive us for sins of omission.

But there's one other thing that we see about the rich man that's worth pondering. When Abraham tells him there is no way for Lazarus to relieve his suffering in hell, the rich man suddenly remembers his family and cries out, "Then please Father Abraham, send Lazarus to my five brothers to warn them so they won't have to come to this place!" Someone has noted that this might be the first time in the rich man's life where he's not thought of himself. In fact we might be tempted to commend him and feel some pity. In Dante's masterpiece, *The Inferno*, the Roman Poet Virgil escorts Dante on a vivid tour of the 9 rungs of hell. In each rung, Dante descend lower and lower and witnesses the punishment of sinners, each sufficient to the sins they committed in this life. Not long after Dante enters the 8<sup>th</sup> rung, he begins to feel sympathy for some of those who are lying in agony, weeping and gnashing their teeth; and more than sympathy but a sense that what they'd done perhaps doesn't warrant their condition. Virgil, being wise and virtuous rebukes Dante against such sympathy, as dangerous for his own soul. "Are you so foolish as these?" Virgil asks. "Pity and compassion here, in the realm of the dead?" What can be more criminal than to show pity where God has pronounced judgment?"

Were he here today, Virgil might offer us the same counsel...to have little sympathy for the rich man, lest we imperil our own souls. You see the rich man's reply tells us a great deal. When Abraham tells him that his brothers have all the warning they need in Moses and the prophets, by which he means the Scriptures as given by God... the rich man says, "No!" In effect, "No God, that's not enough. It is not enough for them and by implication, it's not enough for me! It is a crystal clear picture of defiance; that spirit that neglects the means God gives and refuses to acknowledge wrong-doing to the bitter end. Which is to say whatever we believe about hell, it is not a place full of sorry, repentant people.

Now I have to admit, I'm not so sure about preachers and writers who seem to enjoy giving their people a steady stream of fire and brimstone sermons. Nevertheless, the reality of hell is something that Jesus assumed; and it was a subject that he did not avoid. You may even be surprised to know that Jesus said more about hell and judgment than he did heaven. In John 3, Jesus says:

"For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the judgment: light has come into the world, but men loved the darkness instead of the Light because their deeds were evil."

Jesus reminds us that in the end God does not send anyone to hell. No. The Scriptures say, "God desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God, *and* one mediator between God and men, *the* man Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all." (1 Timothy 2:4) God does not

desire the demise of any of his creation. But God will not force the issue...he'll not force our hand. He loves us, pursues us every day. But He also allows us to decide what kind of person we'll be...one made holy and ready to see Him in all his glory; or one who wants his own way in the end. This is why, as C.S. Lewis rightly says, "The doors of hell are locked on the inside."

[By this], Lewis says, "we do not mean that these souls do not wish to come out of hell, but only in a vague fashion, like an envious man who wishes to be happy. [Such a man] might want some form of happiness, but he will not WILL even the first preliminary stage of that self-abandonment which does the soul good." "The [condemned] are in one sense successful rebels unto the end...the doors of hell are locked on the inside."

How different is Lazarus. Poor, wretched, destitute and yet carried by the angels to the bosom of Abraham in heaven. We're not told much about his character, don't know much about his life...how he got there, but we are told something. We're told his name. Lazarus means "God is my help." "God is my help." It is the recurrent cry of all those who persevere. "God is our refuge," says the Psalmist, "an ever-present help in times of trouble." "The Lord is my strength and my shield, my heart trusts in Him, and I am helped." For all the poverty and pain and suffering Lazarus knew, he trusted in the help of the Lord. And because of this, God lifted him up to glory

Two men, two lives, two destinies...In the telling of this parable, Jesus presents us with a truth we all must face: Every day we are moving toward one of two ends. By our decisions to love or not to love, to reach out to others or look after ourselves alone, we're either becoming more warped and wretched, fit only to live in a hell of our own making, or we're being made more pure and righteous, holy and fit for the kingdom of heaven. Salvation comes by faith; but faith shows itself by unnumbered decisions to look out for and love others, to meet the needs of those around us. Jesus said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and will dine with him, and he with Me." (Revelation 3:20)

I suspect that somewhere not many paces away from you, the Lord is knocking. Through the life of a struggling friend or family member or classmate or colleague, Jesus lying at the gate, is knocking. May God give us the grace to see Him, the courage to swing open the doors of our hearts, and the love to welcome Him in. "For by this all men will know we are His disciples, if we have love for one another." They that have ears to hear, let them hear what the Spirit is saying to the Church. Amen.