

Pentecost 19
September 25, 2016

"People Need God's Word to Escape Eternal Punishment"

LUKE 16:19-31

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' ²⁵ But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' ²⁷ He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' ²⁹ Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' ³⁰ 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' ³¹ He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

The stories or parables that Jesus told have elements that surprise us and even shock us. A shepherd leaves 99 sheep and goes after one that is lost. A father welcomes home a son who has just squandered half of the family estate and made a mess of his life. A rich man compliments his servant who just ripped him off for being clever and shrewd. A man in hell is told that his brothers won't believe even if someone comes back to them from the dead to warn them of this terrible place.

People who fall into one of two categories. Either they are like this rich man who dies and finds himself in eternal death and punishment. Or they are like the poor man who dies and is taken home to be with Jesus and Abraham and all those who believe in Jesus as their Savior.

You would think if someone came back from the dead and warned the people of this community about the horrors of eternal death in hell, everyone would jump up and say in large numbers, "Tell me what I need to do to be saved." We have relatives and friends who don't believe in Jesus. They don't want anything to do with the treasures of his kingdom. We wish there was some way to shock them into the realization that they need to believe to be saved. The only thing that will change their hearts and bring them into the kingdom of God is the book I am holding in my hand, the Bible. Someone needs to lead them to God's Word so they can be saved. That is the only way. Nothing else works.

A shocking story

What a shocking story this is! Jesus is speaking to very religious people called Pharisees who were religious but they loved their money more than they loved God. They sneered at Jesus for warning them they could not serve God and money. "There was rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day." Here is a man who is at the top of the food chain. He has all the money he needs to live in luxury every day. He is so rich he can afford to wear the purple clothes that were so valuable in that day along with the finest linen clothing available. So rich was he that he could live in luxury every day. Like a rooster that wakes up and crows, he could wake up every morning and crow to himself and others about all his luxuries in life.

In shocking contrast to this rich man was the beggar Lazarus who lay at his gate. "At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores." The beggar was laid at the gate. He had to ask others to place him there. He lived each day with the hope that a few table scraps from the rich man's table might come his way. Dogs licked the ugly sores that were all over his body. So there are people today who are able to live in luxury every day and there are people so poor they don't know where they will find enough money to buy their next meal.

Did you hear what happened last night? That poor old beggar that lay outside the gate of the rich man's house died. They found his body and hauled it away. At least we don't have to look at him anymore.

But that's just part of what really happened last night. You see when that old beggar breathed his last breath of life here on this earth, angels came and took his soul to be with father Abraham. "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side." That's what happens when people die who have the treasures of Jesus' kingdom. They are taken home to be with Jesus, and Abraham, and all those who have died in Jesus. In one of our hymns we sing, "Lord when at last your angels come, To Abraham's bosom take me home." Jesus told a dying thief, "Today you will be with me in Paradise." So the old spiritual song teaches this important truth in a touching way. "Rock a my soul in the bosom of Abraham...."

Did you hear what happened last night? The rich man died. You know that fellow who had the big mansion with the fancy gates. You know that guy who strutted around like a peacock with his purple clothes and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. I am sure they will have a big funeral for him. I wonder how much he left behind.

That's not the whole story is it? "The rich man also died and was in torment." When he died he left his treasures behind. You can't take it with you. As we heard in our second lesson for today. "For we brought nothing into this world, and we can take nothing out of it." Instead of dying and going into nothingness, this man finds himself in the torments of hell.

Jesus does not hide the reality of hell from us. With these story he shows us that hell is real and there is eternal death and suffering. The rich man longs for someone to give him just a little bit of relief for his suffering. "He looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus at his side. So he called out to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue for I am tormented in this

flame.” Remember first hearing about this as a child. Longing and thirsting for just a drop of water on his tongue. This is real. This is the suffering people will experience forever if they don’t have Jesus and the treasures of his kingdom that last forever.

It was Jesus who described hell as a place where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. He described it as a eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. Abraham told the rich man that there was no way Lazarus could help him. “And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.” When the end comes, there are no second chances. There is no relief. Everything is final.

Why did Jesus tell this story about the rich man and poor Lazarus to the wealthy religious leaders who laughed at him for talking to them about the treasures of God’s kingdom? He told this shocking story because he loved them. He wanted to warn them about what was to come. In Mark 8 Jesus said, “What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” In our second lesson we heard the warning, “For the love of money is root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” In another parable Jesus tells about a seed that is planted in the ground and grows up to be a beautiful plant, but then it is choked by weeds which are life’s worries, riches and pleasures. The rich man put his hope and trust and love into riches and what they could give him. The poor man put his hope and faith in Jesus and the treasures of his kingdom. The rich man faced the horrors of hell when he died. The poor man had the blessing of being forever in the place Jesus has prepared for us.

Jesus wanted these people who trusted in themselves and their riches to put their hope in him. He wanted them to listen to his words and to the words of the Old Testament prophets. So the story continues with an application.

An application for our lives

“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’” He thinks of his five brothers. He does not want them to come to this place of torment. He wants Lazarus to come back from the dead to warn them. Abraham tells him, “They have Moses and the Prophets let them listen to them.” He argues that if someone came back from the dead his brothers would surely listen to that person and take the warning to heart. Abraham counters, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets they will not listen even if someone rises from the dead.”

We have a list of people. We have them in our prayers constantly. These are the people we know personally who do not believe in Jesus and do not possess the treasures of his kingdom that last forever. We do not want them to experience the torments of hell that are so vividly portrayed for us by Jesus. We wish there was some way they could be shocked into seeing the truth. What if someone who has seen hell could come back and describe it to them? Would they not believe? What if someone could come from heaven and described the glory of being with Jesus, would people we love and care for not listen to them?

There is a case in the Bible where a person came back to life after he had been dead for four days. His name was also Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. When he started telling people what happened to him large numbers of people came to see him first hand and hear his story. The religious leaders who were opposed to Jesus plotted to kill him. When Jesus rose from the dead, they manufactured a story the disciples had stolen his body and even paid the Romans soldiers to further that lie. Would large numbers of people start looking at the Bible's account of Noah and the world wide flood if some day the melting ice on Mount Ararat would reveal that such a large ark was real?

Jesus words are so clear and so relevant for us today. They have Moses and the Prophets, let them listen to them. If I meet someone who does not believe in the treasures Jesus has for them in his kingdom, I cannot hope for some magic silver bullet that will bring them to faith in him. My only hope for seeing someone believing are the words of the Bible. Only through the Word can they come to see what ordinarily their eyes could not see.

Whether I am rich or poor, famous or hardly known, young or old, God's Word has the power to open my eyes to see how far short of God's glory I have truly fallen. Only God's Word can open my eyes to see how completely Jesus has removed my problem of sin. With the Apostle Paul we say, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ for it is power of God unto salvation to all who believe." So we dedicate ourselves to bringing more of God's Word to more people more often so they can have the treasures we have. Amen.