“The Rich Man and Lazarus,” Luke 16:19-31 (Fourth Sunday after Epiphany, January 28, 2024)

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. **20**And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, **21**who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. **22**The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, **23**and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. **24**And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ **25**But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. **26**And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’ **27**And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— **28**for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ **29**But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ **30**And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ **31**He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’

PRAY

We are continuing in our study of the gospel of Luke and today we come to one of the most memorable parables ever told, not just by Jesus but by anyone. It’s memorable because it’s so frightening. I can well remember this being read in church when I was a kid.

It is a parable. It is a story, fiction. I don’t think there was a historical figure named Lazarus that Jesus had in mind, just like I don’t think that when Jesus told the Parable of the Prodigal Son, he was talking about this family he knew back in Nazareth. And because this is a parable, we should not press the details too much. I don’t think that, because of this text, we can say that people in Hades (or hell; in the New Testament those words refer to the same place) can see and communicate with people in heaven. We should not read too much into the details of this story.

However, parables are meant to teach. Jesus isn’t telling a scary campfire story. He means to teach us about a very real place called hell. Jesus talked more about hell than anyone else in the Bible. That means if you don’t take hell seriously, then you don’t take Jesus seriously (and Jesus was the most influential person who ever lived).

What can we learn about hell from this parable? Three things: *first, the road to hell.* *Second, “life” in hell.* *Third, avoiding hell.*

First, the road to hell. The main character of this parable is “a rich man,” and in just a few words Jesus demonstrates that he is indeed very wealthy. He eats the best food every day, and lots of it. No expense is spared on his meals. He has a “gate” at the front of his house; some neighborhoods in our community have gatehouses at the front of them, but this man had his own gatehouse, and it wasn’t ornamental. It was functional, with security inside it. The rich man wore the best clothing. Purple dye was the most expensive in the ancient world, and only the wealthiest few could afford it. He even had the best underwear. “Fine linen” refers to the garment you’d wear closest to the body.

Now we are warned about money time and again in the Scriptures. In 1 Timothy we read, “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils.” In Matthew 13, Jesus warns of “the deceitfulness of riches.” And in Mark 10, after the rich young ruler walks away, Jesus says, “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” Mark 10:25.

We need to hear that because, if you’re in this room, you are by the world’s standards, wealthy. We are all in the top five percent worldwide. 95% of the people in the world have less money than anyone in this room. And I would not be surprised if some in the room are in that exclusive club of the top one percent of all Americans.

We are wealthy. But the problem with the rich man ***is not that he’s wealthy.*** The Bible is full of godly people who have been blessed with abundant resources. In the Old Testament you have the examples of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Lot, Job, David, and Solomon. In the New Testament we read of followers of Jesus like Joseph of Arimathea, Zacchaeus, and Lydia.

The problem with the rich man is not that he has money. The problem is ***that’s he’s nothing but a rich man****.* His wealth is his identity. What is an identity? It’s how you know who you are, why you matter, why you’re valuable, and what you are here to do.

The rich man’s money is all that matters to the rich man. His only concern is enjoying his next good meal and figuring out which fine wine to serve with it and what designer fashions to put on his body.

Because his money is all that matters to him, because he’s blinded by his wealth, the rich man can’t see this poor man suffering at his gate. He is covered in sores, he’s starving to death, but the rich man just walks right by him whenever he leaves his big fine house to head to town.

And every time he walks by the poor man, ***the rich man takes another step on the road to hell.*** He’s not on the road simply because he has money. Nor is he on the road to hell because he’s an atheist. In that day and time no one was an atheist. He would have certainly professed to believe in God and thought of himself as a good person. After all, he’s not hurting anyone with his wealth. He’s not oppressing people with it. He’s just enjoying the finer things in life.

But the rich man is on the road to hell because while he would have ***said*** he believed in God, he was so consumed by his wealth that he never ***took what he said he believed about God seriously.***

And you can see that from his behavior. Jesus said there are two great commandments that God gives to all people: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. **38**This is the great and first commandment. **39**And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.” Matthew 22:37-40. Love your neighbor as yourself! No one was a closer neighbor to the rich man than this guy.

Yet at the rich man’s front door there had lain a beggar and ***the rich man never saw him.*** Let me ask you: are you just a rich man? Are you ignoring people in your life because you are consumed with money? Or … are you just a spouse? When I pastored in a previous church, I met two widows. They were friends, and I met one of them about a year before I met the second. As soon as I met the second widow, she launched into how much she missed her husband. For fifteen minutes she cried and said how her husband had this important job and how everyone knew them in town and when they’d walk in a room everyone paid attention, but now she didn’t know what she was going to do without him.

And after she left, I turned to the other widow, the one I’d known first, and I remarked, “Wow. She’s really hurting. When was her husband’s funeral?” I thought it had been a few weeks ago. The other widow said, “Brother J.D., it’s been three years, and she’s my friend but I don’t know if I can keep taking this. I miss my husband too, but I’ve tried to keep going. But she hasn’t.”

What happened? ***She was just a spouse.*** Being this man’s wife was the only way she knew she mattered. She probably had been in church all her life, but she was so wrapped up in being this man’s spouse that she never took God command to have “no other gods before me” seriously.

Are you just a spouse? Are you just a parent? Are you consumed with the lives of your children, their school, their relationships, their games, so that you just don’t have time to even think about anyone else? I mean if someone should ask you, you’d say, “Of course I believe in God. I’m a Christian.” But are you to the point where you think you only matter because of your children and you find they are all you care about?

Are you just a parent? Are you just a career? Are you just a body that looks good? Are you just a sports fan? A few weeks ago, someone sent me a screenshot of something posted on one of the online message boards at an SEC school (not Ole Miss). The message said, “You should be donating 10% of your salary (pretax) to [our school’s NIL fund]. Stop tithing if you need to until we dig our way out [of this hole]. We are in a CRISIS. Your church will be fine. If it’s not you can join another. Football is a religion in [our state], and it’s time to prove it.”

You can say you believe in God, but if you build your identity on anything other than him so that you’re blinded to how you break God’s law by failing to love him and your neighbor, you’re on the road to hell. ***And it is indeed very possible to be on this road and not know it.*** Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. **22**On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ **23**And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’” Matthew 7:21-23.

Second, “life” in hell. There are some big misconceptions about what it’s like in hell. I’ve found that a lot of people, both inside the Christian faith and outside, think of hell as if it’s “God’s guilty pleasure.” They think God gets his kicks out of creating individualized torture chambers in hell, and even though the people consigned there are sorry for what they’ve done and beg for mercy and plea to be let out, God says, “Noooo, it’s too late for you,” and enjoys watching them writhe in agony.

But that’s not what the Bible teaches at all. God grieves every single soul that winds up in hell. “As I live, declares the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live.” Ezekiel 33:11. God “desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” 1 Timothy 2:4.

Yet even more revealing about “life” in hell is what the rich man says there. In verse 23 where we read the rich man is “in torment,” then we read in verse 24, “And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’” Luke 16:24.

Doesn’t that seem odd to you? The rich man is in unspeakable agony. He sees Abraham up in heaven. And he says, “Can you send someone to make me just a bit more comfortable?” Is that would you say if you were burning in hell and saw someone in heaven? I can tell you what I’d say: ***“Get me out of here!”*** But the rich man doesn’t say it.

“Life” in hell is terrible, it is torment, it is agony, ***but the point is people in hell don’t want out***. They don’t want to go to heaven, which is the only other place to go.

Hell is the natural consequence of rejecting God and building your life on something else.

Romans 1 says that if in this life you go on rejecting God long enough, he will finally give you over to your desires, so that forever you will be ***only*** this identity that you’ve chosen for yourself. Therefore, in an exercise of God’s ***judicial wrath***, there comes a time when God will say, “You don’t want me, you refuse to acknowledge me as your creator and sustainer of your life, you insist on building an identity apart from me … OK. Fine. Have it your way.”

And in hell, separated from the light and glory and love of God, existence is a disintegration that goes on forever. Hell in Luke 16 is depicted as a fire. Think with me, “What does fire do?” ***It destroys what it touches***. In hell, those who have determined to reject God enter a process of eternal destruction. Enslaved by the idols they’ve chased all their lives, people in hell are utterly miserable, burning in the fire of an eternal corruption of their own making, the identities they’ve made for themselves falling apart, but they can’t get out. They want relief, but they don’t want God and they don’t want heaven, and therefore for all eternity they weep and gnash their teeth. That’s “life” (so-called) in hell.

A couple of other things about hell: ***never, ever make the mistake of thinking that God’s wrath is intrinsic to his character.*** Love is intrinsic, essential to God’s nature. Holiness is essential to God’s nature. Rather, God’s wrath is the judicial outworking of his holiness when confronted with rebels ***who hate him.*** God’s wrath is not like our wrath. God never loses his temper or flies off the handle.

Plus, there is good evidence in the Scriptures that those in hell ***continue to sin.*** Again, those in hell aren’t crying out, “Please, God, now we see the error of our ways.” No, they are so enslaved by their sins and idols that even in their torment they continue in them.

Revelation 22:11: “Let the evildoer still do evil, and the filthy still be filthy, and the righteous still do right, and the holy still be holy.” More sin, then more judgment, more sin, then more judgment, more sin, then more judgment, on and on forever in hell. Let the evildoer do evil still.

Hell, C.S. Lewis said, is the greatest monument to human freedom. He writes, “There are only two kinds of people – those who say [to God] ‘Thy will be done’ or those to whom God in the end says, ‘Thy will be done.’ All that are in Hell choose it. Without that self-choice it wouldn’t be Hell. No soul that serious and constantly desires joy will ever miss it.” And that gets us to the third point.

Third, avoiding hell. A common objection among critics of Christianity is that if hell is so serious, why doesn’t God make the reality of what we face after death clearer to us? Why isn’t it in our face all the time? Why doesn’t he write it in clouds in the sky: “Repent or burn”? Or why doesn’t he provide some miracle to get our attention? Why can’t God get my dog, while I’m scratching her ears, to say, “Thanks for petting me and, oh, by the way, watch out that you don’t wind up in hell”? I’d listen to that!

Bertrand Russell was one of the most prominent atheist philosophers of the middle part of the twentieth century. He was sort of the Richard Dawkins of his day. He was once asked what he would say if he found himself standing before God on judgment day and God asked him, “Bertrand, why didn’t you believe in me?” And Russell said he would reply, “Not enough evidence, God!  Not enough evidence!”

That’s what the rich man is saying. We read in verses 27-30, “‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— **28**for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ **29**But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ **30**And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’” Luke 16:27-30.

In other words, the rich man is saying, “Moses and the Prophets; I mean, that’s great and all. It’s good literature. My brothers and I learned all that as kids. But c’mon! No one really listens to the Bible. Abraham, you’re going to have to do more than that if you don’t want my brothers in hell. They need evidence! Send someone from the dead. That will get their attention!”

The rich man wants Abraham to do “A Christmas Carol” on his brothers. You remember that Charles Dickens novella? Ebenezer Scrooge is a greedy, selfish man, until three ghosts visit him: the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. They show him how greedy he is, how he doesn’t care about people, and then the final ghost shows him how he dies alone, and Scrooge is terrified. He says he’s going to change, and he promises that he’ll be good from now on.

That’s what the rich man says his brothers need; they need the “Christmas Carol” treatment. You’ve heard of scaring the hell out of someone. ***The rich man wants Abraham to scare his brothers out of hell.***

But what does Abraham say? Verse 31: “If [your brothers] do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.”

***The problem of unbelief is not due to a lack of evidence.*** If seeing ghosts would save you from hell, God would let you see them everywhere. Remember, in this chapter of Luke Jesus is addressing the Pharisees, the religious leaders of Jesus’ day, ***and we know that they did see someone rise from the dead.***

John 11-12, a different man named Lazarus was dead for four days, but Jesus went to his tomb and said, “Lazarus, come out!” And Lazarus rose from the dead! Now the Pharisees had already determined to kill Jesus. When they saw Lazarus come out of the tomb and rise from the dead, what did they say? Did they say, “Oh, my goodness, this Jesus is telling the truth! He has been sent by God. We’d better listen to him and do whatever he says!”? No, they say, “Well, we better kill Lazarus, too, because everybody’s going to start following Jesus once they see that this guy has come back from the dead.”

My friends, you don’t avoid hell by getting more evidence. If you’re on the road to hell, if you’re nothing but a rich man, evidence will only harden your heart and your rebellion against God. ***Our unbelief is not due to a lack of evidence; it is a moral problem!***

We don’t care that we have been so blinded by our idols that we’ve broken God’s law. We don’t care that we fail to love God with all our heart, soul, strength, and mind, and that we don’t love our neighbors as ourselves. For many of us who grew up in the church, we don’t take seriously the hundreds of claims in the Bible that we are guilty before God.

So, how do we avoid hell? As I said at the beginning of the sermon, the main character is the rich man. He and Abraham do all the talking. But the poor man speaks by his name. His name is Lazarus. This is the only time Jesus gives one the characters in his parables a name. Therefore, we need to pay attention to this. Do you know what Lazarus means? “God has helped.”

Don’t you think that’s an odd name for Lazarus? “God has helped”? Lazarus is starving, covered in sores, and is so weak he must be “laid” at the rich man’s gate. How, exactly, has God helped him?

Lazarus is not in heaven because he’s poor any more than the rich man is in hell because of his wealth. Lazarus is in heaven because something happened to him in his life. He saw not just the misery of his poverty, but the misery of his sin. God helped Lazarus see the biggest problem in his life wasn’t his hunger, or his sores, or his poverty (big as those problems were). ***His biggest problem was that he didn’t love others as he should.*** His biggest problem is that he was a sinner and had broken God’s law. But he looked to God, asked for forgiveness, received it, and in heaven finally he received his good things.

Friends, when you look over your life, what do you see? Are you so consumed by some identity in your life that you all you can see is how other people have let you down, or how other people have gotten the breaks you haven’t, or how your life hasn’t been as easy as other people’s? Are you so consumed that you just can’t be bothered to sacrificially love anyone else? Are you just a rich man, spouse, or career? If that’s you, God hasn’t helped you ***and you don’t want him to.***

Or are you amazed at how good God has been to you, even though you know you don’t deserve it? Do you ever say, “I can’t believe the mercies God’s shown me. I’ve been so unkind, I’ve been so greedy and selfish, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve failed to love my neighbor, but God has shown me so much grace that it shocks me”?

Most of all, does Jesus on the cross make sense to you? Do you look at Jesus, the Son of God who lived a perfect life on earth, on the cross dying in your place for your sins and think, “That is the most precious act anyone could ever do for me?” Do you see Jesus on the cross as if he’s saying, “My life for your life; I’m going to die here in your place so that you can live”?

***And this is the key: do you see Jesus on the cross dying for you and say, “God has helped”?***

Then you’re avoiding hell. No one who sees those things will ever wind up there.

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! According to his great mercy, he has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **4**to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you…” 1 Peter 1:3-4. Can you say that’s your hope? Then hell has no claims on you; instead, the good things God has stored up for you in heaven await.

One last application: who have you, like the rich man at his gate, been stepping over on your way to town? Who is the Lazarus that, because your so blinded by this identity you’ve created for yourself, you’re overlooking? Students, who is it in your school or in your neighborhood or on the team or in the play that you’re ignoring because you think you’re too good for them?

It doesn’t have to be that way. Listen to the Law and the Prophets. See your sin and trust Jesus Christ. Make the one who loved you so much that he died for you even when you didn’t deserve it your identity. And then you’ll find more and more you’re seeing the people around you, loving and caring for them, and not walking past them in your blindness. PRAY