

5. The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

(Luke 16: 19-31)

On our *Journey Through the Parables*, we have learned a lot about how to live a Christian life. Jesus often presents us as servants and laborers, because we have to do some work in the Christian life. We have learned that when we work in God's vineyard, we must be humble enough to accept the same rewards everyone else receives. When God blesses us with a good harvest or money, we should be giving Him the first fruits, because He is the true owner of the whole world. We are like tower builders or kings who would go to war: we have to be prepared to give everything we have, to love God before we love anything else, so that we can be true followers of Christ. We should be like the wise virgins, who make the effort to keep their lamps full of oil, and who are watchful and ready to join Him in the Kingdom at a moment's notice. The Christian life involves some effort!

In *The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus*, Jesus speaks about what happens if you don't make those efforts, if you don't enter into the Kingdom. Like the foolish virgins who cannot go to the banquet because they weren't prepared and ready when the bridegroom came, this rich man will not be able to accept God's invitation, because he didn't do the work of loving his neighbor in time.

This parable is about a rich man whose name we don't know, and a poor man named Lazarus. First of all, we should say that this is a different Lazarus. This is not Jesus' friend from Bethany who Jesus would call out from the grave; this is a totally different person named Lazarus.

It's interesting that we know this poor beggar Lazarus' name, but we don't know the rich man's name. Usually, everyone knows the names of rich people. Those are the important people. We all know the names of the celebrities, but how often do we know the names of the poor people who sleep on the streets? In this parable, Jesus turns the usual order of things upside down: He tells us the poor man's name, but not the rich man's name. God's Kingdom is so different from this world's way of doing things! The world may love riches, but God doesn't love the rich people more than He loves the poor people! To God, the poor people on the street are beloved and important, and He calls them by name.

The parable begins:

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

There is a big difference between these two men's lifestyles. The rich man wears wonderful clothing and lives comfortably, while the poor man is very uncomfortable, covered with sores and laying on the hard ground. The rich man "fared sumptuously" while the poor man was hungry. This means that the

rich man has abundant and wonderful food -- he has more than he needs, so he could easily share some with the poor man who would be happy just to have some crumbs.

Jesus gives us a powerful image of Lazarus, there on the ground, covered in sores, being licked by dogs. There is something very low and sad about being down there with the dogs. A man laying with the dogs has fallen way below a normal human status, and is living like the animals. At the same time, it's also nice that dogs are trying to take care of him. The dogs see his wounds and they react by trying to help him. The rich man sees his sores and knows that he is hungry, but he never tries to bandage Lazarus or to give him any crumbs. He doesn't invite him inside or bring food out to him, but instead he just steps over Lazarus and ignores his suffering. The rich man must have walked through that gate every day, but he never did take pity on poor Lazarus. Even the dogs take better care of this human being than the rich man does! That makes you wonder, which of these two men is lower than a dog? Perhaps the dogs are actually better than the rich man!

We noticed that Lazarus has a name but the rich man does not. There is something very important about names in Scripture. Before we take communion, we pray, "Lord, remember me when you come into Your Kingdom!", which comes from the Bible, from the thief who was on the cross next to Jesus. *Remember me*. Also, when people die we say, "Memory Eternal!" We are praying that they will be in God's eternal memory forever. When we say that God *remembers* you, we mean that He *knows* you. If you are prayerful and loving, then you're spending time with God in prayer, and He knows you well. If God doesn't remember you, that means that you didn't come to Him; maybe you didn't pray, or maybe you weren't loving and kind and trying to grow close to God.

Blessed Archbishop Theophylact lived in the eleventh century and he was a great teacher in the Church, and he points out something interesting about this parable:

The Lord gave no name to the rich man in this parable, because such a man is not worthy to be remembered by God by name. As the Lord says, through the prophet, nor will I make remembrance of their names through My lips. But the Lord mentions the poor man by name, for the names of the righteous are inscribed in the Book of Life.

(From *The Explanation* by Blessed Theophylact)

If you love God and you love your neighbor, your name is said to be written in the Book of Life, which means that you have been given eternal life in the Kingdom of God. On the other hand, if you have lived in a way that didn't show love or charity, if you didn't love God and man, then your name is not in the book! If God remembers you, and has put your name in the Book of Life, that means you'll be with Him in heaven -- and if not, then you won't.

The parable goes on to tell us what happens after these two men die:

So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

When Lazarus dies, he is taken up by angels -- but when the rich man dies, Jesus just says that he is buried. "Buried" sounds a lot less wonderful than "carried by angels"!

Lazarus is carried to Abraham's bosom. Saying his bosom, is like saying his hug. Lazarus is carried to a place where he is embraced by Abraham. The Blessed Theophylact points out that it didn't have to be Abraham -- it could have been any of the righteous prophets who had gone before him, like Jacob or Daniel or Elijah. He says,

Why was it that he saw Lazarus in the bosom *of Abraham*, and not of any other of the righteous? Because Abraham showed hospitality to strangers. The rich man sees Lazarus with Abraham as a reproof of his own in hospitality. Abraham used to draw into his own house even those who were just passing by, while the rich man overlooked a man who was lying every day within his very courtyard.

Abraham is known for his hospitality, for welcoming strangers to his home and feeding them, and taking care of them. When three strangers came to his home, Abraham and his wife fed them the best food and treated them like honored guests, and they turned out to be angels!

This rich man should have been like Abraham when Lazarus showed up at his gate. He should have taken care of this human being who needed him. Instead, he ignored his suffering. So Lazarus is carried to Abraham's bosom, to the hospitality he should have received on earth, and the rich man goes to another part of Hades, which is not as beautiful or welcoming.

The parable continues,

"Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

The rich man is hoping that Abraham will send Lazarus to help him. He is still thinking of Lazarus as lower than him -- he wants Lazarus to serve him. Abraham points out that life on earth is really the opposite of the Kingdom: those who are rich with blessings may be poor and suffering on the other side, and those who are poor and suffering on earth may be the ones who are most comforted and beloved in God's eyes!

Blessed Theophylact sees something really interesting about Abraham's response. He says,

How then does Abraham respond? Does he say, "o cruel and heartless man! Are you not ashamed? Only now do you remember compassion?" Not this, but rather, *Son*. Behold a compassionate and holy soul! A certain wise man has said, "Trouble not a soul that has been brought low." This is why Abraham says, *Son*.

Abraham is still kind to the rich man, even though the rich man was unkind. He isn't mean, and he doesn't insult him. He is still loving, and speaks warmly to him. He calls him "son", but he explains that no one can cross this great gulf between them. The rich man lived his life very differently from Lazarus and Abraham. The rich man was uncaring and did not share, but Lazarus and Abraham were kind and generous and good. There was a big difference between them when they were alive on earth, and now there is a big difference between them in death! And they can't cross over, even if they want to cross over!

When the rich man understands that Lazarus and Abraham cannot come help him, he begins to think of his family, and he worries that his brothers -- who must be unkind like he was -- will also find themselves suffering in Hades. Now that he is suffering (kind of like Lazarus suffered before), he is finally becoming aware that it's important to take care of others. He is even worrying about other people, about his brothers. He asks Abraham to help them:

"Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'

Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' "

The problem is not that no one ever told people to be kind. The rich man and his brothers have Moses and the prophets; God sent them many people to teach them how to live righteously, but they didn't listen. The rich man hopes that Lazarus could go convince them, but Abraham points out that they have already been taught. The problem is really that they don't listen and they don't care.

The rich man thinks that if "one goes to them from the dead, they will repent." What an amazing thing he is saying -- if Lazarus were to rise from the dead, they would repent. Jesus knows that one day soon, He will raise a man named Lazarus from the dead! A lot of people will see that, but those rich people in charge of Israel will not repent. Like Abraham says, "if they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead." Some people do not embrace God and change their lives, and if they won't do it listening to the prophets, they won't do it when Lazarus rises, and they won't even do it when Jesus rises from the dead!

God sends messengers to us all the time. He has sent all of the prophets and the Saints, He has sent Jesus and the angels, and He sends priests and Sunday School teachers. We have many opportunities to understand that God loves us, and we need to show that love to other people. We should spread the love throughout the world, and share our blessings with the people around us. We have all been taught this, and it's really up to us to decide to follow Christ and to do these good things. As Abraham explains to the rich man, it's not that we just need one more person to come tell us! We must make the choice to repent, and we have to do it ourselves!

QUESTIONS:

From the beginning of this parable, Jesus begins to teach us something about God's kingdom, just by using (and not using!) names. What is He showing us with the rich man and Lazarus?

- *Jesus shows us that God's Kingdom is so different from this world's way of doing things! The world loves riches and rich people. But to God, the poor people on the street are beloved and important, and He calls them by name. So in the parable, Lazarus has a name, but the rich man does not!*

What was life like for Lazarus?

- *Lazarus was poor and he lay in the rich man's gate, begging for crumbs of food. He was covered in sores. The rich man must have passed him every day, as he went through the gate, but he never gave Lazarus anything. Dogs would try to help Lazarus by licking his sores, but the rich man did nothing for him.*

When Lazarus is with Abraham, and the rich man is in Hades, is he still selfish, or has he changed at all? How do you know?

- *The rich man is no longer just thinking of himself. He is beginning to be aware that it is important to care for others. He worries about his brothers and tries to get Lazarus - or anyone with Abraham - to go and warn them so they don't end up in Hades, too.?*

FOR DISCUSSION:

Maybe you're not rich like the man in this story. Chances are you do not have anyone lying in your gate, all covered in sores, wishing for scraps from your table. But God sends every single one of us other people who we should help! Talk about this: should the rich man have helped Lazarus? How could he have helped?

It's very easy for us to understand what should have happened, here, when we hear this parable. But what about us? Take a minute to think about the Lazaruses in your life. Who has God put "at your gate"? Maybe your Lazarus is not all covered in sores and needing food. Maybe they are someone you know who always plays alone because no one invites them to join. Maybe your Lazarus does not have many toys because their parents can't afford them. Maybe they don't have the coolest clothes or quite enough healthy food because their family is struggling to make ends meet. Are you helping your Lazarus? Or are you acting like the rich man in the parable?

Jesus said that we will always have the poor with us, so there are ALWAYS others around us with less than we have. No matter how little we ourselves have, there is always someone with less. Talk about ways that you will work on doing a better job of seeing the Lazaruses that God places "at your gate", and what you will do to help them before you lose your chance to do so.