

## An Eternal Proposition

### Luke 16:19-31

You may have several in your home. If you don't, you should and don't forget to check them at least annually. Schools and businesses are equipped with them. Their piercing sound is unmistakable. (I'm not talking about kids.) Those installed in such facilities are also designed with a flashing light for the hearing impaired. If you haven't guessed by now, I am talking about smoke or fire detectors. They serve as a warning that danger is imminent and that the building should be evacuated and 911 contacted to request the service of the fire department to check out the building.

Beginning in chapter 15 Jesus is teaching a large crowd that had gathered to hear Him speak. Included in the growing crowd were Pharisees, those who opposed Him and looked for any occasion to challenge Him.

Take your Bibles and turn to **Luke 16:19-31** where we have the very familiar story of the rich man and Lazarus. Would you stand in honoring God's Word as we read this passage?

There are those who believe that this is just a parable. We know a parable to be a short, simple story using something that is familiar in order to get across a moral or religious lesson. Those in His audience that day would be able to identify any number of rich men and poor men and Lazarus was a fairly common name.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that because Jesus calls the beggar by name that in itself indicates this is a real story with real people in a real life situation. After all, they argue, the Shepherd knows His sheep and calls them by name. Let me also clarify that this is not about His friend Lazarus whom Jesus raises from the dead.

Whether you hold one view or the other isn't of

primary concern here. What is of importance is that Jesus uses this story to speak against the Pharisees and to instill in His hearers a sense of urgency in the path that one chooses in this life that will seal his destiny in the life to come. Much like the piercing sound of the smoke detector, this passage serves as a penetrating warning.

In our series we are looking at God's provisions. God has made available an eternal provision for every person. Some will receive the provision of reward; others will receive the provision of retribution.

From our passage I want to make to main observations.

There is a striking disparity

There is a serious discussion

### I. A STRIKING DISPARITY – v. 19-22

In this section there are at least five details in how Jesus describes these two men.

1. Their position
2. Their possessions
3. Their person
4. Their pain
5. Their path

If there were ever two men who were total opposites they would have to be the two men Jesus describes here. We are introduced to a rich man and a beggar. Let's talk about the beggar first.

As I was reflecting on this story my mind went to another familiar story and a particular scene. The story is a familiar one, written by Charles Dickens. Here is an excerpt from his novel *A Christmas Carol*.

It's from the scene where two men enter in to inquire about a donation for the poor from Scrooge.

“At this festive season of the year, Mr. Scrooge,” said the gentleman, taking up a pen, “it is more

than usually desirable that we should make some slight provision for the Poor and destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time. Many thousands are in want of common necessities; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir."

"Are there no prisons?" asked Scrooge.

"Plenty of prisons," said the gentleman, laying down the pen again.

"And the Union workhouses?" demanded Scrooge.

"Are they still in operation?"

"They are. Still," returned the gentleman, "I wish I could say they were not."

"The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigor, then?" said Scrooge.

"Both very busy, sir."

"Oh! I was afraid, from what you said at first, that something had occurred to stop them in their useful course," said Scrooge. "I'm very glad to hear it."

"Under the impression that they scarcely furnish Christian cheer of mind or body to the multitude," returned the gentleman, "a few of us are endeavoring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink, and means of warmth. We choose this time, because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down for?"

"Nothing!" Scrooge replied.

"You wish to be anonymous?"

"I wish to be left alone," said Scrooge. "Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. I don't make merry myself at Christmas and I can't afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned: they cost enough: and those who are badly off must go there."

"Many can't go there; and many would rather die."

"If they would rather die," said Scrooge, "they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population."

Here is this beggar in our story. We aren't told the circumstances that led to his social status, just that he was a beggar. He had nothing and was in a state of extreme poverty. The same Greek word is used in **Galatians 4:9** and is translated worthless or miserable. This beggar was an outcast of society. If he had any friends, they were few and most likely very much like him. He was reduced to begging for his existence. Like Dickens character, Scrooge, many felt that the poor were a blight on society and

"if they would rather die, they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population." They were treated with contempt.

Now our text tells us that this beggar was "**laid at the gate**" of the rich man. It's a further description of his deplorable condition.

We have been introduced to other beggars in Scripture.

In John 9 we read about the man born blind who was healed by Jesus. He is described as one who sat and begged.

In Mark 10 we are introduced to blind Bartimaeus who begged by the roadside. When Jesus came by he called for Jesus to heal him.

In Acts 3 we meet the beggar who sat by the Temple gate hoping to receive compassion from worshippers as they entered the Temple.

Then there was the beggar who sat by the pool of Siloam hoping someone would help him in the pool when the angel stirred the water.

Understand that this beggar in our story could not walk. He was laid at the gate. Of all the malady's he faced, the inability to walk was one of them. He relied on people to get him from place to place. He couldn't call up the Scooter store and get one delivered and Medicare pick up the cost. They didn't have a Wright-Filippis in town to purchase a wheelchair. He needed to be carried - everywhere.

The term used to describe where the beggar is put is significant. It says he was laid at the gate. There is a wide range of meanings associated with the term. It can mean that compassionate people carried him and put him there or more likely to demonstrate the utterly pathetic condition of this man, the word can also mean that he was just tossed there in a heap. His condition was contemptuous.

Not only was he unable to walk, his body was covered with sores. That the sores were open and festering is understood because dogs would come and lick them. These were not pets. Most dogs

were mangy scavengers. They roamed the streets. The only companions this guy had were dogs.

If his physical condition wasn't bad enough, we also see that he was starving. It says that he longed to eat what fell from the rich man's table. In those days many of the rich people after dining would use stale bread crumbs to clean their hands after they ate and then brush the crumbs on the floor. This beggar wasn't even given table scraps. He reminds me of the prodigal son who **"longed to fill his stomach with the husks fed to the pigs."**

Eventually, as will happen with every one of us, the beggar died. We aren't told about any funeral service. Some of the poor were buried in a pauper's field; others were taken out the gate of Jerusalem and tossed in the Valley of Gehena. It was the city dump where the fires continually burned. Notice though that even though no one on earth attended to his needs, angels came and ushered him into the presence of Abraham. To the Jew and to the Pharisees this was a place of honor. It wasn't a place they expected to find this beggar. The belief was that if you were poor, you had been cursed by God. If you were rich, you had God's blessing. The story illustrates that what appears on the outside isn't necessarily the case at all.

I want to mention one more thing of importance. I have not spoken about his name. It's significant. Lazarus means "God a helper." Jesus gives the beggar a name to remind us that when no one else is around to help us in our time of need, God is there. But notice that God's provision did not come in this life. This gives us an important principle illustrated in this story. *God's provision may not come in this life, but it surely will in the life to come.*

On the opposite end of the social and economic spectrum is the rich man. He is the primary focus of the story. He lived in the lap of luxury. If television had been around he would have been a featured guest on the show that Robin Leach hosted

**"Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous."** At the end of every episode he would say "where champagne wishes and caviar dreams come true."

The Dutch have a saying. It's "conspicuous consumption" meaning that they like to flaunt their wealth.

This guy would have been on Forbes list of the richest people in the world. Articles would have told us how much he was worth, where he shopped for his designer clothes, where he dined, what kind of car he drove. There would be pictures of his massive estate. By the way, you never see in any magazine the 10 poorest people of the world. We don't care about them. We'd rather read about the rich. They're more interesting and we would rather aspire to wealth and luxury than be reduced to a beggar.

Notice that it was a daily habit to dress in purple and fine linen. These were the most expensive clothes of the day. Purple dye was hard to come by. It was a lengthy and difficult process of extracting it from a certain shell fish. Linens came from the cotton of Egypt. Anything he wanted he bought and he bought the best.

**I read this last week that the very rich in China are getting around the one child law by having surrogate designer babies.**

**I also read a short article about where the rich spend their money. In their private jets fixtures are gold plated and toilet seats are made from alligator skin.**

It amazes me that when society pages talk about the women walking the red carpet they always have to tell us where they got their designer dress and jewelry and how much each cost. It's a way of saying that they've made it. We better be impressed. We better swoon.

But notice in verse 22 that the same thing happened to the rich man that happened to Lazarus. He died. With all his wealth and social status, he couldn't buy off the inevitable. Notice too that no one attended to him after death. Oh, he was buried and probably had the best funeral money could buy, but it couldn't buy him one more minute on earth.

When you consider the two there is a striking disparity between them as they journeyed this earth. The sad thing is that if Israel had been living as it should by the Law, the beggar would not have been in need or been suffering. The law was written in such a way as to assist others in need. He wouldn't have been rich, but he would have been cared for.

Notice the difference between the two. The beggar was outside while the rich man lived in a house. The beggar had many needs and the rich man had none. The beggar wasn't even given table crumbs while the rich man had the best chefs feasting on delicacies.

The beggar was sickly and the rich man probably enjoyed good health with the best doctors.

The beggar was physically tormented requiring assistance from others while the rich man lived in luxury.

The beggar was a nobody in the eyes of society while the rich man would have been well known and given places of honor.

The beggar was given no dignified burial customary to Jews with spices and linens for burial while the rich man would have been given a lavish burial fit for one who was rich.

There is a striking disparity.

## II. A SERIOUS DISCUSSION – v. 23-31

The first two words of verse 23 are sobering. You read them and they leave you breathless, speechless. "In hell." Let that sink in for a moment. That's where we find the rich man. In the snap of a finger when the last breath was drawn by both men, their

individual state was reversed. The tormented became the blessed, the blessed became the tormented. If we didn't know any better we could assume it came from an episode of *The Twilight Zone*. One stood in the place of honor, next to the most prominent figure of Judaism, ushered there by angels, at last comforted and cared for. The other was alone, tormented and in hell.

Hell is a real place and many today have an image of Hell that is not based on reality. Sure there is the popular notion that says hell is just a figment of one's over active imagination, too many horror movies and some bad chili. It's a real place.

In the 1990's Betty Edie wrote a book that remained on New York's Times bestseller list for 40 weeks and was ranked number one for 5 weeks. The premise of the book is about an event that occurred in her life in 1973. She relates that while undergoing a hysterectomy she died and returned to life five hours later with the secrets of heaven revealed to her by Jesus. In the book she states that Jesus never wanted to do or say anything that would offend her.

Well, I'm sorry Betty but Scripture tells us a lot of things that Jesus did and said that offended others. One of those things was about hell, that it is real and it has real torment. Unfortunately today, for the sake of winning the audience many pastors will try and tone down what Jesus so clearly had to say on this subject. They don't want to offend others.

Scripture has a lot to say about the reality of hell even though people have their own notion about it. For example Mark Twain once said, "I'll take Heaven for the climate and Hell for the society."

Television mogul Ted Turner stated "I'm looking forward to dying and going to hell because I know that is where I'm headed."

Jerome Butler who, as a convicted killer awaiting execution, told another death row inmate “I’ll wait for you in Hell!”

When I conduct funerals it is my habit at the end of the service to stand at the head of the casket as people pass by to pay their last respects. I will occasionally here some say “I’ll catch you later” or “I’ll be seeing you.” I want to interrupt their nostalgia for a moment and tell them that unless they are a Jesus follower and the person was a Jesus follower, that isn’t going to happen.

This rich man died and he went to hell, but that’s not the end of his story. Hell is not annihilation. Now understand that in the Greek it is the word hades. It is, if you will, a holding cell for them while they await the final judgment of God.

Oscoda County where my Dad and brother serve in the Sheriff’s Department, is the only county in the lower peninsula of Michigan that does not have a permanent prison. They can only hold prisoners for up to 72 hours and then they have to be moved to a permanent facility. Usually my Dad will go pick them up for court, they receive their sentence and then he takes them to their permanent prison.

Hades is like that. It’s a temporary place where they are held over until the final sentencing by the judge. But notice that it is no country club atmosphere. This is just like prison. He was in torment. He was thirsty and in agony in the fire.

Nowhere in the discussion does the rich man try to argue his case, that there was a mistake and he shouldn’t be there. Notice also that hell or hades is not a place of soul sleep as some suggest where you go into a coma like condition and wait for judgment. This is clearly showing us that a person is cognitively and consciously aware of his surroundings. He knows full well what’s going on. Understand that this is the soul, not the body. The

soul is just as aware of pain and anguish as is the body.

After their respective amputations both my Mom and Pastor Don often talked about phantom pain even though there was no appendage. The nerve endings still thought it was there and still felt pain.

People in hades will know what’s going on and will experience pain. To illustrate that for us we see that the rich man makes two requests.

1. There was a request for water to cool the suffering of his torment.

Even in this deplorable condition he thought his status on earth would get him stuff in hell. “Can you send Lazarus over to dip his finger in some water and cool my tongue?” He was still expecting that others would serve him. He was expecting that somehow, someday his agony could be eased. But folks, there is no AC in hell, there are no water coolers or pop machines or ice cream vendors. There will be no giant shade trees or lakes to take a cool swim in. It will be absolute and relentless suffering and it will be forever. There will be no parole. There will be no pardon. There will be no possible way of escape.

There are two reminders in response given by Abraham.

1. There was a great disservice. In the previous life he had never helped Lazarus even though every day he had the opportunity to do so. Lazarus was probably put there in the hopes that the rich man would become a benefactor. But that never happened. The tables are now turned and even if Lazarus could help or wanted to help out of compassion he couldn’t.

2. There was a great divide. In essence Abraham was saying to him that the condition of both is fixed. It’s permanent. There was no way

any one could cross over to him and there was no way he could cross over to where they were. The choice we make in this life about the condition of our soul through the provision of God forever seals our destiny. We cannot change our mind once we have died. It will be too late.

I viewed some pictures of foot bridges that span some pretty amazing distances at some very dizzying heights.

Some were well constructed with high rails to keep people in.

One was just a few cables with some old drift wood spaced about every 3 or 4 feet strung out over a river.

Abraham describes it as a great chasm that has been fixed between the two places. There is no foot bridge to travel back and forth. That means this great divide won't be moved and it can't be spanned.

I said there were two requests. Water was the first request. Here is the second.

2. There was a request for a witness to go to his brothers and warn them.

At last the rich man is mission minded, but notice he is only concerned for the eternal welfare of his brothers. He didn't want them to end up in the same deplorable place he was now bound to. Again notice the request is asking for Lazarus to return from the dead. He still thinks he's calling the shots.

His brothers must have known who Lazarus was. They would have seen him at the gate begging when they went to visit. And they would have known that he had died. Certainly if he went back and talked to them that would be just the warning they would need to turn from the same fate. He was hoping that his brothers would have a fair warning and opportunity to change. He wanted Lazarus to be their eternal fire detector.

But he was deluded into thinking that they would listen to Lazarus. In the previous life he had lived only for himself and thought nothing about life after death. Now that he has time to think about that life and his actions it was too late to make any changes even for the benefit of his brothers.

Jesus once asked what profit is there to gain the whole world only to forfeit the soul. At another time He said it was truly difficult for the rich to be saved, sighting that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Not that the rich can't be saved, but that they rely so much on their wealth that they figure they don't need God. This man was forever doomed to hell and he hoped there would be some consideration of his request so that his brothers wouldn't end up there as well.

There were two requests and two reminders. Notice in conclusion two refusals.

1. They refused to listen to the Word.

That they wouldn't listen to Moses refers to the law given to them through this leader. For centuries the Old Testament was available to teach them the way to God and yet many refused to follow its teachings. The history of Israel is replete with examples of their refusal to heed the Word of God and the voice of God through His prophets. Consequently God brought judgment on them and still they did not listen.

There is a saying that says that those who ignore history are destined to repeat it.

Like the rich man, his brothers also refused to listen to the prophets or to the Word.

2. They would refuse to listen to someone from the dead. Even if someone came back from the dead, they would not listen. Jesus had raised a young man from the dead and they did not listen. In just a short while Jesus would raise His friend Lazarus from the dead and the Pharisees will plot to kill them both. Theirs was a stubborn refusal to see the obvious, but rather reject the truth. They wanted a sign but none would be given them

because even in the signs they were given only furthered to cement their hatred for the truth.

One author noted that “if a person’s mind is closed and Scripture is rejected, no evidence – not even a resurrection – will change him.”

Please do not take away from this story that the rich will go to hell and the poor will go to heaven. Scripture has many examples of just the opposite. Abraham was rich and went to heaven. The lawyer who questioned Jesus about how to get to heaven went away saddened and didn’t go there.

The story isn’t told to show us what will happen after death but to show the importance of making the right decisions now. **It is not as one atheist wrote on his tombstone “all dressed up and no place to go.”** Hell is the destiny for those who refuse the provision God made through His Son Jesus Christ.

Hell is the future whether poor or prosperous, even if they are religious for those who reject God’s provision. A person can live the good life and take all kinds of extravagant trips now only to find that their final trip is to hell. Remember that even Jesus taught that there will be those who will be surprised that they end up there.

Hell is a real place of eternal torment.

**Mark 9:42-43 “And if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to be thrown to the sea with a large millstone tied around his neck. If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.”**

Hell is a place of no hope. It will never change. But hell can be avoided if a person listens to God’s Word and repents.

One day when Vice President Calvin Coolidge was presiding over the Senate. One Senator angrily told

another Senator to go “straight to hell.” The offended Senator complained to Coolidge as presiding officer, who looked up from the book he had been leafing through while listening to the debate and wittily replied: “I’ve been looking through the rule book. You don’t have to go.”

The rich man was told that God’s Word holds the promise to avoid the pain, punishment and permanency of hell. Let this story serve as the smoke and fire detector warning of impending destruction.

God’s provision is very clear and very simple **“all who call upon the Lord will be saved.”** If you are here today and have never trusted Christ as Savior don’t put it off any longer. Your fate will be the same as the rich man otherwise.

If you are here today and have already accepted God’s provision through Christ then pause today and give Him thanks.