

It's Real, Really!

Luke 16:19-31

Please turn in your Bibles this morning to our passage in Luke 16:19-31 and stand with me to honor the reading of God's Word.

While you are still standing, turn to the Old Testament book of Ezekiel 18:20-23.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost. He said so Himself. The lost include the likes of murderers, thieves, liars, prostitutes, betrayers, sinners and tax collectors, even the Pharisees. They have names like Rahab, Saul, Matthew, Nicodemus, you and me. No one is excluded or beyond His reach. God's words through Ezekiel tell us that He does not delight in seeing a person die in sin to be forever banished and punished. Peter writes the same that "God is not willing that any should perish, but have everlasting life." So a provision was made through the death of Christ who shed His blood and then rose from the grave assuring our own victory over sin and death and the grave. Christ's resurrection was proof that His substitutionary sacrifice had been accepted by the Father as payment for sin. That was the plan all along - to die on the cross and bear the penalty of man's debt for the sin he committed so that by our faith we could have eternal life.

In our passage Jesus tells a story, not to bring condemnation and judgment but to bring conviction and confession. The story that is before us today is a story of contrasts. It is a story Jesus uses to illustrate the reality of man's destiny based on a simple, single choice in this life. The Pharisees all thought that heaven was theirs, that they would enjoy the bliss of eternal rewards. Jesus wanted to show them that their thinking was erroneous. I believe that what He said jolted their theological world. It wasn't something they considered to be even remotely possible. Jesus hoped that through what He said they would respond and repent.

Some scholars believe this to be a true story about two people who they all may have been familiar with. I believe that this is a parable with fictitious people even though He gives a name to one of the characters. I'll tell you the significance of that name later on. While the story has two characters the main focus is an unnamed rich man. He is not just rich, he is filthy rich. Notice the description about him. "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day."

There is a term that is sometimes used to describe the wealthy. It's *conspicuous consumption* which simply means that a person will spend money and acquire luxury goods and services in an effort to publicly display economic power. It's a way to show off their wealth for others to see.

Another term is *invidious consumption*. This is the deliberate act of someone to spend lavishly in an effort to provoke others to envy.

I'm going to step out on the proverbial limb and suggest that this describes the rich man. That's how the Message puts it: "There once was a rich man, expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption."

He had everything and needed nothing. What he had was the best: Gouchi handbags, Armani suits, Bentley automobiles. Purple cloth was the material of nobility and the wealthy. This dye was extracted from a certain type of snail. The process was a long and arduous task. I think they put it in a container and marked it s-cargo. (See what a week off does?) At any rate, they used this to dye cloth. It's the stuff Lydia sold. It was an expensive procedure and only the truly affluent could afford it. That's how he dressed every day.

He was also dressed in fine linen. It was choice material. Some believe it was a special type of cotton that came from Egypt. It was his habit to

dress and eat without any thought of what he was spending. He had no needs. Anything he wanted he went out and bought and he bought the best there was. Cost was no barrier to him.

Contrast the rich man with the other character. He is given a name. It's Lazarus. It is not the same Lazarus who is the good friend of Jesus. The Hebrew equivalent to Lazarus is the name Eleazar. We'll talk more about the meaning in a moment, but first let's meet Lazarus. In contrast to the rich man who had need of nothing, Lazarus was a beggar who had need of everything. The word used describes someone in abject poverty. He had nothing. As a beggar he depended on the generosity of others to help him with his daily needs. He even needed someone to carry him to a spot where he could beg. Notice that every day he was laid at the gate of the rich man's estate. We surmise from this that he was lame and depended on someone to drop him off in the morning and pick him up in the evening.

The Greek word used here is ballow and means to fling. Picture in your mind's eye that he's being carried and just sort of tossed in a spot by the gate, dumped in a heap on the curb to lie there all day and beg for something, anything.

In addition to his inability to walk, he is covered in sores. They are some kind of ulcerous, festering, oozing sores all over his body. His appearance must have been truly grotesque. If that wasn't bad enough, dogs came along and licked the sores. It was perhaps the only real comfort he ever received.

There is one more thing described here. It says he longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the table. I read that these weren't scraps that inadvertently fell from the plate while you were eating, but rather that it was dry bread crumbs they would use to clean their hands. The grit would clean up what was on the hand since that is how they ate. These crumbs would be brushed onto the floor and the dogs would

come around and eat them. If it hits the ground it goes to the hound.

Lazarus longed to get a morsel of those crumbs.

I hope you see the stark contrast that Jesus is conveying in the story.

One man had everything.

The other man had nothing.

One dressed in the finest clothes money could buy.

The other wore threadbare rags.

One ate the choicest delicacies.

The other longed for even crumbs.

They stand in stark contrast to one another.

But we see that in spite of these sharp differences both encounter one common experience. The Bible says that it is appointed unto man to die.

Lazarus died and is ushered into the presence of Abraham by the aid of angels in a place known as Abraham's bosom. It's a place of comfort.

The rich man also died and found himself alone and in a place called hades. Please note that where your Bible may use the term hell, it is not the place of final judgment. Sheol in the Old Testament and Hades in the New Testament are the same and refer to a subterranean place of all the dead until the judgment.

The roles are now reversed. Lazarus has everything and the rich man has nothing. Lazarus now knows splendor and the rich man now knows want. Lazarus is comforted and the rich man is destitute. His money can buy him nothing.

As I said earlier this must have been a real jolt to the Pharisees who believed that what you received in this life was indicative of God's favor or disfavor. If you were blessed, that meant God looked with favor on you. If you were experiencing a life filled with trials and difficulties then you were not in God's favor. For the roles to be reversed is not what the religious leaders would have expected.

The poor man ends up in paradise while the rich man ends up in the place of torment.

There is a lot of debate about the terms used here for Abraham's bosom and hades. Are they two separate places or are they the same place separated by a great chasm? Our passage seems to indicate that hades was one place for all the dead divided into separate compartments: one place for those awaiting final judgment and another place for those who are welcomed into paradise.

For those who believe that it is one place divided into two compartments believe that a fundamental change occurred at the crucifixion. They hold that at Jesus' resurrection the place of paradise was emptied and those souls were taken with Jesus into paradise. They site Jesus' statement to the thief dying with Him that he would be in paradise that day. There would no longer be an intermediary place for the believer to wait, while the unbeliever would remain in this place until the final judgment that will occur in the future.

At this point in Jesus' story the focus is on the rich man. Notice the contrast from his previous life to his present condition.

Where he was accustomed to comfort and luxury, now he is in constant torment.

Where he had everything, now he has nothing.

This is perhaps the first time he prayed, but notice two things. First, his prayer is self-centered and second, his prayer is not to God, but to Abraham. This is perhaps an acknowledgment on his part that he recognized his plight was permanent and that not even God could or would help him. He may have even thought that his punishment was just. He doesn't even plead for his life to be spared or for a reconsideration of his punishment. What he asks for is some temporary relief by the very person he ignored in the previous life. He wouldn't help Lazarus but he wanted Lazarus to help him.

When that request was denied, he pleaded for the life of his brothers. He wanted Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn them of the fate that awaited them if they didn't change. Again his request was denied. The rich man was claiming that what was taught in the Old Testament was insufficient but that someone coming back from the dead, someone the brothers would know, like Lazarus, would convince them to change. Abraham indicated that wouldn't help. There is enough proof in the Bible that should convict men to see a need of change.

Now let me come back to Lazarus for a moment and speak about his name. I think it's important. I think it's also significant that the rich man isn't given a name in Jesus' story. In Revelation 21:27 we read "Nothing impure will ever enter it, nor will anyone who does what is shameful or deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life." I believe that he is nameless in the story because his name is not found in the Lamb's book. On the other hand Lazarus is named because it is written and known in heaven.

The name Lazarus is significant because it strikes a stark contrast with the rich man. Lazarus is a name that means "God has helped." I think the name is significant because on the one hand here is this rich man who believed he needed no one to help him, on the other hand the name Lazarus shows us that to get to heaven only God can help us.

Now, I want to change gears here and talk about something that is not talked about in a lot of churches today. It is the topic of hell. Please keep in mind that hades and hell are two distinct places. Hades is a temporary place for unbelievers waiting for final judgment. My Dad does prisoner transport for the Sheriff's department. He will pick up a prisoner from jail so they can stand before a judge and receive their sentence. They are then taken to where their sentence will be carried out. Jail is that

temporary place as they wait for prison. The conditions are the same, but the latter is permanent.

From this passage I see several important truths about hell.

- There is the reality of hell.
- There is the reason for hell.
- There is the response to hell.
- There is the remorse in hell.
- There is recognition in hell.

Jesus spoke more about hell than he did about heaven and yet today many either ignore it or believe that it doesn't exist. The thought of hell isn't popular; they would rather dwell on the positive, what makes them feel good. Yet what Scripture teaches about hell should serve as an urgent warning to the lost. Its description is terrifying. Maybe that's why it's avoided. People don't want to talk about what is unpleasant. Some even try to downplay it. Their caricatures make it seem almost appealing, not that bad, tolerable. One cartoon paints it as a place that serves cold coffee. Another makes it look like you're in a doctor's office waiting forever to see the doctor. Yet another shows those entering heaven receiving a harp while those entering hell are given accordions.

Hell is a real place, a horrible place. It's not a figment of the imagination. It is not a country club setting where you sit around with your buddies and participate in all manner of vices to your hearts content. It is a place of endless torment, conscious awareness, and desolate isolation. There will be no refreshment, no respite, no rehabilitation, no parole, no hope, and no help. Cries for mercy will go unheeded because they will be unheard. It will be endless suffering in conscious agony. That is the destiny of those who die having never trusted Christ as Savior in this life.

On one occasion when Jesus was talking to His disciples, He asked a very direct question: "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet

forfeit his soul?" (Mark 8:36)

Think about anything that can be achieved or acquired in this life and none of it will be able to help you in the next. In Jesus' story the beggar became rich and the rich man became the beggar.

Consider then these key facts about eternity.

1. Everyone will exist eternally in heaven or hell. Daniel 12:2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

Matthew 25:46 "Then they will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life."

John 5:28-29 "Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned."

Revelation 20:14-15 "Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire."

There is no state of limbo. It is not soul sleep or annihilation.

You can't work it off over time, or get out on good behavior.

The living cannot pray your soul out of hell.

Heaven or hell are the only two options and that will be for eternity.

2. Everyone has only one life in which to determine their destiny.

Hebrews 9:27 "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment."

There are no second chances, no way to work it out.

3. Heaven or hell is determined by whether a person puts their trust in Christ.

John 3:16, 36 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life...

Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on them."

John 5:24 "Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life."

I John 5:11-13 "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life"

Your eternal destiny depends on what you decide in this life about Christ. In the story Jesus told, that Lazarus is at the side of Abraham means that he was a believer otherwise he would not be there. That the rich man is in hades means he had chosen a life without Christ. He died lost in his sin.

Your eternal destiny is settled here on earth, before death. So, let's consider some facts about hell.

1. Hell will be the final destination of the lost and will include Satan and his demons.

Matthew 25:41 "Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels."

2. Hell is a conscious, physical torment.

Matthew 13:50 "and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Mark 9:48 "where 'the worms that eat them do not die, and the fire is not quenched.'"

Revelation 14:10 "they, too, will drink the wine of God's fury, which has been poured full strength into the cup of his wrath. They will be tormented with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb."

3. Hell is eternal and irreversible. It will be final and unalterable.

Revelation 14:11 "And the smoke of their torment will rise for ever and ever. There will be no rest day or night for those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name."

Revelation 20:14-15 "Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire."

Luke 16:26 also tells us that there is no path between the two. It's a one way ticket.

After death there is no second chance to escape hell. Last week two prisoners escaped from a maximum security prison in upstate New York by means of elaborate measures and the help of one of the female guards. There will be no escape from hell.

And neither is hell is a state of mind or a condition here on earth. It is unimaginable anguish.

Hell is not a place where eventually everyone will be released to enjoy eternal bliss in heaven.

Hell is not a place in which at death you cease to exist – both body and soul.

But some object and ask how a loving God could send anyone to such a horrible place. To that we answer that they neither know the love of God nor

do they understand His justice. And neither do they understand man's wickedness. We deserve it. On one hand, "God's kindness leads to repentance", according to Romans 2:4. On the other hand, God is just and does not show favoritism. We are all under the same standard of justice. Everyone is given the same opportunity in this life to be saved. No one is without excuse.

Romans 1:19-20 "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness, since what may be known about God is plain to them, because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse."

And the way of salvation is the same for everyone. There is only one way to be saved and it has been that way all along. "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved." That will never change.

John 3:16-19 "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. 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 they have not believed in the name of God's one and only Son.

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil."

II Corinthians 5:14-15 "For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again."

I Timothy 2:5-6a "For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people."

I Timothy 4:10 "That is why we labor and strive, because we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.

Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God has appeared that offers salvation to all people."

II Peter 3:9 "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."

Ephesians 2:8-9 "For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God - not by works, so that no one can boast. "

So while some argue that a loving God wouldn't condemn people to hell, others believe that hell is too severe a punishment for sin. They believe that after you do your time you should be released from the crime. To that we need to be reminded that God is a holy God and we have all fallen short of His standard and deserve punishment in hell. His holiness and His justice demand it. Yet His love and grace have made it possible to be forgiven of the debt and punishment.

I Peter 2:24 "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by His wounds you have been healed."

I Peter 3:18 "For Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring you to God."

The story Jesus tells here is about two places, both are real. Just as hell is a real place so is heaven. Christ told His disciples He was going there to

prepare a place so that we might be with Him forever. We are told not to despair because He will return to take us to that place. (John 14:1-4)

Heaven is a place of joy. It is a place where we will be with Christ. The essence of hell is the absence of Christ. The essence of heaven is His presence. We will be with Him.

Colossians 3:4 “When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory.”

I Thessalonians 4:14, 17 “We believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in Him...And so we will be with the Lord forever.”

I Thessalonians 5:10 “He died for us so that, whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him.”

II Timothy 2:11 “It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with Him, we shall also live with Him.”

There is a tremendous promise given by the Lord at His crucifixion for those who die in Christ “This day you will be with Me in paradise.”

Someone has rightly said that “heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people.”

We could also say that hell is a prepared place for an unprepared people.

Someone else has said that “death is not the end, it is the beginning of a whole new existence.”

In 2007 a Gallup poll was conducted to find out people’s view of heaven and if they believed they would go there when they died. According to the research of those polled virtually all people who believe in heaven also believed they would end up there.

In the masterful work *Dante’s Inferno* he writes “Abandon hope, all who enter here.”

What takes a sinner to hell? It isn’t because of being rich. It is rather their unbelief, their refusal to trust Christ as Savior.

It’s estimated that 150,000 people die every day. Their destiny is wrapped up in whether or not they have trusted Christ. Repentance leads to eternal life in heaven. Rejection leads to eternal life in hell.

As I conclude this morning I have two prayers. The first prayer is that each of you has decided your eternal destiny by trusting Christ as Savior. If not, today is the day. Hell is real and it’s forever.

The second prayer is that each of us might understand the urgency of sharing the gospel with others, that they might come to grips with the reality of the horribleness of hell and that there is only one way to avoid its eternal grip. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ to be saved. Without Christ there is no hope and only one destiny.

Jesus illustrates by way of contrast two men and two destinies. Just as there is a marked contrast between the two characters in this passage there is a significant contrast between heaven and hell. If heaven is a wonderful place filled with glory and grace then hell stands in complete contrast to it. God does not delight in the death of the wicked because He knows the eternal punishment that awaits them. He patiently waits for all to repent.

So, today, right now, do you know where you are headed?