

The Parables of Jesus

Week 7: Eternal Priorities -- Luke 16:19–31

Jesus paints two men in a single brushstroke, and they could not be more different. The first is rich, fabulously so. He is “clothed in purple and fine linen,” the wardrobe of royalty, and he “feasted sumptuously every day.” Not on holidays, not now and then, but every single day his table groans with the best of everything. He is the picture of a life that has arrived. And just outside his gate, close enough to step over on the way out each morning, lies the second man. His name is Lazarus, which is striking, because it is the only character in any of Jesus’ parables ever given a name. He is covered with sores, so weak he cannot keep the street dogs from licking them, and so hungry he longs for the scraps that fall from the rich man’s table. Two men, one gate between them, and two completely different worlds.

Then both men die, as all men do, and the camera, so to speak, follows them past the grave. Lazarus is carried by the angels to Abraham’s side, to comfort and rest. The rich man is buried, no doubt with an impressive funeral, and finds himself in torment. For the first time the gate between them is gone, but a far greater distance has opened up. The rich man, in anguish, lifts up his eyes and sees Abraham far away, with Lazarus beside him, the very beggar he had stepped past for years. And now the man who once had everything begs for the smallest mercy: “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.”

Abraham’s answer is tender but firm. “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.” And then a line that should sober every one of us: “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.” The time for crossing was during life, at a gate the rich man walked past every day. Now that time is over, and the gulf cannot be bridged.

So the rich man makes one last plea. If nothing can be done for him, let something be done for his five brothers, still living, still feasting, still heading the same direction. “Send Lazarus to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” And here Jesus delivers the point He has been driving toward all along. Abraham says, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” The rich man protests that a visitor from the dead would surely get through to them. And Abraham answers, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” Read this parable slowly. It tears the curtain off eternity for a moment, and it asks what we are doing, today, with the gate at our door and the word of God in our hands.

Group Discussion: The rich man’s sin was not that he was wealthy, but that day after day he stepped past a suffering man at his own gate and felt nothing. Why do you think it is so easy to

grow numb to the needs that are closest to us, and what does this parable suggest about how God views a comfortable life lived in indifference to the suffering of others?

Personal Reflection: Lazarus lay at the rich man's gate, close enough to notice, yet the rich man trained himself not to see. Who is the "Lazarus at your gate" right now, the person whose need is near enough for you to meet, but easy enough to walk past? What would it take for you to truly see them this week?

Read Luke 16:19–31

Study Questions

1. The rich man is never accused of fraud or cruelty; his sin is that Lazarus lay at his gate day after day and he did nothing (vv. 19–21). What does this teach us about how God evaluates a life of comfort and self-indulgence lived in indifference to the suffering of others, and about the kind of sin that consists not in what we do but in what we fail to do?
2. It is easy to grow numb to need, especially when it is constant and close. Where have you trained yourself not to see the people God has placed within your reach? Name one specific need you have been stepping past, and ask why it has become so easy to walk by.
3. When both men die, the parable follows them beyond the grave, where Lazarus is comforted and the rich man is in anguish (vv. 22–25). Being careful to stay with what the text actually affirms and not to speculate beyond it, what does this passage teach us about the reality of conscious existence after death and the great reversal that awaits?
4. The rich man assumed his comfortable life would simply continue, and he was wrong. How would living with the unshakable certainty of life after death, and of accountability before God, actually reshape the priorities you set this week, this month, and this year?
5. Abraham tells the rich man that "a great chasm has been fixed" that no one can cross (v. 26). What does this sobering image teach about the finality of our eternal destiny once this life is over, and why does it press such urgency onto the choices we make now, while the gate is still open?
6. The rich man had a lifetime of chances to step across the small gap to Lazarus, and he let them pass. Are you living as though this life is the preparation ground for eternity, or as though death and judgment are safely far away? Where is that assumption showing up in how you spend your days?
7. When the rich man begs that his brothers be warned, Abraham answers, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them" (v. 29). What is Jesus teaching here about the sufficiency and authority of God's written word, that Scripture itself is enough to lead people to repentance and salvation?
8. The rich man assumed it would take a spectacular sign, someone risen from the dead, to move his brothers, when in fact they already had everything they needed in Scripture. Where are you tempted to want some dramatic experience or sign from God while neglecting the word He has already given? How fully are you actually listening to the Scripture you already hold?

9. Abraham's final word is stunning: "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead" (v. 31). What does this teach about the authority and sufficiency of God's word, about the true cause of unbelief, and about why a heart that will not submit to Scripture would not be won even by a miracle? And how does this land with even greater weight for us, who know that One truly has risen from the dead?
10. Look back across the parable. Jesus pulled back the curtain on eternity, not to satisfy our curiosity, but to change how we live today. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through this story. What is the one priority you most need to reorder this week in light of the gate at your door and the word of God in your hands?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Hebrews 9:27, that it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment; 2 Timothy 3:14–17, the Scriptures that are able to make us wise for salvation and that thoroughly equip us for every good work; 1 John 3:16–18, the love of God shown by meeting a brother's need rather than closing our heart against him; Luke 12:32–34, selling possessions and giving to the needy, laying up treasure in heaven; John 5:46–47, Jesus' word that Moses wrote of Him, so that those who reject the Scriptures reject Him.