

## **Luke's Gospel**

### **Pharisees rebuked and the rich man and Lazarus**

### **Luke 16: 14-31**

*[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

#### **Introduction**

It might be helpful to begin by reminding ourselves of the surrounding context to today's verses in Luke chapters 15 and 16. At the start of chapter 15, we found the Pharisees complaining about the fact that Jesus was accepting sinners and eating with them. The Lord responds with the three beautiful parables that we are all familiar with: those of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost (or prodigal) son. The ringing message of these parables is that God loves the lost and wants to welcome them home to Himself. In fact, only those who recognise they are lost will ever get saved by God's grace. Then chapter 16 opened with Jesus telling the parable of the unjust steward to His disciples, concluding with the statement that, "You cannot serve God and mammon." The main sections of our passage today are:

1. verse 14 – The Pharisees mock Jesus and His teaching
2. verse 15 – Jesus says the Pharisees are seeking justification before men rather than before God
3. vv16-18 – Some pertinent statements about the law
4. vv19-31 – The parable of the rich man and Lazarus

The parable in today's passage and those at the end of chapter 15 and the beginning of chapter 16 make an interesting group. We might characterise them as describing:

- A man who squanders his **father's** goods (the lost, or prodigal, son)
- A man who squanders his **master's** goods (the unjust steward) and...
- A man who squanders his **own** goods (the rich man)

Before we go any further, let's read the first three sections of our passage for today.

"Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. And He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God. The law and the prophets were until John. Since that time the kingdom of God has been preached, and everyone is pressing into it. And it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one tittle of the law to fail. Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced from her husband commits adultery.'" Luke 16:14-18

## 1. The Pharisees mock

The parable of the unjust steward was told to the disciples, but the Pharisees were obviously listening in, and they were clearly unimpressed! The conclusion which Jesus drew, that “You cannot serve God and mammon,” seemed entirely foolish to them. They loved money and were convinced that **they** were serving God. They thought that they themselves contradicted what Jesus had just asserted: after all they were serving God very dutifully while holding mammon, or money, in the highest esteem!

## 2. Jesus responds

Jesus devastating assessment is that they are not serving God at all; indeed, they are not even genuinely trying to do so! What they really want to do, is to justify themselves before other human beings, that is, they want to be well thought of and well-respected members of society, with a **reputation** for being godly. They have indeed achieved the reputation without the reality, and they can do this for two reasons.

- a) Other people can only see their actions and hear their words – they can’t look into the motives of their hearts. So the Pharisees can maintain an outward appearance of being God’s servants while inside they are anything but.
- b) Sinful human beings have a totally perverted outlook and set of values, which means they judge things in radically different ways to how God judges them. Many things that human beings naturally esteem highly, and even regard as evidence of godliness, God finds abominable!

## 3. Upholding the law

The Pharisees would doubtless have argued that they were making their judgements according to the law of God and not based on human values, so Jesus goes on to talk frankly about the law. First of all, the law was in preparation for the coming of the Messiah. John the Baptist had arrived, and had announced that the Messiah was coming very soon and the people of Israel needed to repent and prepare for His arrival. Now King Messiah was here in person and personally announcing the kingdom of God. The sinners that the Pharisees had been despising at the start of chapter 15 were now pressing into that kingdom. “Everyone is pressing into it,” Jesus says. That is, all apart from the Pharisees and those like them are pushing their way into God’s kingdom and the lost are being recovered. In one sense the law of Moses is being superseded and the Pharisees were constantly complaining that Jesus and His disciples were breaking the detailed requirements of that law, as they had traditionally interpreted them. In another, very real, sense the law is not being compromised at all. We might paraphrase Jesus’ words along the following lines, “You think I am reducing the demands of the law in my teaching? Let me tell you that creation itself will crumble before the least decoration of one letter of the law fails. **That** is how seriously I take God’s law.”

The irony is that while the Pharisees constantly complain that Jesus and His disciples flout the law, Jesus perpetually maintains that the **Pharisees** are the ones who fail to take the law seriously enough. His contention is that they obsess about the minutiae of the law in ways that simultaneously burnish their own reputation for holiness, while utterly failing to engage seriously with what God really demands of them. The example Jesus picks up here is marriage and divorce. Jewish scholars in Jesus’ time had very little respect for the sanctity of marriage as instituted by God. They taught that a man was perfectly justified in divorcing his wife if she failed to cook his dinner properly, or if a prettier woman came along. A man just needed to write out a formal note declaring that he divorced his wife and she was free to re-marry, and that was it, he could now marry the better cook or the prettier girl! The wife had no such rights. Thus, they had elevated the

guarded permission that Moses had granted for divorce in some circumstances, in a way that completely undermined God's initial instructions about marriage. Instructions that had been given at the very start of creation. We might say that their teaching on divorce, and the enormous damage it caused to women was, 'an abomination in the sight of God.'

#### 4. The rich man and Lazarus

Jesus now goes on to tell a quite shocking story to illustrate the terrible position the Pharisees are placing themselves in. We need to read the story remembering it is intended to be a solemn warning to those who love money, but still think they have a living relationship with God.

"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. 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 torment in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. 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.' 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.'" Luke 16:19-31

Here are two men: a rich man with no name and a poor man named Lazarus. The rich man is pencilled in first. He is clothed in purple, the most expensive cloth of that time and the clothing of emperors and the super-rich. He also wears fine linen. Apparently, the wording suggests that it is his under garments that are of the finest linen. He is so posh that even the underclothes that nobody can see are only the best quality! He doesn't just have great feasts on a regular basis, he dines in luxury every single day. We are to picture a man of extreme wealth who denies himself nothing.

Lazarus, on the other hand, is a beggar. He has no wealth at all. He doesn't have good health either, he is covered in sores, whether as a result of his poverty and malnutrition or in addition to it, we are not told. In fact, his health seems to be so bad that Lazarus is incapable of walking. We read that he is laid at the rich man's gate, presumably by others. Having a gate, rather than a house door, implies the rich man has a large property with a wall around it and a gate in that wall. We should picture some kind of country estate. The intention of Lazarus being laid at the gate is that the rich man, and perhaps his wealthy visitors, might take pity on the desperately needy Lazarus, who would gladly have eaten the scraps falling from the rich man's table. The Syrophenician woman that requested that Jesus heal her daughter, says that dogs commonly eat the table scraps, so Lazarus was looking to share some of the dog food. He doesn't appear to have had any assistance from the rich man, not even those table scraps of dog food. The only sympathy coming to Lazarus from the household of the rich man is the licking of his sores by what were probably the rich man's guard dogs.

Now the beggar dies. No mention is made of burial, so he may have been thrown into a paupers' common grave, or even onto the rubbish heap, but, in a fantastic turnaround, he is carried by angels into the bosom of the great patriarch Abraham! Abraham is the great father of the nation of Israel: a very exalted character among the Jews. He is also the great exemplar of faith, and was, incidentally very wealthy indeed! These last two characteristics are very helpful in interpreting this parable. We can reasonably infer that Lazarus appearing with Abraham implies that he shared, to some degree, the same **faith** as Abraham as well as the same nationality. That is, Lazarus has gone into heaven based on a real faith in God, not because he was poverty stricken during his lifetime.

You might read Abraham's statement, a little later, to the rich man, "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 reach the conclusion that poor people get to heaven and rich people go to hell. You would have to ignore the rest of the teaching of the Bible to conclude in that way, but it might seem a reasonable inference from just those words. Remember though, that Lazarus is in the presence of Abraham, who was spectacularly rich! So the conclusion doesn't even fit with the details of this story: if rich men all go to hell, Abraham had been sent to the wrong place! Saying Lazarus was in the bosom of Abraham seems an odd expression to us, but it describes a place of intimacy. Remember how in John 13:25 John speaks of himself as, "Leaning back on Jesus' breast" and speaking privately to him. You need to picture men reclining on their sides on a couch, alongside each other to eat. The way to have a quiet word is to lean back and place your head on the chest of the person next to you. Imagine a filthy, smelly, lame, sore-covered beggar reclining onto Abraham's bosom – except of course Lazarus is none of those things now – he is transformed.

The rich man also dies and doubtless has the grandest and most expensive of funerals when, 'he is buried!' He too gets a transformation: from the lap of luxury and idleness into torment! We are now given some information about what happens after death that we get very little insight into elsewhere in the Bible. The rich man is clearly conscious and in torment. He is also able to see Abraham and Lazarus in a place of blessing. No doubt that only adds to his torment. We then get a dialogue between the rich man and Abraham. No words are spoken by Lazarus at all, and the rich man never deigns to address Lazarus directly! He maintains his sense of superiority and arrogance even in his torment.

First, he appeals to Abraham for some mercy, perhaps trying to claim some national blessing as a Jew by addressing Abraham as 'Father Abraham.' He obviously recognises Lazarus, which means that he can't claim he was never aware of the poor man at his gate. He has deliberately ignored Lazarus' need rather than simply not seeing it. Now he wants to carry on playing the rich aristocrat and have Lazarus stir himself up from Abraham's bosom to bring him some relief!

Abraham reminds the rich man of how matters were for himself and Lazarus during their lifetimes. This is really the key part of the parable. Remember, Jesus is telling this story to people who loved money, despised his teaching about not being able to serve God and mammon, and were seeking to justify themselves before men, while forgetting God had a very different set of values. The rich man had used all his wealth, and the opportunities it gave him, for his own comfort and pleasure. He had comprehensively served mammon and doubtless been thought a good citizen by most of his wealthy friends. He had 'spent' everything on the 'here and now' of this world and enjoyed all that it could get him. He had ignored the claims and commandments of God, and invested nothing at all in heaven. He could therefore not complain at how things had turned out; the outcome was perfectly just. Lazarus, on the other hand, had not had any of the money and opportunities of the rich man, but had apparently had faith in Jehovah despite the evil things that had come into his life. Now, in a great reversal, Lazarus was enjoying the consequences of trusting and serving God, and the rich man was suffering the consequences of doing the opposite. Not only so, their respective positions were now fixed. A "great gulf" prevented any movement in either direction,

even if it was wished for. While they were alive the men had options to choose and opportunities to repent and change, now those opportunities were gone, and the die was cast.

The rich man then takes another tack and tries to have Lazarus sent on a different mission! Having realised that his own position is hopeless he wants to do some special pleading for his brothers, who he evidently knows are headed for the same destination unless they repent and change course. He wants Lazarus sent back into the world, a world in which he had mistreated him so badly (!), to give a distinct and miraculous warning to his five brothers. Abraham's response is simple and brief: let the brothers listen to the messages from Moses and the prophets recorded in the law, that are preached in the synagogues every day. In short, they have the same opportunities and warnings as Lazarus and every other Jew has had, indeed that the rich man himself had enjoyed, if he had been minded to take them. Abraham infers that people end up in the place of torment because of the hardness of their hearts, not because of any inadequacy in the information and warnings they are given. The rich man, in his continuing arrogance, seeks to put Abraham right on his doctrine! He insists that if his brothers were to have a visitor from beyond the grave they would repent. Abraham closes both the dialogue and the story, by stating explicitly that, "neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead." He firmly locates the problem in the hearts of the hearers, implying that no amount of evidence and warning will move the hearts of those who are determined not to hear. We know from John's gospel that another man called Lazarus actually was returned from the grave by Jesus Himself, after he had been there four days. What was the reaction of the Pharisees to this miracle? Did they listen to the supernatural warning? No. They plotted to kill both Jesus and Lazarus. In due course Jesus gave His own life on the cross and rose again in triumph. Has this moved the hearts of the whole world to faith and repentance? Evidently not. Abraham had his theology dead right!

## Conclusion

Remember, I said at the beginning that the previous parable and teaching of Jesus about money had been intended for the disciples, the Pharisees had really just been eavesdropping. The solemn warning at the end of that parable was that Jesus disciples, those who have a genuine relationship with God, need to be very careful about whom they are serving with their lives; God or mammon. That was pretty stark. The warning in this parable of the rich man and Lazarus is actually far stronger. The warning is to those who **think** they are in a relationship with God, when they are, in fact, completely estranged from Him. If such people spend all of their time, money and energy on the here and now, what they have in this world will be everything they ever have. There will be no eternal blessing, no heaven, no comfort, only suffering and eternal separation from God. Warnings don't get any blunter than that! What about you? What about your family and friends, neighbours and colleagues? Who do you know that needs to hear that warning while they still have an opportunity to change?

Heavenly Father, thank you that You are always loving enough to tell us the truth, even when that is the last thing we want to hear. Please make us willing to listen, and ready to pass on Your warnings, lovingly and prayerfully when You give us the opportunity to do so. Amen.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on Luke's Gospel, Chapter 16:14-31, talk number T1145.

---

## Please Note:

We encourage you to use this transcript for your personal or group Bible studies. This material should not, however, be used in any publications without the express permission from Truth for Today, whose contact details can be found on page 1.