

**Berean BFC**

**5 July 2020**

**Lessons from a Former Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31)**

As Christ begins his earthly ministry, Luke records his Lord reading from Isaiah 61 on the Sabbath in his home town of Nazareth. It went like this:

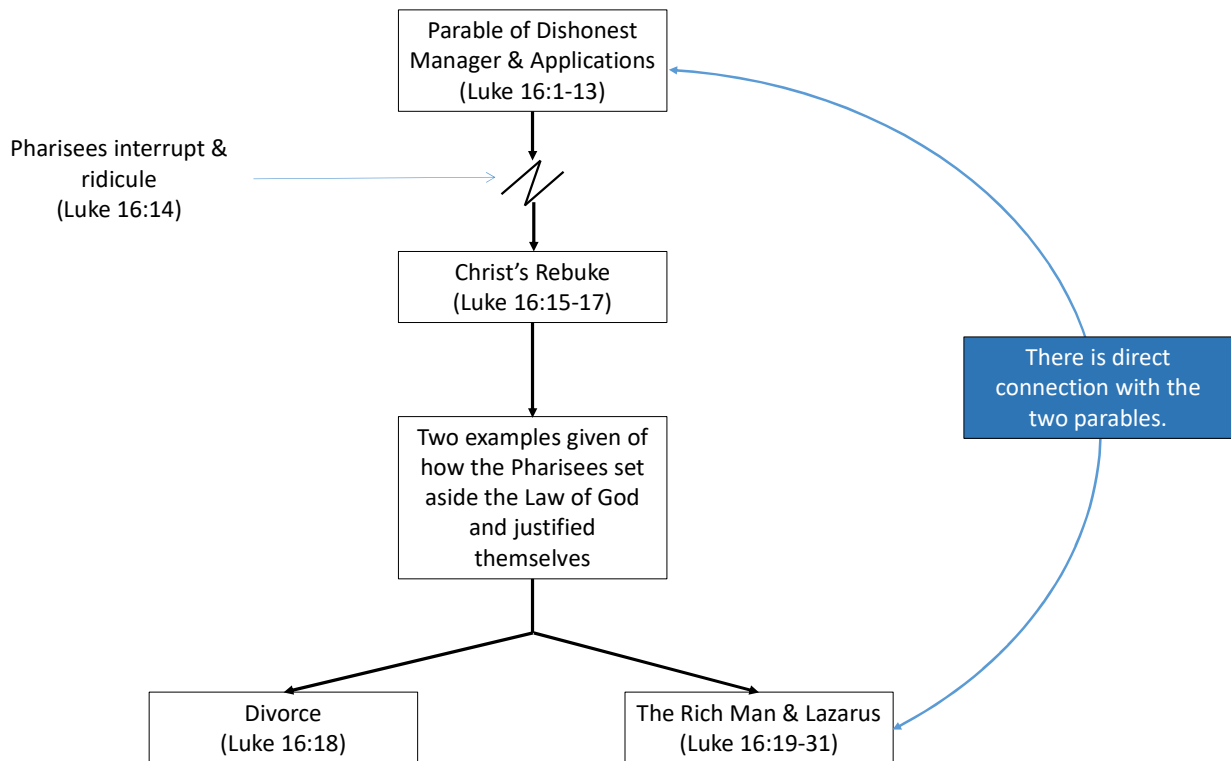
“And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He [Jesus] unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: ‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.’ And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.’” (Luke 4:17-21)

There is no better summary, at least in my opinion, of Christ’s preaching ministry than this. This really says it all. It was more than a 1000 years from the time of Abraham, but the long awaited Messiah had finally come to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom. To quote Isaiah again, “The LORD [YAHWEH] has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations, and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God” (Isaiah 52:10).

However, when we get into the nitty gritty of specific sermons and teachings, our human hearts recoil and give out a little cynical complaint, “Hey, wait a minute. This really doesn’t have the same the upbeat quality of Isaiah’s prophecy.” In Luke 14:26-27 we read, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever, does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple.” This is kind of hard to swallow. It’s not “uplifting and encouraging.” And there’s so much talk about hell and teaching against making wealth our god. In fact, our Lord spends more time talking about hell than he does heaven. How then do we reconcile the epic declaration made by Jesus in Nazareth on that Sabbath day with what takes place over the next three years? What are we to do with that? I would like to at least in part answer that question this morning by looking at the Gospel of Luke chapter 16.

At this point in his gospel, Luke is detailing Jewish opposition to Jesus and his teaching. In Chapter 14, there were the objections to healing on the Sabbath and Jesus taking shots at Jewish meal etiquette. In Chapter 15, as the Pharisees are grumbling about Jesus receiving sinners and eating with them, he tells the parables of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin, and the Lost Son to demonstrate God’s pursuit and celebratory welcome of the wandering sheep and the insignificant coin found, and the morally bankrupt son who humbly comes home. These all were directed to the Pharisees and crowd.

Now as we enter into Chapter 16, as Ed read the text, we see Jesus turning to his disciples, and then being interrupted by the Pharisees who were listening in. If you look at the bulletin insert, I have included an illustration of the chapter flow found here.



Let's read Luke 16:19-31 to see the linkage between the first parable and how Jesus deftly handles the Pharisees scorn and false teaching, and then to answer part of our dilemma with Isaiah 61 and Christ's preaching emphasis hell and the love of money. (Read the text.)

There are two key characters introduced in Christ's parable. First there is the Rich Man. Though, not royalty, "his whole life is a gorgeous celebration" as one commentator put it. The purple outer garment was the clothing of a king. The fine linen tunic was imported from Egypt. The imperfect tense of the verb denotes that he always dressed this way. His feasting was on par with his wardrobe. Before we think of him being a Greek or Roman or apostatizing Jew, I need to tell you he was an integral part of the Jewish community. Philip Ryken goes even further to write, "...the rich man came from a religious family. His people lived in a community where they could go to the local synagogue and hear the Scriptures of the Old Testament. If only they had believed what the Bible said, it would be enough to save them. They would know the promises of God about the coming of salvation, they would know that they needed blood to atone for their sins, and they would know that Jesus was the Christ. It was all there in the Scriptures: all they needed to do was believe it" (*Luke, Vol. 2: Chapters 13-24; Reformed Expository Commentary*, p. 205).

While having all the outward appearance of being a faithful Jew, the Rich Man lived in sin and unbelief. His sin was NOT his wealth. There were other godly men God had blessed in this way, men like Abraham. No, the primary sin was unbelief which manifested itself in coldhearted self-indulgence. There was so much self-indulgence and pleasure seeking that the Rich Man's conscience was seared to the point that he was able to daily step over or around beggars laid at the main gate of his home without even one thought of having his servants dishing up some leftovers to feed them. One final note, interestingly

Jesus gives the Rich Man no name. Making a name for yourself is near the top of what men of power and prestige grasp for to claim as a legacy. And yet, the Sovereign Lord of the universe denies him that accolade in the parable.

The second main player in this drama is Lazarus. His name is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Eleazar which means “God my help” or “God has helped”. Lazarus was the antithesis of the Rich Man—constant hunger and constant infirmities. He was too weak to get around and too weak to fight off the dogs. His friends or family would have been the ones to lay him at the Rich Man’s gate. Christ does not detail or describe any of Lazarus’ righteous deeds in order to emphasize the point that the only requirement for admittance into heaven is **our great need** and **total dependence** on “God my help” in life and death. Lazarus dies and even in death there would have been no honor or decency only a trench or common grave for the poor as the final resting place for his body.

The Rich Man also dies and is buried.

In death, Lazarus is carried by the angels to Abraham’s side or bosom. There Lazarus is comforted after a life of misery. This in no way is intended to teach that all the poor will inherit the kingdom. No, not at all. It is ONLY those who are poor in spirit, who mourn over their sin, who are meek, who hunger and thirst for righteousness. They are the ones who will possess the kingdom, be comforted, inherit the earth and be satisfied.

In death, the former Rich Man is now in immediate, indescribable, irreversible, and unending torment. While this parable was not intended to be a full blown exposition on hell because that was not its purpose, it is enough to show the outcome of a life sown to the Spirit and one sown to the flesh. As Calvin wrote,

“The Lord is painting a picture which represents the condition of the future life in a way that we can understand. The sum of it is that believing souls when they leave the body lead a joyful and blessed life outside the world, but that for the reprobate are prepared the terrifying torments which can no more be conceived by our minds than the infinite glory of God” (John Calvin, ***A Harmony of the Gospels***).

Ironically, the two names in life which the former Rich Man seemed to be oblivious to, he now knows. Those names are Father Abraham (the third key player in the parable) and Lazarus.

What’s up with “Father” Abraham? I think it is significant. It’s almost as if he’s claiming a faithfulness to Judaism. Even in the torments of hell, the former Rich Man seems to try to leverage a façade of righteousness to ease his anguish. Yet, in this life, he disregarded the heart and letter of the Law which he learned from infancy into adulthood. He blew off passages like:

Leviticus 25:35 – “If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you.”

Deuteronomy 15:7ff – “If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be. Take care lest there be an unworthy thought in your heart and you say, ‘The seventh year, the year of release is near,’ and your eye look grudgingly

on your poor brother, and you give him nothing, and he cry to the Lord against you, and you be guilty of sin.”

Psalm 52:7 – “See the man who would not make God his refuge, but trusted in the abundance of his riches and sought refuge in his own destruction!”

Proverbs 11:28 – “Whoever trusts in riches will fall...”

The second name we are shocked to learn that the former Rich Man knows is Lazarus. He cries out, “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.” Though neither man has a body, the former Rich Man is in such torment that the imagery here is wanting even a simple drop of water to bring relief. What audacity that maybe only the super-rich could pull off! The one who never showed mercy or compassion now requests it from the one who received none while on earth. But there is none to be given.

Now, please catch the connection with the first parable of the Dishonest Manager. Our Lord instructed his disciples to “make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into eternal dwellings” (Luke 16:9). Lazarus, the potential, but never-to-be-had friend, would have welcomed him into paradise. However, the former Rich Man **mismanaged his stewardship** by not using his unrighteous wealth to make friends demonstrating that his wealth was the god he loved and served.

Don’t misunderstand what is being said. This is not some payment plan for salvation. Instead, Christ’s teaching underscores the fact that the God we worship and serve dictates how we behave. It is in line with 1 John 3:16-19: “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and see his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him? Little children, let us not love in word or talk but in deed and in truth.” The obvious answer to John’s question is the love of God does not abide in him because if it did, he would be moved to care for his brother remembering that in Christ’s poverty he was made rich.

There is a second request. Read it with me beginning in verse 27: “And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him [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.’” Don’t be fooled here. There is no change of heart coming over the former Rich Man as if he has now developed an evangelistic fervor. No, unrepentant men love their own and do good to those who do good to them. Remember what Christ taught in the Sermon on the Mount: “For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same” (Matt. 5:46-47)? So, in an attempt to return a favor, the former Rich Man asks Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to scare his brothers into belief and right living.

Abraham’s response appears to be cold and lame, but that couldn’t be further from the truth. What was his reply? “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” Luke would capture this phrase one more time at the end of his gospel as he recorded the words of the risen Christ with two disciples on the way to Emmaus. Jesus “beginning with Moses and all the Prophets ... interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:27). Far from being lifeless, dusty commands and stories, the Old Testament Scriptures on every page point to the coming Messiah and what was required

for a just God to reconcile sinful men and women to himself. “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins **in accordance with the Scriptures**, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day **in accordance with the Scriptures...**” What Scriptures does Paul refer to? It was the Old Testament Scriptures. All the early evangelistic sermons and appeals were based on Old Testament passages.

But just as he discounted and discarded the riches, wisdom, and salvation found in Scripture while alive, the former Rich Man underestimates its saving power now. Again, there is no change after death—the reprobate heart remains the same. Hell brings no **change of heart**. The former rich man saw no **value, relevance** or **power** in Scripture while living and he continued to hold that belief in hell. He insists that Abraham send Lazarus back thinking that this will do the trick. Like so many today writing books about time spent in hell or those who want to talk with the dead, the former Rich Man was sure that this would awaken the conscience and provide supernatural guidance. But Abraham nails it. If your brothers won’t accept the warnings and salvation of the inspired word of God which are able to convert the soul, they will not accept the admonition of a dead man come back from the grave.

Both requests having been refused, the former Rich Man is faced to live out all eternity the words Jesus spoke in Luke 12, “And that servant who knew his master’s will but did not get ready or act according to his will, will receive a severe beating....Everyone to whom much was given, of him much will be required, and from him to whom they entrusted much, they will demand the more” (Luke 12:47-48).

**So, while on this epic Isaiah 61 mission, why did Christ preach so often and hard on hell and the love of money? It is because if captives are to be set free, they need to see and understand what holds them captive and what the end of that enslavement will be. (repeat)**

**I might consider cutting some material up top and spend some time developing this idea. Maybe even include an illustration that would drive this idea home. This is the main idea of the sermon and it takes a while to get to it.**

Let me ask you, are you like the Pharisees in the sense that you are a lover of money rather than a lover of God? Do you sidestep the Word of God to justify yourself before men, and somehow believe there will be clemency before God in the end. The love of money (**maybe make this more generic; the love of money is only a symptom of a greater problem, which is trusting in the created thing rather than the creator for hope and happiness, significance and security**) will blind you to:

1. The glorious magnificence of God which is of greater value than all the world’s riches
2. The Lord’s ownership of all things
3. The stewardship of what is providentially given to you—ultimately you cannot claim the “Atta boy!” for banking it; every good fortune is only due to the gracious hand of God and he commands generosity not hoarding
4. It blinds you to the plight of the poor and constructs reasons for their poverty and justifications for why your assistance should be minimal
5. And most damning of all, it leads you to believe God has favored you in this life and this favor translates into a saving act of justification on his part—you foolishly think your economic terms are identical to God’s, but “what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (Luke 16:15)

You do not need to be wealthy to struggle with the blinding love of money. In the end, rich or poor, this blindness leads to a financial reversal the likes of which we cannot comprehend. Remember Calvin's words: "terrifying torments which can be no more conceived by our minds than can the infinite glory of God." Christ's emphasis on hell breaks the disconnect we all have in thinking who we are and how we act have little impact on our eternal outcome / destiny. Scripture is clear: we reap what we sow. The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians: "Do not be deceived: God is not mocked, for whatever one sows, that will he also reap. For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up. So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith."

Therefore use Christ's sermons on hell to strengthen your resolve so that along with an 18 year old Jonathan Edwards we can say: "Resolved, to endeavor to my utmost to act as I can think I should do, if I had already seen the happiness of heaven, and [the torments of hell]."

Brothers and Sisters in Christ, we the American Church have known unprecedented wealth. At no other point in the history of the Confessional Church have the children of God experienced such comfort and financial blessings. We are dangerously close to resembling the Pharisees of Luke 16 and suffering from a Laodicean false confidence: "I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing." Today, we are standing on the precipice of judgment (if we have not already gone over the edge). Any fasting, prayer and repentance over the mismanagement of our stewardship should have started a long time ago. As our culture vents its full hatred against us and our Christ, we may potentially lose possessions and sources of income. Let us therefore daily kill our love of money and act the part of faithful stewards. May we be shrewd even in poverty to love God more and "make friends for [ourselves] by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive [us] into the eternal dwellings."