

## **“A Great Chasm” (Luke 16:19–31)**

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One of the great questions that people have is, “What happens after I die?” At least, that should be a question that we ask ourselves. Yet many people avoid talk of death and the afterlife, and that’s unfortunate. There was a comedian who was interviewed by *Time* magazine a few years ago. He was asked why he spoke so often about death in his stand-up acts. He said it’s because we’re all going to die. He made this analogy: it’s like we’re all getting on a bus that’s headed to Pittsburgh. The bus says “Pittsburgh” on the front, but when we get on the bus, no one is talking about Pittsburgh. Then, when someone starts to talk about that city and what they’re going to do there, people get uncomfortable and they ask, “Why are you talking about Pittsburgh.” And you say, “Because that’s where the bus is going. It says it right on the tickets!”<sup>1</sup>

This morning we’re going to talk about Pittsburgh, metaphorically speaking. Actually, we’re going to talk about what is beyond death. We’re going to hear from Jesus about two eternal destinations, what we would call heaven and hell. We’ll do this by considering a story that Jesus told, found in Luke 16. The story is something like a parable. The actual events are somewhat fictitious, like the events in his other parables. But this story teaches some very true things, things that Jesus wanted his original hearers to know, and things that God saw fit to record in the Bible.

If you haven’t been with us recently, we’ve been studying the Gospel of Luke. This is one of four biographies of Jesus found in the Bible. At this point in Jesus’ life, he is teaching about the proper use of wealth. God has given us everything to be used wisely, not just for ourselves, but for the sake of others and, ultimately, for the sake of God’s kingdom. In this story that we’re looking at today, Luke 16:19–31, we see how a rich man failed to do that.

So, without further ado, let’s turn to Luke 16:19–31. I’m going to read the whole passage, and then I’m going to go back and make four points about the text, and then some comments about what this has to do with the work of Jesus.

<sup>19</sup>“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. <sup>20</sup>And at his gate was laid a poor man named

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<sup>1</sup> James Poniewozik, “Louis CK Interview, Part 2: Money and Mortality,” *Time*, June 23, 2011, <http://entertainment.time.com/2011/06/23/louis-ck-interview-part-2-money-and-mortality>.

Lazarus, covered with sores,<sup>21</sup> who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.<sup>22</sup> The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried,<sup>23</sup> and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.<sup>24</sup> And he called 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.'<sup>25</sup> But Abraham said, '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.'<sup>26</sup> And besides all this, 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.'<sup>27</sup> And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—<sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.'<sup>29</sup> But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'<sup>30</sup> And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'<sup>31</sup> He said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"<sup>2</sup>

As I said earlier, I want to make four points about this passage. The first is that we see two very different men. First, there is a rich man, who isn't named. We're told that he wore purple clothing, which might not seem like an important feature, but purple dye was very rare. So were linen undergarments. In short, this man was clothed in very expensive clothing. He also "feasted sumptuously every day." In the ancient world, this simply wasn't possible. Most people ate a simple diet. But this man lived it up every day. The second man is Lazarus, a very poor man. This isn't the Lazarus found in John 11, the one whom Jesus raised from the dead. This is, after all, a fictional character. But perhaps it's not surprising that they bear the same name. Lazarus is a form of the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means "God has helped," or "God is my help." God helps this Lazarus, but not before he has a miserable life. He was covered with sores, and his lot was so bad that wild dogs came to lick his sores. David Garland, in his commentary on Luke, says, "Dogs [from a Jewish perspective] are regarded as unclean animals and are often mentioned as eating the bodies of the dead (1 Kgs 14:11; 16:4; 21:19, 23, 24; 22:38)."<sup>3</sup> In a way, this man was left for dead. Lazarus was brought to the gate of the rich man, with the hopes that he could eat some scraps from this man's table. We're led to believe that he never got those scraps.

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<sup>2</sup> All Bible quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

<sup>3</sup> David E. Garland, *Luke*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 670.

Now, we're not told a lot about these men other than these bare facts. But from what we see here, the rich man knew who Lazarus was. He even calls him by name. So, he was aware of this man's plight, and it seems that he repeatedly saw Lazarus lying in terrible condition outside his gate, but he did nothing to help the man. We don't know anything about Lazarus other than his poverty and terrible physical condition. He never speaks in this story. But he must have been a man of faith, a man who trusted in the God of Israel. The story doesn't tell us everything about why people go to either one of two destinations in the afterlife; we have to draw some inferences based on our knowledge of the rest of the Bible. For now, it's important to pay attention to what this story says about these two men.

We see that both men die, but they go to two different places. The poor man dies and is taken to "Abraham's side." This is what we would call heaven. There are times in the Old Testament when we're told that someone who died was "gathered to their fathers" (Gen. 15:15; 47:30; Deut. 31:16; Judg. 2:10; 1 Kgs. 1:21). Abraham was the forefather of all of Israel, a man of faith, someone who trusted in God's great promise to bless the whole world through Abraham's offspring. So, Abraham here is a representative of people of faith. But, more than that, in this story he's also representative of God.

By contrast, when the rich man dies, he goes to Hades. (We're told that the rich man was buried, but we're not told that about Lazarus, which suggests that he didn't have a proper burial because he was so poor.) In the Old Testament, Hades is called Sheol. It's the realm of the dead. But while in the Old Testament, Sheol is a rather neutral place for all the dead, Hades is known as a place of torment. The rich man says that he is "in anguish in this flame." We might call this hell.

It's probably best to think of both places as provisional stations of the afterlife. At the end of the Bible, we're told that the final destinations of all who live are either the new creation, a renewed and perfected physical world in which God's people dwell with God forever, or the "lake of fire," best thought of as a place of torment that exists beyond the world. But the Bible teaches that before the new creation and that final lake of fire, there is an intermediate state. For those who die trusting in Jesus, their spirits are in heaven. We're not given as much information about those die not trusting in Jesus, but it seems there is some kind of provisional place of torment, Hades. And that's what is being pictured here. Sometimes, this place is pictured as

being one of fire. Other times, it's a place of darkness and isolation and pain. It's best to think of it as a removal from anything good, apart from any of God's blessings.

What's interesting is that the rich man, though he's suffering in Hades, does not seem to show any sign of change. Yes, he does say, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me." That's because he's suffering. But he never suggests that he was selfish and greedy, that he lived a life of comfort and ease while he ignored the plight of a suffering man who was right outside his gate. In fact, the rich man still treats Lazarus poorly. He tells Abraham to send Lazarus to him to give him even a drop of water to cool his tongue. He's treating Lazarus like a lackey, and not like a person made in the image of God. The rich man shows no sign of true remorse, no sign of repentance. He's trying to control the situation in the afterlife.

As for Lazarus, we're not told about his devotion to God and his faith in God. But we are given a picture of the rich man's poor character. Everything seems to be about him. Yes, he later shows concern for his five brothers who are still alive. But earlier in Luke, Jesus said this:

<sup>32</sup> "If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. <sup>33</sup> And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same (Luke 6:32–33).

The rich man should have realized that Lazarus was his brother. In the Old Testament, fellow Israelites were regarded as "brothers and sisters," and there were commands to help the poor. Here is just one example, from Deuteronomy 15:

<sup>7</sup> 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, <sup>8</sup> but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be (Deut. 15:7–8).

And beyond commandments of the law, we find other statements in the Old Testament that show that a failure to help those in need is ultimately an insult to God. Here is Proverbs 14:3:

Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker,  
but he who is generous to the needy honors him.

When the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus, Abraham responds tenderly, by calling him "child." But he reminds the rich man that he had a life of ease and failed to help Lazarus, and now he is in anguish. Lazarus had a life of poverty and pain, not to mention the same of being licked by dogs, but now he is comforted. There is a great reversal. This is what Mary sang about in chapter 1:

- <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;  
<sup>52</sup> he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;  
<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty (Luke 1:51–53).

It is also what Jesus said would happen: “some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last” (Luke 13:30).

The rich man’s problem is that all his thoughts and cares are about himself. Theologians from Augustine to Martin Luther have noted that this is what sin does. The power of sin curves us in upon ourselves, so that we don’t look to God, who made us to live for his sake, and we don’t truly look to the welfare of others. We are selfish and proud, arrogant and greedy. At this point, I’m reminded of some lines from C. S. Lewis’s novel, *The Great Divorce*. It’s an interesting book, one that imagines a busload of condemned people given a chance to visit heaven. They are offered another chance to repent of their sinful ways and to believe in the God of the Bible. But they don’t. The book is a fantasy, not a work of systematic theology, so it’s not the place to go for clear answers on heaven and hell. But like all of Lewis’s writings, it has some powerful insights. At one point, a character says, “a damned soul is nearly nothing: it is shrunk, shut up in itself.”<sup>4</sup> The unredeemed soul shrinks, curved in on itself, shut up in itself. By contrast, the redeemed soul loves God and loves God’s creatures. At another point in *The Great Divorce*, it is said, “You cannot love a fellow-creature fully till you love God.”<sup>5</sup>

So, these two different men end up in two very different places, one of torment and one we must assume is a place of rest. The third thing we see is that there is a chasm fixed between these two places, and this chasm cannot be crossed. Abraham says, “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.” C. S. Lewis imagined the possibility of that chasm being bridged, but the fact is that the Bible is consistent in its teaching: once someone has died, it is too late to repent, too late to turn to God in faith. The book of Hebrews says, “it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment” (Heb. 9:27). There is no passage in Scripture that suggests that the citizens of hell want to be in heaven, nor does any passage suggest there is a

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<sup>4</sup> C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (originally published in 1946; New York: HarperOne, 2001), 139.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

way to get out of hell into heaven. Upon death, one's eternal destiny is sealed with an utter finality, and this should be sobering to us.

There are many people who claim to be Christians who think that there is some way for people who haven't turned to God in this life to be saved in the next. Universalists believe that everyone will be saved. Others believe that, somehow, God will save more people, who will ultimately be won over by God's great love. Yet there really is nothing in the Bible to suggest that this is possible. In fact, given what we see in the Bible, those who are condemned don't want God. They don't want to repent, just like the rich man. They don't see the error of their ways. The book of Revelation says that even while God is pouring out his righteous wrath against sin, people still refuse to repent (Rev. 9:20–21; 16:9–11). The greatest passage in Lewis's *The Great Divorce* captures this reality:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock, it is opened.

The Bible says that God gives people over to their sinful desires (Rom. 1:24, 26, 28). Basically, God says, "You don't want to live life on my terms? You don't want to love me and live for me? You don't really want me in your life? Fine, go your own way."

Now, the very notion of hell and judgment is off-putting to some people. But I don't think those people are considering things carefully. Imagine that the world that God created is like one big house. It's God's house, and he made the rules. And his rules are good, because God not only created the house, but he designed all of life. Now, there are some people in God's house who decide to break the rules. This isn't just an insult to God. It's also dangerous. It's harmful to the other people who live in the house. The rule-breakers are messing up God's house and hurting other people. And the fact is, they don't even want to be in God's house. So, at the end of the day, God will say to them, "Get out. You don't want to be in my house. You don't want to obey my rules. You don't truly love me or the people I have made. You must go." God is right to do such a thing. He's protective of his creation. And he's protective of his own glory. We exchange the glory of God for the lesser glory of created things. We don't worship the Creator. Instead, we make other people or things in this life more important to us. All of this is wrong, and God is perfectly right to kick us out of his house. Yes, there's anguish and torment outside of

God's house. But the fact is that though people experience that torment, they won't want to live by God's rules. It seems like the torment of hell goes on forever because the people there keep sinning forever.

Now, to get back to the story, we see something very interesting at the end. As I said, the rich man shows some concern for his five living brothers. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to them to warn them to change their ways, "lest they also come into this place of torment." At least the rich man has some awareness that how he lived led to his current state. But notice that he's still treating Lazarus like an errand-boy at best. Nevertheless, Abraham, who is representing God in this story, tells the rich man something interesting. He says of the man's brothers: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." He means that these brothers have the Old Testament, which should be sufficient to warn them against living like their dead brother.

The rich man protests. He says, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." Abraham knows better. He says, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." Think about that for a moment. Imagine that someone you know to have died appears to you, telling you, "If you don't change your ways, you'll end up like me, condemned and in anguish." If you've seen any of the many iterations of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, you know that this is basically what Jacob Marley's ghost tells Ebenezer Scrooge. Imagine how powerful that would be. Of course, this isn't going to happen. God could make it happen if he wanted; he is the God who made the whole universe out of nothing. He can cause the dead to come back to life. But God knows that sinful hearts are so hard that not even a messenger from the grave would turn people away from sin and back to him.

But what's stunning is that Jesus says God's word is sufficient. Abraham tells the rich man that if his brothers will not pay attention to the Old Testament, they wouldn't listen to a resurrected Lazarus. The Old Testament has plenty of warnings about misusing wealth and treating the poor poorly. The Old Testament has many calls to repent, to turn back to God and seek him with your whole heart. If people won't listen to that, they won't pay attention to a miraculous messenger, whether that's a dead person risen back to life, an angel, or a vision of Jesus himself.

This should tell us a lot about the importance of God's word. The Bible is enough to tell us everything we need to know about God to be reconciled to him and to live a life that is

pleasing to him. Yet many people don't realize this. At this church, we try to conform our practices to that idea. That's why we don't have gimmicks here. Many churches rely on entertainment. They try to make a big splash with events that have nothing to do with Jesus. But here, we make much of the Bible, because we try to make much of God. We spend time reading the Bible and talking about it because we want to hear from God. I preach messages that explain the Bible because I realize that the Bible is God's word to us. It's a message from him. Why spend time on cute stories, or funny anecdotes, when they don't have the power to save us from condemnation? They don't have the power to transform us. Yet when God's word is applied by the Holy Spirit to hard hearts, God can change a person. He can warn a person to repent. He can show a person the errors of his or her ways. He can comfort a person with the promise that all who come to Jesus can rest from striving to be their own gods and saviors. God makes wonderful promises in his word that all who come to Jesus in faith can be forgiven of sins, can be adopted into God's family, and can come back into God's house. In Jesus, we can come back home, to a place of comfort and rest. We wouldn't know that apart from the Bible.

Before I close, I want to show how this passage connects to Jesus. In this story, we see the reason why the rich man went to Hades. He didn't love his fellow man, a man whom he knew by name, who was laid outside his gate in the worst of conditions. The reason he was selfish and didn't care for Lazarus is because he didn't truly love God. We may not all be rich, but all of us have been selfish, fixed upon ourselves. We have all failed to love God and other people as we should. This passage doesn't teach that every rich person is bound for hell. What matters is not how much money we have, yet how we use our money is a reflection of where we stand with God.

In a similar way, it would be wrong to conclude that every poor person goes to heaven. We don't have any reason to believe that Lazarus went to heaven simply because he suffered in this life. What I mean is, if we read this passage in light of the whole Bible, we shouldn't come to that conclusion. The Bible makes it clear that all have sinned (Rom. 3:23), and that includes both rich and poor. I think that we're supposed to conclude that Lazarus was like Abraham, the man of faith. If you read about Abraham in the Old Testament, you realize that he was a pagan for much of his life. He probably worshiped false gods, just like his forefathers did. But the true God called him, and Abraham believed in God's great promises. Abraham wasn't perfectly obedient. He could be afraid. And his trust in God's promises wasn't perfect. His fear was a

reflection of some doubt. And yet, in Genesis, we're told that Abraham "believed the LORD, and he [God] counted it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). Abraham was not righteous, yet he believed God's word. As a result, God gave Abraham the gift of righteousness, of a right standing before him.

This is the way that sinful people are reconciled to God. None of us are righteous (Rom. 3:10). All of us have rejected God and rebelled against him. Just think of how often you ignore God. Think of how often we haven't sought him out. Think of how often we haven't looked to God for direction in our lives. Many of us don't wake up every day thinking, "God, how can I obey you today? How can I serve you? How can I bring you honor and praise today?" We often do what we know is the wrong thing to do, or we fail to do what we know is the right thing. God would be just to condemn us all. But the amazing thing is that God loves us so much that he gave us a way to be regarded as righteous in his sight. God didn't say, "Clean yourselves up and you'll become acceptable to me." God knows we could never do that. And God knows that if we did do that, we would become even more proud—"Look what I did!" So, God sent his beloved Son into the world.

Jesus, the Son of God, is the only person who ever lived a perfect life. He was never selfish and greedy. He always loved God the Father perfectly. He loved people so much he cared for their physical needs and he told them the truth about their condition. He warns us today not to be like the rich man, but to turn to him in faith. If you trust Jesus, if you realize that he is the Son of God, that he is the King of kings, that he alone can make you right in God's eyes, that he alone is the gate of heaven, then you are credited with his righteousness. You are regarded as being perfect in God's sight. But God is a perfect judge. He must punish all wrongdoing. He must punish sin. God punishes the sins of his people through the cross of Jesus Christ. Jesus was treated like a criminal, rejected, mocked, tortured, and crucified, not because he had done anything wrong, but because we have. On the cross, he descended into Hades. He endured the hell of God's righteous wrath as darkness covered the earth. He did this so all who turn to him in faith have their sins forgiven. Jesus' sacrificial death paid for all the sins committed by Christians. If you don't know Jesus, you can turn to him today and be forgiven of all your sins, even the worst things you've ever done, not to mention the worst thoughts and desires you've ever secretly harbored.

None of us deserve heaven, yet God opened up a way to that place of rest, beauty, and comfort. That way is Jesus. If you haven't put your life in his hands, do so now. I would love to talk with you about what that would look like in your life.

If you do know Jesus, consider what it would look like to show more concern for those who are in anguish in this life. We may not have a dying man lying outside our house, hoping for a few scraps of food. But we are aware of needs throughout the world, and there are ways that we can help the poor, by giving to agencies dedicated to helping them. There are many Christian organizations that help the poor.

But let us not forget that the greatest need everyone has is to be reconciled to God, to have their sins forgiven. We can feed, clothe, and house the poor in this life, but if they don't know Jesus, then they will be poor, naked, and in a place of anguish for eternity. If we truly love God, we'll truly care about where others are going to spend eternity. Heaven and hell are real, more real than this life, and we should see that every soul is bound for one place or the other. The chasm between those two places is one that cannot be crossed. Let us tell others to cross over to Jesus in this life while there is still time.