

LUKE 16:19–31. (EHV)

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen, living in luxury every day. A beggar named Lazarus had been laid at his gate. Lazarus was covered with sores and longed to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Besides this, the dogs also came and licked his sores. Eventually the beggar died, and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In hell, where he was in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus at his side. He called out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me! Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in misery in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus received bad things. But now he is comforted here, and you are in misery. Besides all this, a great chasm has been set in place between us and you, so that those who want to cross from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father’s home, because I have five brothers—to warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. Let them listen to them.’ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ Abraham replied to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Money is nothing more than a means of exchange. That’s it. I give someone money, I get something in return.

If I give someone a certain amount of money at the grocery store, they will let me walk out with a gallon of milk, a pound of bacon, and a block of pepper jack cheese. And they won’t call to report a theft.

If I give someone a certain amount of money at the theater, they will let me walk in, sit in front of a screen larger than one I’ve ever had in my home, and watch a bunch of people act like they’re other people in order to tell an hour-and-fifty-minute visual story. I can even spill popcorn on the floor and somebody else will clean it up.

If money is nothing more than a means of exchange, why does Scripture contain so many warnings against it? Why does Jesus sigh, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven”? Why does Paul have to warn us so earnestly against the love of money and tell us to flee from wanting to get rich?

The question is not, “Why are there so many warnings against it?” The question is, “If money is only a means of exchange, why do I love it so much?” Probably because, as a means of exchange, it produces results, often instant results, that we can see. If there is an empty spot in my house, I can go to a furniture store with enough money and suddenly it is occupied. If I am down in the dumps and I apply enough money to an interesting pursuit, I can cheer myself up. Money makes a difference, as we considered last week.

Jesus warns us today, though, that money only goes so far. Money makes a difference, but only a temporary difference. **Only God’s word makes an eternal difference.** Without God’s word, the richest person will suffer hell. With God’s word, the poorest person will inherit heaven.

1.

Jesus right away introduces us to two contrasting people. There's a certain rich man, and there's a certain poor man.

The rich man was dressing himself in purple and fine linen. Perhaps this doesn't communicate anything special to us, especially us guys. Some of us wouldn't be caught dead in purple, unless you're a fan of a certain football team in a neighboring state. In order to understand Jesus's description, we might think of someone who goes to work dressed in the finest custom-fitted, tailor-made merino wool suits and silk ties every day, and even when relaxing is dressed in extremely comfortable wool and cotton.

He also lived luxuriously every day. He enjoyed the finest food—meats, cheeses, breads, grapes, pomegranates, and other fruits. He had enough people working for him that he could pursue many of his own non-work-related interests, or just relax and take life easy. He lived in a gated mansion. He had it good.

The poor man, on the other hand, was placed outside at the rich man's gate to beg. He was covered in sores, and, like a dog, he longed to eat just the things that were falling from the rich man's table. And speaking of dogs, wild ones would regularly come and lick his sores. This likely increased the poor man's misery in two ways. First, it kept his sores open and kept them from healing. Second, he had to live with the depressing realization that these dogs were getting more satisfaction from his sores than he was from the rich man's table. And if they had access to his sores, he probably wasn't wearing too much more than rags.

But despite these vast differences, both men died. Death is the great equalizer. The old Scottish poet William Dunbar penned it well: "Unto the death goeth all estates, Princes, prelates, and potentates, Both rich and poor of all degree, The fear of death disturbeth me." We're told that the rich man was buried, probably a fine burial in a tomb. But he went to hell.

And even in hell, the rich man continued his selfish ways, even though his selfishness had landed him in hell to begin with and didn't bring him any comfort in hell. First, he sought *physical* relief for himself. He asked Abraham to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off his tongue. He is still treating Lazarus with contempt, wanting him to be his slave.

He also treats God's punishment with contempt. He tries to go behind God's back, asking Abraham to get relief for his pain, like a child who asks Dad if he can have a bowl of ice cream because he knows Mom won't let him have any. And he refuses to accept the finality of God's sentence. He is like a criminal sentenced to life in prison for an unspeakable crime who shakes the bars of his cell whenever a guard walks by and yells, "Let me outta here, just for a little bit, would ya?"

Yet we see how pathetic his defiance is. He was suffering such torment and agony in continual flame, that just a drip from a tip of a finger on the tip of his tongue was a most welcome thought.

When that didn't work, he sought *psychological* relief for himself. He had come from a family of eight—Dad, Mom, and five brothers. Yet, in addition to whatever poor example his parents had set, by his own words and example, he had helped to lead his brothers to seek after the world's pleasures and ignore what really mattered, what really made a difference. Can you imagine the thoughts of guilt that now plague him as he thinks of his brothers nearing their own

death? He does not actually care about their well-being. He only cares about silencing the endless cries of his guilty conscience.

So he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them so that they might not have to come to that place of torment. “They have Moses and the Prophets,” Abraham replied. “Let them listen to them.” “Moses and the Prophets” was shorthand for the Old Testament Scriptures, the only Scriptures available to them. Today we would say “the Bible,” the Scriptures available to us.

But the rich man shakes his fist in God’s face yet again. “No, father Abraham!” Just as he did on earth, he denies the power of God’s word. Just as he thought on earth, he thinks that what captivates the senses is what will make a difference. “If someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.”

Abraham silences him once and for all. “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” No miracle or vision, no matter how great, would work repentance to salvation. The word of God alone, the Bible, has the full power of God to persuade and save.

If we only knew the first part of the story, before the rich man and the poor man died, which would we have thought was better? Which would we have wanted to be?

The fact is that we should not care about either poverty or riches. We should care about whether or not we have the Bible, the word of God.

Yet whether we consider ourselves rich or poor, we all know what it is like to live more like the rich man than the poor man. What has more fingerprints, more wear and tear, in our homes? Our stuff or our Scriptures? How often have we entertained the thought that our church would automatically be bigger, richer, more active, more like “those other churches” if we just had the right programs and knew how to do everything right? When we’re wondering how happy we are, do we ask ourselves, “Do I have everything I want?” Or do we ask ourselves the only question that matters: “Do I have Moses and the Prophets? Do I have the Evangelists and Apostles?”

Friends, hear the rich man crying out! He doesn’t give a fig about what happens to us, but Jesus does. That’s why Jesus shares with us the pain and agony the rich man is in. Hear him shouting, “No, father Abraham!” Hear him shouting that something, anything besides the Bible makes an eternal difference, and look where that notion has landed him. Without God’s word, the richest, most well-off person will suffer hell.

2.

Now look at the poor man.

We passed over an important bit of information before. This poor man has a name—Lazarus. He is the only person named in *any* of Jesus’ stories not taken from the Old Testament. This *might* indicate that this story is not a parable, but a true story. But it *for sure* indicates something else.

It indicates that the rich man was just “a certain rich man” to God, but the poor man was Lazarus. The poor man was known to God. His name means “God is help,” and so it indicates that he trusted in God for help, even though his circumstances seemed to indicate that God was nowhere to be found in his life.

This poor man trusted in God's mercy, even though hardly anyone on earth was showing him any. He trusted that, even if the rich man would not let him through the gate to his mansion, God would allow him admission through the gates of the mansions of heaven. He trusted that, even if the rich man would not throw him a scrap from his table, God would give him a seat of honor at the wedding feast in the kingdom of heaven.

He trusted God because he did *not* live by what he could see. He lived by what God said in his word. The word of God said that his greatest problem was not his poverty, but his sin. The word of God said that God would send his Messiah to suffer and be pierced for his sins. The word of God said that God would not abandon his Messiah to the grave. The word of God said that through the Messiah the poor man, and all people, had life eternal.

Thus, when the poor man died, something different happened. I'm not talking about what happened to his body, which was probably just unceremoniously dumped into a hole in the ground. I'm talking about his soul. His soul was winged away to Abraham's side in heaven amidst the trumpet blasts of angels.

Here was a man who had not been able to afford God any great and glorious works in the eyes of men. What could he do? What could he give? What words of encouragement would have any effect coming from him? All he could do was listen to God's word, pray, and not begrudge the poor dogs the discolored matter oozing from his sores. Yet his soul was lifted to heaven straightaway! The quality and quantity of his works meant nothing. The only thing that mattered was that his few and meager good works were prompted by the one thing that saves - faith in Jesus the Messiah, created and sustained by God's word.

And once in heaven, how different things were! At Abraham's side he was clothed in dazzling white garments. At Abraham's side he was constantly receiving comfort. At Abraham's side there was no danger of him ever receiving anything bad ever again. No more starvation. No more sores. No more sin. Forever.

All of this he received through the word of God.

Brothers and sisters, use your Bible. If they have been collecting dust, dust them off. If they have been getting less use than other possessions, change your priorities. Only the Bible, God's word, makes an eternal difference in your life, because only the Bible works repentance which leads to eternal life. Only God's word works recognition of and sorrow over your sins. Only God's word works faith in Jesus for forgiveness of all your sins. Only God's word gives you the sure hope for an eternal life no matter what your troubles may be in this life. Only God's word distributes eternal riches at no cost to rich and poor without discrimination, since its author Jesus paid for the sins of the rich and poor without discrimination.

Money, wealth, a whole host of sense-stimulating messages and techniques can make a difference to an extent. But only God's word makes an *eternal* difference by quietly giving repentance unto eternal life. Without God's word, the richest person will suffer hell. With God's word and the faith in Jesus that it gives, even the poorest person will inherit heaven, and you will too. Amen.