

Lent

Bible Reading from Luke chapter 16 verses 19 to 31 AMP

The Story of the Rich Man and Lazarus

¹⁹ “Now there was a certain rich man who was habitually dressed in expensive purple and fine linen, and celebrated and lived joyously in splendour every day. ²⁰ And a poor man named Lazarus, was laid at his gate, covered with sores. ²¹ He [eagerly] longed to eat the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. ²² Now it happened that the poor man died and his spirit was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom (paradise); and the rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades (the realm of the dead), being in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom (paradise). ²⁴ And he cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in severe agony in this flame.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things [all the comforts and delights], and Lazarus likewise bad things [all the discomforts and distresses]; but now he is comforted here [in paradise], while you are in severe agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you [people] a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to come over from here to you will not be able, and none may cross over from there to us.’ ²⁷ So the rich man said, ‘Then, father [Abraham], I beg you to send Lazarus to my father’s house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—in order that he may solemnly warn them and witness to them, so that they too will not come to this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have [the Scriptures given by] Moses and the [writings of the] Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ³⁰ He replied, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent [they will change their old way of thinking and seek God and His righteousness].’ ³¹ And he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to [the messages of] Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’”

SERMON

If my maths is correct, we are 19 days into the season of Lent. Almost half way through this time of reflection. Just to remind us all, I thought I would look up a definition of Lent and this is what I read on the Wikipedia web site:

'Lent is a solemn religious observance in the Christian liturgical calendar that begins on Ash Wednesday and ends approximately six weeks later, before Easter Sunday. The purpose of Lent is the preparation of the believer for Easter through prayer, doing penance, mortifying the flesh, repentance of sins, almsgiving, and self-denial. This event is observed in the Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox, Lutheran, Methodist, and Catholic Churches. Some Anabaptist and Evangelical churches also observe the Lenten season. Its institutional purpose is heightened in the annual commemoration of Holy Week, marking the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, which recalls the tradition and events of the New Testament beginning on Palm Sunday, further climaxing on Jesus' crucifixion on Good Friday, which ultimately culminates in the joyful celebration on Easter Sunday of the Resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Lent is traditionally described as lasting for 40 days, in commemoration of the 40 days Jesus spent fasting in the desert, according to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, during which he endured temptation by Satan, before beginning his public ministry.'

'So, traditionally, Lent is concerned with doing penance, mortifying the flesh, repentance of sins, almsgiving, and self-denial.' Those words got me thinking. Are these concepts taught in your Church today?

Well I believe they certainly should be.

But what I continue to see is many Churches watering down any teaching which it believes its congregation might not find too affirming or exciting...

I've got to be honest, I can't remember the last time I heard a sermon about 'penance', 'mortifying the flesh', 'repentance of sins' or 'self-denial'.

Well, **I have talked to you** on a number of occasions about repentance. I have also talked to you about 'mortifying the flesh' - it's just that I didn't call it that; I referred to being 'born again' and 'crucifying the flesh'. And there are two key

New Testament Scriptures concerning ‘mortifying the flesh’, both written by Paul. The first is Romans 8 verse 13 (AMP) which says this:

‘If you are living according to the [impulses of the] flesh, you are going to die. But if [you are living] by the [power of the Holy] Spirit you are habitually putting to death the sinful deeds of the body, (and then) you will [really] live forever.’

The second Scripture is from Colossians 3 verse 5 (AMP):

‘So put to death and deprive of power the evil longings of your earthly body [with its sensual, self-centred instincts] immorality, impurity, sinful passion, evil desire, and greed, which is [a kind of] idolatry [because it replaces your devotion to God].’

And so those two Scriptures define what we mean by crucifying the flesh. It means, we need to bring to an end doing what our human desires cause us to do, and instead, listen to God’s still small voice - His Holy Spirit - and do what **He** tells us instead. Because what He tells us won’t be self-centred but Christ-like – and only then can we put God and others ahead of our own selfish interests.

Incidentally the very next verse, verse 6 says this:

‘Because of these [sinful] things the [divine] wrath of God is coming on the sons of disobedience [those who fail to listen and who routinely and obstinately disregard God’s precepts]’; and that is a description of unbelievers, one of whom was the rich man in our Bible reading today.

You may well be wondering what today’s Scripture reading has got to do with Lent. I read it in my quiet time at home on the morning of our last service here, and I felt in my spirit I needed to talk to you about it today.

I didn’t know what I was going to say at that time so, as I always do, I asked God to give me the words and I believe He did.

As I indicated earlier, Lent is about preparing for the death and resurrection of our Saviour, which we celebrate at Easter. It is about prayer, abstinence, penance, crucifying the flesh, self-denial, and repentance of sins.

And clearly, the rich man in the Bible passage practiced **none** of these attributes. This rich man represents a wealthy person who made an idol of his wealth. **‘Money’** had replaced **God** in his life. This man, like so many in the Western World today, worshipped money, fame and fortune.

Words - and come to that actions - like 'abstinence', 'penance' and 'self-denial' were not in this man's vocabulary. If the rich man couldn't even be bothered to offer the '**poor man named Lazarus, who was laid at his gate, covered with sores, some of the crumbs which fell from (his) table**', how much less would he have been prepared to help **anybody** else he came across. Lazarus was on his door-step!

And because the rich man was not prepared to repent of his sins, he ended up after his bodily death, in Hades (the place of the dead) where he was in torment.

The poor man Lazarus, however, went to 'paradise' when he died and was enjoying 'a blissful place of comfort and security'. Those are the words used in the Amplified Bible footnote concerning the phrase 'Abraham's bosom' which is where we are told Lazarus was lying.

As we take a quick look at this passage, we see some interesting things, especially concerning the rich man. We are told '**he habitually dressed in expensive purple and fine linen, and celebrated and lived joyously in splendour every day**'.

Purple die was expensive, hard to come by and so purple linen was worn solely by the very rich. It was like driving around today in a Porsche or Ferrari. It was a first century status symbol. This man was **seriously** rich.

We then discover that, even in Hades this rich man showed no repentance whatsoever. By the way, we know from Scripture that 'Hades' is the initial place we go to when we die; whether a believer or an unbeliever. I mention this because it is easy to get confused about where people go when they die. We often say, 'so and so' was a Godly person and is now in Heaven, but according to both the Old Testament and the New, on bodily death we first go to 'the place of the dead'. The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament for this place is translated 'Sheol' and it is the same place as the Greek word used in the New Testament, which is translated 'Hades'.

It is clear from the Scripture we have been studying, that both the wicked and the righteous go to this place called 'Hades' when they die, and that this 'place of the dead' has two segregated areas – one for the righteous (the saved), and one for the unbelievers and unsaved (that is the 'condemned' or 'damned'). It is only when Christ returns and defeats once and for all Satan and his demons,

that the righteous will go to spend eternity in Heaven with God and the angels, and the lost will spend eternity in Hell with the devil and his minions.

(Quoted from: <https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionary/hades/>)

Ok. Moving on...

As I just said, the rich man shows no repentance whatsoever. I am referring to his incredible arrogance and self-importance which are abundantly clear to all, as he says to Abraham ***“Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in severe agony in this flame.”***

“Send Lazarus?!”

This is the poor man Lazarus, who the rich man had completely ignored all the time he sat outside the rich man’s house.

Not “Please help me I am a terrible sinner, I am so sorry, I’m in agony, please soothe my pain.”

No, just simply: ‘Send Lazarus’. It seems pretty obvious to me this man must have had many servants whom he expected to do exactly as they were told.

Abraham gracefully replies to the rich man, without showing any anger; he simply reminds him of this: ***“Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things [all the comforts and delights], and Lazarus likewise bad things [all the discomforts and distresses]; but now he is comforted here [in paradise], while you are in severe agony.”***

This wealthy man was a Jew, not a gentile. He might have expected he was going to go to Heaven, because before Christ’s resurrection, gentiles knew they had no place in Heaven. The Jews were God’s chosen people.

The fact that he was a Jew is clear because Abraham called him ‘Son’. Sons of Abraham are Jews.

So the unrepentant, self-important rich man shouts out another ‘order’, ***“Then, father [Abraham], I beg you to send Lazarus to my father’s house—²⁸ for I have five brothers—in order that he may solemnly warn them and witness to them, so that they too will not come to this place of torment.’²⁹ But Abraham said, ‘They have [the Scriptures given by] Moses and the [writings of the] Prophets; let them listen to them.’***

Clearly this rich Jewish man made no time to read the Holy Scriptures and heed the warnings of the prophets of old.

Finally, and this I find particularly interesting; remember it is Jesus Himself telling the parable. Jesus tells us that the rich man then says **this** in an attempt to warn his family of the fate of unrepentant people who make idols their God:

“Father Abraham, if someone from the dead goes to them (the rich man was referring to Lazarus, but Jesus - in telling the parable - was referring to Himself, knowing **He** would rise from the dead). So let me read that again:

“Father Abraham, if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent [they will change their old way of thinking and seek God and His righteousness].”³¹ And (Abraham) said to him, ‘If they do not listen to [the messages of] Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.”

And of course, many of the ‘rich’ people in those days did not listen to Jesus. Not just those who were materialistically rich, but also those who thought they were spiritually rich as well. I’m referring to those in spiritual authority, such as the Scribes, the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the High Priest etc. And of course, it was *they* who had him crucified.

Generally speaking, those who made Jesus their Lord, were the poor, the meek, the ordinary folk; the repentant sinners - including those despised in society at that time like tax collectors, lepers, prostitutes, gentiles and the like.

One of my favourite men of God from the last century is Oswald Chambers. I’ve quoted him many times. In his Devotional ‘My Utmost for His Highest’ part of his entry for February 15th reads as follows:

“Why has God left us on the earth? Is it simply to be saved and sanctified? No, it is to be at work in service to Him. Am I willing to be broken bread and poured out wine for Him? Am I willing to be of no value to this age or this life except for one purpose and one alone - to be used to disciple men and women to the Lord Jesus Christ. My life of service to God is the way I say “Thank you” to Him for His inexpressible, wonderful salvation. Remember it is quite possible for God to set any of us aside if we refuse to be of service to Him – ‘lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.’ (1 Corinthians 9 verse 27).

The Rich man in this scripture was 'set aside' by God to spend the rest of his days (after his death) in eternal torment, because he refused to be of service to God. He refused to 'Love His Neighbour as Himself' as Jesus commands us to do. He refused to say 'Sorry God, I am a sinner. I turn from my selfish ways.' That is what repentance would have required of him.

It **wasn't** because he was rich, that when he died, he went to hell. There is nothing inherently wrong in being rich. It is not sinful to be rich. God blesses many of His faithful people with financial riches.

The Bible makes it clear that whether we are rich or poor, our salvation is determined by nothing other than whether or not we believe in Jesus Christ as our Saviour and turn from sin (repentance). And then, out of love for God and what He did to save us by sending His Son to die in our place, it is out of this love for God that we will respond by doing with our riches what God asks of us and expects of us.

That will usually involve giving some or much of it away, but God will tell us how He wants us to share our wealth if we ask Him.

In the case of the rich man in Jesus' parable, it was because of his selfish misuse of his fortune, his making an idol of his riches, and worshipping money rather than God, together with his unwillingness to repent, that sealed his eternal fate of '**severe agony in this flame**' (which was Jesus' depiction of Hell in the Scripture).

Tragically, many today will follow him to that same eternal destination. As Jesus said, after talking to another rich young man - two chapters later in Luke's Gospel, "**It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man [who places his faith in wealth or status] to enter the Kingdom of God.**" (Luke 18 verse 25 AMP.)

As we ponder what God has been saying to us today, let us reflect upon what we can or should be doing, during this period of lent building up to the Easter season, to put in order those parts of our lives that are out of sync with God's will.

For the rich man, it was too late, he had died and the doorway to Heaven was firmly closed.

One good thing about being alive is that Heaven's doorway is still open. There is still time to put right things that God is convicting us of. For example, to stop doing or saying things we know are not of God. To pick up the phone or write

that letter to say sorry to someone we may have offended, that we might never see again. To spend more time praying, or reading God's Word.

Whatever it is - and God will tell us if we ask Him - there is still time to repent of any sin that may come into our minds, to ask God to forgive us, and so rest in the peace of knowing that our salvation is assured.

God bless you all.

AMEN

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