

The Rich Man and Lazarus

by John Wesley

The sermon argues that the story of the rich man and Lazarus teaches us to beware of the dangers of wealth and materialism, and to prioritize our relationship with God.

Scripture: Luke 16:19

Topics: "Wealth and Spiritual Poverty", "The Urgency of Repentance"

Description

John Wesley preaches on the parable of 'The Rich Man and Lazarus,' emphasizing the stark contrast between earthly wealth and spiritual poverty. He illustrates how the rich man, despite his status and comfort, ends up in torment after death, while Lazarus, a beggar, is comforted in paradise. Wesley argues that true repentance comes from heeding the teachings of Moses and the Prophets, rather than relying on miraculous signs, as even a resurrection from the dead would not persuade the hardened heart. He warns the wealthy of the dangers of complacency and urges all to seek true riches in faith and good works. The sermon concludes with a call to recognize the urgency of repentance and the importance of living according to God's word.

Transcript

"If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."
Luke 16:31.

1. How strange a paradox is this! How contrary to the common apprehension of men! Who is so confirmed in unbelief as not to think, "If one came to me from the dead, I should be effectually persuaded to repent?" But this passage affords us a more strange saying: (Luke 16:13:) "Ye cannot serve God and mammon." "No! Why not? Why cannot we serve both?" will a true servant of mammon say. Accordingly, the Pharisees, who supposed they served God, and did cordially serve mammon, derided him: exemyktErizon. A word expressive of the deepest contempt. But he said, (Luke 16:15,) "Ye are they who justify yourselves before men; but God knoweth your hearts: And that which is highly esteemed among men, is (very commonly) an abomination before God:" A terrible proof of which our Lord subjoins in the remaining part of the chapter.

2. But is the subsequent account merely a parable, or a real history? It has been believed by many, and roundly asserted, to be a mere parable, because of one or two circumstances therein, which are not easy to be accounted for. In particular, it is hard to conceive, how a person in hell could hold conversation with one in paradise. But, admitting we cannot account for this, will it overbalance an express assertion of our

Lord: "There was," says our Lord, "a certain rich man." -- Was there not? Did such a man never exist? "And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus."- -Was there, or was there not? Is it not bold enough, positively to deny what our blessed Lord positively affirms? Therefore, we cannot reasonably doubt, but the whole narration, with all its circumstances, is exactly true. And Theophylact (one of the ancient commentators on the Scriptures) observes upon the text, that, "according to the tradition of the Jews, Lazarus lived at Jerusalem."

I purpose, with God's assistance, First, to explain this history; Secondly, to apply it; and, Thirdly, to prove the truth of that weighty sentence with which it is concluded, namely, "If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."

I. 1. And, First, I will endeavour, with God's assistance, to explain this history. "There was a certain rich man;" and, doubtless, on that very account, highly esteemed among men, -- "who was clothed in purple and fine linen;" and, consequently, esteemed the more highly, both as appearing suitably to his fortune, and as an encourager of trade; -- "and fared sumptuously every day." Here was another reason for his being highly esteemed, -- his hospitality and generosity, -- both by those who frequently sat at his table, and the tradesmen that furnished it.

2. "And there was a certain beggar;" one in the lowest line of human infamy; "named Lazarus," according to the Greek termination; in Hebrew, Eleazer. From his name we may gather, that he was of no mean family, although this branch of it was, at present, so reduced. It is probable he was well known in the city; and it was no scandal to him to be named. -- "Who was laid at his gate;" although no pleasing spectacle; so that one might wonder he was suffered to lie there; -- "full of sores;" of running ulcers; -- "and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table." So the complicated affliction of poverty, pain, and want of bread, lay upon him at once! But it does not appear that any creature took the least notice of the despicable wretch! Only "the dogs came and licked his sores:" All the comfort which this world afforded him!

3. But see the change! "The beggar died:" Here ended poverty and pain: -- "And was carried by angels;" nobler servants than any that attended the rich man; -- "into Abraham's bosom:" -- So the Jews commonly termed what our blessed Lord styles paradise; the place "where the wicked cease from troubling, and where the weary are at rest;" the receptacle of holy souls, from death to the resurrection. It is, indeed, very generally supposed, that the souls of good men, as soon as they are discharged from the body, go directly to heaven; but this opinion has not the least foundation in the oracles of God: On the contrary, our Lord says to Mary, after the resurrection, "Touch me not; for I am not yet ascended to my Father" in heaven. But he had been in paradise, according to his promise to the penitent thief: "This day shalt thou be with me in paradise." Hence, it is plain, that paradise is not heaven. It is indeed (if we may be allowed the expression) the antechamber of heaven, where the souls of the righteous remain till, after the general judgment, they are received into glory.

4. But see the scene change again! "The rich man also died." -- What! must rich men also die? Must they fall "like one of the people?" Is there no help? A rich man in London, some years ago, when the physician told him he must die, gnashed his teeth, and clenched his fist, and cried out vehemently, "God, God, I won't die!" But he died with the very words in his mouth. -- "And was buried;" doubtless, with pomp enough, suitably to his quality; although we do not find that there was then, in all the world, that exquisite instance of human folly, that senseless, cruel mockery of a poor putrifying carcass, what we term lying in state!

5. And in hell he lifted up his eyes." -- O, what a change! How is the mighty fallen! But the word which is here rendered hell does not always mean the place of the damned. It is, literally, the invisible world; and is of very wide extent, including the receptacle of separate spirits, whether good or bad. But here it evidently means, that region of hades where the souls of wicked men reside, as appears from the following words, "Being in torment;" -- "in order," say some, "to atone for the sins committed while in the body, as well as to purify the soul from all its inherent sin." Just so, the eminent heathen poet, near two thousand years ago:

_Necesse est

Multa diu concreta modis inolescere miris,

Ergo exercentur poenis --

-- Aliae panduntur inanes

Suspensae ad ventos: Aliis sub gurgite vasto

Infectum eluitur scelus, aut exuritur igni._

[This quotation from Virgil (Aeneid vi.737-742) is thus translated by Pitt:

"Ev'n when those bodies are to death resign'd,

Some old inherent spots are left behind;

A sully'ing tincture of corporeal stains

Deep in the substance of the soul remains.

Thus are her splendours dimm'd, and crusted o'er

With those dark vices that she knew before.

For this the souls a various penance pay,

To purge the taint of former crimes away.

Some in the sweeping breezes are refined,

And hung on high to whiten in the wind:

Some cleanse their stains beneath the gushing streams,

And some rise glorious from the searching flames." -- Edit.]

See the near resemblance between the ancient and the modern purgatory! Only in the ancient, the heathen purgatory, both fire, water, and air, were employed in expiating sin, and purifying the soul; whereas in the mystic purgatory, fire alone is supposed sufficient both to purge and expiate. Vain hope! No suffering, but that of Christ, has any power to expiate sin; and no fire, but that of love, can purify the soul, either in time or in eternity.

6. "He seeth Abraham afar off." -- Far, indeed! as far as from hell to paradise! Perhaps, "ten-fold the length of this terrene." But how could this be? I cannot tell: But it is by no means incredible. For who knows "how far an angel kens," or a spirit divested of flesh and blood? -- "And Lazarus in his bosom." It is well known that, in the ancient feasts among the Jews, as well as the Romans, the guests did not sit down at the table, as it is now the custom to do; but lay on couches, each having a pillow at his left side, on which he supported his elbow; and he that sat next him, on the right side, was said to lie in his bosom. It was in this sense that the Apostle John lay in his Master's bosom. Accordingly, the expression of Lazarus lying in Abraham's bosom implies that he was in the highest place of honour and happiness.

7. "And he cried, and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me." -- Thou fool! what can Abraham do? What can any creature, yea, all the creation do, to break the bars of the bottomless pit? Whoever would escape from the place of torment, let him cry to God, the Father of mercy! Nay, but the time is past! Justice now takes place, and rejoices over mercy! -- "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!" How exceeding modest a request is this! He does not say, "That he may take me out of this flame." He does not ask, "That he may bring me a cup of water, or as much as he might hold in the palm of his hand;" but barely, "That he may dip" were it but "the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue." No! It cannot be! No mercy can enter within the shades of hell!

8. "But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented." Perhaps these words may supply us with an answer to an important question: How came this rich man to be in hell? It does not appear that he was a wicked man, in the common sense of the word; that he was a drunkard, a common swearer, a Sabbath-breaker, or that he lived in any known sin. It is probable he was a Pharisee; and as such was, in all the outward parts of religion, blameless. How then did he come into "the place of torment?" If there was no other reason to be assigned, there is a sufficient one implied in those words, ("he that hath ears to hear, let him hear!") "Thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things;" -- the things which thou hadst chosen for thy happiness. Thou hadst set thy affection on things beneath: And thou hadst thy reward: Thou didst receive the portion which thou hadst chosen, and canst have no portion above. "And likewise Lazarus evil things." Not his evil things; for he did not choose them. But they were chosen for him by the wise providence of God: And "now he is comforted, while thou art tormented."

9. "But beside all this, there is a great gulf fixed:" -- A great chasm, a vast vacuity Can any tell us what this is? What is the nature, what are the bounds, of it? Nay, none of the children of men; none but an inhabitant of the invisible world. -- "So that they who would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence." Undoubtedly a disembodied spirit could pass through any space whatever. But the will of God, determining that none should go across that gulf, is a bound which no creature can pass.

10. Then he said, "I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldst send him to my father's house; for I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment." (Luke 16:27, 28.) Two entirely different motives have been assigned for this extraordinary request. Some ascribe it wholly to self-love, to a fear of the bitter reproaches which, he might easily suppose, his brethren would pour upon him, if, in consequence of his example, and perhaps advice, they came to the same place of torment. Others have imputed it to a nobler motive. They suppose, as the misery of the wicked will not be complete till the day of judgment, so neither will their wickedness. Consequently, they believe that, till that time, they may retain some sparks of natural affection; and they, not improbably, imagine that this may

have occasioned his desire to prevent their sharing his own torment.

11. "Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the Prophets: let them hear them." (Luke 16:29.) "And he said, Nay, father Abraham; but if one went to them from the dead, they will repent." Who would not be of the same opinion? Might not any one reasonably suppose that a message solemnly delivered by one that came from the dead must have an irresistible force? Who would not think, "I myself could not possibly withstand such a preacher of repentance?"

II. This I conceive to be the meaning of the words. I will now endeavour, with the help of God, to apply them. And I beseech you, brethren. while I am doing this, "to suffer the word of exhortation." The more closely these things are applied to your souls, the more ye may profit thereby.

1. "There was a certain rich man:" -- And it is no more sinful to be rich than to be poor. But it is dangerous beyond expression. Therefore, I remind all of you that are of this number, that have the conveniences of life, and something over that ye walk upon slippery ground. Ye continually tread on snares and deaths. Ye are every moment on the verge of hell! "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for you to enter in the kingdom of heaven." -- "Who was clothed in purple and fine linen." And some may have a plea for this. Our Lord mentions them that "dwell in kings' houses," as wearing gorgeous, that is, splendid, apparel, and does not blame them for it. But certainly this is no plea for any that do not dwell in kings' houses. Let all of them, therefore, beware how they follow his example who is "lifting up his eyes in hell!" Let us follow the advice of the Apostle, being "adorned with good works, and with the ornament of a meek and quiet spirit."

2. "He fared sumptuously every day." -- Reconcile this with religion who can. I know how plausibly the prophets of smooth things can talk in favour of hospitality; of making our friends welcome: of keeping a handsome table, to do honour to religion; of promoting trade, and the like. But God is not mocked: He will not be put off with such pretences as these. Whoever thou art that sharest in the sin of this rich man, were it no other than "faring sumptuously every day," thou shalt as surely be a sharer in his punishment, except thou repent, as if thou wert already crying for a drop of water to cool thy tongue!

3. "And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, who was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table." (Luke 16:20, 21.) But it seems both the rich man and his guests were too religious to relieve common beggars! -- a sin of which pious Mr. H. so earnestly warns his readers; and an admonition of the same kind I have read on the gate of the good city of Winchester! I wish the gentlemen who placed it there had seen a little circumstance which occurred some years since. At Epworth, in Lincolnshire, the town where I was born, a beggar came to a house in the market-place, and begged a morsel of bread, saying she was very hungry. The master bid her be gone, for a lazy jade. She called at a second, and begged a little small beer, saying she was very thirsty. She had much the same answer. At a third door she begged a little water; saying she was very faint. But this man also was too conscientious to encourage common beggars. The boys, seeing a ragged creature turned from door to door, began to pelt her with snow-balls. She looked up, lay down, and died! Would you wish to be the man who refused that poor wretch a morsel of bread, or a cup of water? -- "Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores:" Being more compassionate than their master. -- "And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried of angels into Abraham's bosom." Hear this, all ye that are poor in this world. Ye that, many times, have not food to eat, or raiment to put on; ye that have not a place where to lay your head, unless it be a cold garret, or a foul and damp cellar! Ye are now reduced to "solicit the cold hand of charity." Yet lift up your load; it shall not always be thus. I love you, I pity you, I admire you,

when "in patience ye possess your souls." Yet I cannot help you. But there is One that can, -- the Father of the fatherless, and the Husband of the widow. "The poor crieth unto the Lord; and he heareth him, and delivereth him out of all his troubles." Yet a little while, if ye truly turn to him, his angels shall carry you into Abraham's bosom. There ye shall "hunger no more, and thirst no more;" ye shall feel no more sorrow or pain; but "the Lamb shall wipe away all tears from your eyes, and lead you forth beside fountains of living waters."

4. But see, the scene is changed! "The rich man also died." What? In spite of his riches? Probably sooner than he desired. For how just is that word, "O death, how bitter art thou to a man that is at rest in the midst of his possessions!" However, if that would be a comfort, "he was buried." But how little did it signify, whether he was laid under a lofty monument, or among

Graves with bending osier bound,

That nameless heave the crumbled ground!

And what followed? "In hell he lifted his eyes." This, it is certain, ye need not do. God does not require it of you: "He willeth not that any should perish." Ye cannot, unless by your own wilful choice, -- intruding into those regions of woe, which God did not prepare for you, but for "the devil and his angels."

5. See the scene change again! "He seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom." And he knew him; although, perhaps, he had only cast a glance at him while he "lay at his gates." Is any of you in doubt whether we shall know one another in the other world? Here your doubts may receive a full solution. If a soul in hell knew Lazarus in paradise, as far off as he was, certainly those that are together in paradise will perfectly know each other.

6. "And he cried, and said, Father Abraham, have mercy upon me!" -- I do not remember, in all the Bible, any prayer made to a saint, but this. And if we observe who made it, -- a man in hell, -- and with what success, we shall hardly wish to follow the precedent. O let us cry for mercy to God, not to man! And it is our wisdom to cry now, while we are in the land of mercy; otherwise it will be too late! -- "I am tormented in this flame!" Tormented, observe, not purified. Vain hope, that fire can purify a spirit! As well might you expect water to cleanse the soul, as fire. God forbid that you or I should make the trial!

7. And "Abraham said, Son, remember:" -- Mark, how Abraham accosts a damned spirit: And shall we behave with less tenderness to any of the children of God, "because they are not of our opinion?" -- "Thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things." O, beware it be not your case! Are not the things of the world "thy good things?" -- the chief objects of thy desire and pursuit? Are they not thy chief joy? If so, thou art in a very dangerous state; in the very condition which Dives was in upon earth! Do not then dream that all is well, because thou art "highly esteemed among men;" because thou doest no harm, or doest much good, or attendest all the ordinances of God. What is all this, if thy soul cleaves to the dust; if thy heart is in the world; if thou lovest the creature more than the Creator?

8. How striking are the next words! "Beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed; so that they who would pass from us to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence." This was the text which occasioned the epitaph on a right honourable infidel and gamester: --

Here lies a dicer; long in doubt

If death could kill the soul, or not:

Here ends his doubtfulness; at last

Convinced; -- but, ah! the die is cast!

But, blessed be God, your die is not cast yet. You are not passed the great gulf, but have it still in your power to choose whether you will be attended by angels or fiends when your soul quits its earthly mansion. Now stretch out your hand to eternal life or eternal death! And God says, "Be it unto thee even as thou wilt!"

9. Being repulsed in this, he makes another request: "I pray thee, send him to my father's house; for I have five brethren; that he may testify to them." It is not impossible that other unhappy spirits may wish well to the relations they have left behind them. But this is the accepted time for them, as well as for us. Let us then address them ourselves; and let us beg our living friends to give us all the help they can, without waiting for assistance from the inhabitants of another world. Let us earnestly exhort them to use the helps they have; to "hear Moses and the Prophets." We are indeed apt to think, like that unhappy spirit, "If one went to them from the dead, they will repent." "But Abraham said, If they hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."

III. 1. I am, in the Third place, to prove the truth of this weighty sentence; which I will do, First, briefly, and then more at large.

And, First, to express the matter briefly: It is certain that no human spirit, while it is in the body, can persuade another to repent; can work in him an entire change, both of heart and life; a change from universal wickedness, to universal holiness. And suppose that spirit discharged from the body, it is no more able to do this than it was before: No power less than that which created it at first can create any soul anew. No angel, much less any human spirit, whether in the body or out of the body, can bring one soul "from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God." It might very possibly fright him to death, or to the belief of any speculative truth; but it could not frighten him into spiritual life. God alone can raise those that are "dead in trespasses and sins."

2. In order to prove more at large, that if men "hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be" effectually "persuaded" to repent, "though one rose from the dead," I will propose a case of this kind, with all the advantages that can be conceived. Suppose, then, one that does not "hear Moses and the Prophets," that does not believe the Scripture to be of God, to be fast asleep in his bed, and suddenly to awake while the clock was just striking one. He is surprised to observe the chamber as light as if it were noon-day. He looks up, and sees one whom he perfectly knew standing at his bed-side. Though a little surprised at first, he quickly recollects himself, and has the courage to ask, "Are not you my friend, who died at such a time?" He answers, "I am. I am come from God, with a message to you. You have often wished you could see one risen from the dead; and said, then you would repent. You have your wish; and I am ordered to inform you, you are seeking death in the error of your life. If you die in the state you are in now, you will die eternally. I warn you, in His name, that the Scriptures are the real word of God; that from the moment you die, you will be remarkably happy, or unspeakably miserable; that you cannot be happy hereafter, unless you are holy here; which cannot be, unless you are born again. Receive this call from God! Eternity is at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel!" Having spoken these words, he vanishes away; and the room is dark as it was before.

3. One may easily believe, it would be impossible for him not to be convinced for the present. He would sleep no more that night; and would, as soon as possible, tell his family what he had seen and heard. Not

content with this, he would be impatient to tell it to his former companions. And, probably, observing the earnestness with which he spoke, they would not then contradict him. They would say to each other, "Give him time to cool; then he will be a reasonable man again."

4. Now, it is constantly found, that impressions made on the memory gradually decay; that they grow weaker and weaker in process of time, and the traces of them fainter and fainter. So it must be in this case; which his companions observing, would not fail to seize the opportunity. They would speak to this effect: "It was a strange account you gave us some time since; the more so, because we know you to be a sensible man, and not inclined to enthusiasm. But, perhaps, you have not fully considered, how difficult it is, in some cases, to distinguish our dreams from our waking thoughts. Has anyone yet been able to find out an infallible criterion between them? Is it not then possible, that you may have been asleep when this lively impression was made on your mind?" When he had been brought to think, possibly it might be a dream; they would soon persuade him, probably it was so; and not long after, to believe, it certainly was a dream. So little would it avail, that one came from the dead!

5. It could not be expected to be otherwise. For what was the effect which was wrought upon him? (1.) He was exceedingly frightened: (2.) This fright made way for a deeper conviction of the truth then declared: But (3.) his heart was not changed. None but the Almighty could effect this. Therefore (4.) the bias of his soul was still set the wrong way; he still loved the world, and, consequently, wished that the Scripture was not true. How easily then, as the fright wore off, would he again believe what he wished! The conclusion then is plain and undeniable. If men "hear not Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded" to repent and believe the gospel, "though one rose from the dead."

6. We may add one consideration more, which brings the matter to a full issue. Before, or about the same time, that Lazarus was carried into Abraham's bosom, another Lazarus, the brother of Martha and Mary, was actually raised from the dead. But were even those who believed the fact persuaded to repent? So far from it, that "they took counsel to kill Lazarus," as well as his Master! Away then with the fond imagination, that those who "hear not Moses and the Prophets, would be persuaded, though on from the dead!"

7. From the whole we may draw this general conclusion. That standing revelation is the best means of rational conviction; far preferable to any of those extraordinary means which some imagine would be more effectual. It is therefore our wisdom to avail ourselves of this; to make full use of it; so that it may be a lantern to our feet, and a light in all our paths. Let us take care that our whole heart and life be conformable thereto; that it be the constant rule of all our tempers, all our words, and all our actions. So shall we preserve in all things the testimony of a good conscience toward God; and when our course is finished, we too shall be "carried by angels into Abraham's bosom." Birmingham, March 25, 1788.

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