

RUF Large Group Bible Study  
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Parable of Hell/Word (Luke 16:19-31)<sup>2</sup>

Luke 16:10 “One who is faithful in a very little is also faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. 11 If then you have not been faithful in the unrighteous wealth, who will entrust to you the true riches? 12 And if you have not been faithful in that which is another’s, who will give you that which is your own? 13 No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

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19 “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 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.’ 25 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. 26 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.’ 27 And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— 28 for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ 29 But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ 30 And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ 31 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.’”

Here’s Jesus again, doing things he’s not supposed to do. Many people think Jesus is the preacher of love, the giver of mercy, the provider of healing – only. He certainly is those things. But he spoke more about Hell than anyone else, more than any of the other writers of the Bible, probably even combined. If you say, I can’t believe in a God who would send people to Hell, that’s so repugnant and barbarian and un-modern, then you are saying that you are smarter and more moral than Jesus. Are you willing to say that? He didn’t have trouble with an all-loving and all-just God. He didn’t have trouble with mercy and justice. He didn’t have trouble with Heaven and Hell. Those were working concepts for him.

Let’s look at this parable, one of the most unusual of Jesus’ teachings to see what he tells us about Heaven and Hell. This is the only place in the Bible where we see the description of a person suffering in Hell. And this is the only parable where one of the characters has a name. This parable is one that was common in the culture, and in other cultures as well. Jesus takes it and makes it his own by turning a phrase or two, by using the words that the Pharisees would have spoken against them. What is Jesus trying to tell us? “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Mark 4:9)

### *The parable itself*

Obviously, this parable is about two different men contrasted to bring out a point for Jesus’ listeners and for us. The big contrast at first is the temporal and financial states of the men.

The rich man dressed in garments worn by kings, even his underwear was made from fine linen. He went to banquets during the day, because he didn’t have to work. He feasted as an occupation. But we don’t know his name.

At the other end of the economic spectrum, we have a man who lived in abject poverty. His friends had to carry him so he could beg at the gate of the rich man’s mansion. He had no medical care, so his skin was covered with sores. He looked like a skeleton, he smelled, he was disgusting as he survived on the scraps of food that were tossed his way. His best buddies were the dogs who came and licked his sores. But we know his name. Lazarus is short for Eleazer, which means “God is my help.”

Both were Jews in the story, which means that they would have known God’s law, they would have heard his teaching. But the rich man ignored God’s commands to care for the poor, even though he knew Lazarus by name. Every day he would have come across Lazarus and yet he never showed him any mercy.

I want to point out that we don’t read of anything else negative about this man. He prayed. He gave money. He was a good brother and perhaps a good husband and father. There is no indication that he was a bad person. The only thing he did in his life that we can point to at first is that he neglected to care for the people around him in need.

And what about Lazarus? The funny thing about him is that he doesn’t say anything in the whole parable. He doesn’t give a testimony to his faith, he doesn’t do anything righteous or noble. And yet he is escorted straightaway at his death to the lap of Abraham, a figurative term for heaven, the place where he is found to be in true relationship with the father of our faith and The Father Of Our Faith. Lazarus may or may not have been buried. He may have been thrown into a mass grave. No one would be there, and yet he is, at his death, dazzled with the riches of the father.

The rich man would have had a fabulous funeral; his family would have pulled out at the stops. And yet, once dead, he was stripped of all his riches and sent into Hell, a place described as a place of torment, a place where the wicked languish for forever.

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<sup>2</sup> My sources are: *Harmony of the Gospels*, J. Calvin; Tim Keller sermons found at redeemer.com and preached to Redeemer Presbyterian Church; John Piper sermon manuscripts found at [desiringgod.org](http://desiringgod.org); *The Gospel According to John*, DA Carson; *The Gospel According to John*, L Morris; *Exposition of The Gospel According to John*; A. Pink; *John*, Hughes; *Getting to Know John’s Gospel*; R Peterson;

The rich man wants comfort, but he gets none. The rich man wants someone to go tell his family about this place so they won't have to go there, but he is rebuked. The parable ends with the proclamation of the Word as sufficient for salvation.

We'll talk more about the applications of this parable, but this is the basic story.

Here are a few before we get to the big ones. The rich man isn't in Hell because he is rich. There is nothing wrong with being rich (Abraham was rich); likewise, there is nothing praiseworthy about being poor. You'll remember though, the warning in *1 Timothy 6:9-10*: "*But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.*"

There isn't a correlation with riches and spiritual poverty.<sup>3</sup> The correlation is between *loving* riches and spiritual poverty. Being rich definitely didn't help the rich man – he was led away from the Lord because he idolized his comfort and wealth. And being poor apparently helped Lazarus, because he was able to turn his eyes toward heaven more easily. Lazarus' poverty was an indirect blessing to him, forcing him to draw near to God, read, pray, find God. This is often the case in countries and societies where they struggle to make a living. In the midst of hunger and economic hardship, faith is alive and vibrant.

But there are rich people in heaven and hell, and poor people in heaven and hell. We could maybe better describe these men as rich financially but poor spiritually, poor financially but rich spiritually. Or the poor rich man, and the rich poor man.

I've said this many times, but it needs to be repeating. You are among the top 5% richest people in the world. I would guess you have never missed a day's worth of food, unless you did so on purpose or were sick. You have never slept outside, unless you did so on purpose because you went camping. You have never walked five miles so you could work for one dollar for the day. In fact, some of you may have never actually done physical labor at all.

Are you a poor rich person? Are you physically rich but spiritually poor? Or are you a rich rich person?

### ***Jesus teaches about Hell (or "Ah, Hell!")***

So what are we to make of the Hell stuff? Old fashioned thinking, like the world is flat and the earth is the center of the universe kind of stuff? Death is the great equalizer, for we all must face it regardless of what you think happens afterwards. Shakespeare wrote, "golden lads and girls all must, as chimney-sweepers, come to dust."

Let me point out a problem you have if you don't believe in Hell. What happens when we die? You basically have three options: the first is that there is an afterlife and it is divided between a good place and a bad place. The second is that there is an afterlife and everyone goes to the same place (usually a positive one). The third is that there is no afterlife at all. You just die and that's it. You're relegated to pushing up flowers, ala Whitman's beautifully sad poems.

If you don't believe in an afterlife, you are saying that this is all there is, and that your life here on earth basically has no higher purpose than for you to survive from day to day. This is a purely biological, evolutionary view. Unreligious of course most of the time, secular in its thinking. But if that is true, if there is no afterlife, why do you think that your life right now has a meaning? If this is all there is, then why do you get so hot and bothered if things don't go your way? There can't be meaning inbetween two infinite spots that don't have meaning, can there? You're saying there is no meaning in the infinite past, and there is no meaning in the infinite future, but there is meaning *now*? I would submit that you certainly live as if there is meaning now, but your stated worldview contradicts the way you live. You can do that of course, but you must realize that you are living contrary to your position.

The Bible clearly teaches that this life has a meaning, a purpose, because you are a soul that has been created to live for forever in relationship to God and His world. And yet you have lived in rebellion to that purpose since the day you were conceived. The Bible teaches that God is holy and just, therefore He cannot leave sins (the word for these acts of rebellion) unpunished. Some of these sins are punished here on earth in a temporal sense – people are put in jail, money is reimbursed from those who stole it, wrongs are tried to be made right. But there is an ultimate judge who sees all who will eventually judge everything. And we all deserve this judgment – to be sent to eternal prison, to Hell for our sins of thought and deeds, for doing wrong and for not doing right.

Now what is this Hell? I don't know all about it, but I have a few thoughts for you tonight.

Hell is the natural progression of sin. In other words, sin is a mini-Hell, a foretaste of Hell. Huh?

Here is an illustration. Say you buy a new computer. The makers of this computer send you an operator's manual to tell you how to run the computer. They do this so that you will best be able to use the computer for its designed purposes. You get the manual, and say to yourself – this is restrictive! This is oppressive! This is manipulative! They have superceded my freedoms and put letters on my keyboard! They have said I have to plug it in to the wall in order for it to receive power! They have forced me to use it for things I don't want to use it for. So you don't type on it (you don't believe in the alphabet), you never plug it in, but instead want to put it outside so it can run on windpower, and you decide it would be good to use it to hammer in nails and various other house projects you have.

You've heard this illustration before. Is it restrictive that you have to put gas in your car? Why not water or beans or grass?

Things run best when they run according to their design, according to their purpose, as told to you by the designer.

When you don't run your life according to its design, given to you by the designer, you are breaking down the very nature of that life. That is sin. It's a much bigger concept than just doing wrong things. It's living contrary to the design you were given. Some of you would like to be Christians, but you have heard or you know that that means you have to reserve your sexuality for your spouse, or you have to tell the truth, or stop cheating, or stop getting drunk. You don't want someone telling you what to do. It all sounds too restrictive.

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<sup>3</sup> "The parable overturns conventional Jewish wisdom which saw the rich as blessed by God and the poor as punished for their wickedness." Blomberg, p. 206<sup>3</sup>

But when you live contrary to your design, you break down. You disintegrate.

Sin is like a fire destroying your life. When a fire burns a log, what happens to the log? All the “stuff” is still there, isn’t it? Atoms aren’t destroyed, they are displaced, made into something that is scattered and unconnected. The fiber that connects them is taken apart. Smoke and ash is what you get. The log is gone in some ways and not gone in others. *Colossians 1:17* says: “*And He is before all things, and in Him all things consist.* (NKJ) or “*And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*” (ESV) The structural integrity of our hearts, our minds, our bodies, everything is held together by God. Sin corrupts that. Like an acid, it seeps in and destroys the integrity of whatever it touches.

So this is what sin is. When you disregard God’s law, his way of thinking about the world, his design about yourself and the way you were made, about Him, you are putting yourself into fire and it is disintegrating you. It is a dangerous place to be.

We have a fireplace. Sometimes in the morning, I poke around and the log is still there, underneath the ashes. Other times, the log is gone as far as being a log goes. I have only ash. If you continue to allow sin to eat you, you may have no log left, my friend. Do you take sin seriously like this? Do you see it as your foe, something to be fought against, something you must wage war against?

Hell is the ultimate place where disintegration happens in its fullness.

Now we can talk about this in abstract and illustrative terms like this, and it sounds terrible. Who wants to disintegrate, right? That’s just it. We all do. Because of Adam’s sin, because of the nature of sin, because of Satan’s lies, we actually like sin. Left in our natural states, we prefer it. The Death Eaters in Harry Potter don’t have to follow Lord Voldemort, but they want to. Think of a little kitten stuck in a tree. If you go to help it, what might you get? Hissed at, struck at – anything but wanting to be helped.

Look at the rich man in the parable. He doesn’t exactly give the indication that he really wants to be anywhere but where he is. He is still treating Lazarus as a servant. He never repents. He doesn’t say he’s sorry. Though he prays, he asks for his desires to be met. Even in what appears to be concern for the others is the attitude that he was wronged. If he just had the right information, he says, he would have done better – he’s being unjustly imprisoned.

Does that seem strange, that he wouldn’t instantly see things as they really are? Do you have the conception of Hell as a place where people are screaming and yelling and wishing and crying out to be anywhere but there? That they want to be in Heaven but God just won’t let them? Like they’re crawling towards the opening out of Hell, but God slams the lid on them and sends them back where they belong? CS Lewis talks about Hell being shut, but it is shut *from the inside*.<sup>4</sup>

I have to admit that this is somewhat a new thought for me as well. It makes me shudder, to be honest.

There are two types of judgment. The first is the spanking. This is active judgment. You can think of the flood where God sent judgment on people. The other kind though is the removal of help, a withdrawal. You can imagine my kids trying to make pancakes with me standing there to help. I bend over and open the package, help crack the eggs. Dad, get lost! I can do it! If I withdraw my helping hand, that is a judgment. You think you can do it? You don’t want my help? Go ahead then. I’ll let you. That is a passive judgment, and I will submit far worse than the first. Disaster ensues, but the recipients don’t know it. They have finally gotten what they longed for – independence.

Every sin we commit is, if you are tracking with me, a rebellion against the way we were made. It is a declaration of our independence to our designer and creator. It is standing on the desk and quoting “I am the captain of my fate!” It is independence writ large, or small, but asserted and lived out. So what we’re saying is that Hell is the ultimate in that. It is where God finally does leave you alone, He finally does let you have what you want – complete independence from Him for forever. Lewis writes, “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.”<sup>5</sup>

Again, here Lewis, “The whole difficulty of understanding Hell is that the thing to be understood is so nearly Nothing. But ye’ll have had the experiences... it begins with a grumbling mood, and yourself still distinct from it; perhaps criticizing it. And yourself, in a dark hour, may will that mood, embrace it. Ye can repent and come out of it again. But there may come a day when you can do that no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood, nor even to enjoy it, but just to grumble itself going on forever like a machine.”<sup>6</sup>

So what are we to make of these thoughts? Am I only trying to scare you to into Heaven? I hope you know me better than that. But we must speak of Hell, since Jesus does. I want you to think about these things. First, do you see that sin is the disintegration of how you were designed? That when you disobey God, you are hurting yourself, however counterintuitive it feels at the time. Pornography may feel good and right at the time, but it destroys who you are. That’s just one example. Next, as you realize that we were made to live according to God’s design., you need to see that you have the capacity to live that way now. When you don’t you are in Hell’s suburb. If you refuse to repent and change your heart, then you may end up living downtown eventually. The little sins in your life that you are keeping going, the ones that you don’t think anyone knows about, the ones that are no big deal, these must be brought out in the light and dealt with. You need to repent of those, because like an acid they are slowly eating away at the very fiber of your life. If you are a Christian, you need to see that you aren’t being who you are. Be who you are! You are a Christian, a child of the light! A beloved son or daughter of the King of Kings! Be that person, not someone poking around in darkness, conspiring with the enemy, hiding harmful things in your life. If you aren’t a Christian, then it is time for you to repent and believe. To forsake these things that aren’t helping you but in fact hurting you. To receive a new name, God is my help.

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<sup>4</sup> “I willingly believe that the damned are, in one sense, successful, rebels to the end; that the doors of hell are locked on the inside.” *The Problem of Pain*, chap 8, para 11, p. 127

<sup>5</sup> *The Great Divorce*, chap 9, pp. 72-73

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*, chap 9, p 75

### ***The Difference***

For that is one of the differences between these two men. As we've said, Lazarus doesn't make a peep this whole time. Why is he in heaven? Not because he is poor, not because he is a Jew, not because he is quiet, not because he is a good person. Because God knows his name. Because his name is God is my help. He has surrendered his life to a Redeemer and thus received a whole new life. He has made himself a slave, and thus become adopted as a prince.

And the rich man? He remains nameless. Who or what is his help? Not God, that is for sure. The rich man had his focus, his ultimate good in everything but God. Money was his help. Reputation was his help. Feasting and clothes were his help. Abraham told him this, "*you in your lifetime received your good things.*" The things he had trusted in, his helps, were gone. And still, there in Hell, he didn't repent. He didn't cry out and understand the true nature of things. He still felt that Lazarus should serve him. He still felt slighted and mistreated. He still thought he shouldn't be there, but refused to humble himself and acknowledge the true nature of things.

So the first difference is the name. God gave Lazarus a name, God is my help. Friends, is that true of you? Who is your help? What is your ultimate good? Is there something in your life, that if it were taken away, you would be devastated? Undone? A girlfriend or boyfriend? A husband or wife? A career? A position? Your children someday? Your status? Your cars or boats or houses or vacations? Those cannot bear the weight of your soul, and yet so many of you try to make them the meaning of life for you. Relinquish your hold and cry out to God as your help, alone. Seek him, his face, not what He can do for you, but Him alone. Make Him your help.

The other difference is at the end of the passage. Abraham explains to the rich man, "*If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.*" You cannot blame God for your lack of closeness to Him. We believe here at RUF that God is sovereign and man is responsible. God does not create evil within you. You have more than enough already. Your judgment and punishment are perfectly just, if He chooses to give it to you. Abraham tells the rich man that the Old Testament is enough to show a person that He needs to give over control of his life, he needs to have a substitute to pay for his sin, he needs to acknowledge a God who is Spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness and truth.

You have all you need. This passage says that even if someone came back from the dead, you would find a way to dismiss that as hooey. Your sinful mind works that way. Signs and wonders won't help. Speaking in tongues won't make people believe. Healings won't penetrate to awaken someone. What makes people believe? The Word of God. Seeing it and hearing it, and dealing with it.

Hear the Westminster Shorter Catechism on this:

Q 89: How is the Word to be read and heard, so that it may be made effectual to salvation.

A: The Spirit of God maketh the reading, but especially the preaching, of the Word, an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners, and of building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

Q 90: How is the Word to be read and heard, that it may become effectual to salvation?

A: That the Word may become effectual to salvation, we must attend thereunto with diligence, preparation, and prayer; receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives.

Here are three quotes to end us:

The abiding rule of listening to God's Word obediently and thankfully. Love God and love our neighbors, materially and spiritually. The theme of "too late" winds through all portions of the passage, weaving it into a tightly-knit unity. The rich man pays attention to Lazarus too late, he sees the unbridgeable chasm too late, he worries about his brothers too late, and he heeds the law and the prophets too late."<sup>7</sup>

"Some lust for angels to come down from heaven, some for the dead to rise from their graves, some for ever new miracles to seal what they hear, some for voices to thunder from heaven. But if it came to pass that God fell in with all these perverted wishes, we should be no further forward, for God has included in his Word whatever it is useful for us to know, and He has witnessed and proved the authority of this Word with genuine seals. Moreover, faith does not depend on miracles or portents. It is the special gift of the Spirit and is born of the Word. Finally, it is the office proper to God Himself to draw us to Him, and it is His will to work effectively through His Word. Therefore it is no hope that those media will avail us which divert us from obedience to the Word... But here Christ is only saying that those who are deaf and stubborn against the teaching of the Law cannot be corrected by the dead or brought to a sound frame."<sup>8</sup>

"Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." Psalm 95:7-8

Jesus paid the penalty for the sins of His people. He suffered an eternity of Hells for an innumerable number of His children. The wrath of God He suffered pained Him, for He deserved Heaven, not Hell. He had never sinned, had never declared His independence, had never experienced disintegration. And yet, He was punished as if He had. He went under the judgment of fire, He felt God's pleasure and His love for Him depart. He bled to save the kitten in the tree, the one who didn't even want saving.

My friend, if you hear his voice today, do not harden your hearts.

Repent and believe.

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<sup>7</sup> Blomberg, p. 204

<sup>8</sup> Calvin, p. 123