

## The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31 (New American Standard Bible)

<sup>19</sup> “Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, enjoying himself in splendor every day. <sup>20</sup> And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, <sup>21</sup> and longing to be fed from the scraps which fell from the rich man’s table; not only that, the dogs also were coming and licking his sores. <sup>22</sup> Now it happened that the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to **Abraham’s arms**; and the rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> And in **Hades** he raised his eyes, being in torment, and \*saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his arms. <sup>24</sup> And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus, so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.’ <sup>25</sup> But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup> And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set, so that those who want to go over from here to you will not be able, nor will any people cross over from there to us.’ <sup>27</sup> And he said, ‘Then I request of you, father, that you send him to my father’s house— <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not come to this place of torment as well.’ <sup>29</sup> But Abraham \*said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ <sup>30</sup> But he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!’ <sup>31</sup> But he said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.’”

### Introduction

The audience is the Pharisees. They claimed that they loved God. They also loved money (Luke 16:14). So when Jesus said that no one can serve two masters: God and money, they ridiculed Him (Luke 16:13).

Their theology goes like this: wealth is the evidence of God’s favor. You have wealth because God has blessed you, and God has blessed you because you obeyed His commandments (Wealth=blessing of God=obedience to God’s commandments). Their view was based on Deuteronomy 28: *obey God and He will bless you wherever you go and whatever you do* (F. Craddock). It resembles a modern day ‘health and wealth’ theology.

Here’s the problem of such theology: the Pharisees interpreted the Law of Moses in the ways that they chose to. They loved Deuteronomy 28 yet failed to remember another chapter in the same book that spells out “*You shall open wide your hand to your brother, to the needy and to the poor, in the land*” (Deuteronomy 15:7-11).

To the audience with such mindset, Jesus teaches a parable of the rich man. By the way, the Latin Bible (the Vulgate) calls the name of the rich man Dives (pronounced: 'daivz), so will I call him Dives here. Dives was a believer in God, yet he was caught in three traps that

cost him eternal life in the presence of God. Let me tell you what those three traps are so that we may not fall into the same fate.

## **Content**

First, self-centeredness.

### **Self-Centeredness**

Dives's life: Humanly speaking, it couldn't be any better. It was the life anyone of us would dream of. It was the true manifestation of American Dream. The Scripture puts this way: he fared '*splendidly*' (*lampros*—where the English word, 'lamp,' comes from) or dined '*sumptuously*' every day. He was "*clothed in garments worthy of a king; he is a connoisseur of the finest cuisine*" (Danker). He would throw a party and celebrate every day.

Life couldn't get any better than that for him. As a matter of fact, it was so good that he wrapped himself up with the security in his own wealth. His life was so comfortable that he was living in a cocoon of self-centeredness, which in turn made him callous to the cries of the needy in his neighborhood.

Please note here that he was not an immoral man. He was not accused of refusing a minimum of alms to Lazarus. As a matter of fact, beggars in those days "*were not directed to the homes of skinflints*" (Danker). The problem was that Lazarus never really got his fill. Always, scraps. Dives didn't pay attention to his neighbor's plight unless he had to. When he did, it was minimal. Not from the heart. The next trap was indifference.

### **Indifference**

Note in the story that Dives knew the beggar by name yet failed to attend the urgent need of his neighbor. He might have reasoned that Lazarus deserved such a miserable life. He might have thought that Lazarus wasn't blessed by God or even cursed to be a beggar. Such a belief could've kept him in apathy so as not to do anything about the hunger and disease right at his own doorsteps under his nose. E.g. The U.S. and Haiti.

Lazarus: The name means "God helps." He was a beggar. He was covered with sores. Nobody cared. He longed for the scraps from the rich man's table. Even for that one, he was competing with dogs. After he died, he was too poor to have any proper funeral service for himself. Just angels came and took him home. Look verse 22. It says, Lazarus *died and was carried away* by the angels (that means, no burial, no funeral): Dives *died and was buried* (funeral and burial). Luke the writer points to such a misery of having nothing or nobody during his life and even at death. No funeral, no friends, and no remembrance. Where was Dives in all of this? Lazarus's neighbor. Such an indifference happens everywhere.

E.g. Once John Steinbruck, pastor of a church in Washington D.C., “found a paradigm of more lamentable insensitivity to the plight of the poor in the very capital of the U.S. In response to one of his requests for leftovers from state banquets so that he might have additional distributions for the hungry, one spokesperson for the White House said to a reporter, ‘We think the idea is disgusting’” (Danker, pp. 283-284). Avoid the trap of apathy.

The third trap Dives was in was illusion.

### **Illusion**

Let me sidetrack a little bit here. Without getting into too much in detail, Jesus reminds us of the existence of Heaven and Hell.

Heaven: in today’s text, it is called ‘Abraham’s arms’ (v. 22), but it is the same. It is the place of comfort (v. 25) and consolation. No more sorrow. No more tears. No more crying. No more pain. No more death. It is God’s abode. His presence will be with us for eternity. Everyone wants to be there (except atheists).

Hell: in today’s text, it is called ‘Hades’ (v. 23), but it is the same (cf. Matthew 16:18). Hell is the place of agony (v. 24, 25), torment (v. 23, 28), and flame (v. 24). Nobody wants to be there. You won’t find God in this place, either.

The Bible clearly indicates that both places are real. Believe in them. Believe in Heaven.

Back to the parable: By the time Dives found out that he was in Hell, and by the time he realized his fate for eternity in flame, it was too late. There was nothing he could do about it.

Please note here it is not that he didn’t have faith in God. He did. He called Abraham Father, didn’t he? However, his lifestyle of self-absorption and indifference toward neighbor’s plight kept him in the illusory state of his own future fate. Had he got disillusioned before he died, had he had time to alter his lifestyle and reached out to his poor neighbor, his eternal fate would’ve been different.

I believe his “only-in-formality” religion, or so called “in-name-only” believer, resulted in his sorry fate. His daily practice of shallow almsgiving, vastly detached from his confession of loving kindness to his neighbors, kept him in a spiritual illusion that he too would be in the presence of God. Deceived by the same illusion, he ended up in Hell instead—the miserable place no one wants to stay, not even for a minute.

### **Action Points**

Bill Graham once said, “The test of a preacher is that his congregation goes away saying not, ‘What a lovely sermon!’ but, ‘I will do something.’” Here’s something you can do this week.

- Be on alert against self-centeredness. Come up with one plan that would keep you from being self-centered.
- Be attentive to the neighbors' needs. Come up with one plan to help the needy.
- Set your mind in Heaven. Memorize one verse on Heaven. E.g. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain." (Revelation 21:4).

## **Conclusion**

Any one of us can fall into the rich man's traps: believing in God, having a promise of Heaven, blessed by God, yet can easily wrap ourselves with self-absorption, indifference, and illusion.

May God help us to repent from "*our self-centered callous way of life and help us to produce the deeds of loving kindness to the needy*" (G.W.E. Nickelsburg, NTS 25, 338).

Amen.