

Luke 16:19-31 *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. ²²“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’ ²⁵“But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’ ²⁷“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’ ²⁹“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’ ³⁰“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ ³¹“He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

Would you consider yourself blessed if you found yourself in Lazarus’ position? I don’t think too many of us would. Put yourself in Lazarus’ shoes. You have nothing. You have no food, no shelter, no help. You have no friends who want to help you. They just bring you to the gate of rich man’s house and leave you there. You have no job so you have to beg for your food. You are covered in oozing sores all over your body. You are in such a bad way that you don’t even have the strength to chase away the dogs who are licking at your sores. In fact, you are in such rough shape that the dogs licking of your sores actually feels pretty good because it relieves your pain and suffering temporarily. You have no shelter over your head. You long to eat even the scraps which comes from the rich man’s table, but that never happens because he never gives them to you. You can see the luxury and smell the food and you have nothing but suffering! Put yourself into that kind of suffering day after day and ask yourself, “Would you consider yourself blessed if you were in Lazarus’ position?”

The truth is: we do everything we can to avoid being like Lazarus at all costs! When suffering and misery come our way, we don’t consider those to be blessings from God. We try to relieve ourselves through medicine and doctor visits. We lean on family and friends to help us so we don’t have to suffer too much. We find the easiest way possible to navigate through the system to avoid as much suffering as possible at all costs. Were we to actually be in a position like Lazarus, instead of feeling blessed we might feel cursed, abandoned, and all alone. There’s a good chance we would question God’s care for us, grumble and complain about how unfairly God is treating us, try to justify why God should treat us better than this because of all of the good things we’ve done and maybe even turn on God if the sufferings got too bad or continued too long. If we had to choose which of these two men we would rather be...Lazarus wouldn’t be our first choice.

No, as we look at the rich man...that’s what we would consider blessed. We tend to see the evidence of God’s blessings only in the material and physical things what we have. If that were the only measure of God’s blessings, then we would say this man was truly blessed by God. He was dressed in *purple and fine linen*, which is to say he was dressed in the best and most expensive of clothes. He *lived in luxury every day*. He didn’t just have food every day, but he ate the richest of delicacies every day. This speaks of lavish dinners with many guests and friends. This suggests eating gourmet foods at every meal. He not only had a house to shelter him but had a gate to protect him and keep him safe. This man isn’t portrayed as being a scoundrel either. He seems to be a reputable man who was well thought of. No, if we had to think of a blessed life, we would think first of the rich man. He had it all. That’s a blessed life that we would want to strive for...especially over and against that of Lazarus who was lying outside of his gate.

There was just one thing missing in this man’s “blessed” life. While he appeared to be reputable and respected among men, he was an abomination before God because of one thing: Unbelief. This man’s “blessed” life was marked by unbelief and a complete lack of faith. You see, we are tempted to think that this story is about the rich verses the poor, but that’s just not the case. We’re tempted to think it’s all about God exhorting Christians to help the poor or face hell, but it’s not. This isn’t about rich vs. poor. It’s about faith verses unbelief. The rich man did not heed the words of Moses and the prophets. He didn’t trust that God’s promises proclaimed by Moses and the prophets were enough for him. He didn’t heed their encouragement to look for the Messiah who would rescue them spiritually. He didn’t heed their warning against turning away from God and turning in on himself. He didn’t pay attention when they cautioned him against forgetting God as the source of all of his blessings. He was by all accounts an unbeliever and his actions displayed that. He focused on his riches and was only concerned about living the good life. He held so tightly to his treasures that he didn’t even notice the poor Lazarus begging outside his gate. If he did see him, he certainly wasn’t moved in his compassion to help in any way. His lack of faith led him to disregard his fellow human in need of help right outside his gate. Not only didn’t he sacrifice anything to help Lazarus, but he wasn’t even willing to give to him the scraps from his table. He put his trust in his wealth and in so doing scorned the greater blessings of God. This rich man isn’t taken to task because of his riches. He is taken to task because of his heart, which directed how he used his riches. His view of life was “Eat, drink and be merry.” He was busy storing up things for himself but was not rich toward God. He wasn’t worried about the afterlife. He wrongly assumed his many physical blessings made him certain of blessings in the life to come and didn’t worry. He was so busy making a living that he was blinded to the real life God offered to him in Jesus. He didn’t realize the treasures and life he had built for himself would disappear in a heartbeat.

And that's exactly what happened. We have the opportunity to see who was truly blessed when death came. While poor Lazarus was carried by the angels to Abraham's side, the rich man we're told simply died and was buried. His great wealth may have provided a lavish and impressive funeral for him, it did nothing for him in the afterlife. He found himself separated from God by a great chasm and suffering in the eternal fires of hell. He may have enjoyed luxury on this earth, but for the rest of eternity would long simply to have a drop of water provide momentary relief from the unending torment of hell. My how the roles were reversed...and so quickly. Lazarus may have suffered while on earth, but in eternity had the privilege of dining at Abraham's table. While the rich man cared nothing for the afterlife and focused only on building his best life here, Lazarus held tightly to the promises of God. Though Lazarus appeared to have less than nothing, the truth is he had everything. He held tightly to God's promises proclaimed through Moses and the prophets about the Messiah who was to come and God's love for him. He knew that his security didn't come from bank accounts or real estate or investments but from God. He knew God had not forsaken him but was always with him, using his suffering to produce perseverance and character and hope. He knew that his hope of heaven didn't depend on his social standing or final net worth but on his Savior. He put himself in the hands of a God who promised him blessings beyond compare in the world to come.

Here's the main point of this lesson: the determining factor for our eternal destiny is not the possession or lack of earthly wealth, but the possession or lack of faith in Christ. How we use our worldly wealth either is a fruit of our faith or shows to all the lack of faith. Wealth can be a blessing from God. God isn't speaking against wealth here. If he were, he would not have used Abraham as his example. Abraham was a man of great wealth. We note that many of the patriarchs were men of wealth. But wealth can be a distraction for us when we put our faith, confidence, security and focus on it. And that can happen all too easily. We tend to see our earthly wealth as evidence of God's blessings on us. When we are lacking in wealth or hitting a hard time or facing some serious challenge or suffering, we start to question God's care of us. We fall into the same trap as this rich man—thinking that Moses and the prophets and apostles who wrote God's word for us in Scripture were not enough. We know the promises God makes to us in Scripture: that God loves us, that he will always sustain us, that he works good in all things for us, that he will never leave us or forsake us, that he will never give us more than we can bear, that he will provide all that we need and that with God nothing is impossible. Yet, we still act as if those promises aren't enough. Like the rich man who thought that sending a dead person back to life would shock his relatives into believing, we want to see the spectacular from God and put our faith in only what we can see and touch and know. We don't see ourselves as blessed when challenges and sufferings strike but rather begin to doubt God's love. Not trusting in God is the very definition of unbelief. Putting out trust in and finding our confidence and security in what we can achieve and feel and touch is the very definition of idolatry. Focusing on the physical and earthly blessings and treasures of here, being stingy and selfish with what we have, and failing to use what we have to help others is the very definition of someone who doesn't know God's love. And the eternal destination of this rich man reminds us what awaits anyone who ends their lives in unbelief with their focus and confidence on the things of this world: eternal death in hell.

So we lay outside the gate of heaven covered in the oozing sores of our sin, begging the rich man inside for mercy and to have even just the scraps of food left over from his table and unable to do anything about our spiritual situation. Thankfully, inside this gate is a rich man who wants to help. You know how Jesus, instead of ignoring us and leaving us to die alone, gave up the riches of heaven and for our sakes became poor so that through His poverty we might become rich. Jesus came down to this earth where we live and suffered and died for your sins and mine. Jesus, the truly rich one, emptied himself for your sake. He suffered the anguish and torment of hell so that you would not. He was covered with the bloody wounds of beating and flogging. They threw the scarlet robe on him in mockery and a crown of thorns on his head. Then he suffered hell itself as he was nailed to the cross and was buried in the grave. All this he did for you. He saw you lying there helpless, dying in your sins and he came here to take your place. Christ has opened the kingdom of heaven for all believers. This is what it truly means to be blessed. These are the blessings that last beyond all measure and will be yours for all eternity. These are the blessings that we are to cling to with all our spiritual might no matter what we face.

God may choose to bless you with many earthly blessings. Or he may not. But earthly blessings or not, God has given you eternal blessings through Jesus your Savior. We do well to follow in the footsteps of Lazarus. We know that we will face sufferings, sometimes severe sufferings, in this life. Yet we can still live by faith. Those sorrows won't save us or impress God, but they will keep us dependent upon him for our eternal blessings to come. We can lean on God and trust in him rather than our own riches or ability knowing that whatever we have to face here, God has something awesome waiting for us in heaven. Most importantly, we know God will never leave us in our sorrow. We have Moses and the prophets and apostles to cheer us. We are comforted by his promises and hope through the Gospel of Jesus. That's how we are blessed...even when the physical blessings aren't there. I've had the opportunity to give the Lord's Supper and share God's word with people on their death beds and through some of the most challenging times and sufferings of their lives. So far, it hasn't healed them or taken away their sufferings. But many of them were brought to tears and all of them found comfort by it and were thankful for it. They didn't think it a small thing. It might not have been medicine for their bodies, but it was the remedy they needed for their souls. You are blessed...even in your sufferings. God does not leave you in your sorrows without comfort. Use those challenging times as opportunities to be strengthened by God's Word and to hold tightly to his promises. The risen and ascended Lord Jesus loves you and has taken away your sins. His word of comfort and strength will see you through the sufferings you face to the eternal home waiting for you in heaven. You are blessed. **Cling Tightly to the Blessings that Matter Most.** Amen