

# HAVE YOU HEARD THE REAL STORY OF THE RICH MAN, POOR MAN?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

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Every January, a special section in *Life* magazine reminds us that many rich, famous and creative writers, musicians, scientists, sport figures and movie actors have been removed from this earth by death in the year just past. The magazine prints their pictures and makes admiring comments about them. This year the world lost Miles Davis, the jazz pioneer who died at the age of 65. The beautiful movie actress, Gene Tierney, died at 70. *Life* said of her: "View one of her films today and you'll notice here timelessness. She was quite grand in that way." Edwin Land, whose Polaroid camera revolutionized color photography, died at 80. Redd Fox died at 68. *Life* commented: "When God sent us Redd, he sent us a natural-born comic." Red Grange died at 87: "He was a truly loved American hero," said the magazine. Fred MacMurray, the world's best father," said *Life*, died at 83. One of my favorite newscasters, Harry Reasoner, died of cancer at 68. Mike Wallace, his co-worker, said of him: "He wasn't just a reporter getting a story. With Harry you got insight, intelligence and compassion in addition to the facts."

Some of these people who passed away during the year were rich while they were on this earth, but also during the year, according to the *San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper, more than one hundred and fifty poor and diseased homeless people died on the streets of San Francisco. The issue is not who was rich or poor, but that, following a short time on this earth, all of these people tasted death. If *Life* magazine or the *Chronicle* were to have the final word on their lives, one would assume that they are gone forever. But if you read the New Testament, and hear the words of Jesus Christ recorded in Luke 16:19-31, you will discover that all these people are still living somewhere in eternity-and that somewhere is determined by what kind of relationship they established with Jesus during their short stay on this earth. As we begin this New Year, God is giving each one of us another moment in time to consider establishing a personal relationship with his Son, and what we do with this invitation will determine where we will spend eternity.

As we open to the gospel of Luke this morning we see that our Lord is ministering in the area of Perea on the east side of the Jordan, teaching his disciples the secrets of the kingdom of God. As the tax-gatherers and sinners gathered around him to listen to his teaching, a group of Pharisees surrounded him also, grumbling and upset to the point that they charged him with receiving sinners and eating with them (15:2). Our Lord went on to tell the story of a certain rich man who had a unrighteous but shrewd steward who was eventually caught and fired. But before he was fired he went around to the men in the community who owed money to his master and cut their debts so that in the future, when he had nowhere to go, they would take him in because of his kindness towards them. Jesus used this story to warn the disciples that the "sons of this age are more shrewd in relation to their own kind than the sons of light." Continued Jesus: "And I say to you, make friends for yourselves by the means of mammon of unrighteousness that when it fails, they may receive you into the eternal dwellings" (Luke 16: 8-9.) However, the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, scoffed at his words.

Now, from his heart of love and mercy, Jesus is about to open the curtains of eternity once again in order to show this crowd of Pharisees, sinners and disciples gathered around him, as well as all of us, that our lives are not merely lived out on this earth, but in time we must all appear in eternity and give an accounting. Our Lord's conclusion will not be the same as our present-day New Age prophets. They say that when we die, we will be met by a warm light at the end of a long tunnel. We will feel love all around us, and we will be met by our family and friends who have died before us. Nor does Jesus hold out the false hope that spiritualist mediums give their clients when they tell them things like one elderly man reported recently: "I've heard from my wife and my brother, and they tell me that the world ahead is a beautiful one. There's no pain; everybody's happy. I'm content here, but I can't wait to join them." Rather, where we appear in eternity will be determined by how we related to the Lord Jesus Christ during our short stay on earth. By the way, when Jesus uses the term "a certain man," most biblical scholars believe that he is referring to someone he knows or has some firsthand knowledge about. He is not using this merely as an illustration, in other words. It is probably true to say

therefore that these two men once lived out their lives on this earth, one in splendor and one in poverty.

## **I. The rich man and the poor man lived on this earth**

Luke 16:19-21

"Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day. And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.

"Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day." Our Lord has already used this phrase, in 16:1: "There was a certain rich man who had a steward..." Although the Jews were living under the Roman government, many of them were still able to acquire riches. This rich man could have been featured on the TV programme, *The Life Style of the Rich and Famous*. He dressed in purple and fine linen-the same clothing as the high priests. His gourmet food was served on exotic dishes. This was a self-indulgent man. He was what we might call filthy rich. But that was not his problem. Jesus never condemned anyone for being rich, but rather for being "lovers of money." Why? It was because he taught his disciples earlier that "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and riches" (Matt. 6:24.) Paul wrote to Timothy: "But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many a pang" (1 Tim. 6:9-10.) Apparently his selfish lifestyle so blinded this rich man that he was poor toward God and toward the many poor people around him, some of whom lay at his gate to beg.

Our text continues:

"And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides even the dogs were coming and licking his sores."

Lazarus was a godly man who believed in the God of Abraham. He was so sick that apparently some people had placed him against the gate of the rich man's home, so the rich man should have seen him every day. Lazarus sought nothing more than the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, but the only comfort he received was provided by the stray dogs who licked his sores. In time, he died of disease and starvation.

Have you heard the real story of the rich man, poor man? They both lived on this earth some two thousand years ago. And then,

## **II. The rich man and the poor man died**

Luke 16:22-31

Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.' 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. And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' And he said, 'Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to my father's house - for I have five brothers - that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' But Abraham

said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' But he said, 'No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.'

The poor man made rich. "Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom." I always like when the Lord Jesus pulls back the curtains of eternity and gives us these wonderful views of heaven. We are told by our Lord that Lazarus, who apparently depended on God as his help and salvation, was finally rewarded with the joy of spending eternity in the presence of God. At the moment of his physical death (and apparently no one gave him the dignity of a proper burial), his spirit and soul were taken by angels into the bosom of Abraham.

The universe is filled with these wonderful spirit beings-angels-who are faithful servants of God. They appear to be forever present in and around the righteous, encouraging us in times of danger (Acts 27:23-24), and observing as we live out our Christian lives (1 Cor. 4:9; 1 Tim. 5:21). They can appear on earth and speak to people and then step back into eternity. For instance, the angel Gabriel appeared to Zacharias, a priest and husband of a barren wife named Elizabeth, to announce the birth of John the Baptist. He also appeared to Mary to announce the good news that "the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy offspring shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35.) A short time later, an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, encouraging him to take the now pregnant Mary as his wife and name her son Jesus, "...for it is He who will save His people from their sins" (Matt.1:20-21.) Angels ministered to Jesus after his temptation in the wilderness, and they announced the good news of his resurrection to the women at the empty tomb. We know that angels rejoice over the salvation of one sinner who repents, and now we see they are involved to taking the righteous into the bosom of Abraham.

The phrase, "in Abraham's bosom," pictures an ancient eastern feast, where men laid around the table, each with his head near or on the chest of the man on his right. To be in the bosom of the host was an honor indeed. We will see this same picture at the Last Supper, where "there was reclining on Jesus' breast one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved" (John 13:23). According to Matthew 8:1-13, to be in "Abraham's bosom" refers to God's presence, where the righteous will be comforted in his presence as well as that of Abraham. Jesus said to his disciples after witnessing the faith of the Roman centurion who had come to him on behalf of his dying servant: "I say to you many shall come from east and west, and recline at table with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven; but the sons of the kingdom shall be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Lazarus had trusted God as his helper on earth, and now at the time of his physical death he was carried by angels into Paradise and placed into the bosom of father Abraham. He was not related to Abraham because of blood, but because of his faith in God. "Even so Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness. Therefore, be sure that it is those who are of faith that are sons of Abraham" (Gal.3:6-7.)

The rich man made poor. "...and the rich man also died and was buried." What a contrast between the death of Lazarus and the death of the rich man! The angels came to bring the soul and spirit of Lazarus to Abraham's bosom, but the rich man died and was buried in the cold earth. Once he died, all his earthy power, position, authority and wealth remained here on earth. He left his fine purple robes to the moths, and his wealth to his quarreling relatives. He may have had a great burial service (which he never had the privilege of witnessing), but his first moment of consciousness in eternity revealed to him that he had arrived in Hades spiritual bankrupt.

God's view of eternity. Then the Lord gives seven helpful but sober spiritual insights, using the rich man as an example, regarding one's conscious existence in eternity.

1. The former rich man died and went to Hades. One scholar has written: "The ancient Greek view of Hades, and the Roman view of Orcus, or Inferna, is that of a place for all the dead in the depth of the earth; dark, dreary, cheerless, shut up, inaccessible to prayers and sacrifices, ruled over by Pluto. This presiding god was the enemy of all life, heartless, inexorable and hated accordingly by gods and men. The Hebrews equated Sheol in the O.T. with Hades. It is the subterranean abode of all the dead until the final judgment. From other

scriptures we can surmise that the unrighteous who die are sent to Hades until the time of the Great White Throne judgment, then Hades will surrender the wicked. They will be judged and be cast into the Lake of Fire, called Hell, forever (Rev. 20:11-15). Before the cross, it appears that believers went into the bosom of Abraham, a place of security and comfort, but since our Lord's death and resurrection, believers upon their death are immediately placed into God's presence (Phil 1:23; 2 Cor. 5-10). The believing thief on the cross who repented was told by our Lord: "...today you shall be with Me in Paradise" (Luke 24:42-43.) The rest of the ungodly who have died are now waiting in Hades for the final judgment.

2. He was alive. The former rich man awoke after his physical death and found himself fully conscious of his spiritual bankruptcy. He was aware that he was in Hades, with an eternal body, which was experiencing torment. He was equipped with eyes to see where he was and where Abraham and Lazarus were, and he was also able to see that there was a great distance between them.

3. He was fully rational and able to communicate. "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me...'" It is interesting to note that, according to our Lord's story, the former rich man showed no mercy toward Lazarus when he was on earth, yet he now pleads for mercy. He called Abraham "Father" because he believed, as all Jews believe, that to be physically born a Jew automatically makes them spiritual candidates for a place in "Abraham's bosom" when they die. We now see that their theology is false. Abraham is the one who placed his faith in God and his promises. He was declared righteous in the sight of God, and for the last 2000 years he has been living in God's presence. Abraham also was declared to be "Father Abraham" to all who place their faith in God and in his Son Jesus Christ. He was alive in eternity with Moses and Elijah, who appeared before the disciples on the Mt of Transfiguration.

4. He was experiencing physical pain. Because he had power, position and authority on earth, the rich man still thinks he has that power in Hades. Thus he asks Abraham to order Lazarus to meet his immediate need, like some earthly servant: "...send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame." The former rich man who never needed anything on earth now finds himself begging Abraham for water from the hand of a beggar whom he formerly ignored.

5. He discovered the reason for his present position. "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life (on earth) you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.'" Abraham is saying, in effect, "When you were on earth you received all the good things-beautiful clothes, fine food, and position and power. These were the first things on your priority list. But living according to the royal commandment, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength and with all your mind and your neighbor as yourself' (Luke 10:27), was not part of your life style. You did nothing to build up your treasure in heaven, whereas Lazarus, who had nothing, was spiritually rich towards God in love and service towards others. He never let pain and suffering drive him away from God. He chose to receive true life from God and now he is bathing in the fulfillment of God's promises of eternal life."

6. He discovered the hopelessness of his position. "And besides all this between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us." Note carefully here: Abraham is aware that some of the redeemed, seeing the terrible condition of the former rich man and others like him, would want to do something to help relieve this, but God had created a "great chasm" in order that those who wished to cross over to the other side would be prevented from doing so; and that same "great chasm" would prevent the unrighteous from trying to enter into the presence of Abraham. They had plenty of time on earth to find out how they could do so. If they missed it and then died, their fate was eternally sealed. There is no second chance, no purgatory where in time they would finally earn the right to cross over the chasm and enter into the presence of God.

7. He discovered he was helpless to save his brothers. Still thinking he has the power of influence, the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his Father's house "...for I have five brothers-that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment." Reality is beginning to sink in. He realizes that Abraham isn't able to show him mercy because of the great chasm; that he isn't going to get any water for his tongue; that he isn't going to get out of this eternal torment; and finally, it has dawned on him that his five brothers were living unrighteous lives on earth, and that if someone did not warn them about the hellish place he was in, they too

would end up in Hades. Again, we can see how selfish he is. He thinks only of his immediate family, not his neighbors and friends, etc. His plan was to persuade Abraham to allow Lazarus to leave heaven and tell his brothers the bad news and then the good news of how they could end up in Abraham's bosom after their physical death, if they would but repent of their view of God and place their faith in him, turning from their wicked and selfish lifestyles.

Last week, I spent some time at the graveside of a man who had recently died. I was amazed by the size of the cemetery; it had thousands of graves. The fresh Christmas flowers on the tombstones indicated that almost all the grave sites were being cared for. I had been studying this passage, so I remembered that these thousands of people were still alive eternally. They all had to appear before God and give an account of their relationship with his Son Jesus Christ; then they were placed in a place of comfort or a place of torment to await the final judgment. I was asked to say a few words of comfort for the family, so I read from John 14:1-6, the words that Jesus uttered to his disciples on the night before his own death on the cross for the sins of humanity: "Let not your heart be troubled, believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many dwelling places; if it were not so I would have told you; for I go to prepare a place for you, and if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also. And you know the way where I am going.' Thomas said to Him, 'Lord, we do not know where You are going; how do we know the way? Jesus said to him, 'I am the way, and the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father, but through Me.'"

Shortly after the service I had an opportunity to talk with a young man who was standing next to me. In the course of our conversation he told me that death terrified him. I encouraged him that that fear was given to him as a gift from God to help him during his short stay on earth to become sober about his life and his relationship with God and his Son Jesus Christ. I told him that he would be wise to seriously consider the claims of Christ, for when Jesus said he was the "way the truth and the life and that no man could come to the Father except thought him." I asked him if he was interested in some printed material concerning the claims of Christ, as well as how to eliminate the fear of death. He said he was interested, and I sent him a booklet entitled "Just because you're breathing doesn't mean you're living," as well as an invitation to continue our conversation sometime in the future.

Now we come to Abraham's response to the rich man's request: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." Had this man read Moses and the Prophets, he would have seen the love that God had for him and his own need to place his faith in the God of Abraham, for when Abraham put his faith in God it was reckoned to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6). Abraham was accepted in the sight of God before the Law was written. It was Moses who wrote: "Hear O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6.) And then it was the Law that instructed the Jews to participate in good works towards the poor, widows, orphans, slaves and aliens. Both Moses and the prophets pointed toward Jesus as the long-awaited prophet, priest and king who would become the final lamb of God who would die as a ransom for the sins of many. Abraham told the former rich man that someone returning from the dead to walk on the earth would not be enough evidence to change their wicked hearts. The Lord had given the Scriptures, which are able to lead men and women, and even this man's brothers, to a saving knowledge of the Lord and the joy of eternal life. "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." Later, as you remember, another Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha, died, and Jesus raised him from the dead. In spite of that miracle the chief priest tried to kill the Lord (John 12:9-10), Later, Jesus himself would die for the sins of the world, be buried and rise again, but few would believe in him as the Savior of their souls. So the miracle of a dead man being raised from the dead would not convince this man's brothers to change their wicked ways. The only way their hearts would change would be if they placed their faith in God as their father Abraham did so long ago, and that would be accounted unto them as righteousness.

Do you want to hear the real story of the rich man, poor man? The rich man and the poor man lived on this earth for a short season and then they both died. The man who refused to place his faith in God and use his life on earth pursuing good works died and awoke in a place of torment called Hades; he is still there awaiting the final judgment. The man who placed his faith in God, on the other hand, and lived a life that honored him on earth, died and awoke in Abraham's bosom in security and comfort. He is still there to this day and will be

forever.

The point of this story that our Lord told the disciples, the sinners and the Pharisees does not concern being rich or poor; the issue rests on one's spiritual relationship with God. A rich man or a poor man can either reject or accept the gift of salvation that is offered by God through his Son Jesus Christ. Rejection of the salvation that is offered in Jesus, however, regardless of whether you were rich or poor on this earth, will result in your spending eternity in hell. If you accept the gift of salvation as offered by God in his Son Jesus, whether you were rich or poor on this earth, you can be assured that after your physical death you will spend eternity in the presence of God and his Son, your Savior and Lord forever.

As my friend and I stood at the graveside of his father-in-law, I was reminded once again that the grave only ends one's life on earth, but not in eternity. I also realized that I had by faith invited Jesus Christ to become my Lord and Savior, and my eternal existence had already been determined. My prayer now is for the salvation of my friend who at this point has rejected the gift of salvation. At this moment in time, his eternal existence hangs in a balance between heaven and hell. His only hope while he is still breathing on earth is that he will come to see his need to invite Jesus Christ to become his Lord and Savior before he breathes his last. Many of you are in the same position, and God in his grace is offering you one more opportunity to spend eternity with him. Do it now, before you stop breathing on earth.

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