

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16.19-31

Big idea: If you don't choose Jesus you'll end up with nothing.

Video: Luke and Darth Vader in ESB

Here at Church not only do we want to help you learn the Scriptures,
but we also want to make sure you know your cinematic history!

We've just had a clip from the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*,
the second film of the original Star Wars Trilogy,
and like all good stories it has moments of tension;
moments when the characters have to make a decision

Luke has to make a choice, doesn't he?

Does he go with the Dark Side and rule the galaxy with his Father,
or does he stay with what's right and just,
fighting with his friends to defeat the forces of evil?

And so this decision is reduced down to this moment
where he either grabs on to his Father's arm,
or he lets go, surrendering himself to what's right,
taking a freefalling risk in the hope that what is right will save him.

We're in the middle of a series on Luke's Gospel.

And like any good story, Luke has heroes and villains,
and he also has points of tension

where the characters have to *make a decision*.

Let me remind you of a verse from last week's passage, Luke 16.13

No servant can serve two masters. 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 both God and Money.

Jesus realizes that aside from God people have another ruler: money.

Their lives are ruled by always seeking a greater income,
by always positioning themselves for greater financial gain,
by investing and reinvesting to the point
where they forgo opportunities to be generous.

And so in the face of this reality he asks us to make a decision:
Whom will we serve? Because we cannot serve both God and money.

In *today's* passage Jesus reveals the shocking result of what will happen
when our decision is the wrong one.

This parable is like one of those ads that's designed to help us quit smoking.

You know the ads that show us the future consequences
of deciding to smoke now?

The woman who's dying of cancer; the aorta which is full of yellow gunk...

What Jesus does here is that he pulls back the curtain on the future,
 and he shows us the consequences of saying *no* to him and *yes* to money.
 We may feel shocked,
 we may feel uncomfortable,
 but just like those ads are trying to warn us for our own good
 so too Jesus is giving us a warning before it's too late.

We're in Luke 16, picking things up from verse 19

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

Jesus makes a special effort to describe these two characters.

We have the rich man who was dressed in the finest clothes of his day.
 His outer garment was coloured with very expensive purple dye.
 Purple dye was harvested from a particular sea mollusk
 and so was very hard to obtain,
 making purple clothing very expensive to buy.

And not only did he love to dress in the finest clothes, but he also loved to eat!
 Our NIV translations tell us that he lived in luxury every day,
 but some older translations tell us that he *feasted sumptuously*
 He would have been a prime candidate for *Biggest Loser Palestine*

And then we have Lazarus, the beggar at the rich man's gate.

It's easy to miss, but do you see how v20 says
 that Lazarus was laid at the man's gate?
 The idea here is that someone had to carry Lazarus and lay down;
 Lazarus was so sick and weak that he couldn't take himself there.
 In v 21 dogs come to lick poor Lazarus' sores;
 he's so weak he couldn't even shoo them away.

And he's hungry. Man is he hungry! All he want's is a scrap of food.
 As he's sitting at the gate he can *smell* the food.
 He just wants the leftovers, the stuff which falls off the table.
 Have you ever finished eating and you get up
 and you realize that there's food over the floor, squashed into the ground?
 Have you ever been so hungry that you'd be willing to eat the scraps from
 the floor?

I haven't, but this guy is.

And so here we have the scene:

Fat, rich and satisfied guy; hungry, skinny and suffering guy.

And as Jesus is starting to set up the scene,

We're already starting to feel uncomfortable;
 we get the sense that the rich guy is probably heading for trouble.
 He would have seen Lazarus every day as he walked out the gate,

He would have *seen the sores* on the poor man's body,
 but he hasn't even given Lazarus the leftovers.
 Even the dogs have treated Lazarus with more respect
 as they came and did something to attend to Lazarus' sores.

It's a picture of complete self-centeredness and greed,
 a picture of a man who thinks of nothing else except his own comfort.

Do we see any of ourselves the rich man,
 falling into the temptation to have our own comfort as the first priority,
 looking upon the needy as an imposition rather than as an opportunity?

Perhaps our worship of money comes in a more subtle way,
 Maybe in our struggle to feel safe and secure
 we hold onto our material instead of sharing it around.
 Our banks have built whole advertising strategies upon this worry.
 "How do you know you'll have enough to live on?"

And so we find ourselves like Luke Skywalker in that clip.
 Sensing we're in danger we have to work out what to grab on to.
 The easy option is to grab on to the thing that's most obvious,
 the thing that's right in front of us.
 "If I hold on to as much money as I can, then it will be ok."
 It's much harder to abandon yourselves to the ancient words of a book,
 words that tell of a God who knows what we need even before we ask.

Where is your trust?
 It's important to this analysis now,
 because there will come a day when that analysis will be done for us.

Verse 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. ²³ In hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and
 saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So 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. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who
 want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'

The life that we're living now—
 This life where we gather up stores
 to keep us satisfied and to give us a sense of security—
 This life is only the first page
 of a story that for each of us will extend into eternity.

And as Jesus gives us a glimpse into how that story might unfold,
 we see that the story can take a shocking twist.
 The shock is that things can be reversed:
 Lives of comfort and lives of security, *they can be stripped back to nothing.*

When we meet the rich man, he's shut himself off from the rest of the world.
 He's behind his big wall, protected by his gate; no one can get in.
 And when we meet Lazarus the beggar he's in agony with his sores,
 and he longs for just the tiniest morsel of food.

But now in the age to come, the tables are completely reversed.
 Abraham says as much in verse 25 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".

And the imagery sends the same message.
 The separation between Lazarus and the Rich Man is still there –
 it's there in the form of the chasm –
 but this time it's the rich man who has to beg.
 And this time it's the rich man who's in agony,
 And this time—for all-time—
 it's the rich man who longs for the tiniest amount of water.

It's a picture of complete reversal, and that's where the real shock is.
 If our decision is to live entirely for ourselves,
 then we'll end up with nothing, absolutely nothing.
 Or at least,
 we'll end up with an irreversible suffering that we really don't want.

While I think that the main emphasis on this passage
 is on the reversal that takes place in the afterlife,
 I think that the strong imagery is still meant to teach us something
 about the horror of God's judgment upon the greedy.

The word used here in verse 23 is *Hades*,
 which is often used as a word for the realm of the dead in general.
Hell is a more specific label for the exact destination of the wicked,
 but although Hades is usually a more general word,
 it can be used as an alternative to the word Hell,
 and that's the way it's being used here.
 There is a place where those who have lived for themselves
 and who've ignored God's way of living will end up

I remember a conversation I had with one friend at a party,
 and in a state of drunken honesty [he'd had a few at this point],
 he said "If hell is real, I don't want to go there."
 No, you don't.
 And that's what this type of language is meant to communicate.
 It is hard to create an accurate picture of what Hell will be like,
 because the Bible uses different images that are not easy to reconcile.
 But what *is* consistent? Each image is equally horrific,
 and so my own conclusion is that I don't want to risk going there.

Some people have claimed that the church made up the idea of Hell

in order to control people. That's not true.
The reason we're speaking about it today is because Jesus spoke about it,
and he spoke about it often enough to for us to know that he was serious.

There is one positive side to the concept of Hell,
and the positive side is that it means God cares about bringing justice,
We worship a God who longs to bring justice
for those crimes and offences that have been carried out against others.
God does care about what's happening in the world
and there's coming a day when he'll make all things new,
where the unjust situation will be reversed.

But as for our Rich friend, a man who, for whatever reason,
decided to overlook the justice which needed to be done at his gate,
He found out about this reversal far too late.

And so what can we do?
If we *have* identified ourselves with this rich guy
and *have* seen what the future holds for us, what can we do?
Well, with the benefit of retrospect,
the Rich man has been able to pick up on part of the answer.

Verse 27 "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house,²⁸ for 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.'

The rich man knows that a warning bell must be sounded!
Verse 28 reminds us that
not only are we to be concerned with people's physical needs,
but their spiritual needs require addressing as well.
My brothers need to be warned! he says

And where does the warning come from?
Let them read Moses and the prophets comes the answer.
The alarm bell sounds whenever the Bible is opened.
If the Rich man had opened his Bible
he would have understood his duty of care towards his poor neighbor,
and he would have also heard
how God is willing to show mercy and forgiveness
towards those who decide to let go of their love and trust of money
and who decide to direct their love and trust towards God instead.

And this message of the OT
Would be repeated yet again during the events of the first Easter.
In verse 31 Jesus includes a subtle reference to what was still yet to come.
From v 36 "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.'"

It seems to be reference to Jesus' own impending death and resurrection,

an event which,
while it may not convince everyone of the reality heaven and hell,
will be enough to secure the salvation of those who *do* believe.

And so the warning bell has been sounded,
God's judgment upon human greed and selfishness is coming,
But at the same time the way of salvation has also been revealed:
Let go of your selfish ways and start following God,
And seek out God's forgiveness,
the forgiveness made possible by Christ's death and resurrection.

I've been reading this book, written by a friend of mine, Meredith Lake,
The Bible In Australia. Meredith documents the history of the Bible in this
nation, including the history of the Bible among our indigenous people.
Have you heard of Bennelong? The aboriginal man who was the go-
between between Sydney's indigenous population and the First Fleet?
Bennelong had a son named Dickey who was converted to Christianity
and is recorded as the first indigenous evangelist. There's a record of a
conversation that Dickey had with one of his own elders. *You must love
God—he instructed the old man—else I shall go to heaven and you will go
to hell – the fire burn you, you will ask me for water and I would not give
you a drop.*

He's quoting the very story that we've been considering here today,
Dickey knew that we each have to make a decision
—Our way or God's way—
and that it's a decision with eternal consequences.

So what's your decision going to be?

I'm going to give each of us a chance to make this decision right now.
I'll pray a prayer that approaches God
and confesses our self-centeredness and our dismissal of God's ways,
and which seeks God's forgiveness and God's power to live differently.

If you know that it's time to make this decision,
then allow me to lead you in prayer.
I'll say the words, you can follow along in your own heart,
saying Amen at the end.

Let's pray
Heavenly Father we have heard Christ's warning to us this morning,
and we confess that in our lives, selfishness and greed have been
dominant, and we can see that such a life will one day attract your
judgment. And so we say that we are sorry, we seek your forgiveness and
we seek your help in turning away from our selfishness. Save us from the
punishment that our sins deserve, and like Lazarus, bring us into eternal
life. Thank you for Jesus, who makes this possible, Amen.

[Cards.]