

# The Rich Man and Lazarus

By Tom Hill

**Bible Text:** Luke 16:19-31

**Master Ministries International, Inc.**

2700 Marfitt Road, #315

East Lansing, MI 48823-6338

Website: <http://www.masterministries.org/>

Online Sermons: <http://masterministries.sermonaudio.com>

Mankind doubts the wrath of God against sinners. They say, “It’s just not His character. He is a God of love.”

They argue that the tribal God of the Old Testament gave way to the loving God of the New Testament. Thus, they hold no fear of God.

This lack of Godly fear encourages a lack of concern about sin. Our society has become amoral as a consequence. Our nonmoral society rejects all concern about morality in life and its decisions.

Thus, society lives without regard for offenses against God. Instead, it loudly protests against God in numerous ways.

1. It proclaims, “Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we may die.”
2. Mankind pursues an irrational, emotional romanticism about life. They say, “If it feels good, do it.”
3. Proudly, men and women flaunt confidence in an internal, subjective intuition, “I am the captain of my ship. I’ll do what I want when I want.”

In the process, these claims dismiss the reality of hell, the eternal punishment of God against sinners.

But, the Bible clearly declares God's hatred for sin and His punishment for it. It describes His wrath against unbelievers.

One of the passages recites a message of Jesus about this very topic. It plainly explains the reality of God's judgment against unbelievers. The Bible recorded it in Luke 16:19-31.

In this story, Jesus recounted the lives of a rich man and Lazarus. The rich man was exceedingly rich. Lazarus was extremely poor, as well as severely ill.

Jesus presented a story of contrasts, not of their financial and physical well being, but of their differing spiritual conditions and their consequences when each of them died.

From this message, I will identify several pertinent absolute truths about the eternal destiny of mankind, especially the judgment and wrath of God against unbelievers.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will clarify their truth to you and apply them in your life.

### **Two different destinies**

In the passage, Jesus clearly described the different destinies for Lazarus and the rich man. He said in Luke 16:22-24:

“And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham’s bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; {23} And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.”

Lazarus lay in Abraham’s bosom. This phrase described the Jewish custom of eating while reclining on couches, which surrounded the table.

The people lay on the couches in a fashion that placed a person’s head near the bosom of the one lying next in order. Thus, it described the happiness and rest at the banquet in Paradise.

Simply stated, Jesus pictured Lazarus residing and resting in heaven. Lazarus experienced no torment, torture, grief, sorrow, or flames. He knew blessedness, contentment, and ease.

The believer today rests in the belief that this tranquillity awaits all who die trusting Christ alone.

In contrast, the rich man lay in hell, which Jesus showed as a place of torment. This word torment described the fires used to test metals. In addition, it depicted a torture rack.

Jesus’ description told of a place of torment, torture, grief, sorrow, and flames.

Commenting upon this sad destiny of the unbelieving rich man, John Trapp makes the following observations. The rich man lay in hell, “...having punishment without pity, misery without mercy, sorrow without succor, crying without compassion, mischief without measure, torments without end and past imagination.” (1)

Clearly, this passage in Luke confirms Trapp’s statements. For the unbeliever, a hopeless future lies ahead.

### **Two different decisions**

In the story, Christ also recounted two different decisions. At birth, both the rich man and Lazarus possessed the same natural condition.

They were born in sin, separated from God and under His wrath for sin. Neither of them had any merit before God. However, at some point in their lives, they made two different decisions.

Lazarus believed the message of the Old Testament prophets. He heard it and believed it. But, the rich man rejected their message. So did his family.

Jesus revealed these conclusions in Luke 16.27-31.

The rich man, in torment, asked Abraham to send Lazarus to his family to testify to them. The rich man knew that his brothers faced his same destiny. He desired for them to avoid his punishment and to join Lazarus.

Abraham replied to him that his brothers could believe Moses and the prophets.

In other words, the decision to believe their message made the difference in the destiny between Lazarus and the rich man.

Their contrasting positions in life had no influence upon it. Notice these truths:

1. The exalted position of the rich man did not qualify him for eternal life;
2. The lowly position of Lazarus did not disqualify him from eternal life.

The difference lay only in their different decisions. The rich man rejected Moses and the prophets, while Lazarus believed them and trusted their message. That alone made the difference.

In fact, prior to this incident recorded in Luke 16, Jesus frequently revealed that all those who believed on Him would inherit eternal life. He gave this message, for instance in John 3-6.

Again, immediately preceding this parable, Jesus recounted three parables of lost things (Luke 15).

In these passages, no reference makes it clearer than John 3:16-18:

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. {17} For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. {18} He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.”

This passage from John 3 applies in lives today, too. Those who believe on Jesus are not condemned. Those who do not believe are condemned already.

The decisions of Lazarus and the rich man determined their different destinies, which confirms the message of Christ.

Lazarus believed this message which the prophets foretold. He inherited eternal life.

The rich man rejected it and received his just punishment, eternal damnation in hell.

That same truth continues today, as well. Destiny depends upon the decision to believe God's word. The prophets and Moses spoke of One Who would come to pay the penalty of sin for sinners. They, as Jesus said, spoke of Him.

### **Two different deaths**

Both of the men of the parable died. Lazarus, the beggar, no doubt suffered the fate of all beggars at death in that day.

They were frequently placed in Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom, the receptacle of the poor and criminals at death. A perpetual fire consumed the putrefying bodies.

The rich man was buried, no doubt accompanied by some pomp and ceremony that was common for the rich at death.

Yet they died different deaths. Death is a separation. In physical death, life departs from the physical body of mankind.

In the case with the rich man and Lazarus, both of them suffered this first death.

But that does not bring the end to mankind's soul. It endures for eternity. Their physical bodies died. But, their souls endured.

However, one of them, the rich man, experienced yet another death. His soul was separated from God, while the soul of Lazarus joined God's presence. The rich man suffered the second death.

Jesus described some of the conditions of this second death in Luke 16.22-24. He stated some additional details in Luke 16.25-26:

“But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. {26} And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; either can they pass to us, that would come from thence.”

Jesus identified a separation of the rich man from God. Christ described a chasm that exists between heaven and hell. He depicted it as impassable and steadfastly established. That made the separation eternal. The rich man had no more chances to change his destiny. It prevented one from passing from hell to heaven and from heaven to hell. Further, it kept one from passing from heaven to earth to warn those still living.

In this parable, Jesus clarified and confirmed the following truths.

1. He affirmed life after death.
2. He established the existence of both heaven and hell.
3. He verified that people reside in both places.
4. He proved the conditions in each place. He demonstrated heaven as a place of blessing, hell as a place of condemnation.
5. He confirmed His wrath upon unbelievers because of their sin.
6. He revealed the eternal punishment of the wicked.
7. He substantiated His gift of eternal life to those who believe on Him.
8. He validated the finality of death: no second chances exist.
9. He proved that no one can pass between heaven and hell. Eternal destiny is determined before physical death

What can the Holy Spirit accomplish in your life today with these truths?

First, this parable comforts believers.

1. It reaffirms the truth of Scripture that promises eternal life for those who cast their sole trust upon Jesus.
2. It brings encouragement and renewal of faith in God.

As a result, the child of God praises, honors, and worships Him for His grace.

Second, the Holy Spirit can convict you of sin.

1. Do you live like the rich man, with no concern for eternity?
2. Do you rivet your attention only upon satisfying your personal passions?
3. Do you center your life around your self and personal gratification?
4. Do you, like the rich man, reject the message of God's word regarding Christ, the Savior of sinners, and your need for a Savior?
5. Do you deny the truth of eternal condemnation for unbelievers?

Beware! Your continued unbelief will assign you the same judgment given to the rich man in Christ's parable. You could fare sumptuously every day, yet spend eternity in torment, eternally separated from God.

Third, the Spirit can correct you from sin.

1. This parable outlines false doctrine to avoid. Hell is real and an eternal place of torment.
2. It also confirms God's wrath against sin and unbelievers. The rich man gives a vivid picture of an example to avoid.
3. Fourth, God's Spirit can conform you to the truth.
4. The Spirit enables believers to conform their thoughts, opinions, and beliefs to God's word.
5. He reveals the truth to the mind and heart.
6. He brings repentance from sin and faith to trust God to do what He said He would do.

Finally, the Holy Spirit can convert you to faith in Jesus Christ.

1. As you have read this article, the Holy Spirit may have opened your eyes to see that you travel the same road as the rich man in the parable. Like him, you have not believed the message of God's word and have no personal trust in Jesus Christ.
2. The Spirit works to reveal to you your true condition before a holy God. He gives a sense of sin, the realization that you are lost, ruined, and condemned. He makes you realize your imminent danger of God's eternal judgment and that you deserve it, as did the rich man.
3. In this way, He shows you your need of a Savior. Your sinfulness and total helplessness confirms your inability to save yourself. He reminds you that you suffer under God's condemnation.
4. Then, the Holy Spirit reveals to you God's provision for sinners like you His provision in Jesus Christ. He is the expression of God's grace and mercy. He is the only hope of relief from eternal judgment for sin. The Spirit drives you to Christ for relief and deliverance from sin.
5. Jesus is the only Savior for sinners. He paid the penalty of sin for sinners like you. The Spirit shows you that salvation from sin comes from personal trust in Jesus Christ as your own Savior. The Holy Spirit enables you to repent from your sin and believe Jesus Christ to the saving of your soul.

How will you respond to these truths that the Holy Spirit has revealed to you? You can reaffirm the truth and find encouragement, renewed faith in God, and praise to God for His grace toward you.

Or you can reject them. You can reject them by excusing your sinful actions, justifying your own good works, or by delaying repentance and faith in Jesus Christ until tomorrow.

If you choose to reject them, remember this warning from Isaiah 55.6-7:

“Seek ye the LORD while he may be found, call ye upon him while he is near: {7} Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the LORD, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.”

God demands immediate repentance from sin without delay. He does not promise another opportunity. You still stand accountable before God for your sin. You will suffer the consequences of your sin by eternal judgment and condemnation.

I pray that the Holy Spirit will bring you to repentance today. I pray that in grace He will come to you today bring you to saving faith in Jesus Christ.

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#### References

Trapp, John. Trapp's Commentary on the New Testament. (Sovereign Grace Book Club, Evansville IN) 1958, p. 331.