



So Much That's Not There

by Rev. Jerry L. McGlone

Luke 16:19-31

There was a rich man, who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died, and was buried; and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes, and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. And he called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame." But Abraham said, "Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us." And he said, "Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment." But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." And he said, "No, father Abraham; but if some one goes to them from the dead, they will repent." [Abraham] said to [the rich man], "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if some one should rise from the dead."

A woman came up to me after church one Sunday and said, "I enjoyed that sermon so much. I don't know how you do it, but you seem to get so much out of the scripture that just isn't there."

I think she gave me a compliment. But, it was also a warning! Watch out!

Sometimes you get things out of the scripture that just aren't there!
Sometimes you uncover a truth that isn't true.

Sometimes you learn a lesson that isn't right.

There are times when you read the scripture. You say, "Aha!" You think you understand everything that it says. You think you've got it for sure. But sometimes, that truth you think you learned from the scripture just isn't there.

It's human nature. It happens to everybody. You search the Bible to find a piece of scripture that says what you want to hear. You find something that sort of fits, and you read into it the message you want to hear, but that message just isn't there.

I do that. After all, a woman told me that I always find so much that isn't there. Well, so do you.

I picked this particular scripture today just because it's one of those passages that you can read and find a lot in it that isn't there. I want to use this passage to show you some of the things that aren't there.

1. You can read this scripture and say, "Aha! Jesus condemns rich people." You may think that kind of condemnation is in it. After all, the rich man in the story ended up being condemned to everlasting torment in hell. It sure seems like a logical jump to assume that he ended up in hell because he was rich. But that's not there.

Just look at that rich man. He strutted around wearing purple clothes. Back then, purple was the most expensive dye you could buy, so only the wealthiest could afford it. He never picked up a burrito from Mighty Taco for a quick lunch on the go. Every meal he ate was a banquet.

He was rich: a man of wealth, a man of substance, a man of formidable social standing. Maybe he was the Donald Trump of Jerusalem.

And while some of us might like to think it's wrong for a man to have so much, Jesus never once said any of that was a sin. Wealth alone does not bring condemnation. Even though the temptation is high, don't read something into this scripture story that's just not there!

2. You can read this scripture and say, "I get it! Jesus says being poor is good!" After all, when you take this story at face value, this is what you find. Rich man goes to hell. Poor man goes to heaven.

You read along and you might think that Jesus is telling you if you get the choice to be either rich or poor, that you better choose poor. You may come to the conclusion that poverty - all by itself - is a virtue. You might suppose that Jesus says being poor puts you in touch with the meaningful

things in life, the things that really count. But none of that's in the story! It's not there!

In the story, the beggar was homeless. He slept on the rich man's front steps. His name was Lazarus - not the guy who was raised from the dead; he was a completely different fellow. The name Lazarus is important to the story. It means "he whom God helps."

You can figure that out for yourself. You've known people like that, people who never seem to do anything for themselves, people who always needed help - help to pay the bills, help to get a meal, help to have something decent to wear, help to have a place to sleep.

For whatever reason, Lazarus couldn't, or wouldn't help himself. So, he walked around wearing ragged clothes. He probably never washed, because ulcers covered his skin. He was so weak, or maybe lazy, that he didn't even drive the dogs away when they came sniffing around. Right along beside the dogs, he begged for the scraps that fell off the rich man's table. When the scraps fell, he found the strength to fight the dogs off.

You may think that Jesus was saying it's better to be poor like Lazarus than rich, but Jesus never says he wants you to be like Lazarus!

You might argue the point: Lazarus ended up in heaven! You might come to the conclusion that there's a connection between being homeless and helpless and getting into heaven when you die. That's just not there!

Well, here's a fact: all poor people won't go to heaven. The story doesn't tell us what got Lazarus into heaven, but it was something else, something the story doesn't say, something we don't see. Whatever it was, it was not his lack of money that sent him upward when he died.

3. You can read this scripture and say, "So that explains it! I now know what heaven and hell are like." You may think Jesus is giving you an accurate description of heaven and hell. You might think it's all spelled out. But it's not there!

Look at what the scripture says. The rich man down in Hades was in torment. He ended up begging for a sip of water to cool his tongue. He was burning in the flames. That seems pretty clear. You might assume that Jesus wants you to think that Hell is a place of fire and brimstone. But, be real careful about it, that description of hell is not there!

You may think his words say just that, but Jesus was just using words people could understand. He was painting a picture of contrast: the eternal difference in treatment given to the rich man and the poor man.

The rich man was suffering down in Hades, but you've got to remember, Hades isn't Hell. Hades for the Jewish mind is a place of separation from God. And being separated from God, Jesus said, is as bad as being burned by fire. Poor, old Lazarus, on the other hand, was described as reclining on Abraham's bosom. That's not heaven. To the Jewish mind, the bosom of Abraham describes being in a state of communion with God, of being in God's actual presence; and that, according to Jesus, is as good as having your every wish fulfilled.

When you give this scripture story a quick read, it seems to be telling you a literal description of heaven and hell, but that's just not there.

4. You can read this story and say, "Well, all right, that rich man learned his lesson. At least he's really, really concerned about his brothers." Well, that's not there, either!

What is there is a clever bit of camouflage. Sure, the rich man begged God to send Lazarus back from the dead to visit his five brothers. But look closely at what the rich man was saying.

He said it would take a dead man coming back from his grave to really convince his brothers to change their lives. He said he didn't see how God could expect any man to be convinced to live their lives differently on the say-so of Moses and the Prophets alone.

After all, the rich man was saying, he hadn't been convinced. If only God had sent a dead man back from the grave to have a talk with him, then he would have lived his life differently!

The rich fellow drew the logical conclusion: it wasn't his fault he lived a selfish life. It was God's fault for not being convincing enough. "I'm down here in Hades," he said, "because God didn't give me a good enough reason to change the way I live." The fault was not his, he said, the fault rested squarely on God's shoulders.

Have you ever tried to blame God for your problems? If you have, you can understand what that rich man was trying to do.

What an argument that rich man made! If only someone you know would come back from the dead, and

- after he clawed his way up out of his grave,
- after he scared you with his stories of hellish torment,
- after he warned you to change your ways;
- after all of that -
 - you might be convinced enough

- to turn you life around
- and be a new kind of person.

But, the truth is, it probably wouldn't.

When it happened, you would gape in wonder, maybe you'd shake in fear, maybe you'd fall down on your knees and have a deeply moving religious experience; but all of those emotions would eventually cool down. As with all experiences of fear and wonder, time softens the impact. And at the end of the matter, you are still left with your same old self.

Jesus discounted his argument. That rich man had been given everything he needed to believe, but he chose to ignore God's message.

Look at what you've got.

You've got the great, good news of Jesus Christ, God's son. You've got his love and forgiveness. You've got his sacrifice and his promise. You've got the assurance that Jesus really did come back from the grave.

So, like that rich man, what have you chosen to do with the information you've got? Do you believe it? Do you allow it to change your living? Or, do you choose to ignore it?

I don't think anybody deliberately intends to go to hell. Ask most any man, he'll tell you he's not going to end up in hell. Inquire of most any woman, she'll let you know she won't be going there. When you think about it, you don't think you'll feel those flames licking at your feet. So why do so many other people seem headed in that direction?

I think most people rely on God being an old softy, willing to overlook their little sins, willing to understand their good intentions, willing to forgive their selfishness. What a rude awakening some people are going to have.

When you read today's scripture passage, you sure can get a lot out of it that's just not there. But I want you to set aside everything that's not in it, so you can learn what is there.

This is in it:

Jesus says what you do in this life determines what happens to you in the next one.

Now don't read into this something that's not there. You might suppose it means when you do something good, you're storing up brownie points in heaven that you can cash in after you die. That's not in it.

What you do reflects the kind of person you are.

A good person will do good things. He won't always be saintly. She won't always make the right choice. But he will intentionally do good. She will do her best to do what is right.

A Christian man or woman lives a Christian life-style. It won't be perfect, but it will be true.

Sometimes I am called upon to perform funerals for people I do not know, and when I stand there in front of the casket, I'll think to myself, "Who is this person? What was she like? How did he live?" I never knew her or him.

When you come knocking on God's door, wouldn't it be a shame if you heard God say, "Who is this stranger knocking on my door? I don't know you. You don't belong here."

Where do you belong? The way you live your life shows where you belong.

This is in that story.

Jesus said between heaven and hell there is an unbridgeable chasm.

You might think that God put it there, that God caused the separation, that God wants to keep people apart. But that's not in the scripture.

Who digs that chasm?

My friends, the clearest evidence of what you believe about God is never, ever what you say. The clearest evidence is always the way you treat other people. Your acts of goodness and generosity, your acts of forgiveness and compassion - or their opposites - they're the evidence. They are the outward evidence of the kind of person you are.

If you are obstinate and angry, if you are selfish and greedy, if you are rude and obnoxious -

- if you are unforgiving and judgmental, if you are argumentative and authoritative, if you are nasty and bad-tempered;

- if you are so sure that your answer is the only one, if you know that you are always right, if you won't play unless it's by your rules;

- if you act that way, you're digging a chasm.

You're driving a wedge deep into your relationships - and you're digging a chasm that separates you from God.

This is in the story.

Jesus says it's not too late for you. He wants you to know your eternal destiny is yet to be determined. Unlike that rich man, you still have time.

What kind of man are you? What kind of woman are you?

You know, there's nothing in the scripture to make me think that that rich man was deliberately evil. His obvious sin was that he just didn't care. He walked past Lazarus every day. He saw that poor man's problems. But he just didn't care.

You're not actively evil. You're not deliberately devilish. You're not consciously cruel. At the very worst, you're a solid citizen, a decent sort of fellow.

But do you care about others? And if you care, how do you show it?

The sharp point of this story that needs to prick your hearts today is this: you don't have to be actively evil to get turned away from the gates of heaven. Indifference is enough. Apathy is enough. Carelessness is enough.

So make sure you're a person who cares.

While driving on the West Virginia Turnpike in years past, I used to see the same sign over and over. It said, "Driving while drowsy can put you to sleep - permanently."

Well, a drowsy, uncaring life can put you in hell, permanently!

And when you read today's scripture passage again, you'll find that message there!