

The Rich Man and Lazarus

PART 4: FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS #1-3 (LUKE 16:19-31)

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It is good to be together this morning. We are glad you are here, whether in this room, in your living room, driving, or wherever you are, we are glad you are with us today. We do plan on partaking of the Lord's Supper right after we study the word of God today, so if you do not yet have the elements for the Supper, this would be a great time to get those. And if you are visiting with us, we would invite you to fill out a visitor card online. The QR code is on the wall up here, it's on the bulletin, it's on the bulletin board in the entryway, and it can also be found on our website at fourlakescoc.org/visitor.

We'd like to begin this morning by inviting everyone here today to obey the gospel, and this goes for anyone joining us live online, on the phone, and anyone who may watch, read, or listen to this message in the future. The good news is that God loves us, and although we sinned, God sent his only Son to take our place on the cross. He died, he was buried, and he was raised up on the third day. We obey this good news by turning away from sin, by confessing our faith Jesus as the Son of God, and by allowing ourselves to be immersed with him, a burial in water, for the forgiveness of sins. At that point, we are born into God's family, and we come up out of the water to live a brand-new life.

As our tradition has been, we do have several examples this week, starting with one of several being baptized through the ministry of West Tennessee Children's Home (similar to Shults-Lewis over in Indiana). I wouldn't swear to it, but I believe the one doing the baptism might be Larry Ivery (I knew brother Ivery from my time at Freed-Hardeman, and I believe he works with the home). A friend of mine is a counselor at the school, and back when we were engaged, Keola and I actually helped install the trim in one of the rooms of a new home on the campus down there. We had no idea what we were doing, but we offered to help, they asked if I had ever used a saw (yes), so they basically said that we could go put the trim in that room down there, and we did. But we are thankful for the good work that continues to be done down there. This was posted a few days ago, and they say that "100% of those we serve will be shown the love of Christ and a seed of God's word will be planted! God gives the increase!" Amen to that!

These are from the Palm Beach Lakes congregation down in Florida where David Sproul (a friend of mine) preaches. They say, "God continues to give the increase! We were filled with joy this evening when Todd Jucket and Caila Buonadonna decided to put Christ on in baptism. Caila's children, Sofia and Jace, were there too." And

we also have a picture of Dan Jenkins, one of their preachers, explaining to Caila's children what is going on. Great to see!

And then we have at least four more baptisms in Ukraine this week, in Nikopol. They say, "Praise God! The Kingdom is growing even under difficult circumstances." We welcome Angelina, and Masha, and Victoria, and Irina. We certainly remember these new brothers and sisters in our prayers. We are thankful for good news, and we invite you to follow the examples we've shared this morning. Please get in touch if we can help in any way.

During the month of March, we have been looking at a series of lessons intended to answer a question that has come from several of our members over the past year: What happens when we die? And as we have just briefly mentioned over the past several weeks, this is a good question! Unless the Lord returns first, all of us will die. So, we wonder, and we want to know: What happens when we die?

Well, to answer this question, we turned our attention to Jesus, and specifically, we've spent the past three weeks studying what Jesus said concerning the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16. We looked at the CONTRAST between these two men in life and in death. We then focused on the SEPARATION that takes place at the moment of death. And then we looked at the rich man's REGRET as he begs father Abraham to send Lazarus back as a warning to his brothers. However, we closed last week with Abraham's reminder that the man's five brothers already had the written word of God, and the word is God's final offer. If we reject the word, there is no miracle that will ever convince us to obey the gospel.

In all of this, we have used the graphic up here as visual representation of what we've learned from Luke 16. We still have a few of these left on the table up here, so feel free to take one of these before you head out today. But the account of the Rich Man and Lazarus tells us that we have a choice in this life, but once this life is over, the saved and the lost are separated by this great chasm (or canyon), and this separation continues on into eternity – ultimately heaven for those who are saved, and hell (or eternal torment) for those who are lost.

Well, my original plan was to leave it here; however, some of you have asked some very good follow-up questions. We are always thankful for those who are eager to study, and we are especially thankful for those who ask thoughtful and honest questions. This morning (and next week), then, I'd like for us to just briefly move through five of these questions. We won't be doing an extensive and exhaustive study of each one, but I would like for us to hit the highlights. We will consult the word of God on each question, I may give a few additional references, and hopefully this will give us a few ideas for future study.

I. Based on our study of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the first of these five questions is this: IF I OBEY THE GOSPEL, WON'T I BE CONDEMNING MY FAMILY TO ETERNAL TORMENT?

Maybe you have wondered about this. I have heard this many times, and maybe you have as well. We study the Bible with people, they start to understand what the Bible teaches, they see what they need to do, but then they realize that their parents or their siblings or other loved ones who have already passed on have not done this. And then they will sometimes have this crisis of conscience: If I obey the gospel, if I turn to God in faith, if I turn away from sin, if I allow myself to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, then I am admitting that this is necessary for salvation. My parents haven't done this; therefore, by obeying the gospel, I am (in a sense) saying that my parents are lost. And this is a sobering thought, isn't it? It's terrifying to think that we

might be separated from our loved ones, not just for the rest of this short life, but for all of eternity. And it's terrifying to think of them as existing right now (and ultimately forever) in a state of torment.

Just a few thoughts here: First of all, God is the judge, and we are not. He is the perfect and righteous judge, he has never made a mistake, and he will never make a mistake at any point in the future. When it comes to assigning eternal destinies to people, God is both just and merciful. And unlike judges here on this earth, God (as judge) is all-knowing. And because of this, in the context of discussing church discipline, the apostle Paul (in 1 Corinthians 5) makes an interesting statement near the end of that chapter. The context is that's there's a man living in sexual sin with his own stepmother, and instead of correcting that behavior, the church is proud of it, "Look how tolerant we are!" And Paul says: No, you need to remove that man from the congregation before the sin spreads to everybody else! They object: But if we separate ourselves from everybody who sins, we would need to leave the world – we could never even shop at Wal-Mart! And in response, Paul makes a distinction between those in the world and those who claim to be Christians. And in this context, in 1 Corinthians 5:12-13, he says, ***"For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Do you not judge those who are within the church? But those who are outside, God judges. REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES."*** I don't think this gives us a false sense of hope, but I do think this passage reminds us that God is the judge, and we are not. And to me, there are some things I just cannot think about. It's too much. We judge those who are within the church. Those who are outside? God judges. And thankfully, what I do or do not do really has no impact on whether somebody who has already crossed over to the other side is saved or lost.

But there is something else to consider here. If I am faced with the decision as to whether to obey the gospel, if I am reading the word of God and I see the clear commands to repent and to be baptized, then aren't I truly in the position of being one of those five brothers from Luke 16? We won't read this again, but remember: The rich man (in torment) is begging Abraham to send Lazarus back to give a warning, and Abraham basically says: NO, ***"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead."*** Worst case scenario: If your loved ones truly are lost (God is the judge, and we are not), but if they are lost, we know from this passage (based on the words of Jesus says here) that their only concern is that you do everything in your power to hear and obey the word of God. More than anything, they want you to do what you know to be right, based on your study of God's word.

And this is reflected in the article on the front of the bulletin last week – the article where a man inherits a general store from his grandfather, someone tells him that the yardstick for selling fabric is an inch too short, he's tempted to defend his parents and grandparents over this, but he finally realizes that he will honor them by doing what they would have done if they had been presented with the same information, and so he fixes it. In the same way, this is our situation. We are the five brothers. There is no other miracle on the horizon. We have the word of God. The question is: Are we listening to it? Are we obeying it? Will we blindly follow the example of loved ones who have passed on (like the rich man's brothers are doing), or will we listen to God's word and obey it?

So, in answering this question, I would emphasize, first of all, that God is the judge and we are not. But secondly, even in a worst-case scenario, based on our study of the rich man and Lazarus, if our loved ones truly are lost, their concern right now is that we honor the word of God by obeying it.

II. Well, the second question is this: HOW DO WE KNOW THAT THE PUNISHMENT OF HELL WILL TRULY CONTINUE FOR ETERNITY?

And to clarify just a bit: The reference here is to the PUNISHMENT being eternal – so, not just hell itself, but how do we know that those in hell are actually suffering for eternity? How do we know that God won't just put an end to it at some point? And this is an interesting question. It's interesting, because nobody has ever asked: How do we know that those in heaven will be enjoying themselves for eternity? Nobody seems to be concerned about the fairness of only serving God for 70 years and then being blessed with an eternity of pleasure. Nobody argues that that's not fair. But we understand why. Nobody is too overwhelmed by an eternity in heaven being too much of a blessing. On the other hand, just the thought of eternal torment is almost too terrible to even imagine. As we try to wrap our minds around this idea, we do see in the account of the rich man and Lazarus that the suffering is ongoing, but to clarify the eternal aspect, I'd like for us to head over to Matthew 25.

In Matthew 25, Jesus is talking about the judgment. He's separating the sheep and the goats – sheep on his right, goats on his left. Then he talks about inviting in those who fed him when he was hungry, and so on. Then, to the others (to the ones who did not provide food and clothing), he says, ***“Depart from me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been prepared for the devil and his angels; for I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat,”*** and so on. Somebody might say: Yes, it says that the FIRE is eternal, but it doesn't say that the SUFFERING will be eternal. Maybe we've found a loophole here. ****PPT**** But then we come to the very last verse in Matthew 25, where Jesus says, ***“These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*** What I hope we notice in this passage is that punishment will last just as long as the reward. Both will continue on for eternity. The same word is used. And to show what's going on behind the translation, I just took a screenshot of an online interlinear, where they have the English translation directly under each word in the original language. Even if we know nothing about this, it's obvious that Jesus uses the same word here. At the judgment, some will ***“...go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.”*** The punishment and the reward will both continue on for eternity. So, if somebody thinks that the wicked will merely cease to exist, no, that is not what's going on here. Both the reward and the punishment are ***“eternal.”***

Beyond this, we could also refer to Daniel 12:2, where the prophet says that, ***“Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt.”*** At the judgment, all of the dead will rise – some will arise to everlasting life, and the others will arise to disgrace and everlasting contempt.

Or, we might refer to Mark 9:42, where Jesus says that, ***“Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe to stumble, it would be better for him if, with a heavy millstone hung around his neck, he had been cast into the sea.”*** The punishment for hurting a child is worse than drowning in the sea. What is worse than having a millstone hung around our neck and being thrown into the depths of the sea? Obviously, eternal torment would fall in that category. There is something worse than death on the horizon.

I believe we have another reference to this “punishment” in Revelation 20:10, where John says, ***“And the devil who deceived them was thrown into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are also; and they will be tormented day and night forever and ever.”*** Someone might say, “Yes, but this punishment is for the devil.” It is. But, I think that if we were to study Revelation, we would find that the ***“beast and the false prophet”*** are symbolic pictures for human deceivers, and note: They are tormented here as well. Besides, when we skip down to Revelation 20:15, John continues by saying, ***“And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire.”*** So, the ***“lake of fire”*** includes not only the devil, but also anyone whose name is ***“not found written in the book of life.”*** All of this ties back in to Matthew 25:41, where Jesus says, ***“Depart from Me, accursed ones, into the eternal fire which has been***

prepared for the devil and his angels.” This idea of “eternal punishment” fits in with what the Bible teaches in a number of passages.

III. The third and final follow-up question for us to consider this morning is this: HOW COULD A LOVING GOD TORTURE PEOPLE FOREVER? In other words, HOW IS IT “JUST” OR “FAIR” TO PUNISH SOMEONE FOR ETERNITY WHEN THEY HAVE ONLY SINNED FOR A SHORT TIME HERE ON THIS EARTH? ISN’T THE PUNISHMENT OUT OF PROPORTION TO THE SIN?

We have a number of things to keep in mind here, starting with the reminder that God certainly does not enjoy seeing anyone lost (for any reason). This goes all the way back to the book of Genesis. We think of God patiently listening to Abraham and lowering the threshold for the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18. God certainly doesn’t want to see the wicked destroyed. He’d much rather see them repent. We might think of God’s message through the prophet Ezekiel in Ezekiel 18:23, where he asks, ***“Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,” declares the Lord GOD, “rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?”*** He continues in verses 31-32 and says, ***“Cast away from you all your transgressions which you have committed and make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit! For why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone who dies,” declares the Lord GOD. “Therefore, repent and live.”*** This thought continues in the New Testament, in 2 Peter 3:9, where Peter says that, ***“The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance”*** (2 Peter 3:9). And this certainly fits with what we’ve learned in our Sunday morning Bible class lately, from 1 Timothy 2:3-4, where Paul tells us to pray, and then he says, ***“This is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.”*** So first of all, God does not want anybody to be lost, but instead, he wants all people to be saved.

Secondly, though, as our Creator and Judge, God does have every right to set the penalty for sin as he sees fit, not necessarily as we see fit. Generally speaking, those who commit crimes usually aren’t in a position to serve on their own jury. And in a way, that’s the position we are in. As those who are guilty of sin, we have no right to lecture God concerning any sentences he hands down. Some, though, have tried to point out how unfair it is that God could sentence someone to an eternity of torment for just a few years of sin. I would point out, though, that the time it takes to commit a crime isn’t always reflected in the length of the sentence.

And, by the way, I do find it interesting that we have had a national discussion this week on the fairness of long prison sentences for crimes that take a short time to commit. We’ve had some hearings for a new Supreme Court justice, and this has been the focus this week. But I think most of us do understand that the length of time it takes to commit a crime does not always relate to the severity of the sentence. Somebody could go on a killing spree in a mall, and nobody argues later that since the crime only took 30 seconds, the guy should only be sentenced to 30 seconds in prison. That’s not how it works. No, the sentence reflects the seriousness of the crime, not necessarily how much time it took to commit the crime.

As to the seriousness of sin, we need to look at sin like God looks at sin, and the penalty for sin is separation from God. God is holy, and when we sin, that relationship is broken. But then we need to think about what God did to fix it. And it seems that we have a clue about the seriousness of sin when we remember what God did for us to save us from sin: He sent his only Son as a sacrifice, as a substitute. And then we need to ask ourselves: If we reject that sacrifice, what do we really “deserve”? And the answer comes in Hebrews 10. We will look at the larger context of this passage as we dig in to our fourth question next week, but for today, we’ll just briefly note Hebrews 10:28-31, where the author of Hebrews says,

²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹ How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰ For we know Him who said, "VENGEANCE IS MINE, I WILL REPAY." And again, "THE LORD WILL JUDGE HIS PEOPLE." ³¹ It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

If we continue sinning, we are treating God's Son as roadkill. Is that too strong? I don't think so. The author says that we have ***"trampled under foot the Son of God."*** God offered his Son on the cross in our place. If we ignore that sacrifice by continuing down a path of sin, we are treating God's Son like the squirrel on the road out here, driving over it again and again with no thought whatsoever: We are demonstrating that we do not care. What if somebody did that to us? What if we offered our child to save somebody but they ran him over and left him in the road? This just starts to help us understand why God would do what he has promised to do. I'm just saying that before we accuse God of being "unfair" here, we really need to understand what sin really is and what he did to save us from it.

Conclusion:

The good news is: He warned us about it. And not only did he warn us, but he has provided his Son as the way of escape. Amazing grace! And in response, we turn to him in faith, turning away from sin, confessing our belief in Jesus as the Son of God, and obeying his command to be immersed in water for the forgiveness of sins, ***"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,"*** Paul says, ***"so that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade..."***

This morning, we've looked at the first three follow-up questions: 1.) If I obey the gospel, won't I be condemning my family? 2.) How do we know that the punishment will truly last for eternity?, and 3.) How can a loving God do something like this? In answering these questions, we've shared some thoughts from several passages, and Lord willing we will be able to come together next week to consider at least two more questions: 1.) What about those who have never heard the good news? and 2.) Are there "holes in the floor of heaven?"

Before we sing a song to prepare us for the Lord's Supper, let's thank God together:

Our Father in Heaven,

You sent your only Son to this earth to save us, to offer himself in our place. We are eternally thankful for that indescribable gift. Thank you for warning us about the consequences of sin. Once again, we are thankful for those who have gone on before us. Regardless of where they may be at this moment, we pray for courage and a renewed commitment to trust and obey your word.

We ask all of this in the name of Jesus, our Passover. AMEN.