

The Rich Man and Lazarus

PART 5: FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS #4-5 (LUKE 16:19-31)

Baxter T. Exum (#1637)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
April 3, 2022



It is good to be together this morning. We are glad you are here, and if you are visiting with us, we invite you to fill out a visitor card online using the QR code on the wall up here. It's also in the bulletin and on the bulletin board in the entryway, and it can also be found on our website at fourlakescoc.org/visitor. 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.

As our custom has been, we are once again starting our service with a brief summary of God's plan for saving us. The gospel is the good news about the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus, and 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 this point, the Christian life begins.

The first example comes to us from Nigeria. We are so blessed to have a baptistery right here in this building! This looks like it's located in a back alley somewhere. We are not given a name, but they say that "There is a great joy in heaven now because of this soul that has been saved. She was a big pillar in many denominational churches where she thought that she was worshipping God. After many years, she got tired of lies and deceit of many fake pastors and false prophets, and she decided not to go to church again before one of our members invited her to worship with us at church of Christ Omachi Rumuodomaya Port Harcourt Rivers state Nigeria. As we began to talk with her, she saw the truth and accepted to be baptized today. Please join us to thank God for her salvation and welcome her to the church of Christ the ground and pillar of the truth." Amen to that!

This next update comes to us from Robert Tipps, down in Winchester, Tennessee. He says that "The best people are always pursuing Jesus. So much rejoicing today! I got to baptize two of my favorite people, my in-laws. This is one of the best days of my life." He says that "They are two of the greatest people in the world, full of good works, loving compassionate hearts, generous spirits, worshippers of God for years and the list goes on," but then he explains that there were two people in the New Testament who were also "great people who worshipped God, had great qualities and attributes, but still desired the salvation of the Lord and were baptized," Lydia in Acts 16 and the man from Ethiopia in Acts 8. Charles and Melissa (his in-laws) had "both been really seeking the last couple of years and studying." He went hunting with his father-in-law last November, and noticed that he had his Bible by his spot on the couch with notes on salvation. Then, he says, "I asked them both this morning if they had any questions and they both said 'no doubts.' Charles told me he was a slow reader but

has read the New Testament through 1-½ times since January.” His mother-in-law “had been baptized as a kid, but due to her lack of knowledge of some scriptures that involved baptism as part of salvation she wanted to make that right.” And then he says, “Today I get to rejoice with 2 of the greatest people I have ever met, and they are amazing examples to me that ‘the best people are always pursuing Jesus.’”

This next one comes to us from Warsaw, Poland, as Vita was baptized into Christ this week. I noticed that the location is tagged as the “Hilton Warsaw City,” so they are apparently in a hotel swimming pool. We’ve done that here in Madison, but here they have some lap swimming going on in the background (these are just a few screenshots from a video). Some of you know that I’ve been doing some swimming lately, so this caught my eye. The post says that Vita is from Ukraine, and we know that many Ukrainians have fled into Poland. Even in difficult times, good things are happening, and we praise God for that.

And finally, we have another update from inside Ukraine. Alexandr Rodichev says that “God is great! The Mom of my dear friend was baptized today in Lviv. Congratulations to Victoria! Welcome to the family! And congratulations to my friend Maxim. Now you are not only a son but a brother.” Absolutely awesome! We are thankful for these men and women who have obeyed the gospel all around the world this week, and we would invite you to follow their example. Please get in touch if we can help in any way.

Over the past four weeks, we have been looking at a series of lessons intended to answer this question that has come from several of our members over the past year: What happens when we die? We started by looking at the account of 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.

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; however, 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.

As I mentioned last week, my original plan was to leave it here; however, some of you have asked some very good follow-up questions. Last week, we looked at the first three of these, starting with the first one: If I obey the gospel, won’t I be condemning my family to eternal torment? We noted that God is the Judge (and we are not), but then we went back and emphasized obedience to the word of God (just as Jesus did in the account of the rich man and Lazarus). Worst case scenario: If our deceased loved ones truly are lost, we know from Luke 16 that their only concern right now is that we personally listen to the word of God and obey it.

We then looked at a second question: How do we know that the punishment of hell will truly continue on throughout all eternity (not just hell itself, but the suffering in that place)? We looked at several passages outside Luke 16, including the last verse of Matthew 25, where Jesus himself said that both the punishment and the reward will be **“eternal.”**

We then looked at a third question: How is this fair? How could a loving God do this? How could God punish someone forever based on only 70 years of sin? Well, we studied God’s concept of fairness, we noted that the punishment for a crime does not usually match the time it took to commit the crime, we looked at what sin

really is, and we noted that God truly wants all people to be saved, with that desire demonstrated in his sending of his only Son to suffer and die for us. If we ignore that sacrifice, we trample underfoot the Son of God (we treat his son like roadkill), and we noted (in that case), ***“It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the Living God”*** (Hebrews 10:31).

I. **This week, I’d like for us to look at the last two questions, starting with someone asking: WHAT ABOUT THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER HEARD THE GOOD NEWS?**

And if I understand the question correctly, we are back to the question of what is fair, what is just – especially with reference to eternal punishment. How is it fair that someone would be lost forever if they have never heard about the Lord, if they have never heard about God’s plan? We will look at several passages to help bring some clarity to this question. But even before we go too far here, we need to ask: If somebody is lost, exactly why are they lost? Are they lost because they’ve sinned, or are they lost because they never heard the gospel? Or maybe we could make a comparison: There’s a guy drowning in the river. Why is that? Is it because he’s inhaled water, or is it because nobody threw him a life preserver? Or somebody dies in a house fire – Did they die because they are in a burning house, or did they die because they didn’t have a fire extinguisher? And I know that these are not perfect comparisons, but I’m hoping we understand that sin is what causes us to be lost. We have a cause of death (water or fire), and we have something that prevents that death (a life preserver or a fire extinguisher). In the same way, we have a cause of spiritual death (sin), and we have something that prevents that death (the gospel and our obedience to it). And as Paul says in Romans 3:23, ***“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** Of course, there’s a time in our life when we are too young to sin, but eventually most of us get to a point in life where we sin; that is, we break God’s law, we miss the mark – even if we didn’t even know it at the time. We lie we steal, we disrespect our parents, we think impure thoughts, and so on – this is what causes us to be lost. All of us do this (this is the bad news). But the good news is that God is able to save us (if we listen and obey), but it’s not a lack of hearing that causes us to be lost. Sin is what causes us to be lost. I hope we will keep this in mind as we work through this.

We might also consider an interesting statement Paul makes in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9. He speaks of God’s judgment, and he says (in 2 Thessalonians 1:6-9),

***“⁶ For after all it is only just for God to repay with affliction those who afflict you, ⁷ and to give relief to you who are afflicted and to us as well when the Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸ dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. ⁹ These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power.*”**

Here, he specifically refers to ***“those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.”*** In other words, those who do not know God are lost. We have a similar passage in Ephesians 1:13, where Paul, referring to Jesus, says, ***“In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation—having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise.”*** I want us to notice that we were saved ***“after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation.”*** If we are saved before hearing the gospel, then what does the gospel save us from? It doesn’t make sense. And this line of reasoning really leads to a disturbing conclusion: If people are saved before hearing the good news (as some people would like to suggest), then wouldn’t it be a whole lot better for Christians to just shut up immediately? Jesus, though, told us to ***“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to all creation.”*** Why? If people are saved

before hearing it, and we go preaching it, and if half accept it and half reject it, haven't we just condemned half the population? And then wouldn't the gospel be bad news instead of good news? And even on a much deeper level: If people could possibly be saved without hearing the good news, then why did Jesus come at all? If people could be saved without obeying the good news about Jesus, then Jesus should have stayed in heaven and avoided the cross altogether. I'm just hoping we see the challenge here. We are lost because we sin, not because we do not know about the cure for our sin. But to be saved, we do need the cure, we need Jesus (just like we need the life ring and the fire extinguisher).

Related to this, I should also point out that ignorance is no excuse, although it was before the time of Christ. I say this because of what Paul says to the Greek philosophers on the Areopagus in Athens, Greece. In Acts 17:30-31, Paul says, ***"Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all people everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead."*** I've read this in the NASB, but the NASB really blows it here by using the word ***"men."*** It sounds like only the ***"men"*** need to repent. Some of you might agree with that, but the ESV (and some others) say that God ***"commands all people everywhere to repent."*** I think the KJV says that God ***"winked at"*** those times of ignorance. That's a bit weird on its own (at least compared to the way we talk today). But the point for us is: There was a time when God ***"overlooked"*** ignorance (basically, do the best you can, people!), but now, God demands repentance, and he demands it from ***"all people everywhere."*** Ignorance is no longer an excuse (as it once was).

In fact, Paul will go on to write the book of Romans, where he indicates in Romans 1:18-20 that the natural world itself serves as a witness to the existence of God. Even the creation testifies concerning God and should cause people to go searching for God, although they often do not. In Romans 1:18-20, Paul says,

18 For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, 19 because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. 20 For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse.

However, having said all of this, I would also give the reminder from Scripture that we do seem to have varying degrees of reward and punishment in the life to come. I don't know whether we are talking about varying levels of physical pain or whether some people will have a greater sense of awareness or regret (probably the later, in my opinion), but I would share several passages, starting with what Jesus says in Matthew 11:20-24,

20 Then He began to denounce the cities in which most of His miracles were done, because they did not repent. 21 "Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! For if the miracles had occurred in Tyre and Sidon which occurred in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. 22 Nevertheless I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon in the day of judgment than for you. 23 And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. 24 Nevertheless I say to you that it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment, than for you."

There's quite a bit we do NOT know about this, but we obviously have Jesus referring to varying degrees of punishment in the next life, and it seems to me (based on what the Lord says here) that all of those who reject

God will be condemned; however, those with more access to the truth will be judged more severely. So, on one hand, we have these random pagans in Sodom and Tyre and Sidon – they are lost; but, those in Chorazin and Bethsaida and Capernaum will also be lost, but they had actually seen the Lord perform miracles; therefore, they will be judged more severely.

Jesus also tells the parable of the master who travels, leaving his servants in charge, and the master of the house returns at an unknown hour. And Jesus illustrates this principle of varying degrees of judgment right at end of the story in Luke 12:47-48. He says, ***“And that slave who knew his master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.”*** So, both servants will be punished for not preparing, but the one with greater knowledge will be punished more severely.

We might also think of something Jesus said to Pilate during his trial in John 19:11, ***“Jesus answered [and said to Pilate], ‘You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above; for this reason he who delivered Me to you has the greater sin.’”*** Think about this for a moment: When Judas and Pilate face God at the judgment, both may very well be lost, but Judas should have known better! Judas, therefore, ***“has the greater sin,”*** Jesus says. Pilate is simply a Roman governor with no real knowledge of the Messiah, but Judas spent 3-½ years listening to and living with the Son of God. Judas should have known better.

And then, on top of all of this, we have that statement from James concerning those who take on the responsibility of teaching. From time to time, we have tried to express our appreciation to the teachers of the congregation, and we’ve tried to encourage others to try teaching for the first time. I’ll do a quick search for passages on “teachers,” and this passage in James 3 always comes up. It’s not really the encouragement I’m looking for, but it is a legitimate concern. In James 3:1, James says, ***“Let not many of you become teachers, my brethren, knowing that as such we will incur a stricter judgment.”*** Come on! We would like you to try teaching! Oh, and by the way, if you accept this responsibility, you will ***“incur a stricter judgment.”*** That’s hard, isn’t it! But we do appreciate those who put themselves at greater risk in this way. It is a heavy responsibility. But what James is saying here is that with great knowledge comes great responsibility, and if the teacher falls, he or she probably should have known better and will therefore stand before God in judgment facing a stricter penalty.

So, to summarize and to try to answer the question: Obviously, God is the judge, but yes, those who have never heard the gospel will be lost. They are lost because they have sinned; however, those who do have full access to the gospel will be judged more severely. And the practical application of this is twofold: First of all, those of in this room this morning probably have more access to the truth than just about anybody. So, of all people, we have no excuse. We know what we need to do; therefore, we need to do it. But a second practical application of our conclusion here is that we need to be sharing the good news with people. Yes, when we share it, many will reject it, but we are at least giving the opportunity. I know, with what Jesus says about repentance and counting the cost, sometimes the message may come across as bad news, but it is not! The gospel is good news, and it is our great privilege and responsibility to share it. Continuing the analogy from a few moments ago: We are the ones responsible for tossing the life ring; we are the ones responsible for deploying the fire extinguisher.

II. **Before we wrap this up, let's consider a second and final question this morning, and that is: ARE THERE HOLES IN THE FLOOR OF HEAVEN?**

A week or so ago, somebody asked me: So, by referring to “holes in the floor of heaven,” are you concerned that people might fall out? No, that’s not it at all! The question is: Are people in heaven able to see what is going on here on the earth? You might remember a song that was popular for a short time back in the late 90’s. As I remember it, it’s written from the perspective of a little boy, nearly 8 years old, whose grandmother had recently died, and it’s raining, and somebody comforts him by suggesting that the rain is actually his grandmother’s tears falling from heaven, that she is watching over him today. I think this made the list of the top 40 saddest country songs of all time. So, the question concerning what happens when we die is: Are those who have died able to see what is happening here on the earth? And it goes back to the rich man being concerned about his brothers who are still living. We won’t re-read that account, but I would just note that Jesus doesn’t say that the rich man could SEE his brothers, but Jesus says that he could **“remember”** his brothers.

Another passage that weighs in here is found in Hebrews 11, and as that entire chapter is applied in the opening verses of Hebrews 12. In Hebrews 11, we have this huge list of the faithful who have gone on before us – men like Abraham, and Moses; women like Rahab and the others. And then we come to Hebrews 12:1, where the author says,

¹ Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

So, the question is: Can these **“witnesses”** see us? I would note, first of all, that the word translated here as **“witnesses”** goes back to the same root word for our English word “martyr” – so, not necessarily that these people are witnessing us, but they are witnesses in the sense that they testify to the importance of faith. In fact, if I understand it correctly, the same word is used four times in Hebrews 11 – in verses 2, 4, 5, and 39. Their faith is a **“witness,”** their faith is a **“testimony,”** we might say – not that they are witnessing us, but their faith is a **“testimony,”** their faith is a motivation for us to have a faith just like theirs. Secondly, I would also note that the passage here is symbolic, isn’t it? The author is painting a picture for us. He describes these heroes of faith, and then he pictures them as having finished a race, and they are (in a sense) now cheering us on as we continue to run in the same race. So, we are to live our lives motivated by their faith – not that they can literally look down on us through these “holes in the floor of heaven.” I’m not saying they can’t (based on this passage), I’m just suggesting that there is another way of looking at this.

Others have appealed to Revelation 19:1-3, where John says,

¹ After these things I heard something like a loud voice of a great multitude in heaven, saying, “Hallelujah! Salvation and glory and power belong to our God; ² BECAUSE HIS JUDGMENTS ARE TRUE AND RIGHTEOUS; for He has judged the great harlot who was corrupting the earth with her immorality, and HE HAS AVENGED THE BLOOD OF HIS BOND-SERVANTS ON HER.” ³ And a second time they said, “Hallelujah! HER SMOKE RISES UP FOREVER AND EVER.”

It seems that those in heaven are at least somewhat aware of spiritual victories that take place on this earth.

We might also think of what Jesus said in Luke 15, with reference to finding the lost sheep and the lost coin. In verse 7, ***“I tell you that in the same way, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance,”*** and in verse 10, ***“I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents.”*** Does this nail it down? It is certainly interesting to consider, but I think we still have some unknowns here. There seems to be some awareness of events here on earth in the heavenly realms, but are our loved ones completely aware of what’s happening here? I am afraid that I do not know. It seems best to me, then, to simply be silent where the Bible is silent. We have looked at some possibilities, but I would have a hard time making a definitive statement concerning whether our loved ones are fully aware of what is happening here on this earth.

Conclusion:

What’s the point of all this? We’ve looked at two questions. As to the first, we’ve looked at whether those who have never heard the good news will be saved. And we learned that when someone is lost, it’s not because they haven’t heard, it’s because they’ve sinned, and all of us have sinned. So, as to answering the “So what?” to this question, I’d have to say the big lesson for us on this first question is: We need to be sharing what we know. The world is lost. Sharing the good news is up to us.

As to the second question, we’ve also looked at whether those in heaven can look back and see us from the other side. And although we did find some relevant passages, we really didn’t have a definitive answer for this one. However, I think we’d agree that what really matters for all of us here this morning is that we make every effort to be on the right side of that great chasm when this life is over. As to whether our loved ones can see us right now, ultimately, that doesn’t really matter, does it? What matters for us is what mattered for the rich man’s five brothers, that we listen to and obey the word of God. And if we can help with this, I would invite you to pull me aside after worship; or, get in touch in some other way, and we would be honored to study God’s word together.

And by the way, thank you so much for the great questions!

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

Our Father in Heaven,

Thank you for Jesus! Thank you for saving us from our sins! We praise you this morning for being a God of justice and mercy. We are thankful for the good news, and this morning we ask for courage as we share this message with the world around us.

Be with those who are joining us this morning from far off places, we pray that their time with us today has been a blessing. Thank you, Father, for providing a way for us to stay connected during difficult times.

We ask all of this in the name of Jesus. AMEN.

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com