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A RICH MAN AND A POOR MAN GO TO HEAVEN  
 Luke 16:19-31; Proper 21C-Pentecost 16C; September 27-28, 2025

A rich man and a poor man go to heaven. That doesn't sound right. Our Gospel Reading is about a rich man who died and went to hell, not heaven; only Lazarus, the poor man, went to heaven, right? That would be correct if there were only two characters in Jesus' story, but there are actually three: the rich man, who ignored the needs of the poor man, died and went to hell; Lazarus, the poor man, who died and went to heaven; and Abraham who was in heaven already, who was a very rich man on this earth.

Abraham's wealth was obvious as he came to the rescue of Lot, his nephew, after Lot was captured and carried off in war. Abraham was able to assemble an army of 318 trained men from those born in his household (Gn 14). In today's terms, Abraham ran a business that employed hundreds of workers. Abraham died a rich man and then went to heaven, as seen in today's Gospel.

Abraham, a rich man, and a poor man, Lazarus, go to heaven. Why did they go to heaven and not the other rich man who died and went to hell? To understand why we need to go back to what Jesus taught in last Sunday's Gospel Reading and to John the Baptist's earlier preaching about how to be ready for the coming of God's Christ.

Jesus told the story of the rich man who died and went to hell and poor Lazarus who died and went to heaven in response to the Pharisees who mocked Jesus' application of the parable of the Dishonest Manager. **“And I tell you, make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings... No servant can serve two masters... You cannot serve God and money.”** The Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they ridiculed [Jesus] (Lk 16:9, 13a-14b).

What Jesus went on to say in the verse immediately following last week's Gospel lays the foundation for Abraham's response to the rich man when he requests that Lazarus be sent to his still-alive brothers. Jesus stated: **“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached”** (Lk 16:16a).

The rich man dying and going to hell is an example of someone not doing what Jesus had just taught: **make friends for yourselves by means of unrighteous wealth, so that when it fails they may receive you into the eternal dwellings.** The rich man in today's story failed to use his earthly wealth to care for the poor man, Lazarus. The rich man was no "friend" to his neighbor, Lazarus, who entered the **"eternal dwellings"** of heaven when he died, but the rich man did not enter eternal dwellings. He died and went to hell.

Why? Because he had rejected what John the Baptist preached in preparation for Jesus' coming. **"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' [That's what the rich man in hell turned to.] For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham. Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire"** (Lk 3:7-9). The "fruit" John meant was repentance of sin and faith in Jesus.

The rich man in Jesus' story was **in torment in hell...** There he **lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on 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.'**" Jesus teaches clearly that once someone is in hell, he is there forever. There is no relief from the eternal suffering of being separated from God. We are warned not to end up there because of our lack of repentance and faith.

When the rich man finally realizes he's never getting out of hell, he doesn't want his five brothers to suffer the same fate. He wants Abraham to send Lazarus raised from the dead to warn them to repent of their sins before they die. Listen carefully to Abraham's response. **"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'** [The rich man] said, **'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'** He said to him, **'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'**" Jesus has risen from the dead, and many people still don't repent and believe in Him.

The rich man was in hell because he trusted in his wealth rather than repent of his sins and trust in the grace of God in Jesus Christ. The rich man had used his wealth only for his pleasure and not to **“make friends to receive him into eternal dwellings.”** He should have repented of his gluttony and lack of love for his neighbor. He should have helped poor Lazarus at his doorstep, but he refused. He thought being rich was a sign that he was in good standing with God and had no need to repent of his sins. He was dead wrong.

**“Moses and the Prophets”** and **“Law and the Prophets”** are parallel expressions. They refer to the same thing: God’s Word in the Old Testament. John preached repentance from the Law/Moses and the Prophets, God’s Word in the Old Testament, that God’s Son was coming. Everyone needs to repent and believe in God’s Christ.

Jesus affirms John’s preaching by saying, **“The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of God’s kingdom is preached”** Jesus came preaching the good news/gospel of God’s kingdom that arrived with His coming. To enter this eternal kingdom, we have to repent of our sins and believe in Jesus Christ as our Savior. Jesus’ comment through Abaraham was directed toward the Pharisees, who did not repent and believe in Him: **“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead”** – like when Jesus rose. We have this same Word of God. We also need to repent.

Jesus gives a name to the poor man who dies and goes to heaven. “Lazarus,” is an abbreviated form of the Hebrew name “Eliazar.” Like most Old Testament names, “Lazarus/Eliazar” means something, and it appears like Jesus chose it for a purpose. This name means, “God of help,” or “God is my Helper.” The words the name Lazarus is based upon are found in Psalm 54:4: **“Behold, God is my helper; the Lord is the upholder of my life.”**

Poor Lazarus suffered in life, starving and in poor health, the dogs licking his sores until he died – unlike Job who suffered and was given relief before he died. Why does Lazarus go to heaven but not the rich man with no name? Because Lazarus believed in God as his Helper despite the fact that he could not prove it based on the suffering he had to endure, even to the point of death.

Lazarus desperately needed God's help. God's plan was for the rich man to help him. The rich man was supposed to make friends with Lazarus through his worldly wealth. Even though the help Lazarus needed in life failed to arrive due to the rich man's selfishness, in his poverty Lazarus still trusted that God would deliver him and uphold his life.

Lazarus is an example of a child of God whom Jesus describes as "blessed." **"Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who are hungry now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh"** Lk 6:20b-21). The "woes" Jesus then goes on to describe apply to rich the man in hell, and others like him without repentance and faith. **"But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. Woe to you who are full now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep"** (6:24-25).

Jesus teaches the physically rich today not to trust in their wealth as a sign of God's favor, but to use it to make friends in this life, Christians who will greet and receive them into eternal dwellings. When the rich fail to do this, they need to repent of their sins. Jesus teaches the physically poor today not to despair that God has abandoned and rejected them because they are suffering. When the poor fail to trust in God's goodness and mercy while suffering, they need to repent of their sins. Rich or poor, we need to repent. Neither poverty nor riches will save us since we are all sinners; both rich and poor alike die because of their sin.

Jesus died for our sin as the poor man and rose to life again. He did this to forgive our sins, raise us from the dead, and give us and all believers in Him the riches of eternal life. We have God's Word, both Old and New Testaments, through which the Holy Spirit works to bring us to faith and keep us in faith until we are received into the eternal dwellings of heaven.

Lord, keep us steadfast in hearing and believing Your Word. Amen.