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A GREAT CHASM FIXED

Luke 16:19-31

By

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Luke Lesson 76

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A man on an ocean liner was leaning over the ship's rail, tossing something in the air and catching it. An onlooker asked, "What are you tossing?" "A diamond of great value," the man said. "It is all that I have in this world."

"Aren't you afraid of losing it, tossing it over the water like that?" "No, I've been doing it for the past half hour, and I've caught it every time," the man casually replied. "But there might come a last time," remarked the onlooker. The man laughed and tossed it again—but this time he missed. For a moment he stood aghast. Then he cried out, "Lost! Lost! Lost!"

You say, "That story is not true." But, it is true of many people! The ocean is eternity. They are on the vessel of life. That diamond is their soul. If they do not know Christ as their Savior, they are taking great risk that every day will be their last on this earth. If they should die without Him, they would be eternally lost.

How can people be so careless about their eternal destiny? One answer is that they get so caught up with the good things of this life that they neglect thinking about the life to come. The great deceiver, Satan, gets them focused on the here and now. Every once in a while—when a friend dies or when a major catastrophe claims many lives—they think briefly about death. But they figure, "I'm a basically good person. God is loving; He wouldn't condemn a decent person like me." And, they put it out of their minds and get on with pursuing the good life.

Jesus directed the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to the Pharisees, who thought that they would get into heaven because they were good men. They were the religious leaders. They were at the synagogue every time the doors opened. They studied the Law and the Prophets and could quote lengthy sections of it. They participated in all of the annual feasts and holy days of the Jewish faith. They gave ten percent or more of their income to the temple. They called Abraham their father.

But, their religion was outward. They did what they did to impress others. But God was not impressed because their hearts were full of pride and hypocrisy (16:15). They would have protested that they kept the Law, but they were not concerned about inner, heart righteousness before God. Like the rich man in the parable, they were living the good life, assuming that they would go to heaven. But their love of money had blinded them to God's perspective. They were in for a rude awakening if they did not repent and take heed to the true message of the Law and the Prophets before they died.

As far as we know, the rich man in the parable was not guilty of any gross sin. His fault was in living for himself and for this life only, with no view to eternity. His sin was *not* in having money; Abraham was a wealthy man. His sin was that he did not use the mammon of unrighteousness to make friends for himself so that when it failed, they would receive him into eternal dwellings (16:9). He failed to lay up treasures in heaven, even though the opportunity to do so literally lay at his doorstep every day. Even having Abraham as his father (16:24, 27, 30) wouldn't help him on judgment day, because he had neglected the true message of Moses and the Prophets. His faith was mere profession that did not result in obedience. Thus the message for us is:

Since present choices determine eternal destiny,
we must repent and believe God's Word and
not be deceived by outward appearances.

There are three lessons to take to heart:

1. There are two and only two eternal destinies.

Jesus makes it plain that there are two eternal destinies, heaven and hell. Heaven is pictured in the parable in the common Jewish symbolism as a Messianic banquet (13:28-29). At a banquet in that culture, the guests reclined at the table in such a manner that you could lean back upon the breast of the one near you to engage in intimate conversation. Lazarus is pictured at the banquet next to Abraham, the father of the faith, enjoying rest, comfort, and fellowship, delivered from the trials he had known in this life.

While we won't be eating perpetually throughout eternity (although that might be heaven for some!), that is the picture here to

show us that it will be a place of eternal rest and enjoyment. Whatever heaven is like, you can be sure that it will not be boring! The idea of sitting on a cloud strumming a harp forever and ever doesn't sound very exciting! But Paul says that we will judge angels (1 Cor. 6:3). While we don't know all that God has prepared for those who love Him, we do know that He will give us meaningful and fulfilling activity. I believe that God has given us the most enjoyable activities on this earth as a little foretaste of what heaven will be like. We will be free from all sin and the devastating consequences of sin, both our own sins and the sins of others against us. God Himself will dwell among us and there will be no mourning or crying or pain (Rev. 21:3-4). Heaven will be infinitely better than the best life that you can imagine on this fallen earth!

But the Bible (and especially Jesus) makes it plain that there is also a place of eternal torment, called hell. Here Jesus uses the Greek word, Hades. Scholars debate whether Hades (and the Hebrew Sheol) was the abode of all the dead, with separate compartments for the righteous and the wicked, or whether it refers only to the place for the wicked dead. We can't be dogmatic about such specifics, but we can say with certainty that hell is a real place and that you don't want to spend eternity there! Sometimes cartoons picture hell as a place where the wicked party throughout eternity, while the righteous sit around bored on a cloud in heaven. Mark Twain said, "I'll take Heaven for the climate and Hell for society." But there won't be any society in hell!

Jesus uses awful word pictures to teach us that it isn't going to be a fun place. He refers to it as the outer darkness, where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth (Matt. 25:30). He cites Isaiah 66:24, describing hell as a place "where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48). He says that it would be better to have a millstone hung around your neck and be thrown into the sea than to go into the unquenchable fire (Mark. 9:43). The flames of hell may, like the golden streets of heaven, be symbolic. But if so, they are a most frightening symbol to warn us that hell will be a place of awful torment. The rich man in the parable says, "I am in agony in this flame" (16:24). If it were a fun place, he would want his brothers to join him for the party. But he doesn't want them to "come to this place of torment" (16:28).

The doctrine of eternal punishment in hell is not pleasant, but you cannot accept Jesus and reject hell, because He taught it so plainly and frequently. R. C. Sproul wrote (“Tabletalk [11/90]),

The fact is, however, that virtually every statement in the Bible concerning hell comes from the lips of Jesus Christ. We cannot take Jesus seriously without also taking seriously what He said regarding eternal punishment.

There is very little about hell in the Old Testament, and very little in the epistles. It is almost as if God decided that a teaching this frightening would not be received from any lesser authority than that of His own Son.

There are three popular views that we must reject. The first is *universalism*, the view that everyone will eventually be saved. The universalist says, “A good and loving God could not condemn anyone to hell. There is some good in even the worst of people. God will take that into account, so that no one will be condemned.” But the universalist underestimates both the awful sinfulness of the human heart and the absolute holiness of God. The rich man in the parable was not an evil man in human terms. He wasn’t a mass murderer or child molester. He wasn’t deliberately hurting people. He was a just living for himself, oblivious to the poor man at his gate. And yet here he is in the place of eternal torment! Clearly, Jesus did not teach that everyone, let alone everyone who isn’t terribly evil, would be in heaven.

The second popular view we must reject is *annihilationism*. This is the view that God will destroy the unrepentant sinner, so that he ceases to exist. In other words, the soul is not immortal. Perhaps God will punish the person for a time, proportionate to his sin. But at some point, God will say, “That’s enough,” and the person will not suffer eternally. God will annihilate the person’s soul. Several professing evangelicals, most notably John Stott, have suggested if not embraced this idea. The Seventh Day Adventists teach this doctrine.

Frankly, the idea sounds humane and appealing. But I cannot dodge Matthew 25:46, where Jesus uses the same word “eternal” in the same verse to refer to eternal punishment and eternal life. If life is eternal, then so is punishment. Also, Revelation 20:10 states

that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will be tormented in the lake of fire and brimstone “day and night forever and ever.” Then, just a few verses later (20:15), it states that all of those whose names are not found written in the book of life are also thrown into the lake of fire. “Day and night forever and ever” sure sounds eternal! The best defense of eternal punishment that I’ve read is Jonathan Edwards’ sermon, “The Justice of God in the Damnation of Sinners.” He argues that since any sin is against the infinite God, it is worthy of infinite punishment.

The third popular view that this parable refutes is the doctrine of *purgatory*. Both the Roman Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church teach that when a believer dies, unless he has attained a state of moral perfection on earth, he goes to an intermediate place where he suffers until all sin is purged away. The sufferings vary according to the guilt and impenitence of the sufferer. Gifts and services to the church, prayers on behalf of the deceased, and Masses provided by friends or loved ones, can all shorten the amount of time the person spends in Purgatory.

If anyone was a candidate for Purgatory, this rich man was. As I said, he was not a bad man. He called Abraham his father, showing his devotion to the Jewish faith. He had a concern for his five brothers’ eternal destiny. But he wasn’t in Purgatory, with a chance to get into heaven after he had suffered a while. He was in hell and there was a great chasm fixed so that he could never cross over. The doctrine of Purgatory is not taught in Scripture (it is based on the apocryphal 2 Maccabees 12:39-45). It undermines the doctrine of justification by faith alone in Christ alone. It adds human works to His finished work on the cross.

So while it is a hard doctrine to fathom, both intellectually and emotionally, we cannot say that we believe in Jesus and the Bible and at the same time reject the doctrine of eternal hell. There are two and only two eternal destinies.

2. The basis for a person’s eternal destiny is fixed in the present life.

A. The fact of a fixed destiny: A great chasm fixed (16:26).

Abraham says to the rich man in hell that there is a great chasm fixed between those in heaven and those in hell, so that

none can cross from one side to the other. Not only does this mean that there is no Purgatory, it also means that there is no second chance after death. Hebrews 9:27 states, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment." As someone has said, there are no unbelievers in hell. They just believed too late!

In the parable, Lazarus died and the angels carried him to heaven. The rich man died, was buried, and was in hell in the flames. Since it was a parable, designed to illustrate a central truth, Jesus pictures the final outcome without spelling out details about future resurrections of the body. Paul says (2 Cor. 5:8) that for believers, to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord. There is no such thing as "soul sleep" while we wait for the resurrection of our bodies at His second coming. The souls of unbelievers go immediately at death into a place of conscious torment to await the Great White Throne judgment when their bodies are raised and thrown into the Lake of Fire (Rev. 20:11-15).

Before death, a person can move from spiritual death to eternal life. But once a person dies, his eternal destiny is fixed. He goes either to heaven or to hell and there is no crossing over from one place to the other after that. There is a great chasm fixed.

B. The basis of a fixed destiny: Repentance and faith in the testimony of God's Word.

A superficial reading of the story might lead you to conclude that a person who is rich and comfortable in this life goes to hell, while a person who is poor and miserable goes to heaven, to even things out. But that would contradict other Scriptures, and even in the story itself, the wealthy Abraham is in heaven. The rich man's problem was not that he was rich, but that he did not repent of his sin of squandering his riches on himself and begin to use them as God would have him to do, to make friends for eternity.

The rich man knew that his brothers needed to do what he had not done, namely, to repent and to be persuaded to believe the message of Moses and the Prophets (= Scripture; 16:30-31). The apostle Paul summarized his preaching as "solemnly testifying both to Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). Repentance and faith are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other.

Repentance is a change of mind that results in a turning of the whole person from sin to God. Saving faith is to trust the testimony that God has borne concerning His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, who offered Himself as the penalty for our sins. A person who has truly believed in Christ as Savior will live a life of repentance and growth in godliness. The fact that this rich man never showed concern for Lazarus, even though he had to walk past him every day, is ample evidence that his faith was an empty profession. He had never repented of his selfishness.

The rich man may have protested: "How was I to know that I should take care of this poor man at my gate?"

- (1) God's Word is a sufficient witness to lead a person to repentance.

When the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers, Abraham replies that they have what they need to repent, namely, Moses and the Prophets. But the rich man protests, saying in effect, "That's not enough. They need something more spectacular, something miraculous. Send them a man risen from the dead to preach to them and then they will repent." But Abraham insists that Scripture is a sufficient witness. If they won't believe Scripture, they won't believe if someone rises from the dead.

Sometimes when you're witnessing, the person will say, "If I could just see a miracle, I'd believe." That is just a smokescreen. The Bible bears witness of many miracles, first and foremost the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. There is sufficient evidence to believe the apostolic witness of the resurrection. If a person won't read and believe the Bible, then he has a deeper problem, namely, a moral problem.

- (2) Repentance is a moral issue, not an intellectual one.

The rich man had known what God's Word says about concern for the poor and needy. But he chose to ignore this hurting man on his doorstep. In effect, he is blaming God for not giving him sufficient witness: "If You had just sent someone from the dead to warn me, I wouldn't be in this place!" But the fact is, he did not want to inconvenience his comfortable lifestyle in order to care about this poor man.

Invariably, when you're sharing the gospel and a person raises an intellectual problem, it is not the true problem. One way I deal with this is to ask the person, "Are you saying that if I can provide a reasonable answer to that problem, you will repent of your sins and trust in Christ as Savior and Lord?" The answer almost always is, "Well, there are other issues, too." I'll say, "Great, make me a list and I'll see if I can find reasonable answers. Then will you become a Christian?" Repentance isn't the result of having all your intellectual questions answered. Repentance and faith in Christ hinge on the recognition that you are a sinner and that you need a Savior. We need to make it clear to people that if they die without repenting of their sins and trusting in Christ, they are fixing their eternal destiny in hell, not in heaven.

Thus, there are two and only two eternal destinies. The basis for a person's eternal destiny is fixed by his choices in this life.

3. It is possible to be deceived about our eternal destiny by present outward appearances.

One key to understanding this parable is 16:15b, "that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God." In the eyes of men, the rich man was successful and Lazarus was a loser. The rich man lived well and enjoyed the finest things in life. Lazarus was a miserable wretch, with the dogs licking his sores. But the irony is, Lazarus was eternally rich and the rich man was eternally bankrupt.

It is interesting that the rich man is left unnamed (sometimes he is called "Dives," but that is the Latin word for rich man). In this world, he was probably well-known, renowned for his wealth like the Kennedy family or Bill Gates. But nobody would have known the poor man's name, much less cared about it. But in God's sight, the rich man is left unnamed and the poor beggar is named. Lazarus means, "God has helped," and truly God had helped him because he had come to salvation.

The point is, it's easy to be deceived by present outward appearances into thinking that you or someone else is well-off because of career success. But if you are not rich before God, laying up eternal riches in heaven, you are really bankrupt in the worst sense of the word. Don't be deceived into pursuing financial suc-

cess at the expense of your soul! Those who believe God's Word live in light of eternity as stewards who will give account to God, using the wealth God provides to make friends for eternity.

Conclusion

A Sunday school teacher told his class the story of the rich man and Lazarus and then asked, "Now, which would you rather be, boys—the rich man or Lazarus?" One boy replied, "I'd like to be the rich man while I'm living and Lazarus when I die."

Wouldn't we all! But, of course, it doesn't work that way. You can't live for selfish pleasure in this life, disobeying God's Word, and expect to live with God in heaven when you die. But, the good news is, when you repent of your sins and live in obedience to Jesus Christ, you find great pleasure, both for time and eternity, no matter what your earthly circumstances. As Jesus said, "Whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it" (Luke 9:25). Two very different destinies lie before you, with a great chasm fixed between them. I urge you, choose life by choosing to follow Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. Have we reacted against hellfire preachers by under-emphasizing the terrors of hell?
2. How would you refute biblically: Universalism? Annihilationism? Purgatory?
3. How would you answer a person who said, "I think that God is cruel if He torments people for eternity in hell"?
4. A person might argue that Jesus is teaching here that we are saved by our good deeds. How would you refute this biblically?
5. What are the implications for witnessing of the fact that repentance is a moral issue, not an intellectual one?

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