

"The Rich Man, Lazarus and Us"

Luke 16:19-31

September 28, 2025

"There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table."

I. What We Know, and What We Don't, about the Rich Man and Lazarus

Here's what we know about the rich man and Lazarus. In this life, the rich man is very rich. He wears fine linen dyed with that expensive purple dye. He doesn't just have a feast now and then, but he feasts sumptuously every day. Lazarus, on the other hand, is poor in wealth, health and dignity. He lays at the rich man's gate, a mess of open sores licked by dogs, desiring just a few crumbs from the table.

Here's what we know about the **death** of the rich man and Lazarus. The beggar dies and is carried off to Abraham's bosom, raised to eternal life in heaven. The rich man dies and finds himself in the torments of hell. Lazarus is in heaven because, by faith, he confesses his sin and trusts in the promised Savior; we deduce this because that is the only way anyone is delivered to heaven. However, look at the rich man in his torment, still suffering for the sins which led him there. So, what were those sins?

First, the rich man apparently believed in salvation by comfort. In other words, it seems that he believed that God must favor him because of his prosperity. Even in hell, he is still preoccupied with his own comfort. Tormented by the flames of hell, he asks Abraham to send Lazarus over with a drink of water; rather than repent of his selfishness and self-righteousness, he still expects someone to come and serve him.

Second, the rich man appears to believe in salvation by label. He calls Abraham "Father Abraham." It would seem that he shares the same bad thinking of the Pharisees, who declared to Jesus, "We have Abraham as our father" (Jn. 8:39; cf. Lk. 3:8), believing God loved them because of their bloodline. Faith didn't matter; genetics did. For the rich man, whatever he believes doesn't matter; he believes Abraham will help him—even in hell—because he wears the label, "descendant of Abraham."

Third, the rich man believes in salvation by wonders, not God's Word. Although he still shows no repentance for his own sin, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to testify to his five brothers still alive, so that they may avoid the torments of hell. Abraham declares that such isn't necessary because the brothers have Moses and the prophets—they have the Word. But this isn't good enough for the rich man. He doesn't believe that God's Word will give faith; rather, he believes that the miraculous return of a dead man will convince his brothers to believe. To this, Abraham replies, "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."

Abraham isn't really talking about the resurrection of Lazarus, but the resurrection of Jesus. Even when He rises from the dead three days after the crucifixion, his enemies still refuse to believe. Because they have rejected the Word of God, they also reject the Word made flesh.

Here's what we don't know about the rich man. We don't know about his popularity or generosity. Because he ends up in hell, we're always tempted to see him as an arrogant money-grubber who hoards every dime and makes Scrooge look like a nice guy, but that is something that **we** bring to the text; it is not something that the Bible tells us. Keep in mind that Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees, and He may well be painting a picture of a man very similar to them. It could well be that he's a warm and popular man who donates money to all sorts of charitable causes. It could be that, when he fares sumptuously every day, that people are clamoring to join him—not because they're hoping for a handout, but just because they want to be around such a warm and friendly guy. We simply don't know what the man is like.

Likewise, we don't know about the character of Lazarus. Again, because he ends up in heaven, we are tempted to picture him as the beggar with the golden heart, a well-meaning man who is unjustly reduced to rags; and again, this is something that **we** bring to the text, not what the Bible says. Lazarus may be a beggar because he did some terrible things in his past, and only lately learned repentance. He may be a disagreeable character who struggles with bitterness and anger every day—but who understands his sin and confesses it.

Please beware! Too often, this parable is misinterpreted to mean that rich snobs are condemned, while nice poor people go to heaven. But it could be that the nice rich man went to hell while the annoying beggar went to heaven. But it's not about being nice. It's about repentance and faith. Because Lazarus is forgiven, the Lord knows his name and he lies in the bosom of Abraham. Because the rich man is not forgiven, he is condemned eternally; and as a chilling reminder, we never find out his name because the Lord doesn't know him. Therefore, we do well to take heed and avoid the sins of the rich man which prevented his faith and repentance.

II. Lessons from the Parable

Remember the three sins of the rich man: salvation by comfort, salvation by label, and salvation by wonders. All three of these sins have a common theme: each was designed to reject the Word of God. Because the rich man measured God's favor by his comfort, clothes and food, he did not listen to the Word about his lack of true riches—faith and salvation. Because he was a descendant of Abraham, he saw no need to believe the Word that Abraham believed. And when Abraham told him that the Scriptures (the Law and the Prophets) could save his brothers, the rich man wanted a miraculous sign instead. All three sins resulted in his condemnation. All three sins seek your loss, too.

The last thing that the devil, the world and your own sinful flesh want you to do is to hear and believe the Scriptures. Therefore, they have devised some clever false gods to make you think you are confessing the truth, when you are not.

Like the rich man, you are tempted to the doctrine of “salvation by comfort,” to believe that comfort is a measure of faith. For instance, you are tempted to believe that God loves you if you are comfortable and God hates you if you are not. Beware of this cruel, damning belief. For one thing, it seeks to persuade you that you have no need for forgiveness if you are comfortable. Worse, sooner or later you will face the discomfiting terror of approaching death; and if you believe that God's love means you feel comfortable, then you will only conclude that God must have no love left for you when you are near death. That leaves you with only despair when you most need the assurance of the Lord's love for you.

There's another facet to the false god of comfort, for all false gods desire worship. Thus, your Old Adam or Old Eve will tempt you to say that worship is good when it makes you comfortable, when it fits your tastes and preferences; and worship is bad when it makes you uncomfortable. In our world of choices and preferences, this is a very real temptation. Or, a sermon is good if it makes you feel comfortable, bad if it makes you ill at ease; this means that you want to avoid that uncomfortable sorrow for your sin. So, the quality of worship is determined by how much you like it, not by whether or not Christ is there to give forgiveness, life and salvation.

Now, when it comes to worship, each one of us will have a preferred set of hymns that we like. Each one of us will wish that the service went a little, or a lot, differently. Each one of us will have a list of certain doctrines that we'd rather **not** talk or hear about, that make us ill at ease. These are different from person to person. Thus, if **comfort** is the goal, it will only divide because every one will have a different comfort level.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, our confession and our worship are not established by what makes us feel comfortable. It is not determined by what will appeal to the youth or the unbelieving visitor. It is determined by the Word of God. It is established by His plan for our salvation. Because we are sinners, we will always be dissatisfied; and because we are sinners, God's Word ought to make us uncomfortable—that's what God's Law is supposed to do. Rather than the false god of self-comfort levels, instead we rejoice that the Lord exposes our sin and grants us the true comfort of forgiveness in Christ.

Like the rich man, you'll be tempted to believe in "salvation by label," that your faith is fine because you are a descendant of Abraham. Well, maybe not Abraham. For you and me, the temptation is a variation on the theme, and it goes like this: "I am a Lutheran. Therefore, whatever I believe must be Lutheran; because I, a Lutheran, believe it." A common corollary is, "And therefore, whatever any Lutheran believes or does must be okay, because it's a Lutheran doing it."

There are many examples: It's tempting to believe that whatever any Lutheran preacher says must be true, and need not be verified by Scripture. It's inviting to believe that whatever a Lutheran church convention approves by a majority must be in accord with the Word of God. It's tempting to believe that any local custom of a Lutheran congregation must be acceptable. It's tempting to believe that any song or devotional written by a Lutheran must be doctrinally solid. It's tempting because it makes life so much easier; there's less need to be vigilant, less chance of confrontation.

But the facts simply don't support the idea. There are plenty of Lutherans out there who deny that Scripture is God's authoritative Word, who condone abortion and homosexuality. There are Lutherans who deny that Jesus was born of a virgin, or that He rose from the dead. There are Lutherans who believe that the Holy Spirit works to save apart from the means of grace, and that the Sacraments are just sort of our own personal twist on Christianity. The label "Lutheran" gets claimed by all sorts of people these days.

Like the rich man, you'll be tempted to "salvation by wonders," the desire to look for God's presence and help in what you see, not in what God says in His Word. Many will judge their faith, and the correctness of their church, by financial gain, numerical growth, health status, and other tangible measures. But once again, such signs are no proof of the Lord's blessing and approval. There are plenty

of people who are blessed abundantly by God with material things, and who still do not believe that Christ is risen from the dead.

Time and time again, this text warns us of sins that would distract us from God's Word. It warns us not to trust in our comfort level, label, or what we see. It bids us to hear the Word of God and believe it, like the Law that we have heard thus far. It does this for your good, because all of these temptations will fail you, and the Word points you to your Savior who will not fail you. So hear His Gospel now.

Are you afflicted? Troubled? Worried? Sick? Most uncomfortable? Your Old Adam will use these things to convince you that God has no love for you. Your sinful nature will use your exhaustion, hurt and circumstances to say that the Lord is out to get you. But you don't listen to Old Adam, your circumstances or your fatigue to know God's will; instead, you listen to His Word. His Word tells you this: There is no way that God does not love you or is out to get you. Why? Because of Christ.

Out of **love for you**, your Savior was afflicted, beaten and troubled. He bore your sins, sicknesses and infirmities to the cross for you, in your place; there He died with them, taking them to the grave. There, at the cross, God poured out all of His wrath for all of your sin; and if God has poured out all of His wrath for all of your sin, then He has no more wrath to pour out upon you now. He has not run out of love for you, nor is He out to get you. Old Adam will do His best to get you to think so, but Old Adam wants you to share the same fate as the rich man in the parable.

Don't learn about God from sinful thoughts and temptations. Learn about Him from His Word. Cling to His promises, all the more when you are afflicted, because there He promises, "I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

Do you suffer for the name that you bear, for being a Christian? A Lutheran who takes doctrine seriously? The world has very little tolerance left for the saving Gospel that Christ has died for the sins of the world, and that the Holy Spirit works through the means of grace to deliver forgiveness and faith. If you cling to this Word, you will likely face scorn. You will likely be made to feel uncomfortable.

But again, you don't get your identity from the world. Because the world rejects Christ and instead looks to endless torment, it will mock His people. It will seek to make you so uncomfortable to be a Christian that you decide you'd rather be worldly instead. So don't listen to what the world calls you. Cling to the Word, and hear what Jesus calls you. He calls you His beloved child, for whom He has shed His blood and risen again. He calls you an heir of heaven, not a lake of fire. He's placed His name on you in your baptism, and He will not let you go. You are not a Christian because you say you are, like the rich man. No, far better: you are a Christian because Christ says you are.

This is a precious parable, because it seeks to deliver us from all things that would not save us. It bids you not to trust in riches or poverty, comfort, signs and wonders, labels, memberships or anything else for proof of God's grace and love for you. Instead, it calls you back to that life-giving treasure of the Word of God. There, in and by His Word, the Lord gives you forgiveness and faith and eternal life. There, He declares the comforting news that your salvation is certain—because it is for Jesus' sake, and only for Jesus' sake, that you are forgiven for all of your sins. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.