

Hell's Plea For A Witness

Luke 16:19-31

I can't think of a more compelling story describing the horrors of hell and the motivating appeal for all of us to become witnesses than the story that lies before us today.

The story Jesus tells, begins with two men. Each living life much differently than the other. It all begins in verse 19.

#1 - Lives In Contrast, Luke 16:19-26

A. A Contrast In Life, Luke 16:19-21

What a stark contrast Jesus paints between these two men in their lives!

Jesus starts His story describing a rich man. His whole life is wrapped up in two things:

- His expensive attire
- His luxurious lifestyle

So the picture that Jesus paints is one of a man who is enormously wealthy.

Then, Jesus turns our attention to the second man in His story, a poor man, whom Jesus dignifies by giving him a name—Lazarus.

- Lazarus, who was laid at his gate and covered in sores. We don't know the exact nature of these sores, but presumably they were open wounds that oozed. The man was miserable, he couldn't work and was reduced to begging.
- Every day he was laid at the gate of the rich man, and we read that he was 'longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table' (v. 21).
- He had no means of employment, and so he lived off the left-overs of this fabulously wealthy man.
- Then Luke writes: 'Even the dogs came and licked his sores.'

B. A Contrast In Death, Luke 16:22

As John Donne (John Donne was an English poet and cleric in the Church of England) said, death is the "great leveler." The rich man died in spite of his wealth and "was buried," no doubt with an expensive funeral, with its paid mourners, costly spices and elaborate tomb.

Notice that Jesus says nothing about the burial of the beggar. It is likely, that Jesus doesn't mention Lazarus' burial because, being a beggar, his body would have been dumped unceremoniously in an unmarked grave.

Even in death, the rich man was treated differently in this world from Lazarus.

C. A Contrast In Eternity, Luke 16:23-26

Death takes place when the spirit leaves the body (James 2:26). But death is not the end; it is the beginning of a whole new existence in another world. For the Christian, death means to be present with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:1–8; Phil. 1:21). For the unbeliever, death means to be away from God’s presence and in torment.

Notice the contrast here between the rich man’s place of eternity and that of Lazarus.

- • The rich man finds himself in Hades and right away Jesus describes it as a place of “torment.”
- • “Have pity on me.” The merciless now desires mercy but will not receive it, for the time of grace is over.
- • He begged to have Lazarus sent over to give him some water. The reality of hell’s horror is so terrible that in this picture, even licking water from a fingertip would bring some welcome relief.
- • Abraham replied that that was not possible and that he should remember that during life he had everything he wanted while Lazarus had had nothing. Even so, the rich man had never helped Lazarus during the course of his life. It’s also important to observe that even now, engulfed in the torment of hell, the rich man still doesn’t “get it.” He still thinks of Lazarus as a beggar who can be dispatched to meet his own needs!
- • Hell is a place with no escape. In Jesus’ story, Abraham points out that there is a great chasm separated paradise and hades so that no one could cross from one to the other.
- • Send Lazarus. Since the rich man knew the name of the beggar, readers should assume that he was aware of the continual misery and need of the beggar lying at his gate.

By the way, this narrative refutes so-called “soul sleep,” for both the rich man and Lazarus were conscious, one enjoying comfort and the other suffering torment. It is a solemn thing to ponder one’s eternal destiny and realize the reality of divine punishment.

Truly, this story of Jesus Christ is intended to describe the seriousness of choosing the right destination for your soul before you die.

C.S. Lewis was told about a gravestone inscription that read: “Here lies an atheist—all dressed up and no place to go.” Lewis quietly replied, “I bet he wishes that were so!”

Notice Lazarus on the other hand, upon his death was taken to Paradise (Abraham’s Bosom). There he found himself comforted and with the Godly saints.

#2 - Hell's Plea For A Witness, Luke 16:27-31

The rich man next begged that Lazarus be sent to earth to warn his brothers. It was his contention that if one came back from the dead then his brothers would listen (v. 30).

He asked that his brothers be “warned.” To “warn” should be understood in the sense of witnessing to them, so that the five brothers would not experience the same fate as their brother. There is, of course, in all “witnessing” a negative side that “warns.”

He said, if someone was raised from the dead and go and warn his brothers, his brothers would “listen to them.” “Listen” carries the sense of heed.

So, the rich man prayed for his brothers. He did not say, “I’m glad my brothers will also come here. We’ll have a wonderful time together!” Occasionally you hear a lost person say, “Well, I don’t mind if I go to hell. I’ll have a lot of company!” But there is no friendship or “company” in hell! Hell is a place of torment and loneliness. It is not an eternal New Year’s Eve party at which sinners have a good time doing what they used to do on earth.

Abraham’s reply was that the brothers already had the OT, which warned them of their need to repent.

In this rich man’s last statement, he urges a witness to be sent to his brothers, giving them another opportunity to repent. This indicates that the rich man’s fate was not due to his being rich but his lack of repentance.