

**Pastor Madelynne Lindsey**  
**September 29, 2019**

COMFORT OR AGONY LUKE 16:19-31

Let us pray: Lord, we ask you that these words from my mouth may speak to us today. Open our ears, open our minds, and open our hearts so we may hear your will for our lives, and that your name may be praised. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior. Amen.

What if you could spend 30 seconds in heaven and 30 seconds in hell? Which of the two do you think would give a greater burden for lost people-- the glory and majesty of heaven or seeing and hearing those in agony in hell?

I hope you took a moment to look at the title of this message because this morning we are going to consider having comfort or agony. In this passage, Jesus pulled back the veil between this world and the next and showed us there is a heaven and a hell.

There are only two eternal destinies and everyone in this room will end in spending eternity in either heaven or hell. Perhaps you've heard the story about the message one man left on his tombstone.

It said, "Consider, young man, as you walk by, as you are now, so once was I. As I am now, you soon shall be, so prepare, young man to follow me."

That sounded pretty profound, but one fellow took a knife and scratched a response on the tombstone that read, "To follow you is not my intent; until I know which way you went!" There are only two directions you can go after death.

The sermon today is found in Luke 16:19-31. Commonly known as "The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus", this parable shows us the foolishness of seeking earthly comfort (which is temporary) to the neglect of heavenly comfort (which is forever). Let us consider this morning the following:

In verse 19 we are introduced to a rich man described as "*clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day*". His purple clothing signified that while he was not a king, he intentionally dressed like one.

The fine linen indicated that he paid much attention to his clothing and desired to use it to show others that he was important. This rich man not only used his money to buy the best clothing, but "*feasted sumptuously every day*".

This rich man spared no expense in regards to his meals. He had magnificent meals prepared daily for his enjoyment and amusement. All of this tells us that this rich man cared greatly about enjoying life and was passionate about pursuing pleasure, comfort, and worldly ease.

We also learn that he not only had great clothing and great feasts, he had a great problem at his gate. At his gate was a *"poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores"*. This poor man who was covered with sores *"desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table."*

The rich man considered Lazarus a problem because Lazarus was an obstacle to his pursuit of pleasure at all costs. Lazarus reminded the rich man that there was suffering and pain in this world. Lazarus reminded the rich man that there were many people who needed help.

Consider the lack of compassion of the rich man because he was covered in the finest clothing while Lazarus was covered with sores. The rich man feasted sumptuously daily while refusing to allow even the crumbs that fell on the floor to be given to the starving man at his gate.

Lazarus had no one to protect him or care for him. In fact, it had gotten so bad, that he was unable to fend off wild street dogs that licked his sores bringing even more pain and misery. Lazarus is a man with worldly sorrow and the rich man's lack of love for Lazarus indicated his lack of love for God.

In verse 22 we learn more about the character of Lazarus (whose name means "He whom God has helped"). In this verse we read that *"the poor man died and was carried by the angels to be with Abraham's side."* The fact that angels carried him to Heaven indicates that he was a man of faith who trusted in the Lord to save him.

In verse 22 we also read that the rich man died. But unlike Lazarus, who was carried to Heaven, the rich man found himself in Hell (called "Hades"). Hades/Hell in this story refers to the place of the wicked prior to the final judgment.

It is a terrible place because Jesus says the rich man *"being in torment...called out...have mercy on me...for I am in anguish in this flame"*. This rich man is experiencing anguish in the form of hellish sorrow and finds himself cut off from heaven.

Abraham explained to the rich man *"remember that you in your lifetime received your good things and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish"*. The rich man pursued lust instead of the Lord, fame instead of faith, and comfort instead of the cross.

The rich man understood it was too late for him now that he was in hell; but that it was not too late for his brothers who were still living. He cried out, *"I beg you, father, to send [Lazarus] to my father's house—*

*for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, lest they come into this place of torment”. The rich man, for the first time, became concerned about the spiritual welfare of his family. Abraham replied “They have Moses and the Prophets, let them hear them”.*

The rich man wants Lazarus to his home because he felt that if someone were to go from the dead they would listen. Abraham replies, *“If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead”*. Abraham warns that we should hear Moses and the Prophets.

Moses and the Prophets speak to us through the Law which was given from God to the lawbreakers.

Are we like the rich man who demonstrates that he loves himself more than anyone else by the fact that he is more worried about having nice clothes than seeing that a poor man has any food and any clothing? Which reminds me of a joke I read:

Ronald Frump was a rich tycoon, who profited from hostile corporate takeovers, often evicted hundreds of people at once from their Manhattan apartments to make way for his building projects, and was known for his ruthless firing policies.

He also cheated on his income taxes, and had little concern for the safety and welfare of his employees, as long as his profit margin was maximized. He had no use for philanthropic endeavors, and was curt to any who would solicit his goodwill on behalf of the poor.

Even the only remotely charitable act by Mr. Frump was really self-serving. He was in a hurry to get to yet another hostile takeover meeting, and on his way he gave a paper boy a dollar bill for a 50-cent newspaper. Not wanting to wait for the boy to fish out the other 50 cents, he abruptly said, "Don't worry about it. Keep it."

So Mr. Frump finally died, and found himself before the pearly gates. Having been used to a sense of entitlement his whole life, he approached St. Peter and, rather presumptuously said, "Well, it's me--Ronald Frump. You can let me in now."

"Well, hold it just a second, here, Mr. Frump," replied St. Peter. "I'm looking in the books here, and it seems you've been a pretty greedy fella all your life. You've run people out of their homes, you've robbed from the poor, you've made life miserable for everyone with whom you've had contact. Now, in light of that, can you think of any reason why I should let you into this holy place?"

Mr. Frump was in a panic. This was the first time he did not have the upper hand in a "negotiation". In his panic, he grasped at the only straw available to him. "Well, once I gave a paper boy a dollar for a 50-cent newspaper, and told him to keep the change."

St. Peter scratched his chin as he puzzled over this for a few seconds, and finally said, "I'd better run this one past God. Wait right here."

Mr. Frump was on pins and needles as he waited. Finally, St. Peter returned. "Well?" St. Peter took his hand, placed two quarters in it, and said, "The Lord said to give you your 50 cents back and tell you to go to hell!"

This parable is meant to startle us, and I think it succeeds brilliantly. It is especially stark because the picture we have of the rich man is not particularly villainous. He was assuredly respected and given honor in his own circles, and the text does not say that he was a sinner or that he was evil.

He probably considered himself a righteous man, yet he ends up being tormented in the afterlife. So what is the sin for which he is being punished? The rich man ignored the poor man in life, and therefore he is being punished in death.

His sin was *ignorance*, especially because his *ignorance* caused the continuation of such visible and avoidable suffering. The wages of the rich man's sin are indeed death.

What must be difficult for the rich man languishing in hell is the memory of how many times he passed by the poor man in life without realizing that the poor man at the gate was crucial to his own salvation.

The name Lazarus means God helps. God helps Lazarus in death when the angels come and take him up to heaven. But the name also indicates that God helps was there for the rich man too, but he couldn't see it on account of his lust for a luxurious life.

In the afterlife, Abraham informs the rich man that the chasm between him and Lazarus is now set forever and cannot be bridged. Yet this only serves as a reminder that while on earth the gate was open as Lazarus waited for some recognition from the rich man. It is too late for the rich man in this story, but not too late for you and for me.

Our place in this parable can be understood as us being the brothers who are still alive back at home, unaware or ignorant of the serious nature of their future predicament. The rich man, understanding that his fate is sealed, seeks to help his brothers to avoid a similar one.

He begs Abraham to send back Lazarus in order to warn them that their ignorance has consequences. Abraham shrugs and said if they did not

listen to the prophets, they will not listen to the one who has come back from the dead--referring to Lazarus and also, of course, to Jesus.

Jesus is teaching us the interconnection between our eternal spiritual life and how we serve and treat our neighbors at the gate.

Abraham's reference to the prophets is important because they were the messengers of God who understood and proclaimed God's demand for justice. They did not ignore the poor and the oppressed--just the opposite--they knew that we could not be right with God and oppress our neighbor and leave the poor in misery.

"The Lord asks: 'Is not this the fast that I choose: to loosen the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and to not hide yourself from your own kin?'"

Service to others and working for justice is not only the right thing to do, but it's also integral to our spiritual salvation--not only in the life to come, but right now in this life. Isaiah promises that when we obey the ethical mandates of God, then we receive God's help saying:

"Then your light shall break forth like the dawn and you shall call and the Lord will answer; you shall cry for help, and the Lord will say, 'Here I am.'"

The Pharisees (hypocritical, legalistic religious leaders) listened to Jesus tell this parable and were shocked that the rich man went to hell and Lazarus went to heaven.

They assumed that the rich man was blessed by God because he was rich and that Lazarus was cursed by God because he was poor. They failed to hear God's message of faith and failed to hear God's messenger: Jesus Christ.

The only cure for the problem of sin is Jesus Christ. Through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection He demonstrated His power over sin and death and His ability to give eternal life. By confessing (acknowledging) that you are a sinner you are placing your faith and trust in Jesus Christ, so you can be saved and find peace with God. Do not wait until it is too late, come to Jesus today.

Today Jesus is inviting all of us to step through the gate of knowledge and radical love into the kingdom of God, where God's will for justice and peace is done on earth as in heaven.

May all of us see God's help at the gate and be blessed with the knowledge of the Lord and the knowledge of one another and be saved. So tell me, do you choose comfort or agony? It's your chose. Amen.

*Please join me in the spirit of prayer.* God, we ask that you would move us from *ignorance* into knowledge and bless our lives as we bless all of your children. May you continue to create and sustain and redeem every one of us, on this day and evermore. Amen.