**If They Will Not Listen**

Based on [Luke 16:19-31](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Lk16.19-31)

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First Sunday after Trinity

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If you neglect the poor, you will go to hell. God remembers the poor.

Repentance is listening to God’s Word.

This is an illustrative story with a lesson. Jesus doesn’t call it a parable, so it could be a true story. Some think this because the poor man is given a name, Lazarus. On the other hand, Lazarus means “he whom God helps”, so it may just be a descriptive name Jesus chose. In any case, the reason Jesus tells the story is because of what it teaches us about poverty of spirit; about neglecting the kingdom of god, about repentance and about listening to the Scriptures.

Lazarus is a poor man, and as we have said, unlike any other parable Jesus told, he is given a name which is unique. It is also appropriate. Lazarus is a child of God and so has his name written in the book of life. He has no name or prestige in the world, but his heavenly Father knows him by name and cares for him.

Lazarus is poor, miserable and destitute. He is poor not only in wealth but also health. He has no food to eat and his body is also covered in sores.

The rich man, on the other hand, is given no name. He is simply, the rich man, because, though he likely has a name with stature in the world, and people know him and flatter him by it here, his name is not written in the book of life. As the bridegroom says to the foolish virgins, so will the Son of Man say in the final judgment to all who have neglected his word in unrepentance, “Go away, I do not know you.” God does not know the rich man, neither does Father Abraham address him by name.

The rich man is materially better off on earth than Lazarus. He is clothed in purple and fine linen; Lazarus is covered in sores. He feasts sumptuously every day, Lazarus longs for scraps. The contrast is important, and teaches us first of all that ones status and wealth on earth does not translate to equal status and wealth in heaven. This is because Lazarus, though poor and miserable, in death is carried by angels to heaven. And the rich man, though well dressed and well fed, dies also only to end up in hell. And the remainder of the story Jesus tells is to explain why this happened.

First, notice it doesn’t say why Lazarus ended up in heaven. It is a mistake to simply assume it’s because he was poor and miserable on earth. There are plenty of people who are poor and miserable on earth, and yet are prideful, spiteful people who neglect eternal salvation and blaspheme the name of Christ. They will not enter paradise by virtue of their material poverty. Neither will those with great wealth end up in hell because of their wealth per se. Abraham was a wealthy man, God made him wealthy and he is already in heaven to receive poor Lazarus.

Lazarus is not in heaven because of his wretchedness. And--though his faith--must be inferred from the fact of his salvation, there is no mention of it. What we see is that Lazarus is in heaven because he is God’s child. He is in heaven because of God’s faithfulness and love. Lazarus is in heaven because God is compassionate and merciful, and he takes care of Lazarus even if the rich man won’t. God calls those with wealth to take care of the poor, but if they neglect to do so God attends to their needs, and will deliver them safely once their trials in this life are over.

Lazarus is in heaven because of God’s mercy and final deliverance of his children from all affliction, wrath and danger. His salvation is God’s doing. But the rich man’s damnation is his own doing. The rich man’s unfaithfulness is his undoing. and the latter half of the story is about the rich man in hell, how he got there and why he deserves to be there. The rich man is in hell not because he failed to help Lazarus. He is there because he did not repent, that is he did not listen to or believe the Word of the Lord.

Noah was saved from the flood, not because he built the ark, but because he believed God when he said he would send a flood, and listened to God who instructed him to build the ark. Abraham was counted righteous because he believed God’s promise to make him the father of nations. But the rich man did not believe the prophet who taught that the one who gives his bread to the hungry shall live (Ezekiel 18:16), nor did he listen to Moses who commanded “you shall love your neighbor as yourself”.

The rich man is in eternal torment because, in this life, he neglected the Word of the Lord. It really is that simple. And jesus tells this story in such a way as to make clear that the rich man had no excuse for doing so, even if there were valid excuses. The rich man couldn’t say he didn’t notice Lazarus, for Jesus said that Lazarus was laid at his gate. Somebody put him there on purpose so that the rich man would see him and feed him. And at the very least, it was God’s will that Lazarus would be laid there, to test the rich man.

The rich man could not say, “I didn’t know that Lazarus was in such desparate need, else I would have helped him.” Jesus adds the detail, “Even the dogs came and licked his sores.” Even dogs noticed how miserable Lazarus was and tried to tend to his ailments.

The rich man could not say, “I didn’t know that I was to help the poor, feed the hungry, or tend to the sick.” Jesus says that he had Moses and the Prophets, and if he ignored the teaching of God’s Word, there is no other hope of repentance, not even if someone would do miracles and signs to urge it.

So the rich man ends up in hell, and the description of his soul in hell is also instructive. Hell is a place where the damned can see paradise, but can never get there, because a chasm is eternally fixed. Repentance is only possible on earth, not for souls in death.

In hell there is not the slightest mercy to be afforded. The rich man cannot receive even a single drop of water to lessen his torment.

Also notice that souls in hell still do not repent from the heart. The rich man is just as clueless and selfish as he was on earth. He saw no use for Lazarus on earth so he ignored him, now he sees a use for Lazarus and expects to be served by him. “Send Lazarus to bring water.”

And the rich man still sees himself as the innocent victim rather than responsible for his sin. “Send Lazarus to warn my brothers”. In other words, “If someone had come from the dead and warned me, I would not be here now”. No, if the Word of God was not a good enough reason to motivate his repentance, neither would a message from a resurrected man.

In fact, there was a man named Lazarus that Jesus did raise from the dead, and the Pharisees and ruling council reacted by plotting to kill him to surpress the truth. The heart set against God will not even listen if someone should rise from the dead.

And someone has risen from the dead, Jesus Christ, as Moses and the Prophets said:

**31**And taking the twelve, he said to them, “See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. **32**For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. **33**And after flogging him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise.”

And he has risen, and those with hearts set against him will continue to suppress the truth. But we who have believed will be carried to heaven in death, to await the final judgment to share in a resurrection like his.