

An Exhortation on Repentance

“Daily Death, Eternal Life”

Luke 16:19-31

With Study Questions

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16:19 “There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. **20** And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, **21** who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

22 The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, **23** and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. **24** And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ **25** But Abraham said, ‘Child, 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. **26** And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.’

27 And he said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house – **28** for I have five brothers – so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.’ **29** But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.’ **30** And he said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ **31** He said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.’”

Introduction

When Martin Luther nailed 95 theses to the door of Wittenberg – the act that many believe to be the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation – what did he write? Secular historians will emphasize the clerical abuses, particularly the sale of indulgences. You remember how indulgences worked right? An indulgence was a certified piece of paper that could

reduce your relative's time in purgatory. Johann Tetzel was charged with raising funds for renovations at St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Being a marketing genius he coined the famous line now in English, "The moment a coin in the coffer rings a soul from purgatory springs." But what was Luther's protest about? The very first thesis of Luther on the door at Wittenberg reads, "*When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Mt 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance.*" Luther was defending repentance. When we define ourselves as protestants we should think of ourselves as those fighting to preserve repentance as a way of life. The entire life of the Christian should be one of repentance. The sum of the Christian life, according to John Calvin is what? "Self-denial."¹ Dying to self.

This sermon has three points:

First: **Two Lives to Choose From.**

Second: **Death and Surprise.**

Third: **The One from the Dead Preaches the Prophets.**

Before I start in those three points let me set up our text with a bit of context.

What is the book of Luke about? The Gospel of Luke is a call; a call to repentance. One of Luke's main themes is that repentance is required to enter the kingdom of heaven. *Repentance is required to enter the kingdom of heaven.* We have to die to ourselves in order to live.

So at the beginning of Luke the one sent to prepare the way – John the Baptist – for the Kingdom begins his ministry "**proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins**" (Luke 3:3). The problem with a large part of John's audience is that they claim, "we have Abraham as our father." The point being, "we are already *in*." Repentance is for those who are outside. But instead of acknowledging their identity as sons of Abraham, John the Baptist calls them something else, "brood of vipers." You could translate this, "you children of the serpent." John the Baptist is saying, "you all need to repent, Jews and Gentiles alike." The King of the Kingdom himself – Jesus – is corrected for eating with tax collectors and sinners and he responds with one of the reasons he came into the world, "I

¹ John Calvin. Institutes of Christian Religion III.VII This is the chapter heading: "A Summary of the Christian Life: Self-Denial."

have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance” (Luke 5:32). Jesus has come to call sinners to repentance. The one preparing the way and the one who *is* the Way both have come to call sinners to repentance.

Now lets come closer to the context of our passage. To get a sense of why Jesus tells this story you need to know what Jesus said just before the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Jesus said, **“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”** (Luke 16:13). The Pharisees do something – in response to this statement – that demonstrates they do not agree with Jesus. The text gives us an insight into their character and says, “The Pharisees were lovers of money.” So Jesus says you can only have one definitive allegiance, God *or* money and the Pharisees respond by ridiculing Jesus. I take that ridiculing to mean, “We serve two masters and seem to be doing fine at it.” So in Jesus’ characteristic way he begins telling a story to drive home his point.

1) Two Lives to Choose From:

The best storytellers only include extensively detailed descriptions when they are absolutely necessary. Jesus is an *excellent* storyteller, so look at what he does. As he opens this narrative about the lives on earth of these two men he draws in the Pharisees. He has just been correcting those who serve money and then he opens the story describing a man who has the good life. In three different ways he is said to be living decadently: **“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.”** You can almost see the ears of the Pharisees perk up. Jesus has been correcting those who are in love with money and then he starts to tell a story about a man whom the Pharisees would look up to. He is wealthy. He is well dressed – demonstrating that he fits in the right social circles. And finally, he has a party going every day. His household hosts a continuous feast. The Pharisees are starting to think, “Alright! Sign me up! Where does this guy live? I need to network with *that* guy.” But then Jesus introduces the contrasting character.

In each way that the first man was worldly wealthy this second man is not. He is first described as poor – instead of rich. Instead of being covered by fine clothing we hear that he is covered in soars. And finally, Lazarus longs for just a scrap that would fall from the rich man’s table, but

the closest he ever gets to that decadent continuous party is the gate of the house. You can imagine being hungry and longing for even something small to eat while you look and listen far off to people celebrating and enjoying sumptuous food. Instead of *being* fed, however, his body is a sort of meal for the dogs. These dogs – by the way – are not cute house dogs from the rich man’s house coming to play and comfort Lazarus. There are multiple words for different types of dogs in the original language and this kind of dog is not a house pet. These kinds of dogs would eat from human waste dumps and seem to be the type of dog that would even eat things that have died and are now rotting. For our day and point of reference they would be more like dirty and stinky hyenas than cute, comforting golden retrievers.

The rich man is very much alive and is indulgently showing the world this is the case. Lazarus, while still breathing, seems to be mostly dead.

There is only a little clue that Jesus is favoring this second man in the story. Jesus has given him a name. The second man is named Lazarus. The first man with a coveted life is left anonymous while the poor, hungry, ulcer infected man is given a name. So which life would you choose? If you are the Pharisees – just having been rebuked for preferring and serving riches – and now you hear of these two lives which would you desire?

Transition: So what happens to these two men?

2) Death and Surprise:

Both men die and they move in different directions. Lazarus is remembered and carried by messengers of God *up* to a place of prominence – Abraham’s side (some texts read bosom). This sounds a little strange in the 21st century. But when you hear Abraham’s side just think the greatest place of prominence. Like the head table at a wedding reception reserved for honored guests and family members of the bride and groom. So Lazarus dies in total isolation, hunger and poverty and his lot is completely reversed. He goes from the lowest place of humiliation to the highest location of prominence.

The rich man, however, dies and goes somewhere else. *Down*. Whereas Lazarus was immediately taken up to heaven, the rich man goes

down into the earth and is buried. From Hades the rich man comes back into awareness and sees Lazarus far off welcomed as a true child of Abraham.

Now, why is Abraham the main character of this afterlife scene? He seems to be the measuring line by which we know that Lazarus ended up blessed and the rich man is far from this. This is the point in the story that would puzzle and make the Pharisees – who were the intended audience of Jesus’ story – very angry. You see the Pharisees were confident in their lineage. They were born from the *right* families. You remember we set the stage in Luke with John the Baptist uttering the infuriating words – to good Israelites – that *even they must repent*. “Do not say to yourselves we have Abraham as our father. For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham.” But Jesus ups the ante.

Jesus not only claims that God will raise up other children for Abraham should some of his physical children be un-repentant, he claims that when this happens and all things are sorted, it will be painfully obvious who are the true children of Abraham. In Luke 13, Jesus says, “Strive to enter through the narrow door. For many I tell you, will seek to enter and will not be able.” Then Jesus points out that many who lived presumptuously thinking that they belonged to him will be horribly surprised. He describes a place where **“there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God and you yourselves cast out”** (Luke 13:28).

Now – just three chapters later – a rich man calling Abraham “Father” wakes up from death and burial only to find Abraham very far off, separated by a chasm that cannot be crossed, locked in torment in Hades asking a poor, hungry, beggar (now proved to be a true son of Abraham) to dip his finger in water and deliver him from his torment. What a terrible surprise. The lots have been completely reversed. The rich in this world, those who loved money and everything the world had to offer end up humbled and in torment. But the poor in spirit inherit the kingdom of Heaven.

Can you imagine how angry the Pharisees would be at this point in the story? As the Gospel of Luke moves closer to Jesus’ death, Jesus tells a parable about tenants in a vineyard. Do you remember it? A vineyard owner – who is on a trip far off – sends servant after servant to check in on

the vineyard. The tenants seize of these messengers and others they killed. So the vineyard owner says, "I will send my son." But what do they do to the owner's son? They kill him. It says after the parable that the scribes and the chief priests at that moment started to try to figure out how they could kill Jesus because they figured out he was telling the parable against them. I can only imagine that a little bit of that is happening here. The rich man calls Abraham his father but ends up shut off from the kingdom whereas poor Lazarus is placed right in the seat of honor at Abraham's side.

Transition: but what about the rich man's five brothers? What will happen to them?

3) The One from the Dead Preaches the Prophets.

Once the rich man in Hades figures out that his circumstances cannot change because of the great chasm between him and Lazarus his plea changes. No longer is he concerned for himself, but he becomes convinced that his five brothers must be saved from the torment he is going through. So he asks that Lazarus be sent to them "from the dead." That phrase – the particular way it is said – is significant because Abraham is going to change it. I think that the rich man is convinced that if there is a big showy sign – like a man coming back to his brothers from the dead – the amazement will change their heart. Like the people who hire a magician to do a show and say, "Do it again!" this generation of people wanted a sign. Luke 11:29 and following says, **"This generation is an evil generation. It seeks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah. For as Jonah became a sign to the people of Nineveh, so will the Son of Man be to this generation."** (Luke 11:29-30) This is a great indictment against the unbelieving and unrepentant Israel.

Foreigners far away from Israel came to the Lord in different ways without seeing miracles performed. The queen of the South traveled far to see Solomon without seeing miracles and the people of Nineveh repented even though Jonah was also not a miracle worker.

But now, back in our text, how does Abraham change the rich man's statement? The rich man said that if one should, "go to them from the dead they will repent." But Abraham replies, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the

dead." See the Abraham in this story is very clearly pointing forward to one who would not only come "from the dead," as the rich man put it, but One who would be "raised from the dead," that is resurrected. Abraham is saying that the message of Moses and the Prophets always anticipated Jesus. He was this Messiah who would as Jesus later says in Luke 24, had to "suffer and on the third day rise from the dead."

Jesus didn't just come "from the dead" as a sign to cause people to believe. He was raised as the Firstborn among many brothers. He is bodily resurrected to show those who repent – die to themselves – will live. It's all connected. You have to die to live.

But the anticipated message in Moses and all the prophets was not simply that Jesus would suffer, die and be resurrected. The purpose of that glorious Gospel story is that it could be now offered to all the nations. Luke 24:46 and 47 says, **"Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem."**

The reason the rich man, his five brothers and all the other Israelites who had heard and rejected this coming Messiah was not because they hadn't had enough signs (Jesus was constantly preaching and healing). The Physical children of Abraham didn't reject Jesus because they couldn't understand the connection between Moses, the Prophets and Jesus but because they *did* get the connection. ***They got it! That was the problem.*** He was calling them to die.

They rejected Jesus because they recognized his message. Moses, the Prophets and Jesus were all calling them and – this morning they call us – to death to ourselves; they call us to be united and connected to the Gospel story of Christ; To follow him to the Cross, to die to ourselves in repentance so that we can find forgiveness and new life in our resurrected King Jesus.

"If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me." As we acknowledge our sins to God we are dying to them. **"For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it."** (Luke 9:23-24)

Listen to how Calvin describes repentance:

"Wherefore, he seems to me to have made most progress who has learned to be *most dissatisfied with himself*. He does not, however, remain in the miry

clay without going forward; but rather hastens and sighs after God, that, ingrafted both into the death and the life of Christ, he may constantly meditate on repentance. Unquestionably those who have a genuine hatred of sin cannot do otherwise: for no man ever hated sin without being previously enamored of righteousness."²

Why do we need messages like this which call us to repentance? Because we so easily forget the type of life Jesus called us to. We forget that we are completely dependent on Jesus for our life. Like the church at Ephesus we have "forgotten the love we had at first." We think we can move past the elementary things and progress past them. Brothers and sisters, you never outgrow a need for repentance. Revelation 2:5 "Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first."

Or we can become deluded like the church at Laodicea. Revelation 3:17-19 "**you say, I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing,**" we so easily become deluded don't we. We forget we are actually still in need. It continues: "**not realizing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind, and naked.**" This sounds like a description of Lazarus. The point here is this: if we know we are needy we can come in repentance. But those convinced they are healthy never visit the doctor's office. The passage finishes saying, **I counsel you to buy from me gold refined by fire, so that you may be rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself and the shame of your nakedness may not be seen, and salve to anoint your eyes, so that you may see. Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.**

Growing up, one of the greatest things Dad taught me was to admit he had sinned against me. I can imagine as a dad it's hard to stoop down to your youngest boy and say, "I sinned against you today. Will you forgive me?" That is a death to self. That is admitting you are needy. That is admitting, "I was wrong. I can't actually do this parenting thing on my own. I need Jesus."

It is only by becoming like Lazarus, recognizing we are poor, hungry and clothed in sinfulness that the physician and "**the Son of Man who has authority on earth to forgive sins**" (Luke 5:24) will heal us. He didn't come for the righteous, but sinners he came to forgive. The healthy do not need a

² John Calvin. Institutes 3.3.20 "Regeneration by Faith. Of Repentance."

doctor, but only the sick. By meditating on our lack and then repenting of it we have hope for resurrection in Christ. Our life in this age will continue being marked by our sins and failings but if we our joined to Jesus in His death through repentance we are promised to be raised with him in newness of life.

Honestly, this is hard. It is easier to talk about coming to the end of ourselves and giving up on ourselves but in particular day-to-day situation who actually wants to die to themselves? When my wife says, "honey you forgot to take out the trash, can you do that before you head off for seminary!" What is my response? Usually, my natural heart response is, "don't you know how important my life is?" But in that moment I need a death. I know it seems mundane. But here I need to die.

"Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a kernel of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." If it is true for Jesus, it is true for us. **"Whoever loves his life loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life"** (John 12:25).

Conclusion: Recognize this morning – dear Christian – that your life in this present age is more like the life of Lazarus than the life of the rich man. We are called to a constant death. If you are new here and you see us celebrating the Lord's Supper every week you may think, "Christians are a bit morbid." This whole sermon has been about dying and seeing ourselves in a Savior who has died. We will again celebrate in a few moments the Lord's Supper. Paul writes to us saying, "As often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, *you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes*" (1 Corinthians 11:26). But as Christians we believe that last line, "until he comes." We are united to Jesus' death *so that we can partake in his life*. He has already risen from the dead but he is one day coming again. We will not celebrate our Lord's death forever. But until he comes we repent and despair of ourselves – in other words we die – so that we can be connected to him. We want Him! We want Jesus' life! He is not dead, he is living. One day we will see Him as he is on that great day when we enter into the eternal celebration of salvation in heaven.

Dear Father,

We ask that you would burry us with Christ into his death, and be raised with him in newness of life; that we may daily follow him,

joyfully bearing our cross, and cleave unto him in true faith, firm hope and ardent love; that we may, with comfortable sense of your favor, leave this life, which is nothing but a continual death, and at the last day, may appear without terror before the judgment seat of Christ your Son.

We ask it in the power of the Name of Jesus,
Amen.

Questions for Study

1. What was the first of Martin Luther's 95 theses? How should that define our lives as Christians?
2. What was John the Baptist and Jesus' recurring message about the Kingdom of Heaven? How might one enter that Kingdom?
3. What or who were the two masters that the Pharisees wanted to serve? What did they love more than God?
4. Which of the two men (the rich man and Lazarus) could the Pharisees relate to more? Who did Jesus favor?
5. What does "Abraham's bosom" or "chest" mean? Why was it so surprising that Lazarus should be there and not the rich man?
6. Why did the Israelites always oppose and even kill the prophets? What about their message was unpopular?
7. What does John Calvin say about a person who has made "the most progress?"
8. Why do we celebrate our Lord Jesus' death every Sunday?