

## Increase our Faith

### Luke 17:1-10

The story of the rich man and Lazarus begs to be asked many questions. We have suggested that Jesus' point was to put everyone who heard the story on the spot. Which would you rather be, a rich man who goes to hell or a poor man who goes to heaven? The natural response to the story might be, why can't I be a rich man who goes to heaven? And the simple answer is that there will certainly be those in heaven who enjoyed great wealth while on earth and the opposite is also true, many in hell will have been people who were poor or comparatively less comfortable or even disadvantaged than many of their contemporaries. (A problem here is a clear definition of what is poor and what is rich.) What is clear is that this discussion of the earthly financial status of heaven's eventual occupants was not what Jesus was interested in talking about. Our interest in the discussion may indicate a certain preoccupation with money, a preoccupation that that may indicate a level of spiritual risk.

A better follow-up question is, what is it about the rich man of Jesus' story that put him in the way of the fires of hell? Our exposure to his life story is very limited. We don't know about his family. We have no idea of the nature of his business. We are told nothing of his status in the community or of his religious affiliation. We know nothing of his politics, his morals, or his core beliefs. Without any of this information how could he be described as an unrighteous man, as a man destined to an eternity in hell? What we do know about him is that he was opulently wealthy and that there was a beggar who laid at his gate who was in a very sad condition and that the rich man apparently did very little to help this man. Isn't it the fate of the wealthy to be exposed to the constant demands of those less fortunate? Is it even possible to help everyone? Was the rich man's sin the sin of possessing great wealth?

On the other hand, what was it about the poor man that indicated that he was worthy of heaven? Again, all that we know of him is that he was very poor and that his only means of livelihood given his desperate condition was begging. There are dishonest beggars who are actually con artists who seek to make their living by defrauding others. Many of these only feign poverty in order to manipulate the sympathy of their targets. But this poor man was not of that type. He was genuinely desperate. His health was failing and he had nothing. Was his poverty an indication of his spiritual health? Or, after such a tough break in this world, did God owe him something better?

What we can fairly observe is that Jesus had a wholistic view of the soul. This would be the opposite of a compartmentalized approach to spirituality. A wholistic view understands that the true you is evidenced in every circumstance and relationship in your life. If you believe in God and you know Jesus as your Savior and Lord then you will be godly at work and at home so that if someone knows you at church then they really know you and if someone knows you because they play on a softball team with you then they really know you. The person who compartmentalizes their spiritual life excuses practices in business or in morals, or in a secret life that are inconsistent with what they say that they believe when at church or at home etc. Jesus rejected this and it was one of the primary bones of contention that He had with the Pharisees and the other religious leaders.

This would lead us to take the one thing we know about the rich man and understand that it was typical of how he was as a man. He was opulently rich and he did not bother to discover the condition of the poor beggar at his gate or to do anything to alleviate his distress. He was not charitable. He was not generous. He was worldly and selfish and hard hearted. He did see the beggar and himself as equals in any way. He believed that it was his prerogative to do as he pleased with his money. He did not expect God to hold him accountable for his rejection of Biblical values. He was not a man of faith. He did not know God. With this understanding Jesus actually did tell us all we needed to know about his spiritual condition to understand that he would awaken one day to the shocking tortures of hell's fires.

As for the beggar, Jesus dignified him by naming him. The name Lazarus means God is my help. It was a name of faith. And if Jesus tells us no more about the man than his name and his condition we should conclude that he was a man of faith who suffered through a terrible illness in the worst of human circumstances. Terrible circumstances and debilitating illness need not result in a loss of faith. What is it that we require of God? Is it Just that we be prosperous and healthy? The problem with such an expectation is that it relegates God to a position of service to His human masters. If that is our view then we truly have things upside down. Much better to value God's presence and companionship no matter our circumstance and if fact, if Jesus has called us to take up our cross daily and follow Him then He has called us to a life that includes some suffering. Every life lived for God will include suffering and some lives lived for God will include great suffering. But suffering is not equal to misery. The greatest gift that Jesus gives us is His presence and with that there is great joy. To suffer with Jesus is to share in His suffering for the suffering share common losses. To grieve over your losses is to come to a deeper communion with Christ who suffered and gave so much for us. Contrary to natural expectations, suffering is not an indication that God has forgotten us or that He does not care about our comfort or happiness. It is instead an invitation to walk with Him and know Him in ways not otherwise possible.

So we have the character of the rich man and that of Lazarus contained within the story Jesus told. The specific neglect of the rich man of the poor suffering beggar no doubt added to his punishment. And the beggar's experience of God's presence with him through his distress made the realities of heaven and the proximity of God even more comforting in the bliss of his afterlife. The story is focused on the suffering of the rich man in hell. He was inescapably held accountable for his sins. It seems that the disciples asked Jesus about the story and He replied, "It is impossible that no offenses should come, but woe to him through whom they do come..." Jesus generalized the story and held the state of the rich man as typical for all who make the same sorts of life choices. Of particular concern is the treatment of the little ones who would include the helpless and needy of all stripes. Then Jesus made a specific application to the

present life of the disciples, "Take heed to yourselves, If your brother sins against you rebuke him; and if he repents forgive him. And if he sins against you seven times in a day, and seven times in a day returns to you, saying, 'I repent.' you shall forgive him." These words elevated the personhood of the less prominent among them. By doing so Jesus was instructing His disciples to avoid the error of the rich man who perceived the beggar to be less than himself.

These teachings were so far removed from what the disciples had ever before experienced that they asked Him, "Increase our faith." In other words, Jesus' teaching was so surprising, so out of the ordinary and unexpected that even though they knew who Jesus was and were committed to following Him, they still needed help receiving this particular teaching... increase our faith.

Jesus replied by citing the faith of a Mustard Seed. (It was a very tiny seed.) and with just that little faith a tree could be pulled up by its roots and planted in the sea. Then Jesus told the parable of the slave who came in from the field. Does his master thank him for his service and reward him with time off? No, the master immediately gives the slave his next assignment. Would a slave expect any more? And yet the slaves they knew about lived in just that fashion. Then Jesus said, "So likewise you, when you have done all those things which you are commanded, say, We are unprofitable servants. We have done what was our duty to do."

So, in whatever circumstance you find that you have been called to serve the Lord, do so gratefully. He gives significance and meaning to every life and if a life seems to have been wasted or ruined by troubles, then even more so, God values that life and that soul. He gives comfort beyond words and strength to endure any and every hardship. If you are in trouble, look up! for God is near and He will not leave you or forsake you.