

Life's reversals

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- [0 : 0 0] Once again, shall we pray to God for his help? Father, we pray this morning that you would be speaking to us.
- As we consider this parable, please let its message take root in our hearts. Let us be challenged and sobered where we need to be challenged and sobered.
- Let us be encouraged where we need to be encouraged. And so Father, give us ears to hear. All this we pray in your Son's name and for his sake. Amen.
- Now last week we saw how we are to be truly wise with our money. Jesus tells us that to invest shrewdly for the kingdom is true financial wisdom.
- Gain friends for yourselves so that they will welcome you into eternal dwellings, he says. Use present resources for future eternal benefits.
- [1 : 0 1] And if you missed last week's sermon, you can find it online on our website. But despite all that, doubts can still creep in. After all, is there really that much at stake?
- I mean, look around and there is so much to aspire to. There are experiences to chase. There are restaurants to visit. There are nicer houses to live in. There are better schooling options for my kids to go to.
- And all of that means money. Is it not more logical? Even wiser than to use my money to upgrade my life?
- And besides, when my life doesn't look as nice as it could be, isn't that when the world laughs at me? Come on lah, my non-Christian friends will say, what kind of God you have?
- Doesn't give you benefit, doesn't show you favour, doesn't increase your prosperity. Why would I want your God? So isn't it better to invest in my best life now?
- [2 : 1 0] Especially if that can make God look more attractive to my friends and family. Well, today Jesus will tell us another parable to answer our doubts.
- He will tell it in a way that shows he is not unsympathetic to our fears about how things look to others. And yet at the same time, he will also insist that the way of his kingdom remains the wisest way possible.
- So, to come at it from the opposite direction, to take the world's advice instead, will actually be an act of profound foolishness.
- Indeed, if last week's parable is arguably Jesus' most puzzling parable, we could say this week is Jesus' most sobering parable.
- But we need to hear it. And so keep your Bibles open, be ready to listen, and the way we'll go through it today is like this. We'll look first of all at the parable in two scenes to get the gist of what is happening.
- [3 : 2 1] And then we'll pause for some extended reflection. And then we'll come back to look at the final dialogue that takes place at the end of this story and see how that is a call to action for us today.

So let us come to our first scene in verses 19 to 21. Once again, we're introduced to a rich man and he is clearly living his version of his best life now.

Check out his clothes, verse 19. Now, in those days, if you are dressed in white, not bad, you're pretty rich. But if you're wearing purple, now we're really talking.

Purple was rare and expensive because of the difficult process of obtaining the best dye from sea snails. So if that is your wardrobe, you're not just rich, you're ultra-rich.

You're Elon Musk rich. You're the kind of person who has the crocodile or snakeskin bags from brands which are superior even to Versace.

[4 : 34] And check out the fine linen that this guy is wearing. Now, here we're talking about his undergarments. So even his underwear costs more than your car loan and house loan combined.

And then there's the luxurious living. The idea seems to be that he's feasting all the time. He doesn't need to wait for Christmas or gaway or birthdays and anniversaries to bring out the fine wine and the wayu beef.

It happens daily. Now, just imagine that whatever cuisine that you're craving for, you can have it. It's no expense spare.

And of course, he gets to live in a nice house. It's grand enough to have a gate at the bottom of the path and not just the kind of gate that connects our church with the Society for the Deaf next door.

No, this is one of those big, imposing gates with all kinds of decorations like butterfly shapes and the fancy spikes. Now, let's be honest, doesn't that all sound great?

[5 : 50] But look a bit closer and we realize there is one blemish on this otherwise flawless scene. Verse 20. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus.

We're now introduced to a second guy who is the exact opposite of the rich guy. Check out his clothes.

He can't be wearing much since we can tell he is covered with sores. He's visibly sick. And what is he eating? Nothing, actually.

All he wants is the man's leftovers. Hardly a difficult request to fulfill since all the food would have been thrown out anyway. But none of us are coming.

Instead, it is him who becomes more or less dog food. Verse 21 tells us that the dogs came to lick his sores and he doesn't do anything about it.

[6 : 53] How sick must he be even for that to happen? And this seems to be confirmed when we check out where he is. The rich man is in his nice house but this beggar has been laid at his gate thrown there like a piece of rubbish.

It seems like he is immobile. Perhaps he is crippled in some way. That's why he is laid there. So this man has it really, really bad.

I mean in Mark's Gospel, in a different incident, a Gentile woman tells Jesus even the dogs eat the scraps of the table.

But not this beggar. It can't get worse for him. Now imagine with me if all you had was verses 19 to 21.

That's it. That's all you can see and know about these two men. Now who would the world judge to have it all?

[8 : 05] I mean that is like the simplest question ever, isn't it? Of course it's the rich man. He has everything. The beggar, he has nothing. The rich man is living his best life now and the beggar is living his worst life now.

And whose life would you want? Again you say, Duh! None of us would want to be in the beggar's shoes.

Occasionally some people glamorise poverty as if it is very noble. But come on, who wants to be dog food? You see, when we observe this scene, no wonder we desire money, don't we?

It opens doors. It enables you to have shelter. It enables you to have food. It enables you to access healthcare. It enables you to have a better life.

And the more money you can spend on yourself, the better your shelter and your food and your healthcare. And actually, does not being rich mean this man must be blessed whereas the beggar must be cursed?

[9 : 26] That is how many Jews then would have seen it. And truth be told, even today, that's how many people still see things.

consciously or subconsciously, subconsciously, our wealth becomes a barometer of our position or our blessedness before God.

But there is more than meets the eye which takes us to our second scene in verses 22 to 26. The rich man, we are told, eventually dies and he gets buried at the end of verse 22.

Now just imagine his funeral. He must have gotten a nice send-off. He's probably laid in a nice church building, maybe something like the new church building, St. Peter's at Padungan, in a nice casket with nice flowers.

And the beggar? Well, he dies as well in verse 22. No surprise given that he's been sickly and starving. But notice he doesn't even get a proper burial.

[10 : 36] Never mind a funeral, there is no mention of one. And so, verse 22 seems to be perfectly in line with what we have come to expect in verses 19 to 21.

The rich man has it better, even at his moment of death. But now comes the first real shock.

Death is not the end and so the story continues. In verse 22, we are told that the beggar is carried again. But whereas previously, he was carried and laid at the gate of the rich man, this time, he is carried to Abraham's side.

In other words, he is being welcomed into heaven. In fact, he might even be feasting with Abraham, since that is how the people would have been arranged at banquets, side by side.

But what about the rich man? Verse 23 comes across as almost unbelievable. One moment, the rich guy is getting a decent burial, and then the very next words are, in Hades, where he was in torment.

[11 : 58] He's not in heaven. He's not at a feast. Instead, he has become what the beggar was on earth. Previously, it was the beggar looking on while feasting happened every day.

But now it is the rich man who does so. Previously, it was the beggar who was in physical torment. Now it is the rich man's turn. Previously, it was the beggar hoping for just a scrap or two of food.

And now, it is the rich man begging for even a drop of water. It is a complete, total reversal.

So what is going on? Is this a story about how actually in the end, the poor go to heaven while the rich end up in hell? Is that the point?

But wait a minute. Abraham was a rich man. And he's in heaven. And at no point does Jesus imply the rich man shouldn't be rich.

[13 : 09] So just what is going on? Let's come back to the narrative to look for clues. Let me just backtrack a little to verses 19 to 21 and mention now a little detail that I haven't drawn your attention to previously.

Did you notice that the beggar is named? He's called Lazarus. Now that is very unusual.

In all of Jesus' parables, this is the one and only time that a character is named. So Jesus must have some reason to do so.

So let us look at his name. What does it mean? Well, Lazarus simply means God is my helper. It indicates someone who loves God, who trusts God, who relies on God.

And given that the rich man has been contrasted at every point with Lazarus so far, that begins to suggest to us the rich man must be his opposite spiritually too.

[14 : 22] He's someone who doesn't know God, who doesn't trust God, who doesn't rely on God. Clearly, his number one love is self, and money is the means by which he can pamper and indulge himself.

And this characterisation of the rich man can be backed up by verse 24. Look at what's happening. Father Abraham, he says, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I am in agony in this fire.

Now, notice something very interesting. He knows Lazarus' name. And if he can call Lazarus by name, that must mean he knew this beggar's presence at his gate while they were still alive.

If you think about it, how could he not? Every time he had to exit or enter his house, he would have passed by him. And yet he never bothered to lift a finger to feed him or help him in any way.

He did not, to use the language of last week's parable, use his earthly wealth to make friends and welcome them into his dwelling so that he, in turn, would be welcomed by them in the future in heavenly dwellings.

[15 : 55] As one preacher writes, there was more than enough wealth behind those gates to provide anything and everything the poor man needed, but only if the rich man would open wide the door of his heart.

You see, that's the real problem. It's not the richest. It's actually the rich man's self-absorbed heart.

Did you notice how in verse 24 that is how he still is? Notice even in the afterlife, he has no problem ordering Abraham around.

And notice that he treats Lazarus still as nothing more than someone who should serve him. He's completely consumed by self.

So let us sum up what we have seen so far. While verses 19 to 21 suggest that using money for self-indulgent living seems like a good idea, the additional picture we're getting from verse 22 onwards is that actually that would end in total disaster.

[17 : 18] And it is a total disaster because the truth is there is no way to change course later. I mean, look at this man.

He's trying to order Abraham of all people around about. He behaves like he thinks there is still a chance he could negotiate his way out. There is still a hint of entitlement about him, but Abraham stops him in his tracks.

Verse 25. Son, he says, remember that in your lifetime you receive your good things while Lazarus received bad things.

But now he's comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this between us and you, a great chasm has been set in place so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.

You see, death is the great leveler. Whether rich or poor, death comes to us all. And then, death is the great divider.

[18 : 31] once you die, you are either in the place of joy and happiness or you are in the place of anguish and torment.

And there is no way any longer to cross from one to the other. In aviation, there is something called the point of no return.

That is the moment when an aircraft burns enough fuel that it can no longer return to its departure point. It must carry on. And death is that point of no return for us.

We must carry on to our destination. But whereas the plane in theory can still land in a number of different places, not so for us.

As will become clear in the later verses, our destination is determined by our repentance in this life.

[19 : 33] And once this life is finished, our destination is set. It cannot be changed. There is a great chasm between heaven and hell and there are no second chances.

Do you see what Jesus is getting at? If this life is all there is, he says, then sure, using money to upgrade your life so that you can indulge in yourself all you want without any thought for others would be the smartest thing to do.

It's logical in fact. But what if there is an eternity beyond this life? What if there is a heaven and a hell?

Then things look very different. And so at this point, let's pause to reflect more on Jesus' teaching. What should we keep in mind as a result of this parable?

First of all, we should be aware of the danger of self absorption. Now here's the thing about money. To a certain degree, it can bring you happiness.

[20 : 52] It can bring you security. I don't think we need to dispute that. That's true for this rich man. After all, he was in a better place than Lazarus in this life.

But here is the danger of money. It can lead us to a place where we are entirely self-focused and self-absorbed. Now perhaps we don't intentionally seek to be so.

In fact, who makes it their life goal to be self-centred? But it creeps up on us. We start thinking more and more about which place has the best coffee. We start thinking more and more about which holiday destination we want to travel next.

We start thinking more and more about which gadget we want to obtain. And so we think about how our money can get us those things. Now drinking nice coffee, having a holiday, buying a new phone, none of those things are wrong in themselves.

But could it be that as a result we now stop thinking about how our money can help others? Could it be that as a result we stop asking how we can use our money in a way that shows we value God more than things?

[22 : 13] You see, if that's where we currently are, it's a dangerous place to be because it means we might be becoming Pharisees. You see, let's not forget who is listening in.

Do you remember last week who was around? Look at verse 14. Yep, it is those Pharisees. And how are they described?

They are lovers of money. They are the people who think of themselves as serving God but have really ended up serving money. That's what they value.

And so they turn their noses up at Jesus' teaching. They justify themselves, verse 15. And the danger is that we become like them.

And so Jesus says, if that's not what we want, then make sure you use your money or your resources not for your indulgence but to love others because that is how you love God.

[23 : 17] And if you don't want to, then we come back to that question. Who exactly is your master? You might call yourself Christian but is Christ really who you follow?

Now to be clear, I'm not saying that by using your money to help others or even support Christian causes, you can buy a spot in heaven. No, that is not the gospel.

Rather, I am saying that the way we use our money will show the degree to which our heart has been changed by our saviour. The way we use our money can show if we truly trust Christ or not.

So today, first of all, consider if we have slowly but surely become self-absorbed like this rich man. He doesn't have a name perhaps because as one commentator suggests, this is Jesus' way of inviting any money-loving listeners of his to provide their own.

And then let us change our ways. Now, this doesn't necessarily mean that you have to go to every homeless person on the streets in Kuching. Just start where you are.

[24 : 38] Just ask, is there someone I've been neglecting? Could it be my very own family members, my spouse or my children? Are they the victims of my self-absorption?

What can I do to love them more? Could it be my own fellow church members, the people in my home group or in Sunday service whom I see weekly but don't really care about?

What can I do to love them more? Then, second of all, we should be aware of the danger of presumption.

Look at this rich man in verse 24. There he is, suffering punishment and yet what does he call Abraham? Father Abraham.

He still thinks of himself as a child of Abraham. In other words, he still thinks of himself as enjoying the privileges of sonship. Hey, I've got Abraham's DNA, so actually I should be in the same place as he is.

[25 : 45] Indeed, if this man had familiarity with Abraham, then he almost certainly has familiarity with the scriptures. There is no suggestion that this guy is an atheist.

In fact, he would probably never ever say he hates God. He is in church most weeks. But we can see that he never gives much of a thought to his relationship with God.

He thinks he's okay, so he simply concentrates on the things of this world. wealth, you see, far from being a sign of sure blessedness from God, doesn't really prove anything either way.

It can protect you in this life, but it is foolish to presume that it can protect you in the next. And so this parable should cause us to ask ourselves, are we presuming that we have a genuine saving relationship with God?

Maybe we think so because our fathers and grandfathers were eyewitnesses to the Barrio and Bakalalan revivals, so we've got the heritage. Or maybe we think so because we are doing well financially and giving quite a lot.

[27 : 12] So surely we must be fine spiritually. After all, blessed to be a blessing, right? But Jesus says, that is foolish. You see, the only way to have a genuine saving relationship with God is to say, number one, I've been stupid, I've been sinful, I've been relying on things other than God, so I need to repent.

To jump ahead in the parable for a moment, notice down in verse 30, that is exactly what the rich man realises his brothers need to do if they don't want to suffer the same fate as him.

He knows that is what is needed. And then to have a genuine saving relationship with God, number two, is to say, God, I need your help.

That's what Lazarus means, remember? God is my help. And in the larger context of Luke's gospel, that's to say, God, I need Jesus.

Because Jesus is the only help I have to come to God. Jesus is my only hope of heaven. That's what we need.

[28 : 30] And here is the irony. if we look at Lazarus, we might presume God is not with him, right? I mean, look at his circumstances.

Where is God when he had sauce? Where is God when the scraps of food didn't come? Where is God when the dogs came instead? Indeed, where is God in his death?

He and God must not have a relationship. You know, God is not on his side. But that is our presumption. Because what happens as he died?

God sent his angels for him. God helps him. God leads him to the entrance of heaven. And remember what does Lazarus have that the rich man doesn't have?

He has a name. And you only need a name if you are known by somebody. And God knows him. God challenges our presumptions.

[29 : 35] The world says it is the rich and comfortable who are blessed. And Jesus says it is not necessarily so. And today if you happen to be suffering but you trust Jesus, here is the comfort for you.

God knows you. God hasn't abandoned you. And Jesus says actually he is preparing the best place for you. hell.

And then third of all, we should be aware of the reality of hell. Now it is important to realize that this is a parable and so Jesus is using storytelling techniques here.

In other words, we should not draw out too detailed a theology of the afterlife based on this passage alone. So for example, it is quite unlikely that two people can be shouting to one another from heaven and hell.

That is certainly not what we get from other passages in the Bible. Jesus is probably only speaking that way for dramatic purposes. So don't get all your theology just from this passage.

[30 : 44] But Jesus does clearly think of hell as a real place. Otherwise, this parable has no impact. In fact, he's already mentioned hell earlier in Luke chapter 10 and chapter 13.

And it is a terrible place. In Luke chapter 13, he describes it as a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth. And in this parable, it is a place of torment, verse 23, and agony, verse 24 and 25.

And some people will be in it. Now, without a doubt, that is unpleasant to hear. And it can cause us to ask, is that fair?

Is that good? Now, I am sympathetic to such questions and they are not easy to answer, but I do think this parable makes clear one thing. Hell is not full of good people crying out and asking for forgiveness.

Again, look at this man's character. He is proud even at this point. He cannot bring himself to address Lazarus directly.

[31 : 59] He is issuing commands to Abraham. He wants relief, but he remains unrepentant. And so, hell is not actually filled with people who are filled with remorse.

In fact, they are filled with the most unpleasant people ever. In hell, in one sense, God is simply giving over sinful people to their sin.

And because Jesus does speak of hell, so must we. We must speak carefully and solemnly and not excessively or melodramatically, but mention it, we must.

you see, if we never speak of hell, then once again, we will be tempted to simply concentrate on this life now and indulge in it.

But if we grasp the reality of hell, is that not renewed motivation to live for God? Does that not spur us on to speak to others about Jesus?

[33 : 11] because once in hell, there are no second chances. There is no such thing as purgatory. But right now, it is not game over yet.

So will not that reality focus our minds on what is really important to see that the act of loving others includes evangelism.

So those are some extended reflections, but actually this parable is not over yet. There is a concluding dialogue we must look at, and in some ways it provides the main punchline of the parable, which provides the main call to action.

So let us have a look. In verse 27, the man knows it is over for him, but it is not over yet for his still-living family.

So he issues a plea. I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them so that they will not also come to this place of torment.

[34 : 20] Now here is what this rich man thinks. I didn't have enough information. If I had known about heaven and hell and the importance of treating others rightly, I would have acted differently.

So get this information to my brothers. That's what they need. Want them. But notice how Abraham replies, verse 29, they have Moses and the prophets.

Let them listen to them. In other words, they, like you, rich man, already have the scriptures, they have the Bible, they have all that they need.

They don't need something extra. Just like you didn't need something extra. But even at this point, the man remains proud.

He's not humble enough to accept that he is wrong and Abraham is right. Verse 30, no, Father Abraham, he said, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.

[35 : 23] If they will just get a spectacular sign, something so miraculous as say someone rising from the dead with a message, then they will wake up and repent.

Surely that will do the trick. But notice the stunning reply of Abraham in verse 31. Nonsense, he says.

If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, that is, if they don't listen to the Bible, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.

The problem Abraham says is not that we don't have enough information. It is not a knowledge problem. And the problem is not that we don't have any signs and wonders.

In John chapter 11, Jesus did actually raise another man, also called Lazarus, from the dead. And straight after that miracle, did the Pharisees all fall down in worship, proclaiming their total devotion to Jesus?

[36 : 33] No. Instead, they said, this man is performing way too many signs for our comfort. Let's murder him. Now, the problem isn't one of not enough information or not enough miracles.

The problem is ultimately one of the hardness of the heart. The scriptures are sufficient to let us know what is expected of us. It is all there, even in the Old Testament, in the Law and the Prophets, about generosity and compassion and justice for the needy.

And the Law and the Prophets are sufficient for people to come to know Jesus. Jesus himself says so in Luke's gospel. Let me read to you Luke 24 verse 27.

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself.

The Law and the Prophets, Jesus says, testify to him. But if the money-loving Pharisees refuse to listen and to repent, the problem is with them.

[37 : 48] And it is the same with us. Today, we do know someone who has risen from the dead. His name, of course, is Jesus.

But if today we continue caring only about indulging ourselves in this life, if we refuse to listen to the Bible, then we will not receive even the risen Jesus.

We will not repent. And that will spell total disaster as it did for this rich man. But if we do repent, then what happens?

Well, remember the parables of Luke 15? There is much rejoicing in heaven. There is the joy of the Father. There is a celebration feast. That is probably why Luke 15 and 16 are told back to back.

Jesus wants us to know that there are terrible consequences for failing to love God. But at the same time, there is the incredible news we can actually be loved by God in Christ lavishly if we would just run to him.

[38 : 57] And so today, my friends, you have the scriptures. You hear them expounded to you Sunday after Sunday and God says, that is enough. The question is, will you listen?

Will you turn to God? Will you rely on Jesus as you use your money? And will you rely on Jesus as you live your life? Next week, Dr.

Honpak will show us more concretely from Luke chapter 17 what a repentant life looks like in other areas of our lives. But today, the simple question is, will you make the choice to live a repentant life?

after all, as an inscription on the grave once said, remember man, as you go by, as you are now, so once was I, as I am now, so shall you be, prepare yourself to follow me.

But here is the good news, if you trust Jesus, you are more than prepared, and if you have the scriptures, you have all you need to tell others about Jesus and to disciple them. It is not the signs and wonders that you need, it is not the pure intellectual arguments that you need, it is the word of God.

[40 : 16] And today, my brothers and sisters, the word of God tells us, although using money for self-indulgent living might seem a good idea, it will end in total disaster.

So make the choice today, in light of scripture, to keep trusting Jesus as your savior and master. let's pray. Father, these are your words, and Father, sometimes your words can be hard to listen to, but Father, we know that your words are spirit and life, and indeed who else can we go to for eternal life, and so Lord, we come to you again, and we pray that we will receive your words, we would turn to you, we would put our trust in you, we would rely on you, we would indeed be like Lazarus, declaring that you are our help, so help us to depend on you, so that we might feast with you on the final day.

All this we pray in the name of Christ. Amen.