

ViralStJames Bible Study #7: Inaction has consequences

The Background: The Rich man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

Jesus is teaching his disciples, with the Pharisees apparently listening in (v14). Jesus, as so often in the Gospels, tells a story to illustrate a truth that packs a punch – for those who have ears to hear. Unlike all of his other parables, where the characters are nameless (a Samaritan; a prodigal son; a judge), in this one, the ‘poor’ man is named – Lazarus. As with everything Jesus did, the name is carefully chosen, as it means ‘God helps’ – as will become evident, the rich man certainly didn’t! The story is not a treatise on ‘heaven and hell’ but a challenge to those listening - where is your focus in life, and if it is putting trust in the wrong things, now is the time to change.

The Passage

Luke 16:19 “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. ²⁰ And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. ²² The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. ²⁶ Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— ²⁸ for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ ³⁰ 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 listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

The Questions

- 1) How is the rich man described, and who might those listening to Jesus have associated him with? (v19)
- 2) How is Lazarus described? (v20-21)
- 3) In death, their roles are reversed. Why do you think the rich man ended up separated from Abraham? Does Micah 6.8 offer any clues? But also, what about v 29 in this passage?
- 4) Pause and reflect on who may be the poor at our gate? How should we respond?
 - *Keith pointed out that whilst recent ‘Black Lives Matter’ protests have focused on historic injustices (slavery) and western experience (America), there are many black lives that get far less attention – e.g. those in the two-thirds world, such as countries in Africa, or refugees from further afield*

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- 5) Gates may keep the poor out, but do they also imprison those who erect them? What was the rich man missing out on? Look at Psalm 24 v 7-10 (which the rich man would have been familiar with) and Rev 3.14-20 (addressed to a church – so a challenge for us) – what happens when we fling wide the gates?
- 6) What did Lazarus do to deserve his place ‘in Abraham’s bosom’? (The image is meant to convey a closeness during feasting, such as that of the disciple Jesus loved at the Passover meal in John 13 23-26, or indeed in Rev 3.20). Look at Mary’s song in Luke 1 v 53-55;
- 7) Even in separation from Abraham, the rich man’s thoughts go no further than his own family, with Lazarus requested to act as a go-between. Why does Abraham turn down his request?
- 8) Jesus does not condemn riches by themselves, but the attitudes, the pursuit, and indulgence of them can lead to. Read Luke 12 13-21. Here we see Jesus condemn greed (v15). But look at v 21. How can we be ‘rich towards God’?
- 9) Whilst the parable (in Luke 16) contains an obvious message about caring for the poor at the gate, what message do you think Jesus was trying to convey to the Pharisees, and do you think Jesus thought that they would listen?
- 10) In this day and age, we may find it hard to identify with either the luxury the rich man enjoyed, or the poverty that Lazarus endured. However, it is not that long ago that the church was writing and singing hymns that included these words:
*The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate
God made them high and lowly
And ordered their estate*
(the now usually omitted verse from ‘All things Bright and Beautiful’ published in 1848)
Perhaps we may be more like the five brothers living in ignorance. Are there attitudes that we as a church or individuals need to repent and turn from?
- 11) What do you take away from this reflection?

The Space for notes
