

Salem Lutheran Church

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SalemLutheran.org

Theme: Hell Is...Hell

Text: Luke 16:19-31

NOTE: This sermon is written from the first-person perspective meaning I will be speaking as if I am the rich man who was sent to hell from Luke 16.

I've never met you before. We've never spoken. And you don't know my name. You do know me, though. You know what I was. You identify me by what I had, which is exactly how I identified myself. Jesus called me "the Rich Man," though that's not exactly true anymore. I was rich, filthy rich, more-money-than-you-will-ever-see rich. And I thought, like a lot of people do, that being rich meant I had it all figured out, that I had all the answers people look for their whole lives. That's what I thought and I'm here to tell you that I thought wrong. Yes, I was wrong; Lazarus was right.

I saw Lazarus for the first time in the middle of the night. A big thud outside woke me up. I walked down my main hallway, the one with the bedrooms 7-13, looked outside, and saw the most disgusting sight of my life: it was a grown man whose body was covered with these sickening sores who looked as if he had just bathed in my garbage. Some guys just dropped him at my door and ran away. I didn't want to go near the guy. So I locked that door, told no one to use it, and tried to avoid that wing of the house from that point on. Of course, every time I accidentally passed by, he would ask me for something to eat or something to drink. He even asked me for my left-over dog food. Can you imagine?

Well, you're familiar with these kind of guys, because you have plenty of them in your world. You probably know that half of the people in your world live on less than \$2 a day, and that there are about a billion adults in the world right now who can't read a book or write their names, and that, just because of poverty, about 30,000 children die every day (that's about 21 kids every minute), and that almost 2 million kids die every year because the only water they have access to is dirty and full of diseases.

And I look back on that and just get sick at myself because I see how much good I could have done for guys like Lazarus. Just one of my paychecks could have fed him for years. I could have at least given him what I throw out. And boy, did I throw food out. But you know about that. You Americans throw away over 100 billion pounds of good food every year. The average person throws out 130 pounds of food just by themselves. The people digging through your garbage know that. I was wealthy, but I wasn't wasteful the way this American society is. I made my wealthy by being wise with my money and not by throwing it away.

That reminds me. Can I tell you something that really bugs me? You all know me as the Rich Man, but that's really quite inaccurate. I have been alive now for almost 2100 years. But I was only rich for 75 of them. That means I was only rich for 3% of my life. And the longer I go here, the lower that percentage goes. And where is here? Well, it's where you don't want to go. I've been poor in hell for over 2000 years!

I don't know what people are saying about hell these days, but in my day I didn't think much of it. Big mistake. I brought a lighter with me today, what a fascinating invention this thing is. It reminds me of my new home. Speaking of hell, I would like a volunteer to come up and place your hand in the flame of this lighter and just hold it there for 20 or 30 minutes. You wouldn't choose to do that, would you? Well, I don't have a choice. I have to live through that. And it's not just my hand. It's my feet, head, arms, chest, private parts, everything. And it's not just 30 minutes. It's been over 2000 years. And it's not stopping.

Some of you, every once in a while, like to say, "Boy, I'm going through hell." And I know you suffer through things, but it is not hell. Your worst hell is my Palm Springs. Honest. That's not to belittle your suffering. It's to emphasize how painful this place is. Hell is...hell! It's filled with an always burning, never consuming fire!

And hell isn't just physically painful. It's emotionally painful because, the moment, I got here, I could see what I missed out on. I saw Lazarus; poor, beaten, abused, neglected, dirty Lazarus sitting comfortably in the arms of Father Abraham. And guess what? The pain he had on earth was all gone! And the sores he had on his body were all healed! And he wasn't all curled up in the fetal position. His arms were outstretched as he received blessing after blessing after blessing. And there's no fire, just the largest feast I have ever seen. And it's there every day. And, sitting in hell, I have to see that every day. And even though I can see it, I can't get to it.

Besides that, there is no mercy in hell. I tried asking. I called to Abraham, "Abraham, please, I am in pain, have mercy on me. Feel sorry for me. Help me." You know what he said? He said, "God was merciful to you on earth. You think you deserved all that money? You think you deserved good health? You think you deserved a nice chariot and a large home? God gave you those things so you would realize how good he is to you."

Listen, none of you know what it's like to live without God's mercy because you are all, Christian or not, recipients of it right now. Everything you have is God telling you how good he is and how much love for you he has. And I didn't see it.

So then, once I realized I was stuck here, I had plenty of time to try and figure where I went wrong. At first I thought I went to hell because I was so rich, that I had my time to enjoy things on earth, so my time not to enjoy

them was going to come after life on earth. And I saw a lot of other rich folk in hell, people I hung out with, partied with, ate and drank with. And now we're all just wishing for one of those little drops of water from the smallest cups we had at our parties. Oh, that would feel so good. And then I looked at poor Lazarus in heaven, and that made sense – rich on earth, poor in hell; poor on earth, rich in heaven.

But then I looked around hell a bit and started to notice a lot of the people I used to step over and make fun of, people who were just as poor as Lazarus. And then it made sense. I'm not in hell because I was rich. I'm in hell because being rich was the most important thing to me. And you can feel that way whether you have lots of money or no money at all.

You see, I believed money was the solution to every problem. It became my obsession in life. It became my purpose for living and working, the place I found my greatest joy. Money gave me all the security I was looking for. It became the proud symbol of my success. I demanded that people define me by my money. That's how I defined myself. If I had money, I liked my life. If I didn't, I hated my life. But where is that money now?

And the only difference between the rich and the poor in hell is that the rich had money on earth and the poor didn't, but they still defined themselves by it. They believed it would solve all their problems, so they became obsessed with it. They believed that more money would bring them more joy, that it would give them all the security they were looking for. They worked hard to get it, but didn't. Actually, some of them didn't work so hard for it. They just expected people to feel sorry for them and give them more money. But they know now what I know now. Money can't make you happy.

Now that I think about it, Lazarus never complained about his lack of money. Not once did I hear him say life was unfair because he was poor, which is really weird to me. And I think it's really weird for you guys too. You know that the vast majority of the world complains about what they don't have, which leads me to believe that the vast majority of the world wants to define themselves by how much money and stuff they have.

And I think it's even easier in your world because you have so many things I never dreamed of – chariots that move without horses and go hundreds of times as fast, metal birds that fly you anywhere you want, little plastic cards that let you buy whatever you want, and plenty of people willing to just give you these little plastic cards. You have homes that stay cool in the summer and warm in the winter. That's crazy to me. You can talk to people thousands of miles away just by putting a little box on the side of your head. Crazy.

But learn from me. Don't do this. Don't define yourself by what you have. And it's easy to tell if you do. When things go sour in your life,

what's your solution for things to get better? Is it shopping therapy? Is it escaping with the toys you have accumulated so that you don't have to deal with life's difficulties? If you think that having more money and more stuff is going to fix your problems and make you feel better, then I suggest you enjoy the hell you have going right now because it's a lot better than this one!

I asked Abraham what I should have done because I wanted my five brothers to learn from my mistake. I cared a great deal for them. I demanded that Abraham send someone from heaven to let them know what they didn't have. You know what he said? He said, "I don't need to send anyone. They already have it." He said, "They have Moses and the Prophets," and I instantly knew what he was talking about. He was talking about the book that had been collecting dust in my big library my whole life, the one people came to the door ready to talk about, the one the synagogue opened every week; the one I kept ignoring, closing the door on, and avoiding.

But since I had the time, I opened it down here. And I found something very surprising inside. I found myself. I saw warning, lots of warnings, to not let your stuff define who you are; warnings against greed and the love of money. Warnings against selfishness and pride. I saw my whole selfish life in there. And it explained very clearly why I'm sitting here, and why Lazarus is happy up there.

Lazarus heard Moses and the Prophets talk about a man who did for all people what I refused to do for even one person, a man who became poor (poorer than Lazarus) so that I could become rich (richer than me), a man who emptied himself of all he had to fill me up with what I needed, a man who chose to hang on a tree so that my sins would not condemn me.

I wish I could switch places with Lazarus, and not just now. That's obvious. I wish I could have had what Lazarus had on earth. Now I know why he never complained. He didn't need anything else. He believed that he needed nothing else but what he already had.

You know what else I envy about Lazarus, looking back? Jesus knew his name. In his story, Jesus doesn't call me by my name. He calls me the anonymous rich man, a complete stranger to him. But he calls Lazarus by name. Jesus once said, "I know my sheep, and my sheep know me." And now I see how true that is, that, for those who know Jesus, regardless of your situation in life, no matter what you have or what you don't have, no matter if you are rich like I was, or poor as Lazarus, Jesus sees you, he knows you, knows how you feel, knows what you need, and he will give you exactly everything you need.

He actually did give all that to me, but I was too blind to see. Open your eyes. Don't be like me. Amen.

GROWTH GROUPS QUESTIONS

Luke 16:19-31

GETTING TO KNOW EACH OTHER

What are some common ideas about hell in society today? How is hell depicted on TV and in movies?

INTO THE WORD

How do the lives of the rich man and Lazarus compare on earth (vs 19-21)? After death (vs 22-24)?

What determines who enters heaven? Why does this poor man qualify while the rich man is kept out?

What does this account teach you about comfort? About suffering? About the afterlife?

How is verse 31 prophetic?

INTO MY LIFE

How does scripture describe hell?

-Matthew 7:23

-Matthew 8:12

-Matthew 25:41

-Matthew 25:46

-Luke 13:28

Who will be in hell?

-Matthew 25:41

-2 Peter 2:4

-1 Corinthians 6:9-10

Where is hell?

-Luke 16:28

-1 Peter 3:19

What will hell be like?

-Matthew 3:12

-Matthew 8:12

-Matthew 25:41

-Luke 16:23-24

How long will hell last?

-Matthew 25:46

-Malachi 3:6

Will some have it worse in hell than others?

-Matthew 10:14-15

-Luke 12:47-48

-Romans 2:12

What does Scripture teach about purgatory?

How can reach out to others with God's Word before it is too late?

Final Thoughts

Hell is a terrible place of never-ending punishment. Those who live in sin without repentance—those who reject Jesus as their Savior from sin—will be condemned to hell. God is very serious about sin. Thanks be to God that Jesus provided perfect salvation! Whoever trusts in Jesus will not perish but will have eternal life. May we reach out to all the world with the mercy of Christ before it is too late!