

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

²² “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. ²⁴ So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, 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.’

²⁵ “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father’s house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

³⁰ “ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

³¹ “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ” (Luke 16:19-31)

How did Lazarus Win?

Are you a loser? Would you admit it if you were? Losing is one of the worst things we can think of. At grade school sports events parents scream at refs because they missed a call and their ten year old might lose because of it. Does it really matter? But we hate losing and sometimes, even for something that small, emotion gets the better of us. There are lots of victories and defeats in life. How do we total them all up? What determines if we won at life? The words that Jesus speaks to us this morning address that issue.

I.

In the story Jesus told, the man who looked like a winner lost. And the man who looked like a real loser won. The man who looked like a winner was rich. He had a big house. He had the best clothes money could buy. Every meal was a feast. But the man who looked like a loser – Lazarus – lived in the street, right in front of the rich man’s house. He begged for food and longed to eat the leftovers that the rich man threw away. He couldn’t get a job because he was in very poor health. Sores covered his body. And in Jewish society, bodily fluids made you unclean. Open, running sores would have caused most people to pull back from him. Only stray dogs would come around him and lick his sores – which Jews at that time would not have welcomed.

But then he died. As did the rich man. And everything changed. The rich man opened his eyes in hell. In pain and torment, in flames, he looked up and far off, he could see heaven. That only made his suffering worse. There he recognized two people. One was his ancestor, Abraham. But the other was Lazarus. So he called out and asked Abraham to send Lazarus to give him some relief. But Abraham could not send him. There is no relief in hell. There is no escape from hell. So he made that final request to send Lazarus to his brothers, but even that was refused.

When we hear this story, don’t we want to see ourselves in Lazarus because he wins in the end? But if we focus on the lives they lived in this world, which one lived a life more like ours? Isn’t it the rich man? By American standards, we’re not rich. But if you compare us to most people in the world, we are. I spent almost five years in Mexico and Colombia. Those countries are not the poorest of the poor. They’re in the middle as far as the whole world goes. Yet, many people in those countries live lives we cannot imagine. We had a maid who used to come once a week to clean our house for eight dollars a day. She told me once that she had never lived in a house that had hot water. And she was not even close to the poorest person you would encounter there. If that’s life in a midlevel country, what’s life like for most people in the poorest countries?

In spite of our current economic problems, we live a comfortable life. We don’t eat steaks every day, but we put food on the table. Our kids have clothes to wear. We have homes. We can get basic medical care.

Our lives are much closer to the life the rich man led. So we must understand why he lost in the end. It was not because he was rich. Abraham was rich, too. He was in heaven. Wealth does not keep us out of heaven. And poverty and suffering don't earn us points for heaven. This man's problem was that he was absorbed with his wealth. He was so focused on the here and now that he never lifted his eyes up and considered where he was going. Then he opened his eyes in hell.

You know what? The same thing could've happened to Lazarus. Poverty and poor health present the same kind of challenge that wealth does. Lazarus could've laid in the street day after day and obsessed about the unfairness of it all. He could've moaned constantly about how hungry he was, about how much his sores hurt, about how hard it was to see the rich man go by without suffering anything. No doubt, there were days when he felt like that. But there was one difference between him and the rich man: Lazarus had faith in his Savior. Lazarus understood that good or bad, this life only lasts so long. And then we stand before God. Either we enter heaven and eternal joy or we go to hell to pay for a life of sin and focus on ourselves and this life.

The real issue is pride or faith. No doubt, there are people among us who see themselves in the hurts and sorrows of Lazarus. Some of us are struggling to keep our homes and ending up in the streets seems like a real possibility. Some of us have chronic illnesses, some are in constant pain, some don't really expect to get better on this side of heaven. Just as much as there is with wealth, there is a real temptation to focus on our lives here, to obsess about how bad it is and to curse God for not treating us better. If we follow that course, we will wind up in the same boat as all rich people who ever were so engrossed in this life here that they forgot about the life to come. We will land in hell.

The truth is, we all can easily fall into that trap because that's the default setting of the human heart. Sinners always focus on themselves. They always put the here and now ahead of God's promise of a better life to come. They always grouse about the things they suffer here and they always wallow in self-pity and they always live for pleasure and wealth and greed. Whether we want to admit it or not, that sinner lives in our hearts. He rises up again and again to attack us and to drag us down to hell.

But by the grace of God, we do share the most important characteristic of Lazarus: his faith. We trust in Jesus who came here to win eternal life for us. We trust in him because he lived a perfect life of trust that now counts for us. We trust in him because he won at the cross and especially at the empty tomb. He conquered this life and all its hurts and even all the pleasures that tempt us. We trust in him because he paid for these sinful hearts that love only ourselves and that can't see past this life. We trust in him because he defeated all that this world is and he has won for us a life to come, a life that will be better than anything that even the richest man in this world has, a life that will be filled with perfect joy in his presence. We trust in Jesus because God gave us that faith and because he did that, we will win. That is the lesson the Lazarus gives us today. **How did Lazarus win? He focuses on the life to come instead of on this life.** Focus on that life to come for as long as you live here!

II.

The rich man was a product of his environment. His five brothers show that. They were in their father's house – they inherited their wealth. Without a doubt, they grew up in an environment that just didn't take seriously the need to look beyond this life. No doubt, they focused on practical things, like maintaining the family business and enjoying the fruits of their labors. They could've fit in to our society very easily. The Jewish world was very religious outwardly. Even the most cynical members of their society went to the temple and the synagogue regularly. In fact, the wealthy sects, who really didn't believe in much at all, had beautiful buildings and regular meetings and provided what they imagined was a religious education for their children. But they didn't want to be too fanatical about it. They let the ideas in their society influence them, even when it came to what God had to say. They focused on the things and the people that mattered to them. In the end, they cared more about what they thought, what their friends thought, what educated people thought than about what God thought. They just didn't listen to God's Word.

In hell, the rich man learned just how foolish that attitude was. He wanted Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. He did love his family. That's not something only Christians do. Most unbelievers care about their own families. Even the richest, most dysfunctional families will shell out big bucks to bail out their spoiled kids. This rich man sincerely wanted to warn his brothers because he realized that they were going to hell just like he had.

His request makes perfect sense. When Abraham told him that his brothers had the Bible and they should listen to that, the rich man said, **“No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.”** No one we know, no one we can talk to, has ever seen heaven or hell. It seems perfectly logical that if these brothers who knew Lazarus and who knew that he was dead were to see him come back and warn them about what was coming that they would at last examine their sinful attitudes and turn to God.

It’s logical, but it’s totally false. Abraham said, **“If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”** How can that be true? It’s true because faith is not a logical conclusion that we reach. It’s not a decision we make. Faith is a miracle that God does in our hearts. And he does that miracle through the gospel. God built the power of the Holy Spirit into the word of God. His power in the law convicts us of sin and his power in the gospel comforts us and gives us faith in Jesus. There is no other way to get that faith. You can’t argue someone into heaven. You can’t do a miracle and prove that what God is saying is true. You can’t even make them believe if someone comes back from the dead and tells them what’s really going to happen when they die.

And of course, someone did come back from the dead. Jesus came back from the dead. But do you remember what happened that first Easter morning? An angel descended from heaven and rolled back the stone in front of the tomb and sat on it. The guards fainted and when they came to, they ran away. Why were there guards at Jesus’ tomb? Because his enemies remembered that he said that he would rise from the dead. They didn’t want his disciples to steal the body and claim that he rose. Well, when the angel came down and opened the tomb, there was no question any more about them stealing the body. God opened the tomb to show the world that he was no longer there – that he rose. And when the guards came and told that to Jesus’ enemies, do you know what they did? They bribed them to tell everyone that they fell asleep and his disciples came and stole the body. Jesus’ enemies knew the truth. They knew he had risen. But they still didn’t believe.

If a heart refuses to trust in the gospel, that heart cannot be persuaded by wonders or by evidence. Until God works a miracle in that heart, it will not believe. God only works that miracle in one way: he comes in the gospel and changes that heart. That’s what has happened to you and me. We don’t deserve it. We didn’t earn it. But God did it. He reached inside us and he made us his. Now, we are like Lazarus. No matter how good or how bad life is here, we will win, just like he did. **How did Lazarus win? He trusted in God’s Word instead of human ideas.**

That is still true today. Every society is full of itself. They all value their own thinking and wisdom above God’s Word. Every day all their antichristian ideas attack our faith. But God’s Word is still the truth. It is still the one way for us to reach eternal life. It still offers us a life that is so much better than the best this life can offer, a life that is worth the worst that we could suffer here. That life is what church is all about. That life is why we gather here. And when God reaches into our hearts and gives us faith in that life to come, he gives us strength to face all that this life dishes out. Lazarus had about as bad a life as anybody could. But Jesus holds him up as a man who won. Pain, sorrow, loss – none of that can steal the prize from you. Focus on the life that God promises and trust his word and promise instead of all the things that people today will say to lead you away. Like Lazarus you will win because God works through the gospel to give you that victory. Amen.