**The Teacher: My Name is Lazarus**

Luke 16:19–31

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Dan Hoffman

When I was 15, I worked at Ness Lake Bible Camp and I learned pretty quickly that the camp had two goals: give kids an amazing experience and introduce them to Jesus. Those things haven’t changed. But what has changed is the flavour of life in the '90s. So to say the least, there were no seatbelts on the jungle swing – and if you fell off it was your fault. And in a short survey I conducted I found that 100% of those who survived the 90’s agree life was more fun.

But the other thing that has changed is how we introduced kids to Jesus. I remember a push to have big numbers of kids getting saved. And so every Wednesday night we gave the salvation message Bible study — where along with Jesus we preached about hell: fire, agony, and eternal suffering. Then Thursday morning we celebrated saying things like: “All 10 kids in the cabin got saved, and 2 leaders rededicated their lives.”

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Hello. We are in our interactive worship service today, so turn around and make a group of 3-5 people. We’ve got a controversial topic today so have fun. Each person gets a minute to answer the three questions on the screen. Go!

1. Hi, my name is \_\_.
2. Whether you believe in hell or not, what 1 word would you use to describe it?
3. What roll, if any, has the fear of hell played in your faith journey?

If you’ve got a Bible open it up to Luke 16. We are going to pick it up in verse 19 with a parable Jesus told to a bunch of Pharisees. Would you stand with me as we come before God’s word? Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read Luke 16:19-31]

This is the word of the Lord. You may be seated.

We've been exploring Luke's Gospel, and over the last few weeks we have been in a section where Jesus tells several parables unpacking the Kingdom of God and what it means to live in it.[[1]](#footnote-1) Now your kingdom, Dallas Willard says, is “the range of your effective will.” That means your kingdom is where what you want to happen, happens.

And so when Jesus is talking about the Kingdom of God, He’s talking about the range of God’s effective will – where what He wants to happen, happens. And living in the Kingdom of God means submitting our lives to God’s will so that what He wants to happen, happens in us.

And I tell you that because this parable gives us an example of what this looks like. And what we see is that when we are living in God’s Kingdom, we have an identity, that lasts forever and is marked by abundance. And Jesus shows us how to get it. That’s where we’re going if you’re taking notes.[[2]](#footnote-2)

So first, when we live in God’s Kingdom we have an identity. Now in this parable we are introduced to two men: a rich man dressed in purple and fine linen, who feasts every day, and a beggar named Lazarus, covered in sores and longing for crumbs. And they both die and end up in very different places. So their lives are obviously intended to contrast each other.

But what is the main difference between them? Yes, one is rich, and one is poor, but that’s not the main difference. Yes, one was healthy while the other was covered is sores, but that’s not it either. I never noticed this before, but the main difference between these two guys is that Lazarus has a name while the rich man doesn’t.

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Now that might not sound significant, but it is. You see Jesus was constantly telling parables, and none of the characters in any of His other parables are given names. It’s always there was a father and two sons. There was a merchant. There was a woman. There was a shepherd. It’s only here that one of His characters is given a proper name while the other is left nameless.

So what’s in a name? Well Babynames.com says “Lazarus means God has helped, or God has saved.” And so the contrast in the story is between a person named Lazarus and some rich man. This is a parable about identity.

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So the one thing we know about the poor man is that he was Lazarus – God was his help. In contrast here’s what we know about the rich man. In verse 25 Abraham says:

‘Son, remember that during your lifetime you had everything you wanted’ (Luke 16:25)

And everything he wanted was what he lived for – this was the meaning of life for him. And for the rich man this was money, luxury, status and everything that went along with that – those were the foundations of his life. And when they disappeared, so did he.

Here’s the point, everyone has a foundation. And your foundation is where you derive meaning. This is what is most important to you. This is what you spend your time pursuing. This is what you spend your money learning. And your meaning and value comes from how successful you are at achieving what you want.

So if sports is everything to you, and you’re at the top; you’re the best player on your team, then you feel great about yourself. Or if being attractive is everything to you, and you’re healthy and people are swarming, and you’ve got that special someone in your life, then you feel awesome. Or if family is everything to you, and everyone’s coming for the long weekend and everyone’s getting along, then you feel awesome.

The problem is that while we have a semblance of control over all of these kinds of things, ultimately, they can go away. And if the source of your meaning goes away you don’t just have nothing, you are nothing.

And so Jesus says if you build a self on anything other than God you don’t actually have a self. And this is why the rich man has no name. He was just a rich man – this was his identity – and then when he didn’t have money anymore, he was just the artist formerly known as a rich man. He was nothing at all.

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In contrast Lazarus looks to God for his help. This is his identity when the crumbs fall to the floor and when they don’t. God is his foundation when the dogs are licking and when they’re not. And while Lazarus would like food and health, he trusts in God regardless of what happens. His name and identity are tied to God. And since God is His foundation, he isn’t affected by circumstance. He has a real identity.

And this what’s available in God’s Kingdom. If, instead of looking to everything the world looks to for value, you look to God, then you get the one thing everyone is looking for – you have meaning. You have an identity.

So here’s the question, who are you really? What is it that makes you who you are? What is it that gives you meaning?

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We’ve talked about this before, but as Canadians the first thing we ask new friends is “what do you do?” And we ask this because our jobs are what give us meaning and value in Canada. Another thing that gives us value is our health. It’s a Canadian axiom to say “Well, if you don’t have your health, you don’t have anything at all.” These are statements of value and meaning.

And because this is where we get our meaning it makes sense that in 2016 Canada passed Medical Assistance in Dying into law. And so if you have a terminal illness, you can ask your doctor to kill you. And the reasoning is that if you don’t have your health and comfort then your life isn’t worth living.

And actually right now there is a bill in legislature aimed at making MAID accessible to people with only mental illness. So after this passes, if you are depressed and simply think your life isn’t worth living, a doctor will help you end it.[[3]](#footnote-3)

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Now honestly this makes sense in Canada because the meaning and value of life here is attached to our ability to perform at work and live healthy and happy lives. And if you can’t have this then you’re simply a rich man who used to be rich. You are nothing. And life isn’t worth living. Talk about a difference from the identity God has for us.

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But the parable isn’t done yet. Life in God’s kingdom doesn’t just give you an identity, it gives you an identity that lasts forever.

So in verse 23 the rich man has died, and Jesus tells us:

In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. (Luke 16:25)

Now Hades, or hell is about the least popular topic in all of Christian doctrine.[[4]](#footnote-4) And there are probably two main perspectives on it in this room. So some of us are thinking “Man, this is everything that’s wrong with Christianity. This is why I can’t believe. The idea that a loving God could torture people for eternity is utterly repulsive! The only thing I believe about hell is that I’m in it and I can’t believe the guy beside me managed to convince me to come today.” If that’s you I hear you.

The other main perspective on hell in this room goes something like this “I believe in hell because I got taught about it. But I don’t think about it much and I’m not actually sure what I believe at all.” Those are the two main perspectives, of course some of you know everything, so that could be a third.

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But just before we dig into this, I want to come right out and say, it doesn’t matter you or I think about hell. What we want to find out is what Jesus thinks. See Jesus was at least the most influential religious figure of all time – at least! Nobody debates that. And then He says He went there and came back so let’s find out what He thinks.

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Well here’s the weird thing, Jesus is known as being all about love. I think you could make the argument that Jesus was the most loving and compassionate person who ever lived. He was constantly taking care of the poor and vulnerable. But at the same time it is Jesus who tells us more about hell than anyone else in the Bible – Moses, Peter, Abraham – all of them give us hardly anything about hell in comparison to what Jesus gives.

And so here’s the predicament – Captain Love Himself didn’t seem to see a problem with both believing in a God of love and believing in hell. And so when we say, “I can’t believe there could be both a loving God and hell, what we are saying is ‘Jesus, I’m more loving and more compassionate that You, because I don’t believe in hell while You do.’” Now you can make that statement, but it’s quite a statement!

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That said, I also don’t think what Jesus says about hell here lines up with most of what church attending people, who do believe in hell, think it’s like.

So wherever you find yourself today, let’s look at how Jesus describes this rich man who finds himself in hell. We see three things.

So first, notice what he asks. He asks for Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue – as though Lazarus was still a servant. Now think about this, even in torment, the rich man is in denial. He’s still clinging to status. He still sees Lazarus as beneath him.

Next, he asks for Lazarus to warn his brothers. Why? Well, it’s because they’re headed to hell. But look at the implication. Why would they need Lazarus’ warning? The implication is “I didn’t get a fair warning about this place, and my brothers aren’t getting one either. So be fair and send Lazarus back.” What he’s saying is, “God, it’s Your fault I’m here. And it will be Your fault if my brothers show up too. He’s blame shifting.

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Finally look what he doesn’t ask – he doesn’t ask to get out. He doesn’t ask for forgiveness. And that’s because he doesn’t think he’s done anything wrong. He thinks he’s a victim. He thinks he’s a poor, unfortunate martyr.

Now this is important. Notice that God isn’t gleefully tossing people into hell here. Hell is self-deception and self-absorption, fully matured. And yes the rich guy would like to be comforted – he would like some water – but he doesn’t even want to go to heaven.

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C.S. Lewis describes the scriptural depiction of hell saying:

“Hell begins with a grumbling mood, always complaining, always blaming others... but you are still distinct from it. You may even criticize it in yourself and wish you could stop it. But there may come a day when you can no longer. Then there will be no you left to criticize the mood or even to enjoy it, but just the grumble itself, going on forever like a machine. It is not a question of God "sending us" to hell. In each of us there is something growing, which will BE hell unless it is nipped in the bud.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

Notice the progression: at first there is a choice to complain, but then you change from someone who complains into a complainer. And then eventually there is nothing left of you at all. Sin destroys our humanity.

Or think about substance addiction as an example. It starts out as a tool to make a bad feeling go away. Maybe you are lonely or depressed, and so you take something and it makes you feel good. But then something changes.

Soon there is a disintegration. Things start falling apart. The thing that once brought relief now brings misery, but you can’t stop. And so you isolate, you make excuses, and you spiral. It’s a blame, denial, self-pity vortex. And anyone who’s been stuck there knows it’s hell. Addiction is a hell we keep choosing. And God lets us choose.

So in Romans 1 Paul talks about how God treats those who refuse to glorify Him. Paul says:

Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts (Romans 1:24)

And that’s what’s happening in this parable. The rich man was spiritually addicted. He used money to give him meaning and make him feel good. And he kept going back even though he was becoming an uglier and uglier person. Look how he treated Lazarus. And then he died. But people are eternal beings and even in death God doesn’t make us change, so his addiction carried on to its ultimate conclusion.

See hell isn’t an angry God throwing people into a fiery pit stepping on their fingers as they attempt to crawl out. That’s not the God of the Bible. What we see here is that hell is the final destination of self-chosen separation. The most terrifying thing about hell is that nobody wants to get out.

Like the used to be rich man won’t repent. He won’t seek God. And so Jesus is warning us, if you build your identity on anything but God, eventually God will give you over to that thing and you will have nothing left at all – not in this life or the next.

But that’s not what God wants for any of us; He wants us to embrace His kingdom so we can enjoy an identity that lasts forever. An abundant identity.

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Now I need to cover this quickly so just a word about context. Jesus is speaking to the Pharisees here. Back in verse 14 it says:

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, “You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of others, but… what people value highly is detestable in God’s sight. (Luke 16:14-15)

Last week we saw the link Jesus made between the older son and the Pharisees who were plotting to kill Him. And we saw Jesus going out to try to win them anyway. And here we get the same thing. Jesus is pursuing the self-righteous, rich-man Pharisees. He loves even them! He wants them to wake up and have a God given identity instead of being consumed by money now and forever.

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Okay, pause. Good thing none of this applies to us right? I mean nobody here is a self-righteous rich man right? Well, either Jesus has lost His touch and doesn’t know His audience, or we might not know ourselves. Those are the options.

So, how do you know if this is you? Well, it’s the way we treat people who aren’t like us. See Jesus isn’t saying rich people go to hell – there are lots of rich people who go to heaven in the Bible – but Jesus says self-righteous people who think money is what gives them value go to hell. And the sign we are self-righteous is in the way we treat people who aren’t like us. Like the rich man in the story distained Lazarus.

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So how do you treat people who are different from you? See if you are a hard-working rich person that’s great as long as God is your identity. And how do you know if this is you? Well the sign is how you treat poor lazy people.

Oh of course you never call them that publicly. But do you look down on them? Or do you have empathy, compassion towards them?... If you’re self-justified and your identity comes from getting ahead by working hard, then you’ll despise people who don’t work as hard as you. But if you’re God-justified and your identity comes from the mercy and forgiveness you unfairly received then you’ll show mercy and forgiveness to anyone. You’ll be marked by humility and generosity. And guess what, this is abundant life. Generous and humble people are way happier than people who know they are better than everyone else. And this abundance starts now and lasts forever.

Okay, last thing, how do we get it? How do we get an identity built on grace?

At the end of the parable, the rich man begs for his brothers, “Send Lazarus back from the dead. That’ll convince them!” But Abraham replies:

‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them…. If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’” (Luke 16:29-31)

Now this is chilling. Of course Jesus is alluding to Himself. But the rich man says “If Lazarus goes back; if a dead man shows up at my brother’s house telling them ‘give yourself to God or you’ll go to hell’ then they’ll believe.” The rich man asks for the fear tactic for his brothers. But Abraham says, fear of hell isn’t the way you get to heaven. It wasn’t the way 2000 years ago, and it wasn’t the way in the 90’s. So what is the way?

Abraham says “look at scripture. That’s where you will learn why Jesus died and rose again.” And this is what we need to see if we are going to be changed. So for example 700 years before Jesus Isaiah told us about the coming Suffering Servant. He said:

It was the Lord’s good plan to crush Him and cause Him grief.  
Yet when His life is made an offering for sin, He will have many descendants….  
When He sees all that is accomplished by His anguish, He will be satisfied. (Isaiah 53:10-11)

So Jesus will suffer but then He will see what He has accomplished and be satisfied. Jesus will look at you and say “Me getting to spend eternity with you makes it worth it.” You are worth more to Me that My suffering.

And guess what Jesus’ suffering wasn’t just nails and a spear. Jesus descended into hell. Jesus endured separation from the Father. He was cast out so you could be brough it. And you are worth even more than that to Him.

So friends, it isn’t the fear of hell that will change you or anyone else, it is seeing the love of God and how much He was willing to pay to get you back. And get this: Jesus was telling this story to a bunch of Pharisees who were about to kill Him and yet even in this moment He’s tracking them down and pursuing them with hope to redeem.

So no matter how far you’ve fallen. No matter how much you’ve rejected Him and been consumed by your own self-justification, if you will see Jesus today then it’s not yet too late. He’ll give you a name and an identity that won’t be shaken no matter what happens in life. In fact your identity will start now and last forever and be abundant the whole time. So will you let Jesus win you?

Those who will are those who are able to say: “I don’t deserve the mercy I’ve received, my name is Lazarus – God is my help.”

1. See Luke 13:18; 14:15; 16:16 for example [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Outline adapted from Tim Keller <https://gospelinlife.com/sermon/upside-down-living/> (Accessed June 26, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/health-services-benefits/medical-assistance-dying/legislation-canada.html> (Accessed June 28, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Are hell and hades the same? <https://www.gotquestions.org/sheol-hades-hell.html> (Accessed June 28, 2025) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Lewis, C.S. *The Great Divorce*. HarperOne, 2001 (originally published 1945), Chapter 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)