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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“ARE WE READY?”

Luke 16:19-31

? Death is coming for us. *Are we ready for it?*

☑ Well, that is a bit awkward, is it not?! Especially today as we “**rejoice with Josh and Bridget in the gift of their son**”! A few minutes ago we petitioned the “**giver of all life**” to keep Liam “**in [his] love that he may grow wise and whole,**” and to “**bring him safely through the dangers of childhood.**” We blessed him, saying: “**Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you to defend you, within you to keep you... beside you to guard you.**”

And then: “*Death is coming for us.*”

Surely, the day on which we dedicate a little child to the Living God is one of the worst times to talk about death! Or is it one of the best times to talk about it?

☐ Please turn with me to Luke 16:19-31, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

✍ This story conveys three basic realities. First, for the time being death is inevitable.

{Rev 21:4} I say “*for the time being,*” because after the Lord’s Second Coming “**There will be no more death... for the old order of things**” – including the historical passage of time – will “[pass] **away,**” and with it mortality. But Christ has not yet returned, and until he does death is the inexorable outcome of birth.

■ In Luke 16 our characters are polar opposites in nearly every way. Even so, they have this in common,

verse 22: “**the time [comes] when the beggar [dies] and... the rich man also [dies] and [is] buried.**”

No surprise there. All except the very young among us “know” that death is a certainty. (Sadly, that exception does not always apply; millions of boys and girls get first-hand experience of death at a young age, especially those who are poor.) But whether early or late, this is a truth everyone learns.

Of course, death is not the dominant truth, much less the only truth. God has immersed us in life in the here and now, and it is a good gift. Not only so, we believe in the historical, bodily resurrection of Jesus and we anticipate our own future bodily resurrection.

However, death is still a force to be reckoned with. Pretending that we and our loved ones are somehow immune to it might make life easier – until death strikes close to home. It might bring us a sort of comfort – until it is shown to be fantasy.

{Ro 8:28-29} Imagining that we are immortal does not help us to be victorious in our struggle with aging, disease, and disability. It inhibits God’s “[work] **for the good**” “**in all things**” and restrains God from using mortality as an instrument to “[conform]” us “**to the image of his Son.**” It diverts our attention from eternity and stops us from finding life in the One who has overcome death.

✍ That brings us to a second reality: death is our entry point into eternal life or eternal torment.

■ In verse 22 Lazarus “**the beggar [dies] and the angels [carry] him to Abraham’s bosom**” where, verse 25, “**he is comforted.**” Meanwhile, verses 22,

23, and 25, **“The rich man also [dies] and [is] buried. In Hades ... he [is] in torment”** and **“agony.”**

Some people say that mortal life is all there is. Death is a blind alley, a Dead End, a blank wall.

That is not what Christ Jesus says. He depicts death as a transition out of the narrow stream of time into the limitless ocean of timelessness.

{Eccl 3:11} Have you ever thought to yourself, “There must be more than this”? That’s because there is. The Creator **“has...set eternity in the human heart.”** Eternity is what we were made for, and it is where we are headed.

Most people do believe in an afterlife, but it is increasingly popular to say that it will be the same for everyone. The idea is that we all go to Heaven regardless of what we believe and do, with the exception of the Hitlers and the bin Ladens of the world.

That is not what Christ Jesus says. He plainly and unapologetically contends that the doorway of death can open either into Heaven or into Hell.

❓ The question is, *Will we transition into timeless wholeness, glory and joy in the presence of God?* Or will we pass into timeless brokenness, squalor, and grief outside of his presence?

✎ That brings us to a third reality: there is a direct, causal link between our lives in time and in eternity.

How we will experience eternity is not a crap shoot. Whether the door opens into Heaven or Hell is not a matter of chance. Luck has no part of it.

Why does the rich man end up in torment and agony? Let’s take a look at him on earth.

■ In verse 19 he “[dresses] **in purple and fine linen.**” Purple dye is a precious commodity in the first century, and purple garments are available only to the richest of the rich. Linen is far too expensive for ordinary people to wear. This man is a card-carrying member of “The One Percent.”

■ Also in verse 19, he “[lives] **in luxury every day.**” Every trip to the store is a spending spree, every meal a banquet of abundant delicacies, every party an over-the-top extravaganza.

It is not inherently wrong to possess wealth, dress finely, or eat well. Nevertheless, it is risky!

{Mt 16:26} Riches can tempt us to acquire and maintain them by immoral, dishonest or unjust means. The Messiah cautions, **“What good will it be for you to gain the whole world, yet forfeit your soul?”**

And the kind of extreme extravagance we see in this man almost always involves greed, gluttony, idolatry and pride. Those are deadly sins, indeed!

☛ But Jesus does not address them here. Instead, he nails the rich man for failing to love his neighbor.

■ Verses 20-21: **“At his gate [there is] a beggar named Lazarus.”** Lazarus is not **“dressed in purple and fine linen,”** but he *is* **“covered with sores.”** Lazarus does not **“[live] in luxury,”** but he *does* **“[lie] at the rich man’s gate.”** Lazarus never **“[eats] sumptuously,”** but he *does* **“[long] to eat what [falls] from the rich man’s table.”** Lazarus has never said to himself {Lk 12:20} **“Take life easy; eat, drink and be**

**merry,**” but he *does* beg for handouts. Lazarus is not pampered by servants, but he *is* hounded by stray dogs that lick his open sores.

Has our rich man taken advantage of the changing economy and bought up vast tracts of land at rock bottom prices, depriving Lazarus of his farm? Has he compelled Lazarus to repay his debts in one lump sum, leaving him penniless? It happens a lot in first century Palestine – but there is no evidence that *this* rich man has done such things.

Has our rich man abused Lazarus? Has he heaped scorn on him, called him names, literally kicked the guy while he was down? Most people in first century Palestine assume that the poor and diseased deserve their fate, and some intentionally add to their suffering – but there is no sign that *this* rich man has mistreated Lazarus or anyone else.

{Mt 25:31-46} Then again, while our rich man has not done anything bad *to* Lazarus, neither has he done anything good *for* him: Lazarus is hungry but the rich man gives him no food, thirsty but the rich man gives him no drink, a stranger but the rich man doesn’t invite him in, under-clothed but the rich man does not clothe him, sick but the rich man does not look after him.

He will likely plead ignorance: “When have I seen the beggar hungry and not fed him, naked and not clothed him?” – and he will be condemned by his own words! The only way he cannot see Lazarus lying “**at [the] gate**” day after day is by deliberately shutting his eyes or averting his gaze. (Not to mention that he knows poor Lazarus’ name!)

The rich man has every chance to lighten Lazarus’ burden, possibly even liberate him from poverty. Instead, he does nothing. He is either willfully ignorant or knowingly merciless, and when he dies the door opens into Hell.

{Eph 2:8-9} You and I might conclude from this that we can earn a place in Heaven. If so, we are mistaken! God’s word reveals that it is by his undeserved mercy and kindness that we are “**saved, through faith – and this [faith] is not from [ourselves], it is a gift of God – not by works, so...no one can boast.**”

{Eph 2:10; Jas 2:17, 20} The same Scripture declares that “**we are... created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.**” “**Faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead**” and “**useless.**”

Faith is the root and good deeds are the fruit. Fruit is the sign and substance of the root, and a lack of fruit exposes a lack of root.

{Mt 22:38-39} Love is the quintessential work of faith. Christ commands us to “**Love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul and...mind**” and “**Love your neighbor as yourself.**” **All the Law and the Prophets [are wrapped up in] these two commandments.**”

The rich man fails to love Lazarus because he has no faith. He has no faith, because he is not saved. He is not saved, so for him death opens into Hell.

Lazarus, in contrast, goes to Heaven. Not because he was poor on Earth, not because he did

good deeds, but because he evidently had vital faith that produced good fruit.

? What about us? *Is the link we are forging between time and eternity a link of life or death?*

✎ Death is inevitable.

✎ Death is our entry point into eternal life or eternal torment.

✎ There is a direct, causal link between our lives in time and in eternity.

These are awkward things to say! But what better time is there to talk about eternity than on a morning when we celebrate new life?

May we, by the grace of God, be ready! May we have saving faith in Jesus that opens the door to Heaven.