

Reversal of Fortune:
A tale of contrasting expectations
Luke 16:19-31

For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his life?

Mark 8:36

Introduction: Stories of ironic reversal are intriguing. As a kid we heard the "Tortoise and the Hare", where the ridiculously fast rabbit lost to slower than molasses turtle. We like the story where the arrogant one who has every advantage ends up losing to the seemingly disadvantaged, gaining a helping of humility along the way. We resonate with the underdog, and crave the happy ending where the one no one believed could win defeats the giant in front of them, overcoming the odds, and securing the most unlikely victory.

Jesus was the master story teller, and He continued a discourse with a crowd of sinners and self-righteous over the realities of life on this earth and beyond. He combined the issues of being lost, of heaven rejoicing, of a Father welcoming back a lost son, and of a shrewd manager who leveraged his money for gain. Now He combines the issue of money with eternity, not only in an ethical sense, but in personal reality.

In a recent article in the Huffington Post based on a Gallup poll, information regarding Americans view of the afterlife was given. It comes as no surprise that a majority of Americans still believe in heaven, and also believe that they will go there:

"Belief in heaven may be widely shared, but there is less agreement about who gets to go. A majority of believers in an afterlife said in a 2006 poll said those who were not of their faith could go to heaven. Those who believe in heaven are fairly certain that they themselves are going there. In a 2014 CBS News poll, 82% said they would, 2% said they were headed to hell, while 9% said neither, and 7% didn't know."¹

Jesus main audience was the religious Jews, those who believed that by heritage and works they deserved heaven. Not only that, but they believed they were the gate-keepers, determining who should and would get in. The problem with their self-righteous view was the fact that they would, short of **repenting of their sin**, face a reversal of fortune. They loved their place, their money, their power, and influence in this life, but that would not translate positively in the world to come. Jesus gives a vivid picture of what could be expected if nothing changed by the telling of the story of the **rich man and Lazarus**, a somewhat known story but one that needs to be seen in full context to understand the Technicolor brilliance. A few considerations:

- There is dispute whether this is a **parable** or a story of actual events. We are going to approach it as a parable, a story told to teach a principle, that is based in reality. In other words, Jesus is not making up a fable or some kind of mythology, but each part has a grounding in reality, just as His other parables. This means we do not draw out our theology of heaven and hell from this parable, but it does help inform us of that theology.
- This is the only parable that Jesus uses a proper name (Lazarus). His name means "God is a help", which plays into the story. This IS NOT his friend Lazarus who WOULD be raised in a few months in Bethany.

¹ http://www.huffingtonpost.com/kathleen-weldon/paradise-poll-ed-americans_b_7587538.html

- This should remind us of our woeful lack of thought of heaven and hell - In the same poll from above, most people that believed in heaven believed it to be a place of spirits, not a physical place with physical people. We know that heaven today is NOT complete, but will one day be final or complete when Christ returns (Rev. 21-22). We also know that AFTER Jesus rose from the grave, He resides in heaven, seated at the right hand of the Father (Eph. 1:20). In this parable, Jesus is obviously not spatially in heaven at the time. Though the intermediate heaven is a place where we will be with Jesus, we await the new heaven and earth which will be much more like our experience on earth than not. Heaven is not a place of disembodied spirits floating around, nor is it a continual worship service (which are both things that I believed growing up). It will be a time of being with Jesus (1 John 3:2) serving Him forever.

A Story of Contrasts: *Riches vs Poverty* (19-23)

Luke 16:19 "There was a rich man who was clothed in **purple** and fine **linen** and who **feasted sumptuously** every day.²⁰ And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with **sores**,²¹ who **desired** to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the **dogs** came and **licked** his sores.²² The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried,²³ and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.

Jesus told some stories that may have been subtle, but this is not one of them. This was a **story of extremes**, and He did not hold back on the contrasting characters. The scene is one that you need to picture in your mind, seeing the polarizing way these two men lived. You have a **rich man**, given over to every pleasure one could think of. He clothed in **purple**, which was a color obtained by the sea snails of Tyre (gross - but so is silk from a silk worm, so you know, we can't say much), and fine linen, which would have been the equivalent of designer underwear. Everyday he was without want, and did not simply eat 3 meals a day, but **feasted** on whatever his heart wanted. He did not care about eating, his choice was simply **what** he would eat that day. The worst thing about this mans life was the fact that he had to step over this sore ridden man each day who laid at his gate. He was an eyesore, a nuisance, someone who would turn your stomach to look at, but everyone has their cross to bear! Each term Jesus used was picked to elevate and enhance the extravagance of his life.

By contrast, you had a **poor man** who was unceremoniously plopped at the outer gate of this man's sprawling house. This man was full of **desire**, since it is most likely that he could not walk, could only hope for the bits of bread that would fall off the table (usually the bread used to sop up the last of the gravy or sauce) that would fall to the dogs of the area. This man was in continual anguish, both mentally and physically. He was covered in sores, the type that weep and burn, and had to fight the wild dogs of the area for little or no sustenance. The dogs would lick his sores which left him ceremoniously unclean, and would also cause more infection. He was a sorry case, one that was easily ignored, denigrated, and condescended to. This was the type of man the rich man would hope the authorities would clean up.

The story is turned on its head when death inevitably came (as it does with all of us). The rich man would have had a huge funeral (or at least a costly one), where public statements would have been made, acknowledgements conferred, and a eulogy that would have included his place in the culture, the committees he was a part of, and the greatness of his life. The poor man's body would have been dropped in the local dump! No pomp, no circumstance, no letter from the city or the mayor, and no eulogy read, simply a place taken with the trash of a forgetful culture. But everything changed at the conclusion of the last breath of life.

The scene is set in the afterlife, a stage of waiting the time for Jesus' arrival and second coming. Lazarus is placed at the side of Abraham, the Father of the Jewish people who was respected and honored by all

Jews, and **the rich man**, who was in physical **anguish**, a place that was **tormenting or torturous**, and separated from where Lazarus was in peace. The rolls were completely reversed from their earthly season, except this time, it was permanent. Before we move on to the realities seen here, we need to address the issue of wealth that Jesus did.

Problem with wealth

Does the Bible ever condemn wealth? A resounding "no". However, wealth reveals our heart and elicits our lusts. After speaking with the **rich young ruler**, Jesus made this abundantly clear: "*Children, how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God. It is **easier** for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.*" (Mark 10:24-25). "**For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs.**" (1 Timothy 6:10). The problem often is not that we do not understand this or believe it could be true of us. Wealth is deceptive because it is highly comparative, since there is always someone with more. But by any definition imaginable, those of us who live and breath in the West ARE wealthy, since none of us goes without food or clothes, except by a choice we make. The fact that we have MORE than we need puts us in an elite category in terms of wealth, so we are inclined to the same caution.

Ethics of wealth

Money demands stewardship, since money by definition will not last. From the OT to the NT, those who have are commanded to give to those who have not or cannot. We are to act with kindness, mercy, and compassion on those who are in want. God demands that we not only worship Him with praise and sacrifice, but with actions of humble justice and mercy (see Micah 6:6-8; James 2:15-16; 1 John 3:17). Jesus said the poor will always be with us, and that God makes rich and God makes poor (Matt. 26:11; 2 Samuel 2:7), which means we CANNOT end poverty nor care for everyone. That rests in God alone, and trying to do what we are not called to do elevates us to a roll possessed by God alone. However, we are to be faithful with what we have been given.

We seek to do this **corporately** and **individually**. As a church collective, not only do we give to keep the message of the gospel the forefront in this community, but fund missions around the world. But we also give toward the **marginalized**. That is why we invest in the MOST MARGINALIZED group of people in America today, **THE UNBORN**. We support the efforts of the CPC who seek to love those considering an abortion to know the truth about themselves and God, to see that both they and their child were made in His image. We support **Children's Hunger Fund** that bring food and sustenance to families around the world with the message of the gospel, and the **Samaritan Center** in town who help our homeless and jobless in this town. these all work in tandem with our mission of making disciples. But we do not support every good thing because we cannot. That means that we all are involved in community help as we each have been given passions and abilities to involve ourselves in different mercy ministries, from prison ministry, to heart defects, to autism, to adoption, and many more. This is what our stewardship should look like.

Mindset of those with wealth

There was a mindset among the Pharisees in terms of wealth. They believed that **riches were a sure sign of blessing from God**, and thus poverty was God staying His hand against people. Poverty was a result of weakness of character, direct sin, or the sin of ones parents. It was believed that a Jewish person had a divine right to salvation, and wealth simply sealed the deal. Wealth lead to attitudes of **pride, condescension toward others, self-trust and control**. Money could buy influence, yield power, and gain control. It lead to a high view of self and low view of others.

This is no different from today. Those who are wealthy think they have greater rights, have more value, and deserve different benefits. Its amazing how people of low character have the ability to make lots of money, but that will be a discussion with Jesus some day. Wealth creates a mind set on the world, trust set on self, and a distorted view of our own value and worth. But as we see on other side of eternity, wealth is a mirage, a puff in the wind, and a fleeting treasure.

A Scary Reality: *Finality of Death* (24-26)

And he called out, 'Father Abraham, have **mercy** on me, and **send Lazarus** to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in **anguish** in this **flame**.'²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime **received your good things**, and Lazarus in like manner **bad things**; but now he is comforted here, and you are in **anguish**.'²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a **great chasm has been fixed**, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.'²

The situation drips of irony. The **rich man**, upon the awakened reality after death, finds himself in the extreme opposite condition that he experienced on earth. Notice the terms used to describe his reality. He was not only **tormented** (a word used for torture), but was also in **anguish** in the **flame**, which means he was experiencing intense pain. Some have argued that this was more *mental* anguish, and though there was obvious mental strain, the fact that he asked for the cooling effect of water, the pain was as physical as he ever experienced. **Lazarus**, on the other hand, was experiencing peace and comfort for the first time, laying by the side of Abraham, with no more pain, shame, or anguish. The man who wanted for nothing now had great desires, and the one who longed for scraps from a table now knew the satisfaction of new life.

But notice the next level of irony. The rich man, still with a mindset that he can make things happen and leverage people, called to Abraham to **send Lazarus over**. This tells us a few things. **One** is that he knew Lazarus, knew who he was each day as he passed by, ignored, and turned his back on this suffering countryman. The rich man did not refuse to help a nebulous, faceless, distant poor man, but one that he knew on a first name basis. **Two**, the rich man still viewed Lazarus as one who could serve him, even in his much more privy situation. He did not appeal to Lazarus but instead he went to the top of the poll and talked directly with Abraham, the biggest name in the room.

Abrahams response also was telling. **First**, he reminded the rich man that he got his reward fully on the earth, enjoying the good things NOT to glorify God but to feed the god of his own belly. Lazarus, on the other hand, lost his life in the world so he could find it in the next. **Does this mean that the rich are not saved but poor people are?** By no means. Lazarus was not saved by his poverty, but because **God was his help**. God saved him, but never changed his reality on the earth, since He had something greater for him. **Second**, he reminded that there was a chasm fixed between where Lazarus was and where he was, and there was no crossover, no visitation, and no switching sides. This tells us a couple of indelible truths of life and death.

Fixed reality after death

This life is a vapor. It is so hard to remember that on a day in, day out basis, but we are truly living for a better country to come. What we do in this life matters. This does not mean that giving our money saves us, but one who is saved should absolutely use his money in a way that reflects eternal realities. One of the greatest and most tragic lies perpetrated on people is that someone can change their eternal destiny **after they DIE!** This is a lie from the pit of hell. It is appointed once for man to die, and then comes judgment. Waiting until "later" to turn to Christ is a cosmic game of chicken that only God's magnanimous love and mercy can overcome. We are all going to face death, and though God knows the time, we sure don't. There is no time to wait, and no time to waste.

Contrast of eternal futures

We also see that there are ONLY TWO POSSIBLE ETERNAL OUTCOMES. This is not a complete picture of heaven or hell, but enough to show that they are permanent, has to do with comfort vs. suffering, and that hell is not corrective but is eternal judgment away from God's presence involving torment. What we own or possess in life HAS NO BEARING ON OUR ETERNAL FUTURE outside of what we do with it. Remember, the most wealthy in this world still had to put on a gown in the hospital, experience their last breath, and had to be put in the ground. All the money in the world could not save Steve Jobs or extend the life of dictators. For a Christian, the only **hell** we will experience is this earth, where we will taste suffering, loss, and persecution. But for those who reject Jesus, this world is the only **heaven** they will ever know, the only gracious gift of sunshine, rain, and food, and the only enjoyment of life. Death is inevitable, and judgment is permanent.

A Study of Sufficiency: *Necessary parts for repentance* (27-31)

And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to **send him** to my father's house-²⁸ for I have **five brothers**- so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this **place of torment**.'²⁹ But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'³⁰ And 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 hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'"

In the beloved work by Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* deals with the issue of how one lived his life determined ones eternal destiny. In the exchange between former business partners Jacob Marley and Ebenezer Scrooge (or Goofy and Donald Duck if you prefer the Disney version - which I do), a diseased Marley comes back to try to convince his friend about his life:

Jacob Marley: I wear the chain I forged in life! I made it link by link and yard by yard! I gartered it on of my own free will and by my own free will, I wore it!

Jacob Marley: In life, my spirit never rose beyond the limits of our money-changing holes! Now I am doomed to wander without rest or peace, incessant torture and remorse!

Ebenezer: But it was only that you were a good man of business, Jacob!

Jacob Marley: BUSINESS? Mankind was my business! Their common welfare was my business! And it is at this time of the rolling year that I suffer most!

This is a literary expression of a Biblical story, but with a different solution for the ending. Realizing that his future was sealed, he then appealed for the lives of his brothers. They would have been living a similar life that he led, and their future would be as inevitable. His first appeal was met with Abraham pointing back to the Moses and the Prophets, or the OT Scripture. But this did not satisfy the rich man. He wanted a Jacob Marley experience. He wanted someone to come back from the dead to tell them, beg them, appeal to them. Notice that on that side of eternity, the rich man knew the requirement that he missed: **REPENTANCE!** He believed that something spectacular would spur them on to believe in God, see their sin, and repent, joining Lazarus and Abraham on the other side of the chasm. But now Abraham told the uncompromising and hard to swallow truth: if they would not believe the divinely given word, they would not be convinced by a divinely given miracle.

Hope of the Spectacular

The gospel is a foolish message. God saving sinful man by dying in their place, and all they have to do is believe and turn to Him. All of this comes from faith, and faith comes through hearing the message given through the Word of God. It seems not only too good to be true, but too foolish for each generation. We think, "If only God would do something spectacular", or "If only we *showed* the spectacular", people would believe. In fact, recently a well known evangelical pastor with a massive

church has said that the key to reaching Millennials is no longer declaring "the Bible tells me so", but a focus on Jesus, the resurrection, but not the Scripture. This is not only absurd, its exactly opposite of what Jesus said here.² If someone is going to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, His death and resurrection, it will be the same grace given faith that believes the entirety of the Scripture. Scripture is what testifies to God's holiness, our sinfulness, Jesus' Deity and Humanity, His death on our behalf, His resurrection, and the call to repent. We do not need something spectacular, but a spectacular message from Scripture given to break through deception, sin, and blindness.

Power of the Divine

It was not for a lack of knowledge, a lack of cultural language, or a lack of signs that caused the rich man to remain unrepentant. It was the love of his own sin. It was the love of his money. It was the love of power, control, and his own righteousness. Rejection of Jesus is not simply that people do not believe that He existed or that He even died. Its the fact they do not want to yield heir life to Him.

And this is the brilliance of the story. The rich man asked for the sign of a resurrected man coming to his brothers, which was denied. However, each person who was listening to the parable was able to hear why. In fact, within a few months Jesus **would raise Lazarus from the dead** (John 11:38-45), which did not cause the religious leaders to believe, but instead fused their unbelief and desire to **kill Lazarus again** (John 12:10). But the greatest sign that would come was the resurrection of Jesus Himself, which validated His being Messiah, crushing death itself and bearing the wrath of God. This was prophesied in Scripture (Luke 24:36-49) and validated by Jesus Himself. This is sufficient for salvation because this is sufficient information to repent.

This whole story is a study of contrasts, ironically turning things on their head. The life that Lazarus lived seemed unfair, suffering daily the shame of begging and the pain of sores. The death of the rich man seemed unfair, being a good man who knew Scripture and was one of God's chosen people. But God operates this way. You see, we want God to be fair, to have things work out the way WE THINK it should go. God does the opposite of what Dickens taught. Scrooge was saved in the story by giving his money and changing his own life. God calls us to have our life changed by Him alone, believing and repenting of our sin, placing our faith in Jesus alone. This is why the best response to this parable, the most reasonable prayer we can pray, is "**God, please by UNFAIR to me, and save me.** I know I deserve hell, I know I've earned hell, and I know you would be perfectly just to judge me there. But turn my life on its head, and save me because of Christ's sacrifice on my behalf." Then we have learned the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

² See the following articles for a discussion on this issue: <http://www.outreachmagazine.com/features/19900-the-bible-says-so.html>; a Biblical response by Al Mohler: <http://www.albertmohler.com/2016/09/26/bible-tells-biblical-authority-denied/>