

## TCC Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2013 – Luke 16v19-31 – The Great Reversal

### **Title: “The Great Reversal – The Beggar & The Rich Man”**

#### **Purpose:**

To appreciate something of the way in which Jesus here repeatedly shows us parables that all have in common the fact that His grace is able to radically reverse people’s fortunes with the key being a message of repentance.

### **Introduction**

#### Coming up from the streets

I want to give you a reasonably well-known phrase – and then you tell me what it is normally connected to.

Ok here we go:

**“Coming up from the streets”**

→ YES → “THE BIG ISSUE”

#### The Big Issue

It was created in the dying days of the Thatcher era, the Big Issue magazine has been a pretty radical symbol of a keen determination to try and do something practical about the problem of the growing number of homeless people sleeping rough on Britain’s streets.

#### This morning

The parable in Luke 16, that we have in front of us this morning, very much carries on this tradition of a BIG ISSUE – COMING UP FROM THE STREETS for here too we have an iconic “man on the streets” by the name of Lazarus:

- a man **immediately recognizable**  
**(you know - --- that one who always lay in the same place, gaunt, hungry and sick-looking)**
- a man, however, **largely ignored**
- a man, **very present, yet seemingly invisible**
  
- yet a man with a **powerful message**
- a parable with **A BIG ISSUE**

#### The Structure

So you know how we are going to come at our section (Luke 16v19-31) we are going to divide it into three:

1. FIRST – THE BIG ISSUE – Coming up from the streets
2. THEN – THE BIG ISSUE – Coming up from the depths
3. FINALLY – THE BIG ISSUE – Coming to me and to you

## #1. THE BIG ISSUE – Coming up from the streets (Luke 16v19-22)

### Some preliminaries

Now as we approach this parable, in order to ensure that we set off in the right direction, there are a few things that we really ought to get clear:

- FIRST OFF – this is not primarily a MORAL TALE, even though, of course, there are naturally some moral aspects to the story.

The reason for Jesus telling this parable is \*NOT\* so that we learn to carry out social justice. (Naturally, we are reminded of the importance of the poor, the sick, the homeless and the despised in God's sight).

- SECONDLY – we are \*NOT\* being taught that to be stinking rich is in itself evil.  
Q. After all, was not "Father Abraham" here a very rich man?

SIMILARLY – we are \*NOT\* learning that to be poor means that you are likely a RIGHTOUS PERSON.

- THIRDLY – we are \*NOT\* to assume that this parable is intended to give us a theology lesson in heaven and hell, it is \*NOT\* intended as an eschatology lecture speaking of all that makes up the future and the final state.

### The characters

Let's take a few moments to familiarise ourselves with the main characters in our parable:

- **THE RICH MAN** – right at the start we get to meet our rich man – he is not named at all by Jesus.

It may be that you have heard this parable called: "The parable of **Dives** and Lazarus" – the name "**Dives**" simply comes from the Latin version of the bible which was commonly used from the 5<sup>th</sup> century onwards where the word "**Dives**" means simply **rich**.

Verse 19 "There was a **rich** man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day."

He is dressed in the most expensive garments, purple and fine linen. These are the type of garment that would more commonly be seen in the temple worn by the priests.

So I think we can confidently say that our man is a definite **POWER DRESSER!**

Not only that, we see that his style of dress is only a small part of his style of living – the **NIV** simply says that **“he lived in luxury every day”** – expressed a bit more literally the **NRSV** says he **“feasted sumptuously every day”**.

This man certainly does not seem to have a care in the world – he reminds us a little of the very successful “barnbuilder” who said to himself:

**Luke 12v19 “... I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of good things laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.””**

So all told we have a bit of a **Rockefeller** as well as a **Powerdresser**.

OK, let’s go onto our other character:

- This 2<sup>nd</sup> person is **LAZARUS** - and we should not overlook the fact that he does get given a proper name –this is, in fact, the only parable where Jesus give one of the characters a name. And so it is sensible for us to take a slightly closer look at this name to try and understand its significance.

**Lazarus** is an abbreviated form of the OT name Eleazar – (and you may remember that one of Aaron’s sons was given this name).

Now like many Hebrew names they are **compound names**, which simply means that they are made up of more than one word. The **“El”** at the start is the common word for **God** (So e.g. El in Elijah, Elimelech etc.) and the word **“azar”** which means **“help”**. Thus Lazarus means “God is my help”.

And just as in the parable of the parable of the prodigal son, the younger son is used to really show us what the older son is really like – so too here, this poor man is Jesus way to take off the wraps on this rich man.

Q. So what do we learn of him? Well **Verses 20 and 21** give us the picture:

**“At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.”**

He makes his living the only way he can, by begging – a most despised of all occupation, and not only this, it appears that he has to be laid there – so if you want a similar person in the NT we

could think of the man crippled from birth in Acts chapter 3 who gets healed by Peter and John and then goes around leaping and jumping. The only point of difference here is that he is not laid at the Temple Gate but at the gate of a rich man.

So here we have a man in a pretty poor shape physically and he is also not in the best shape health wise. He is rather similar to poor Job, he is covered with sores – simply longing to be filled with the scraps that might fall off the rich man’s table.

Bear in mind, in those days, people tended to eat with their hands, and not with knives and forks, and so having finished they would wipe their hands on scraps of bread which would then be discarded. Perhaps it was this by-product of the rich man’s daily feasting that our poor man Lazarus dreams of filling his aching stomach with.

In fact, our poor man is so destitute that even the dogs feel sorry for him and come and lick his wounds!!

#### A graphic start

So in just 3 verses we have quite a graphic start – the opening scenery for what we are to learn is in place in just a very short space.

Summing up the plot so far:

- The RICH MAN is definitely part of the “IN” set – he is the high-flyer
- & The POOR MAN is – well no guesses required here – he’s the DOWN & definitely “OUT” crowd

#### The great reversal

What happens next, to heighten the story even further is the arrival of what we call **“the great leveller”**. Both of our characters are visited by the angel of death.

The poor man’s funeral would have been somewhat basic – in fact we don’t even really know whether someone from the council came along with his truck and took him down to the municipal dump where the carcasses of animals and criminals were chucked and burned.

#### Gehinnom

The municipal facility in the Jerusalem area was called Gehinnom – “the valley of Hinnom” and it in the Greek language this is the place they got their word for “Hell” from: “Gehenna”.

The rich man’s funeral would have been an altogether different affair. It would have filled with dignity, with suitable pomp and ceremony. Little expense would have been spared to ensure that there would

have been professional mourners brought in, the highest quality catering for the post-funeral feasting and of course there would have been the obligatory eulogies from the great and the good along with a suitably glowing obituary in the Jerusalem Gazette.

### The Big Issue

I think we can more clearly and confidently see that the Big Issue – That has come up from the streets is:

- **\*NOT\***, at least here in this passage, a moral issue about homelessness and poverty per se
- **RATHER** –the message it does shows us,(coming up clearly from the street via the agency of Lazarus), is that for one more time, we see very vividly and very graphically, a life being lived out and lived out to its final conclusion in a great PRODIGALITY, in great LUXURIOUS & WASTEFUL, SELF-INTERESTED LIVING.

Now this should ring some bells for us:

- we had in **2 weeks ago** a prodigal son who repented of this and one for whom the story was left open.

- **last week** we had a prodigal manager who wasted his master’s possessions – and one who came to a remarkable discovery of the amazing mercy of the master and again a story that was left open.

### The progression

We are supposed to spot the progression.

It all began back in Luke 15v2 with the Pharisees and teachers of the law, being very “sniffy” about the fact that Jesus is engaging with tax collectors and “sinners”.

Now we are 2 main parables later on, in Luke 16v14, the Pharisees are **not just sniffing, they are sneering**. And so we see too that the parable here starts by warning that a message not heeded will in the end lead to another story where things become IRREVERSIBLE.

So let’s come on now to our second part: #1 THE BIG ISSUE – Coming up from the streets now #2:

## **#2. THE BIG ISSUE – Coming up from the depths (Luke 16v23-19-31)**

This is **ACT 2** of our **2-part play**.

The focus now completely flips over – it is a swap from the PRESENT to the FUTURE and to what we might call the FIXED FUTURE.

### Recap FUTURE in previous parable

You might recall that the FUTURE sounded a significant note in the previous parable of the dishonest

manager. To start with his whole focus was on the PRESENT and enjoying everything in the PRESENT and living very much for the PRESENT – but the day of reckoning came and all of a sudden his whole focus moved and transitioned across to having a keen eye for the FUTURE.

We have now ARRIVED in the FUTURE

Well, in ACT 2, we have arrived in the FIXED FUTURE.

And what we see is that there has been a complete reversal. As Jesus himself said – when it comes to the Kingdom of God – “The first shall be last and the last first” – there will be many surprises when it comes to the Kingdom because its values and principles are not worldly ones.

Now Lazarus is reaping the fruit of his faith and trust in God.

Let us be clear – Lazarus is not here in heaven because he had a bad set of cards deal to him whilst on earth so this is just an exercise in evening things up a bit – because of course that would patently NOT be evening anything up since, on earth, we typically have just 70 years, whereas here – this is for all eternity.

No – for this poor man was Lazarus by name and Lazarus by nature – “God is my help” was evidently more than tag by which people got his attention – this was his personal motto, his modus operandi for life. Lazarus operated by way of placing his full trust in God’s provision.

Q. What is your name?

Can you testify truthfully to the reality that it IS God and God alone in whom your faith and your trust for your eternal salvation is placed.

He did not waver

Lazarus did not waver – even though he knew ZERO satisfaction in the life, he was truly a man in the mould of Abraham (the father of faith) because like him – he also did not receive the promises – let me read you:

Hebrews 11v13-16 “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”

So Lazarus now reclines in the bosom or the lap of Abraham, he is enjoying a wonderful feast with godly and god-fearing people – all alike washing in the saving blood of their common saviour – Jesus.

The remaining focus

The whole remainder of the story now revolved around the rich man – in fact this whole parable is 95% about the rich man – the role of the poor man is simply to highlight the reality of the rich man. If you

haven't noticed before – a great many of Jesus parables work by way of a heightened contrast – they operate by forcing a kind of polarization – you can't be neutral – there is no room given for any grey shading – any no man's land where you can hide yourself away from taking sides or placing yourself in one category or the other.

### In Hell

Now in the NIV – we find our well-to-do man located, verse 23, “**In hell...**”.

The word here is \*NOT\* the usual word translated hell – it is \*not\* the Gk “**Gehenna**” – rather this is the word “**Hades**” – it is the equivalent of the OT word “**Sheol**” and it simply means the realm of the dead.

We might refer to this particular state as that stage between LIFE IN TIME and LIFE IN ETERNITY – it is **the “Intermediate State”** as many theology books would describe it, rather than **the “Final State”**.

So you might say that this realm of disembodied souls – is one where:

- PARADISE approximates to HEAVEN and
- HADES approximates to HELL

So our rich man is in hell where he is in conscious torment, Verse 24 “... I am in agony in this fire”.

Let us bear in mind that we do not take these symbols to be literal – instead we take the message that the symbols convey – that hell is a very terrible place, it is the polar opposite of heaven where there is no more crying, no more sickness, no more evil and pain.

3 cries from hell

And we get the first of three – what I'll call: “Cries from hell”:

#### **So CRY #1 “Send Lazarus to me”**

Verse 24 reads “... 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.”

What strikes you straight away is that “No-one changes in hell”.

The rich man is in no way altered – he is fixed. We see no sign of repentance, we only see him concerned about his own state, we only see him wanting to use those around him – Lazarus is no more than a servant to him.

It does make us think though –Q. When exactly did the rich man become, to all intents and purpose, irreversibly fixed?

The simple answer is of course to just say – the moment he lost consciousness for the last time was when his life and eternal destiny was irreversibly fixed.

Many of us practically think along these very lines. When we are young we say – well, I really don't know about religion – and to be honest I have the rest of my life going for me – when I'm older and probably when I'm old and grey I'll review my options then.

Q. Isn't that what most of us do?

Q. Have you thought though about the effect of a lifetime of doing your own thing and ignoring God?

It is rather like the great difficulty of an effective marriage coming about when someone has lived all their lives as a bachelor or as a spinster having things just the way they like it – not impossible, but very much more in the realm of the improbable.

You think that when you have silver hair you will have plenty of time and plenty of inclination to change your ways. You may well lose your capacity to think rationally somewhat more quickly than you had calculated. The focus of your days might well be taken up with just keeping the doctor at bay!!

### **OK, CRY #2 "Send Lazarus \*NOT\* to me \*BUT\* to them"**

The NIV calls this parable: "**The Rich Man and Lazarus**" – others have suggested that a better title might really be "**The Parable of the Five Brothers**".

Yes, the rich man was one of no less than 6 males in the same family and he has **5 surviving brothers**.

Verse 27 "...I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, for I have <b>five brothers</b> . Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."
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Perhaps, hell is doing the rich man some good, perhaps you might think, he is being to get reformed by the strict regime in hell.

Well this idea might go down quite well in a Roman Catholic setting with their non-biblical idea of people going to purgatory where they get slowly refined until they are good enough to be promoted to heaven. But this is certainly not a hope that the bible affords to us.

Of course one possible reason he might have some concern for the remaining brothers is that if they also stay on the same track that he took, then they soon will be company for him in hell and this will only intensify his suffering as they will not exactly be there to thank him for having given them all bad example so as to pave the way into eternal torment.

### The reply – Moses & the Prophets

See father Abraham's reply:

Verse 29 "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."
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Moses and the prophets is simply code for the Law and the Prophets which is shorthand for the whole of the OT – which was their whole bible.



In simple terms Abraham says: “Let them heed the Bible!”.

The Bible is very much unheeded, neglected, and is just about as invisible as the poor man Lazarus was to the rich man.

This is a very fitting message for our own generation and society, where most homes have one or more bibles, but these bibles are almost entirely UNATTENDED and UNOPENED.

The point that is being made is that this:

- accepting that Jesus and his death on the cross is **the only sufficient way of SALVATION**
- the bible, that “written down and spoken out” word of God is **the only sufficient way of DISCOVERING** that only sufficient way of SALVATION

The apostle Paul has this to say:

**Romans 10v16-17** “But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?” Consequently, faith comes from **hearing the message**, and the message is heard through the **word of Christ.**”

Or again, take the apostle Peter, he says:

**1 Peter 1v23** “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring **word of God.**”

So we see that a most important message that this parable is underlining is the complete sufficiency of Scripture, of the Word of God as given in the Bible.

Ok – back to our 3 cries:            #1 – send Lazarus to me            #2 – Send Lazarus to them

**Finally then, CRY #3 “Send someone dead, send someone resurrected”**

The rich man in life never accepted the word as it was given – and even now he does not submit to the word from Abraham, he is still arguing his point, still arguing the toss.

**Verse 30 & 31** – (the closing verses finally put this parable to bed) – “ ‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ “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.’ ”

Q. Who is the one that might rise from the dead? Well from the immediate context that would have to be Lazarus.

Another one called Lazarus

Although Lazarus was, at the time of Jesus, the fourth most popular name to give your Jewish son, the NT only has two place where we meet anyone with this name. The other place is John chapters 11 and

12, and guess what, this is where the brother of Mary and Martha dies and Jesus raises him on the fourth day from the tomb.

What John 12 verse 9-11 tells us is very illuminating:

(John 12v9-11) “Meanwhile a large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him.”

#### Attaching too much credit to miracles

It is not that miracles have no power to influence people – rather it is that the only SUREFIRE way of people coming to true faith is by way of God’s written and sufficient word.

We place too much stock in the power of the miraculous to convince us.

99 times out of a 100 – true faith (as Scripture says) comes through hearing and not through seeing.

We’ve had:

1. FIRST – “THE BIG ISSUE – Coming up from the streets” – a message from this life
2. THEN – “THE BIG ISSUE – Coming up from the depths” – a message from the next

Finally:

### **#3. THE BIG ISSUE – Coming to me and to you (Conclusion)**

And this is very much by way of conclusion, conclusion not merely of this parable of “The Rich Man and Lazarus” but of the previous two main parables: “The Prodigal Son” and “The Dishonest Manager”.

Allow me to explain.

These three are connected as you might have been concluding yourself – they seem to have a lot of general overlap.

If you want to tie that to the scripture more plainly, rather than just speculating that they have some crossover – be aware that all of them begin with the phrase “a certain man” (Gk. ‘anthropos tis’) it is unique to Luke– I’ll read from the **NKJV** as this is a bit more literal to the original Greek underneath – these are the introduction of the 3 MAIN parables (if you remember, the lost sheep and the lost coin are like teaser or taster mini-parables bolted on at the beginning of the first MAIN parable):

**Luke 15v11** “A certain man had two sons.” (THE PRODIGAL SON)

Luke 16v1 “There was a **certain rich man** who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods.” (THE DISHONEST MANAGER)

Luke 16v11 “There was a **certain rich man** who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day...” (THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS)

1. Each main parable, then, acts to reinforce the message of the others.
2. In each there is a lostness, a brokenness, an alienation.
3. In each there is a reversal of the way things are.
4. In each there is by one party the amazing discovery & experience of the bounteous grace and mercy of God.
5. In the first two parables the ending is left deliberately open in order to signify that the door to receiving the grace of God is open and that we do not know what choice was ultimately made.

Did the elder brother come into the party OR was did he permanently LOST whilst at home!?

Did the dishonest manager change from his old ways once he had that “lights on moment” when he saw and passed on the grace of his manager to others?

The message to me and to you

Q. So what is the cumulative message that had come over these 3 weeks?

Let me answer that by way of some questions that are similarly cumulative, questions that build on and reinforce each other:

#1 Q. Have you come to see, come to experience personally, the wonderful and category shattering grace and mercy of God?

#2 Q. Have you responded to that invitation of grace to come to the Saviour – that you maybe no longer lost, but found and truly home with the Father?

#3 Q. Have you, in coming to this gracious and forgiving Father – acknowledged your sin and evidenced true repentance and turning over that sin?

The last parable contains a very sober note – not that salvation does not exist – Lazarus demonstrated that he had been aware of the existence of grace, and that he had recognised his own need and considered God his help – his name was his confession of faith.

However, there are others who start off sniffing at what Jesus does and the salvation he offers, they go on to sneer at the implications of his teaching and ultimately they find themselves at a point of “no return”! Their fate is fixed and repentance is something that they cannot produce even if they wanted to.

That was the rich man and today there are still many elder brothers just the same – the question will also end up as a personal one.

It is still THE Big Issue and it is still coming up from the streets by way of one Lazarus – one man for whom:

“God was his help”.

You may not be homeless like him – but in eternity, as Scripture makes triply clear You could end up endlessly homeless!

AMEN