

“Our Faith is Credited as Righteousness”

Luke 16:19-31

What kind of man was the rich man? What kind of man was Lazarus? Which of these two would you have wanted to be friends with? The rich man was a leader of the community dressed in the finest clothes and liked to have his friends and neighbors over for big dinner parties. Those are the kind of friends we like.

Lazarus was a dirty, smelly beggar with open sores. How ready are we to engage in intimate contact with persons of that sort? To my shame, I will admit that I am the chief of sinners. That is the time I tend to walk on the other side of the street.

Looking at the story from the comfort of the pew, it is easy to despise the rich man because he had great wealth and would not share it with his less fortunate neighbor. However, if you lived in that town, with which of those two would you have desired to be your friend?

It is very possible that the rich man was loved and respected in his community. And it is very possible that Lazarus was despised and avoided by more than just this rich man. We know it is possible because we see it all around us. The righteous and the unrighteous cannot be determined by the clothes they wear or the curb appeal of their homes.

But it is not that the rich man was a sinner and Lazarus was not. They

were both sinners and both deserving of God's wrath. But the faith of their hearts was not the same. The rich man's god was his wealth and all the things that he had achieved for himself, including his good name and reputation. Most likely he was proud of himself. And these were the things in which he trusted.

Lazarus' God, on the other hand, was the Living God – the God of Abraham; the God who had given him life, salvation, and all things. Lazarus was a sinner who deserved nothing from God, and received nearly nothing in this life. But he trusted His Father in heaven, and like Abraham, his faith was credited to him as righteousness.

The main difference between the rich man and Lazarus was not their bank account or social status or their level of personal hygiene. The main difference was their attitude toward God's Word. Lazarus was sustained by it through even the darkest days of his life. The rich man counted it as nothing.

Even while in the torment of hell – the ultimate torment of being separated from God – even while in hell, the rich man's only thought was to avoid suffering for himself and his living brothers. He wanted a little drink of water for himself, and for Lazarus to come back from the dead and scare his brothers into avoiding God's wrath.

There was no love for God in his heart or in his requests. Even in the pit of hell, he did not recognize the value of the presence of God's Word. But that really isn't surprising. Having only the fear of punishment does not create faith or love. The Law can never accomplish that. The Law can cause a proud head to bow, and can crush us down and bring us to our

knees. It is in the sweet words of the Gospel, it is only in the forgiveness of sins – the washing away of sins through Christ’s blood – that God raises us up and fills us with hope and joy

For all of the “sumptuous” living that the rich man experienced in his life, he did not know the joy that Lazarus had in the words of Moses and the prophets. That is the irony of this parable. It was not just after their death that Lazarus’ true joy exceeded that of the rich man. During Lazarus’ life, the presence of God within him gave him a joy and a hope that was unknown to the rich man. And even though Lazarus’ body was weak by worldly standards, within him was a strength that the world could not perceive or understand.

Our world envies the “lifestyles of the rich and famous”. Millions of magazines are sold so that we can get a taste of what that kind of life would be like. And millions of more magazines are sold because of the guilty pleasure we get from seeing the misfortune and unhappiness of the beautiful people on the cover. But that is not the point that Jesus is trying to make. This was not some story to be read in the grocery store checkout aisle. Jesus didn’t tell this story so that the masses would feel good that this rich guy got what he deserved.

The point of the parable is that both men are sinners. Both men had been exposed to Moses and the prophets. God desired for both men to reside with Abraham. Abraham even refers to the rich man as his “child.” This story is not about class warfare or bringing down the rich. This story is about the power of God’s Word.

It is in the Word and the Word alone that God permits Himself to be

found. There is a lie told by some who claim to represent God that if you live your life a certain way, God will bless you with good things in this life. You will live like the rich man. That is not the way of the cross or the way in which God operates. That is not the message of the God of Abraham; that is not the Word of truth God proclaimed through Moses and the prophets; that is not the purpose for which God sent His Son to be “pierced for our transgressions and wounded for our iniquities.”

The Word of God found written in Scripture, the Word joined with water, and the Word made flesh who made His dwelling among us and now comes to us under the form of bread and wine is not the one who promises earthly riches. As Paul says in his letter to Timothy, the desire to be rich, having that as your higher priority, is a temptation which comes from the evil one. The God who made your body to be His temple and who calls you by name gives you food and clothing and the will to be content. You are His child and the Kingdom is yours. There is nothing here that we can take with us anyway.

As I said before, the righteous and the unrighteous cannot be determined by the clothes you wear or the curb appeal of your homes. Whether the world labels us rich or poor, we are sinners who deserve God’s wrath and judgment. We deserve nothing in this life. We deserve nothing in the life to come except an eternity with the rich man in hell. Our salvation is that, like Abraham, our faith has been credited to us as righteousness. And it is in that faith, formed by God’s Word, that we, like Lazarus, find contentment in this life and joy in the life to come. Amen.