

The rich man went to hell, because he didn't recognize his true treasure. While he was partying with his friends and enjoying an abundance of earthly pleasure, he failed to recognize his greatest asset sitting right outside of his house. It was Lazarus, that poor man who longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table, whose only friends were dogs licking his sores. That poor man named Lazarus, who helplessly laid at the gate, was in fact the greatest treasure that rich man could have had. But he completely failed to recognize it.

Lazarus was poor, but what made him a true treasure was something that the eyes of this world can't possibly see. It's true that this world is capable of some kind of pity for the poor man as they look at the rich man with scorn. But these worldly reactions amount to no more than envy and bitterness. Many social revolutions have been reactions against the greed of the wealthy class and the neglect of the underprivileged poor, but these movements always end up being driven by jealousy, ending in murder and vandalism. The goal of Jesus' parable is not to generate pity for the poor man and contempt for the rich man. No, the point of our Lord's parable is to warn us against trusting in earthly treasures while losing sight of the true, heavenly treasure.

Lazarus had the true, heavenly treasure. It's implied in his name, which means "my God is help." As the Psalmist says, "Our help is in the name of the LORD, who made heaven and earth" (Ps. 124:8). Lazarus did not find his help from earthly things, but after he died the angels carried him into the lap of Abraham. By this, it is revealed that Lazarus is a true child of Abraham. There he goes to enjoy the inheritance that God promised to Abraham. In other words, Lazarus is shown to be the one who trusts in the help and salvation of the Lord. Lazarus is a Christian.

This was the great treasure that the rich man squandered and neglected while he was on earth. It wasn't just his lack of love and care for his brother Lazarus. His lack of compassion certainly showed his true colors. But it revealed something even deeper. It revealed his utter unbelief and neglect for what Lazarus trusted in. The rich man would have been much better off sitting at the gate with Lazarus. Of course, he should have fed and clothed the poor man. He didn't need to go searching the world for people to help. His brother was right there. But even deeper than his failure to help, he should have enjoyed with Lazarus what money can't possibly buy.

This parable of rich man and Lazarus is a picture of the true members of the church and false members of the church. It is about the true Israel and the false Israel. God gave his promises to the people of Israel. Of all the nations of the earth, he adopted them as his own people, revealing his glory, giving them the law and an order of worship with sacrifices and a priesthood. In other words, he picked them to be his visible church on earth.

But as Paul says, not all who are of Israel are in fact Israel (Rom 9:6). Mingled into this outward fellowship of the church of Israel were those who didn't share the true treasure of Israel's inheritance. They enjoyed the status of being born into this great lineage of Abraham. They enjoyed the feasts, the culture, and the good order. They enjoyed the land God gave to their fathers, as well as the kingdom God gave to David. But they didn't trust in the Son of David whom God promised to send.

Jesus gave this parable as a warning to the members of Israel who boasted in their own physical association with Abraham while refusing to trust in the promise that Abraham trusted in. They were like dead branches on a vine. Like the rich man who ended up in hell, they were going to be chopped off and thrown into the fire. St. Paul explains that these branches of Israel were cut off in order to graft into the vine branches from the other nations (Rom 11:19). This is exactly what Jesus was warning the people of Israel about. He said that many would come from the east and the west and from the north and the south to sit with Abraham, Isaac, and Israel in the feast of God's kingdom. And those who boasted of being Abraham's children without sharing Abraham's faith would be tossed out into outer darkness.

God gave these dead branches of Israel up to their hatred of Christ as a judgment against their sin and unbelief. But God was working through it. Their hatred of Christ turned out to be our salvation. Jesus was condemned to die on a cross, and it was on that cross where he bore the sin of all people, not only of all Israel but of all sinners. He reconciled the world to himself. He brought about the full riches of God's inheritance, and by his resurrection and ascension he has made it known to all nations through the preaching of his gospel.

There are those who teach that the physical people of Israel are God's chosen people. If you say that the church of Christ is the true Israel, then they will accuse you of hating Jews. Many even insist that you will be cursed if you don't support the foreign and domestic policies of the present nation-state of Israel. These talking points have especially been trending during the recent conflict between the state of Israel and the state of Iran.

How can we respond to this as Christians? First, it is true that God adopted physical descendants of Abraham to be the beginning of his church on earth. From the lineage of Israel, specifically Judah, the Son of God came into the flesh to bring salvation for all people. But the Bible is clear that the true Israel has always consisted of those who trust in the promise of the gospel given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Those in Israel who did not believe were cut off of this true vine. Jesus fulfilled all the commands and promises given to Israel. His sacrifice for sins has done away with the sacrifices carried out by the priesthood. To confirm this, God sent the Romans to destroy the temple in Jerusalem, so that no more animal sacrifices could be made again.

Now, it's not like God cut off faithful Israelites who just didn't hear that the promised Savior had come. No, Jesus himself traveled all around the land of Israel with his disciples, preaching the arrival of God's kingdom. When he sent his apostles out into all the nations, he told them to start their preaching in Jerusalem, because it was in Jerusalem where God's Word was taught to the people of Israel. When the apostles traveled anywhere, they first went to the synagogues where the Israelites gathered to hear God's Word. Paul calls the gospel the power of God to salvation for all who believe, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. If you were an Israelite who listened to the Word of God, trusting in the promise of salvation, and waiting for the Savior from sin and death to arrive, then you wouldn't have missed it. This is why many Israelites accepted the preaching of Jesus and his apostles. Many who had been broken off because of unbelief were grafted back in by God's grace. But those who continued to reject the gospel were like the rich man in Jesus' parable. They enjoyed their earthly heritage while forfeiting their heavenly treasure.

The current nation state of Israel is not the true Israel through whom God promised to bring the blessing of salvation to all nations. God chose the twelve tribes of Israel as his assembly, and the true members of that assembly were those who were circumcised not merely in their flesh but also in their hearts. They were those whose treasure was in the God of their Salvation. And this is still who the true Israel is. It is all those, whether born from the line of Abraham or brought in from the other nations, who are called and gathered by the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The rich man went to hell, because he didn't recognize this true treasure. He found his treasure in earthly things rather than in the heavenly inheritance won by Christ. Even in hell, he tries to lay claim to the outward status of an Israelite and a child of Abraham. The chasm between heaven and hell is so great that the rich man can't even recognize why Lazarus is so rich. He continues to ask for material things, like water being dipped on his tongue, but he knows nothing of the living water that flows freely from the Word of God. Even in hell, he continues to show contempt for God's Word. Thinking that he knows better, he insists that if Lazarus were to rise from the dead and warn his brothers, then this would convince them to repent.

But if you don't listen to Moses and the prophets, then you won't believe even if you see someone risen from the dead. After Jesus raised his friend Lazarus from the dead, the leaders of Israel still sought to kill him. In fact, they thought about how they could kill Lazarus in order to cover up Jesus' great miracle. These men, who were supposed to be shepherds of Israel, proved instead to be a brood of vipers. Their gatherings, which were supposed to be blessed by God's Word, proved to be synagogues of Satan. They were

broken off of the vine, and those who were poor in spirit and broken in their hearts were grafted in.

This should be a warning to all of us. If God did not spare these leaders of Israel because of their stubborn unbelief, then how do you think he will treat you if you neglect the treasure of his kingdom? We came from wild branches, and it was only by God's grace that we were grafted into the vine of Israel. By God's grace, he has also blessed us with many other benefits. He has given us a rich heritage of culture, music, education, friends, family, and long standing relationships. But if we lose sight of our constant need for the gospel, then we are no better off than the rich man. If you enjoy the benefits of living in a Christian culture without recognizing the true treasure of the gospel, then you won't ever recognize what truly blesses you.

The rich man neglected poor Lazarus, not just because he was greedy, but also because he didn't have anything in common with him. If he would have treasured the gospel, recognizing his need for the forgiveness of sins and the hope of the resurrection, then he would have found great joy in hanging out with Lazarus. If you treasure the promise of your baptism, the body and blood of Christ, and the righteousness of your Savior who died and rose for you, then you will find great joy in hanging out with your fellow Christians, no matter how poor or insignificant they may seem. Because they are the true Israel of God.

They are the ones who, with Lazarus, find their help and salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ. They are your brethren, scattered around the world. They are in Iran, languishing under Muslim persecution. They are in the country of Israel, confessing the gospel at great risk to themselves. They are in your own household and community, taking comfort in the same gospel of Jesus Christ. God is grafting broken branches back into the vine of his chosen Israel, and he is grafting wild branches in as well. He will continue to do so throughout the world until all his chosen members of Israel are gathered to himself.

So consider who your brothers are. Consider who your fellow children of Israel are. They are those who share this same hope of Christ, which surpasses all the hopes and aspirations of this world. Their treasure is not on earth, but only in Jesus. Stand with them on the true doctrine of your Savior. Consider them, even in their darkest and poorest moments. Because God promises to deliver you both. *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel from everlasting, and to everlasting. Amen, and Amen (Ps. 41:13).*