

TEXT: Luke 16:19-31

THEME: LISTEN TO THE RADICAL TEACHINGS OF JESUS

1. Listen to What They Say about the Horror of Hell
2. Listen to What They Say about the Happiness of Heaven
3. Listen because They Are All We Need

Dear Christian Friends:

A little over a decade ago, a book was published entitled, *Whatever Happened to Hell?* The Christian author wrote the book as a response to the widespread rejection of the biblical teaching of hell. From those who dismiss the whole idea of hell to those who want to reduce the torments of hell to something less than horrible and eternal, the author observed that few people believe that hell is a real place.

A decade later, things haven't changed much. Recent polls indicate that most Americans believe in heaven; few Americans believe in hell. That's obviously due to a whole lot of wishful thinking! There are those who brush off the Bible's call to "repent or else perish eternally" with a flippant, "If I end up in hell, at least I'll be with all my friends." Then there are those who frequently punctuate their sentences with the word "hell." They swear by hell: "Hell yes!" "Hell no!" Have they ever stopped to seriously consider what Scripture says about hell?

Jesus more than hinted at its horror when he said, "**It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched**" (Mark 9:47-48). The cooling, soothing drop of water the rich man begged for while in the flames would never be granted...ever!

There are those who claim that it is impossible for a loving God to punish people eternally in hell just for rejecting Jesus as their Savior, just for rejecting Jesus, who is true God. They forget that God is also a just God who "**does not leave the guilty unpunished**" (Exodus 34:7). At the cross, God demonstrated his love by the sacrifice of his Son for sinners; at the cross, he also proved his justice by punishing his Son for the sins of the world. Those who spurn God's love in Christ will have to face God's justice and pay for their sins themselves—in hell.

Instead of trying to ridicule or reason away the reality of hell, let's give thanks that we have been spared its punishment by the grace of God in Christ, who suffered its horror for us. And having been snatched from the jaws of hell, let us cling to Jesus with a true and living faith.

That brings us to a much happier part of our Scripture lesson for today: THE HAPPINESS OF HEAVEN. For a long time, in fact, since I was a student at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, I've had a real problem with the title we've given to the account before us today. We refer to it as "The Rich Man and Poor Lazarus." That title doesn't tell the whole story. It only addresses the circumstances of their earthly lives. The wealth of the rich man turned out to be temporary, while his agony in hell will be forever. In the same way, the

suffering of poor Lazarus turned out to be temporary, but his comfort in heaven will never end. Perhaps a better name for this account would be “The Poor Man and Rich Lazarus.”

How rich he was! His confidence in Christ and perseverance in faith were richly rewarded. At the moment of his death, he left behind the misery that had been his lot in life and was borne by angels to heaven. Left behind was the feeble comfort of the dogs that licked his wounds, and in its place was eternal comfort offered by God himself. King David described that comfort this way: **“You will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand” (Psalm 16:11).** John described it like this: **[God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain” (Revelation 21:4).**

No wonder the hymn-writer encourages us, *“Ponder again what glory then the Lord will give you for your earthly sadness. The angel host can never boast of greater glory, greater bliss or gladness” (CW40:4).*

How important in life’s troubles, at the graves of those who die in Christ, and in our last hours, to listen to what the Scriptures say about the happiness of heaven. How thankful we can be that, rather than the condemnation our sins have earned, eternal comfort awaits us in heaven for Christ’s sake. How fervently we will want to pray:

*Oh, sweet and blessed country, the home of God’s elect!
Oh, sweet and blessed country that eager hearts expect!
Jesus, in mercy bring us to that dear land of rest;
You are with God the Father and Spirit ever blest. (CW 214:4)*

Yet, how do we get there to that blessed country? How do we get to heaven? There are lots of organizations that claim to get us to heaven. One has a Toon Town of three dimensional buildings, a slide 16 feet high, and an animatronic police chief who recites the rules of the play area, as well as the Ten Commandments to teach the children how to get to heaven. What is it? No, it’s not the newest amusement park with a religious twist; it’s Life Church in Edmond, OK. It is one of the fastest growing churches around.

Our church doesn’t have all the razzmatazz of Life Church. So, are we missing out? Do we need these things? If the purpose of the church is to entertain, the answer is probably yes. But if the church has a higher purpose, namely, to make sure that more sinners will not end up like the rich man in the place of torment called hell, then the answer is most definitely no. All we need are the “radical teachings of Jesus.”

When it comes to delivering the souls of sinners from a well-deserved eternity of punishment in hell, Moses and the Prophets, the Holy Scriptures, are all we need. The rich man thought his brothers needed more—he thought they needed Lazarus to come back from the dead so that they could be saved from hell. But Jesus said it clearly, **“They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.”**

Holy Scripture is all we need. It’s all we need because it is the law of God, his holy will for our lives that serves as a mirror to show us our sins. The law is the Holy Spirit’s hammer to crush our proud and self-righteous hearts; it terrifies us with God’s guilty verdict.

Holy Scripture is all we need because it is the gospel, the good news of what God has done through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son, Jesus Christ, to take away our sins. The gospel is the Holy Spirit's soothing medicine that heals the broken heart.

But the gospel is more than news. **"It's the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes,"** says Paul (Romans 1:16). He knew its power. He had seen its power at work in himself and in so many others to whom he had proclaimed the gospel. Paul trusted the power of the gospel. That's why he describes his work in the church at Corinth, the ancient equivalent of Las Vegas, "Sin City," in this way: **"When I came to you, brothers, I did not come with eloquence or superior wisdom...I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified...so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power" (1 Corinthians 2:1,2,5).** Jesus Christ is the only way to heaven. Jesus Christ is the only way to avoid the horror of hell. Jesus Christ is the only way to enjoy the happiness of heaven. May Jesus Christ and his "radical teachings" always be our only message at Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church. Amen.