

Rich man and Lazarus

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Let us consider a story that the Lord Jesus Christ told, which contains important spiritual principles for our lives. It is a story that has been told again and again over many centuries, even to young children, and the principles involved are central in our daily lives. It is recorded for us in Luke 16: 19-31: the story of the rich man and Lazarus. It can also be entitled: "Our moral response now has eternal consequences".

Luke 16:19-31

- 19 "Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day.
- 20 "And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores,

- 21 and longing to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores.
- 22 "Now it came about that the poor man died and he was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried.
- 23 "And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom.
- 24 "And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.'
- 25 "But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.
- 26 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and *that* none may cross over from there to us.'
- 27 "And he said, 'Then I beg you, Father, that you send him to my father's house—
- 28 for I have five brothers – that he may warn them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'
- 29 "But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'
- 30 "But he said, 'No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!'
- 31 "But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.'"

People have wondered whether this story is a parable (a fictional story told to illustrate some points), or a description of a historical event involving this rich man and Lazarus.

When the Lord Jesus tells a parable, He refers to material things in this world to illustrate certain principles, and when He gives examples of people, historical names are usually not included. However, in this story, the Lord Jesus specifically mentioned Abraham, who is a historical figure from the Scriptures. This need not necessarily mean that it must be a historical event, but it certainly brings to our attention that the story is intended to communicate serious matters that we need to take heed. The principles that the Lord Jesus is seeking to communicate are relevant and applicable whether this is a parable or a real-life story. Our attention therefore is to seek to learn what the Lord Jesus wants to communicate to us, and how to apply them in our lives.

Our choices now lead to eternal consequences

In this story, one main principle stands out strongly to me, and the other principles are related to this. The Lord Jesus describes a situation where, during the time on earth, there lived this rich man, and a poor man called Lazarus. He briefly describes their way of life and then He tells us what happened when they died and entered the realm of eternity. We see then that the Lord Jesus is seeking to impress upon us a very important principle: what we do today on earth, the choices that we make each day, the way that we live, will have consequences in eternity, although this may at times not be very obvious to us. The rich man did not seem to be very conscious that his way of living would have consequences in eternity. The reality was impressed deeply on him after he died. Likewise, many of us may not be very conscious that the way we live our lives now will reap eternal consequences. Let us take heed before this opportunity is gone.

Riches affecting our lives

As we read this passage, it may seem as if riches in themselves caused the rich man to go to the place of suffering, while Lazarus was carried to Abraham's bosom just because he was poor and he suffered in this world. However, if we look at the passage more closely, it is quite clear that this is not what the Lord Jesus is teaching. Riches in themselves did not cause the rich man to go to the place of suffering. In verse 30, this rich man himself said, 'No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' We see that the rich man recognized that there was something morally wrong in the way that he and his brothers lived their lives on earth. He recognized that there was a need for repentance. It is a moral issue involving moral choices. Riches in themselves are not morally good or evil. It is the way we live in relation to what we have that determines whether our lives are good or evil. It is

the attitude that we have towards riches, towards God, towards others and towards ourselves – this is the crucial factor.

This principle is also illustrated and explained in other passages in the Scriptures. An example is Mark 10: 17-27. This passage tells us about a man who was very rich. He had positive desires and he came to the Lord Jesus with great enthusiasm asking what he should do to have eternal life. When the Lord Jesus referred to God's commandments because eternal life is to be found in genuinely living by His commandments, the rich man said, "Teacher, I have kept all these things from my youth up." In verse 21, we read, "And looking at him, Jesus felt a love for him and said to him..." This tells us that the Lord Jesus did not despise him because of his riches. Instead, the Lord Jesus loved him, and He could see the potential in his life if he were willing to respond to Him positively. He said, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." We notice, "But at these words his face fell, and he went away grieved, for he was one who owned much property." This rich man, although eager to come to the Lord Jesus for help, was not prepared to follow the Lord because of his riches: he was clinging on to his wealth.

The Lord Jesus, in the parable of the sower, refers to "the deceitfulness of riches" (Matthew 13: 22). When we desire to be rich, or when we cling on to our riches, we can very readily be deceived into thinking that what we are doing is good or right when in reality it is not.

When we look at a parallel passage in Matthew 19: 16-30, we notice that in verse 19, the Lord Jesus said to this rich man, regarding the commandments that he should keep, "HONOUR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER; and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOUR AS YOURSELF". The man replied, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" This man said that he had kept all these commandments. However, when the Lord Jesus said to him, "If you wish

to be complete, go *and* sell your possessions and give to *the* poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me", he was not willing to do so even though it was a specific instruction from the Lord.

He thought that he had kept the commandment to love his neighbour as himself, but he was not prepared to part with his riches in order to help them in their need even when the Lord Jesus instructed him to do so. As the riches grew in importance to him, his perception of obedience to the commandments of God would tend to diminish in objectivity and accuracy. He thought that he had fully obeyed the commandments of God when in reality, his obedience was incomplete because he was clinging on to his riches: his love for riches had deceived him. His wealth was more important to him than the eternal life that the Lord Jesus offered him. It does not mean that whoever wants to follow the Lord Jesus must physically give up all his riches and give them to the poor. The Lord Jesus sees our heart, and He saw that this rich man needed to give up his riches in order to truly follow Him.

This principle is a serious matter: it is not the riches in themselves that are evil but the attitude that we take towards them. When you cling on to the things of this world, when they mean so much to you, they become a deception and a trap so that your whole life degenerates in your spiritual perception and your walk with God.

On the other hand, if we look at another man who was very rich, we see a deep contrast. In the book of Job 1: 1-5 we have a description of a very rich man but his whole attitude was very different with regard to his possessions, his riches.

Job 1:1-5

- 1 There was a man in the land of Uz, whose name was Job, and that man was blameless, upright, fearing God, and turning away from evil.
- 2 And seven sons and three daughters were born to him.

- 3 His possessions also were 7,000 sheep, 3,000 camels, 500 yoke of oxen, 500 female donkeys, and very many servants; and that man was the greatest of all the men of the east.
- 4 And his sons used to go and hold a feast in the house of each one on his day, and they would send and invite their three sisters to eat and drink with them.
- 5 And it came about, when the days of feasting had completed their cycle, that Job would send and consecrate them, rising up early in the morning and offering burnt offerings *according to* the number of them all; for Job said, "Perhaps my sons have sinned and cursed God in their hearts." Thus Job did continually.

Although Job was a very rich man, his attitude of heart was good. He was a man who was described as "blameless, upright, fearing God, turning away from evil". In Job 29: 11-17, Job testified that he had helped many: he cared for the needy, the poor, the suffering, the orphans and the widows. He loved others and he cared for them. He did not cling on to his wealth. His attitude towards God was one of deep worship and submission. Even when his wealth and possessions were taken away because of the evil one at work, Job continued to worship God. This is recorded in Job 1: 20-22.

Job 1: 20-22

- 20 Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head, and he fell to the ground and worshiped.
- 21 And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I shall return there. The LORD gave and the LORD has taken away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."
- 22 Through all this Job did not sin nor did he blame God.

So wealth was not a problem in Job's life because his attitude was good. If our hearts are right, wealth would also not be a problem to us, but we notice that such wealth can have a gripping power on our lives. In the context of His encounter with the rich young man, the Lord Jesus told His disciples that it is very difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.

Matthew 19: 23, 24

- 23 And Jesus said to His disciples, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.
- 24 "And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

We can see therefore, that although riches in themselves are not the problem, they can have a very powerful negative effect on those who are rich. The riches can affect us in our attitude and in our values in life.

Let us return to the primary principle arising from the story of the rich man and Lazarus. What are the consequences that will take place in eternity in relation to the choices we make and the way we live our lives today? These consequences can be appreciated in two categories: the external and the internal consequences.

External consequences

In the story in Luke chapter 16, the external consequences for the rich man meant that he went to a place of torment and suffering. This also applies to us. If our lives are morally negative, if we live in rebellion against God and His laws, there will be a place of suffering, a place of punishment, awaiting us. On the other hand, the Scriptures show us there is also a place of comfort, a place of joy, a place of peace, in the presence of God, for those who repent and seek to live righteously. There are also different degrees in what we will receive in both of these situations.

The Lord Jesus said, in Luke 12: 47, 48, that the slave who knew his master's will and did not do accordingly, will be punished with many lashes, but the one who did not know his master's will but did something that deserved punishment, will receive a few lashes. There will be degrees of severity of punishment and there will be degrees of suffering in the context of punishment.

Luke 12: 47, 48

- 47 "And that slave who knew his master's will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will, shall receive many lashes,
 48 but the one who did not know *it*, and committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few. And from everyone who has been given much shall much be required; and to whom they entrusted much, of him they will ask all the more.

The same principle applies in the positive direction. Heaven is meant for all who love God. However, what God will give to us in heaven will not be the same, but will correspond with different degrees of quality in our lives. In Revelation chapters 2 and 3, the Lord Jesus gives specific promises to those who overcome, regarding what He will give them in the future (Revelation 2: 7, 10, 11, 17, 26-28, and Revelation 3: 4, 5, 11, 12, 19-21).

The apostle Paul teaches us that those who are faithful to God will be rewarded in the future.

2 Timothy 4: 7, 8

- 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith;
8 in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.

Those who are faithful will be rewarded according to the degree of quality in their lives, just as those who are disobedient to God will suffer according to the seriousness of their unrighteousness. These are external consequences that God will bring about in the future, according to the way we choose now, and they will affect what we will experience in the place of joy or the place of punishment.

Internal consequences

The second category refers to the internal consequences. This is the heart of the issue: the consequences in the internal state of our moral and spiritual being and the meaning that arises from that. What we do today, the way we live our lives now, will determine the quality of the internal state of our moral and spiritual being now and in eternity, and this directly affects the degree of meaningfulness in our lives within ourselves and our relationship with God and with others. What the

apostle Paul has written in 2 Corinthians 4: 16-18 helps us to appreciate the importance and value of concentrating on this internal state.

2 Cor 4: 16-18

- 16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day.
- 17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison,
- 18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

In the midst of pain and suffering and many afflictions in this physical body, we must remember that all these are momentary occurrences in the realm of “the things which are seen”. What is of eternal value is the moral and spiritual quality of being that we develop in the midst of these events, in the realm of “the things which are not seen”. As we go through daily situations of life, we should concentrate on the way we respond in our heart rather than the physical occurrences taking place.

In this chapter, the apostle Paul is describing what he went through as he served in the kingdom of God. This included many afflictions experienced in this decaying mortal body, the outer man. In verse 7, he says:

2 Cor 4: 7

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves;

The treasure of the gospel, the revelation of God, the life of God, that Paul sought to transmit, is housed within “earthen vessels” (meaning the physical bodies in which we dwell) during this present time. In the midst of the difficulties experienced in this body, he continued to receive and transmit life from God.

2 Corinthians 4: 8-12

- 8 *we are* afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing;
- 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed;

- 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body.
- 11 For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.
- 12 So death works in us, but life in you.

What the apostle Paul describes in his experience is also applicable to us. As we live for the Lord, we will suffer afflictions, pain and suffering. If we respond well in our heart, if we deny ourselves, the life of the Lord Jesus will be received in our spirit and expressed in our mortal body. The glory and majesty of God will shine through our daily lives on earth in spite of the difficulties experienced in the body, as our moral and spiritual character will grow in quality.

In 2 Corinthians chapter 5 the apostle Paul explains further:

2 Corinthians 5: 1

For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house is torn down, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

He refers to the physical body as our “earthly tent”, which will be “torn down”, indicating that this mortal body is intended only for our temporary period on earth, and it will decay and no longer remain. The sufferings in this body are momentary and need not trouble us. Though the outer man decays, the inner man (our spirit) can be renewed day by day, if we respond well and remain faithful to God, “carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus”, “being delivered over to death for Jesus’ sake”. If we choose what is good and meaningful before God even when this means pain and suffering, our inner man will be renewed day by day. What we suffer now is only “momentary light affliction”, but the very precious and valuable outcome will be “an eternal weight of glory” being produced within us. The afflictions that we go through for our faithfulness can help us develop deep quality in our moral and spiritual being if we choose well, because we are making difficult positive moral choices rather than turning to pleasant alternatives.

In James 1: 2-4, we see the same principle emphasized:

James 1: 2-4

- 2 Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials,
- 3 knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.
- 4 And let endurance have *its* perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

If our response is positive and good, though we undergo severe trials and difficulties, with pain and suffering, we will develop a deeper faith within us, with greater endurance, and moving in the direction of perfection and completeness and maturity in the Lord Jesus Christ. God is seeking all the time to develop the internal state of our moral and spiritual being, to bring about the eternal weight of glory in the inner man, so that we will be continuously renewed to become like the Lord Jesus Christ in His glory of moral excellence. What we do every day will directly affect the continuous transformation in our lives now and will result in what we will be in eternity.

Degrees of moral and spiritual quality

We may then ask the question: will we all be the same? Some time ago recently, one brother asked me this question with reference to 1 John chapter 3.

1 John 3: 2-3

- 2 Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we shall be. We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.
- 3 And everyone who has this hope *fixed* on Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.

He asked whether it means that all of us will be the same in the quality of our being, because the apostle John says “we shall be like Him”. Does it imply that all who go to heaven will be like the Lord Jesus in the same sense, with the same degree of the glory of God?

Some may say, “We may be different, but only in our personalities. For example, some will be more reserved and some will be more vocal, but our moral qualities will be the same. Some may express their love for God in words and some may do so in outward actions, but our love for God will be the same.” Is it true that we will be exactly the same as far as the quality of moral excellence is concerned?

In the passage in 1 John chapter 3, the apostle John says, “it has not appeared as yet what we shall be”, and he then says, “We know that, when He appears, we shall be like Him, because we shall see Him just as He is.” This points to our beholding the Lord Jesus in His resurrection body, which we will be able to see when He appears, when He comes again, and we will know the kind of body that we will also have: “we shall be like Him”. (In this context the apostle John is not saying that our moral character will be the same as that of the Lord Jesus. However, the new resurrection body in future will be suitable for expressing the glory of the character of the Lord Jesus).

When the apostle Paul explained the kind of spiritual body that we will have in heaven, he said, “And just as we have borne the image of the earthy, we shall also bear the image of the heavenly” (1 Corinthians 15: 49). This does not mean that our bodies will be exactly the same as that of the Lord Jesus, but they will be similar in kind.

It is true that all those who belong to the Lord Jesus will have a moral character similar to His. However, there are different degrees of similarity, depending on the quality of character that we have developed. The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians with deep concern, and said, “My children, with whom I am again in labor until Christ is formed in you—” (Galatians 4: 19). The formation of the character of Christ in the moral and spiritual being of the believer is a process and it takes place

continuously as we make our moral choices. The degree of quality is dependent on the depth and quality of the choices made.

In Romans 8: 29 the apostle Paul says:

Romans 8: 29

For whom He foreknew He also predestined *to become* conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren

The expression “conformed to the image of His Son” tells us that He is our perfect example and our goal, in moral and spiritual character. It does not mean that we will all be exactly the same as He is. This is also not possible because He is absolute in His moral perfection but we will only attain to varying degrees of His moral and spiritual glory.

In 2 Peter 1: 3-4 the apostle Peter tells us what God has provided:

2 Peter 1: 3-4

- 3 seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.
- 4 For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

We are to be partakers of the divine nature, the divine character, but does this imply that all of us would have partaken to the same degree? Would we have experienced the same depth and quality of the divine life within us? Would we have been transformed to the same degree of quality in our moral and spiritual being? The apostle Peter is saying that God has made provision for us so that we can all become partakers of the divine nature, we can all be conformed to the image of His Son, but he does not say that we will all be the same.

In Colossians 1: 28, 29, the apostle Paul expresses the deep longing and concentrated labour in his life:

Colossians 1: 28, 29

- 28 And we proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, that we may present every man complete in Christ.
29 And for this purpose also I labor, striving according to His power, which mightily works within me.

Paul longed very deeply to help each one towards that maturity of life, the completeness and the perfection in Christ. During his ministry, many of these Christians might have died physically. They would have died at different stages of Christ being formed in their lives. Would it mean that the moment they passed into eternity, all of them became exactly the same in the degree of their moral excellence?

From what I can understand from the Scriptures, there are different degrees of moral and spiritual development in Christ, and there are different degrees of moral and spiritual glory, even in eternity.

In 2 Corinthians 3: 18, the apostle Paul says:

2 Cor 3: 18

But we all, with unveiled face beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit.

The transformation in our being is “from glory to glory”, from one degree of glory to another degree of glory. The more intensely we work at it and the more faithful we are to God, the greater will be the degree of glory that will be revealed in our lives, because God works in us in association with the quality of our response to Him.

We should then be deeply conscious that the kind of person that we will be, the depth of our oneness with God and the quality of our friendship with Him, depends on our moral and spiritual response now. The kind of person that we will be in eternity bears a very strong relationship with what we do now. Every moral choice that we make each moment will affect our state now and in eternity. However, there

are different degrees of importance in the choices that we make and our primary concern should be to ensure that in the most important issues of life, our choices are good and stable.

Some may remark that it is a self-centred approach in life to seek to be of greater quality than others. Indeed, it would be a self-centred approach if our concentration is on ourselves and our intention is to be better than others. However, God is calling every one of us to strive for the highest quality of our moral and spiritual character, not to compete with one another, but to be the best that we ought to be and can be. It is not based on selfishness, but on what is truly good and meaningful before God.

We must concentrate on seeking for what is good, what is the very best that we can be, to our very utmost for each one of us, and we should help one another to attain to that (as the apostle Paul laboured so hard to bring about). We should not be seeking to be better than others but to rise to the highest level of moral and spiritual goodness and meaning, according to the calling of God for every one of us.

It is not possible to develop a deep friendship relationship with God while our moral being is so very different from His, where the things we like, the things we are concerned about, and the things we are preoccupied with, are so contrary to what is in God's heart. This kind of transformation is therefore central in the ultimate fulfilment of God's purposes and His call for each one of us.

Let us therefore take heed that what we do today and every day of our lives will have consequences in eternity. We may not be conscious that it is taking place, but each time you lose your temper, each time you seek for selfish gratification, each time you indulge in the pleasures of the flesh, each time you give in to self-centred desires – all these will

have an effect on your moral and spiritual being now and in eternity. Each time you respond positively to the Lord, each time you exercise yourself to walk in the truth, each time you seek to obey Him in spite of pain and difficulty, your life will be transformed positively and Christ will be more deeply formed in you.

Opportunity for change now

The second principle, which we can consider from the story that the Lord Jesus told, is that the opportunity for repentance is available now, but in eternity we do not have the same kind of opportunity as we have it now. Regret then will be too late.

In verse 26, Abraham said, "And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and *that* none may cross over from there to us."

The outcome in eternity may be such that our regrets will be too late. This man asked that Lazarus help to "cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame", but Abraham told him that this could not be done. Also, this rich man could not return to earth and choose all over again, neither could he ask Lazarus to return to earth and warn his brothers.

This is a serious matter for all of us to reflect upon. God has given us opportunities in this life to make our moral choices. He will assess us and judge us on the basis of our responses. You may have passed your driving test, you may have passed your university examinations, you may have passed your professional examinations in your work, and you may have passed many other tests set by man, but, will you pass God's examination? What will God say on that day? What will be the outcome of your life? We should prepare now for that outcome. The opportunity is available now. God gives it to us each day, each moment, while we are alive on earth. How will you choose?

There are many practical implications. It would mean, for example, that we should not be careless, we should not be lazy, and we should not be disobedient to God in our spiritual and moral pursuit because if we do, we may not have the same kind of opportunity to change. The degree of your carefulness in living for God, the diligence with which you seek to know the truth and to live by it, the degree of your submission to the commandments of God, and your willingness to do His will at all cost, will bear fruit for eternity.

Many people take great pains and exert great effort to achieve their goals in the physical realm, the social realm, and the fleshly realm. How many will exert themselves in the spiritual and moral realm, in the pursuit of seeking to know God, to understand His ways, to deal with the self-life, and to build upon what is good and eternal?

We should also recognize that the main issue of importance is not whether we do fail at times, but whether we will persevere in the midst of failures and difficulties. If we are determined to persevere in the path of what is good and right, then the choice to persevere is in itself a major aspect of the development of quality in our moral being, as we learn to call upon God and depend on Him in our struggles. During moments when we feel like giving up, we are in fact given the opportunity to develop greater quality of character through the exercise of our will, with determination not to give up the path of righteousness in the midst of pressure and pain.

Our attitude and treasure in life

The third principle which comes forth from this passage is that the important issue is not in our possessions or ability, whether we are rich or poor, or whether we are intelligent or unintelligent, whether we are educated or not, and whether we are of high or low status in society. It

is our attitude and the way we choose to live our lives that determines the outcome in our lives.

When the rich man requested that Lazarus be sent back to warn his brothers, “lest they also come to this place of torment”, we notice that Abraham said (verse 29), “They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.” We see that the primary issue is not their riches, but whether they would submit to God’s revelation through Moses and the prophets – their moral choice determines the moral consequences in their lives.

The rich man said, “...but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!” The rich man recognized that it was a moral issue and he hoped that “if someone goes to them from the dead”, they would listen and repent.

Abraham replied, “If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead”. Their negative way of life was the result of their moral choice and revealed the attitude of their heart. If they were not willing to respond to the truth that God had revealed to them through Moses and the prophets, then the event of someone rising from the dead would not change the meaning of their response.

The description of the life of the rich man (likely to be similar to that of his brothers) is a picture of self-indulgence in the sensual pleasures and enjoyment in this world. In verse 19, we are told that he “habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day”. There is no indication at all that he had any compassion for this poor man named Lazarus, who was “laid at his gate”, and was in great physical need. The statement that Lazarus longed “to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man’s table” implies that he had no food to eat. The description that “even the dogs were coming and licking his sores” implies that his physical needs were not cared for. There is no indication that the

rich man cared for Lazarus in any way. It is basically a picture of a self-centred man, preoccupied with his own enjoyment in the things in the world.

Hence, the issue is not the riches but his moral choice: how he lived his life, related to his attitude towards his riches, towards himself, towards God, and towards other people.

Let us look at another passage from the Scriptures that helps us appreciate the moral and spiritual perspective in the midst of what seems unfavourable physical and outward circumstances: Luke 6: 12-26.

In verse 12, we are told that the Lord Jesus “went off to the mountain to pray, and He spent the whole night in prayer to God”. After he had chosen the twelve disciples, “He descended with them, and stood on a level place; and *there* was a great multitude of His disciples, and a great throng of people from all Judea and Jerusalem and the coastal region of Tyre and Sidon who had come to hear Him...” The Lord Jesus then began to speak. Let us look at verses 20 to 26:

Luke 6: 20-26

- 20 And turning His gaze on His disciples, He *began* to say, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.
- 21 "Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh.
- 22 "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and cast insults at you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man.
- 23 "Be glad in that day, and leap *for joy*, for behold, your reward is great in heaven; for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets.
- 24 "But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full.
- 25 "Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe *to you* who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep.
- 26 "Woe *to you* when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets.

On this occasion, we are told that the Lord Jesus “stood on a level place” after He came down from the mountain. This is a sermon preached when He was standing on a level place and the words bear some similarity with what He preached on another occasion, when He

was on the mountain, recorded in Matthew chapters 5 to 7, but there are also significant differences.

Here, we notice that the Lord Jesus said, "Blessed *are* you *who are* poor, for yours is the kingdom of God" while in Matthew He said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit..." Here Jesus said, "Blessed *are* you who hunger now..." whereas in Matthew He said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..." So we notice here that the Lord Jesus seems to be concentrating His attention on the physical plane. He refers to being materially poor, physically hungry, outwardly weeping. It may seem as if He is saying if you are materially poor, you are blessed; if you are physically hungry, you are blessed; if you cry often, it is a good thing. It is obvious that this is not the meaning. However, He does refer to these physical aspects.

When we look at the context, we notice that verse 20 begins, "And turning His gaze on His disciples, He *began* to say..." We can therefore appreciate the principle that if the disciples were poor, hungry, or sorrowful, in the physical and material realm because they were true disciples of the Lord, they were blessed. The Lord Jesus also said, "Blessed are you when men hate you, and ostracize you, and cast insults at you, and spurn your name as evil, for the sake of the Son of Man." It does not mean that they were blessed just because they were poor or hungry, but if they should be poor or hungry, or sorrowful, or if men should ostracize them and persecute them, and they suffered pain because they were disciples of the Lord Jesus, then they were blessed. When, as disciples of the Lord Jesus, we are willing to part with the treasures of this world and go through all kinds of difficult circumstances in the physical and material plane in order to be faithful to Him, we also will be blessed.

Likewise, we notice that the Lord Jesus said, "...for in the same way their fathers used to treat the prophets." The faithful prophets were

persecuted and maligned by the people. Similarly if we go through difficulties because of faithfulness to God, then we are blessed.

The Lord Jesus then gave a general warning when He said, “But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry. Woe to you who laugh now, for you shall mourn and weep. Woe to you when all men speak well of you, for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets.” Again, the meaning is not that if you have money, you will suffer, if you laugh now, you certainly will have to cry, or if people praise you, then you should be ashamed. In the context the Lord Jesus says, “...for in the same way their fathers used to treat the false prophets.” The meaning is that if you if you follow the people of the world and live according to the ways of the world so that men would appreciate you, so that you can live in luxury, so that you can enjoy the things of this world, instead of being faithful to God, then the Lord Jesus says, “Woe to you”. You may be well-fed, you may be rich, people may speak well of you, but if all this occurs because you are following the world in its self-centred way of life, then you will be miserable because you will suffer in pain and in anguish in eternity.

We see therefore that the material things and the praise of men are not the primary issues, but what matters is the kind of concentration in life, the kind of direction and commitment, and the kind of values we hold in our heart. What is important is where our heart is. What is your treasure? What do you consider to be most important to you? Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Are your treasures what the world offers, or are your treasures in heaven? Is the calling of God your treasure? If it really is, then your heart will be there with God, and all that the world offers you will lose their significance. Whether you are rich or poor, whether you eat or go hungry, and whether men praise you or ridicule you, will not be the primary issues anymore. You will then be blessed because there will be true meaning in your life. The

apostle Paul learnt this well and he says, “Not that I speak from want; for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need” (Philippians 4: 11, 12).

Let us look at Luke 21: 1-4, which records the comments of the Lord Jesus regarding someone who was very poor.

Luke 21: 1-4

- 1 And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury.
- 2 And He saw a certain poor widow putting in two small copper coins.
- 3 And He said, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all *of them*;
- 4 for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on."

The Lord Jesus singled out this poor widow and commended her, praised her. He highlighted her as an example of a life with moral quality. He did not commend her and praise her because she was poor. It was not her poverty that was praiseworthy. He did not say, “Look at this woman, she is so poor and this is such a blessed thing.” Instead, He said, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all *of them*...she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.”

This poor widow was praised, not because of poverty but because of her attitude of heart: she loved God, and she was willing to sacrifice her material possessions in order to express her worship of God. So there is no merit in being poor in itself, neither should we be afraid of being poor. The important thing is the quality of our heart.

We know that many poor people will also ultimately perish in eternity because there are many poor people who covet, who steal, who lie, who kill, and who cheat, to fulfil their own earthly desires. We see the poor widow giving up what she had in her poverty, but there are also many, in their poverty, doing all kinds of evil. They are poor but morally their heart is not positive. There are others who are rich who

are genuinely generous. They give as much as they should, and also wisely store up in order to use it for the service of God. It is the attitude of heart that is primary. We have seen Job, in his riches, caring for others and helping them. We have also seen the rich young man clinging to his riches though the Lord Jesus instructed him to give them to the poor.

Although there is nothing essentially good in poverty, and there is nothing essentially bad in riches, there are tendencies, there are snares, and there are dangers associated with riches. We have considered the difficulty of rich men entering the kingdom of heaven because the tendency to depend on the riches and to enjoy what riches can bring is very great. The temptation to enjoy what this world offers can be very strong when you are rich, but this principle also applies in areas of natural abilities, endowments and status in this world.

The passage in 1 Corinthians 1: 26-31 helps us in understanding the emphasis and the tendencies that easily take place in our lives.

1 Corinthians 1: 26-31

- 26 For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble;
- 27 but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong,
- 28 and the base things of the world and the despised, God has chosen, the things that are not, that He might nullify the things that are,
- 29 that no man should boast before God.
- 30 But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,
- 31 that, just as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord."

The apostle Paul did not say that no one who is mighty, no one who is noble, no one who is wise has responded to God's call, but he says "not many". Paul says "not many" because the tendency for people in that category to boast of what they have is very strong. Likewise the

tendency is strong for the rich to cling on to their riches rather than to repent and to turn to God to follow Him.

It is possible for those who are regarded as wise in this world in the sense that they have great intelligence, to humble themselves and to love God. This applies likewise to those who are of high noble standing in this world, and those who are regarded as mighty in the eyes of men, who are in high positions of authority in this world.

The Scriptures show us that the man Daniel walked in humility before God although he was a mighty man in the eyes of the world, in his position, status, and authority. He could be a ruler with worldly authority at one point of time, and the next moment sentenced to the lions' den, but it did not matter to him. What mattered was faithfulness to God. However, not many live like that. Many in positions similar to that of Daniel would indulge in the pleasures and enjoyment of what the world can offer rather than be faithful to God and His ways. So the desire for the things of the world and the way that the world can grip hold of us is very strong in such situations.

So while there is nothing wrong in being wise, in being mighty and noble, the tendency for us to boast in these things is great. And so Paul tells us that God deals with us to teach us that "no man should boast before God". The tendency to depend on ourselves, to enjoy our worldly possessions, and to seek for self-glory when we are popular, when we are rich, when we are admired in this world, is quite strong. It is a warning to us that although these things need not necessarily draw us into sin, yet they can very easily do so; the pull is great and we have to be very careful.

God will execute justice

The fourth principle which we can appreciate from this passage is that God will execute justice though at times it may not seem to be so. God will ultimately execute justice and this is a warning for the unrepentant and the self-centred. It is also a comfort and encouragement for the faithful who suffer.

In verse 25, Abraham said, “Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.” God will execute justice. God will conclude His perfect assessment of the situation and give to every man his due.

In Galatians 6: 7-9, the apostle Paul warns of the consequences of living a self-centred fleshly life and the outcome of a positive response.

Galatians 6: 7-9

- 7 Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.
- 8 For the one who sows to his own flesh shall from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit shall from the Spirit reap eternal life.
- 9 And let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we shall reap if we do not grow weary.

Let us not be deceived. We may think that God will not judge; we may forget that He will judge but the point is that He will. On many occasions, we may have lived our lives very carelessly, we may have disobeyed God and it may seem to us that nothing negative has taken place. It may seem that we can get away with our negative choices; we can do as we wish without suffering God’s judgment. As this continues, we may think, “Nothing will happen,” and we carry on. That is deception. The evil one wants to deceive us into thinking that we can get away with it, to live as we wish, but Paul warns us not to be deceived. Whatever you sow, that you shall reap, both in terms of your internal state, as well as in the external circumstances of your life in

eternity. What you sow now you will certainly reap in eternity because the Day of Judgment will come; it surely will come; that is something no man can run away from. There are many things that God will do in response to requests from man, but God will not set aside the Day of Judgment in response to man's call. He has decreed that it will be so and it will take place.

If we live our lives carelessly, let us take serious heed. There is opportunity to repent now, to come to God and to walk with Him. If, as we live for Him and we find life difficult, let us be encouraged that God will reward us and He will comfort us. The consequences in eternity will be worth whatever difficulties we may go through now. The temporary afflictions that we suffer now will work for us an eternal weight of glory in the quality of our moral being, and we will receive what the Lord has promised to those who overcome.

As we live each day, we can very easily forget these realities. As we read the Scriptures, let us remind ourselves of what is taking place in the spiritual and the moral realm and that what God has said will come to pass.

Our moral choice is critical

The fifth principle that we can consider from this passage is that the critical factor is our moral response. What is important is our choice, our attitude towards God's ways and His laws, what is right and good, rather than the presence or absence of the influence of supernatural happenings, or spectacular and dramatic events. It is the moral quality of our heart that is primary and this is shown in the way we value the moral and spiritual values and principles that God has revealed to us.

This principle is important because there are many whose lives and whose responses to God are based on supernatural happenings,

spectacular and dramatic events, and not based on moral qualities and meaning. We know that spectacular, dramatic, and supernatural events can also be brought about by the powers of darkness. When Moses contested with the Egyptian magicians in the presence of Pharaoh, Moses instructed Aaron to throw his wooden staff on the ground and it became a serpent, and the magicians did likewise with their staffs (Exodus 7: 8-12).

The powers of darkness can easily deceive us if our attention is primarily in the realm of the spectacular, the dramatic and the supernatural. Even when God Himself is working supernaturally in spectacular and dramatic events, if our concentration is on these things, we will also fall. God worked supernaturally to help the Israelites, led them through the Red Sea, and provided for them miraculously in the wilderness, and yet they continued to grumble and to rebel against God. This was because their hearts were still in Egypt. They were not really settled in their choice for God; it was not a deep moral response to truth. When they were impressed with the supernatural happenings and found them beneficial in their circumstances, they submitted to God for the time being, but when the situation was difficult or unpleasant, they grumbled and complained.

This can also happen in our lives. If our faith in God is based on spectacular answers to prayer, then the evil one can deceive us into believing our prayers are answered by God when in reality they are engineered by the evil one. Also, our faith may collapse when God does not answer in such ways. The critical issue is: would we respond positively to moral meaning in the truth or do we need special experiences before we will choose what is right? Is it a choice based on moral meaning? When we recognise what is good, would we pursue it? When God shows us that something is good and we can see it, do we

choose it because it is good or because we are impressed with the enjoyable things that we can experience?

Abraham said, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead." The experience of listening to Moses and the prophets may be rather dull and uninteresting at the natural level. It may also require much effort. If someone rises from the dead, it can be spectacular, arresting and exciting, and this may lead to a response to God. Many may think in this way and the rich man could have thought in this manner. However, the principle of listening to Moses and the prophets is the correct approach. If you love the truth, you want to be holy, and you want to love God, you will choose this path, whether there are spectacular events or not. When supernatural events take place that are in line with God's purposes, they can be an encouragement to our faith, but they should not form the basis of our faith. God can sometimes help us through supernatural happenings to encourage us, to help us to recognize His hand at work but ultimately this will be helpful only when we genuinely want to do what is right. Hence, if the rich man's brothers would not listen to Moses and the prophets because they would rather choose the path of self-gratification, then when someone comes from the dead, their response will not be substantially different in the moral realm.

The Lord Jesus told this story of the rich man and Lazarus in the context of the negative moral response from the Pharisees with regard to the ministry of the Lord Jesus. We read this in Luke 16: 14-17.

Luke 16: 14-17

- 14 Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and they were scoffing at Him.
- 15 And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves in the sight of men, but God knows your hearts; for that which is highly esteemed among men is detestable in the sight of God.
- 16 "The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John; since then the gospel of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

- 17 "But it is easier for heaven and earth to pass away than for one stroke of a letter of the Law to fail.

The Pharisees were "lovers of money" and although they were religious leaders, they were leading others away from God. When the Lord Jesus said, "God knows your hearts", He helps us to understand that something was seriously amiss in the hearts of the Pharisees and that while they professed to be teachers of the Law of Moses, they were in reality not living by the commandments and revelation of God. Their self-centred approach led to concentration on external forms that may be "highly esteemed among men" but "detestable in the sight of God". Instead of concentrating on moral meaning based on God's revelation through "The Law and the Prophets", they were living on the basis of what was more appealing "in the sight of men", in the material and emotional realm.

In our walk with God, the way we perceive these issues will affect our lives. What do we look for when we pray? What do we expect from God when we go through difficulties? In times of suffering and oppression, let us remember that God's main concern is to purify our lives. His primary concern is to develop our character. There are times when God may remove a difficulty when it is too hard for us to bear or when removing it may encourage our faith. In His wisdom He knows what is best, but God's primary concern is to purify our lives, develop our character, transform us so that we can be like Him, so that we can be conformed to the image of His Son. His goal is that every man should become mature, perfected in Christ. Do we concentrate on what is good or what is comfortable, enjoyable and exciting?

In 2 Corinthians 12: 9, the apostle Paul says that the Lord spoke to him after he prayed three times for the thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan, to be removed. The Lord said to him, "My grace is sufficient for you, for power is perfected in weakness." In the midst of his great sense of weakness and suffering, Paul could experience the sufficient grace of the Lord to

go through that difficulty. In his situation, God did not remove that suffering, but provided grace for Paul to go through it meaningfully. In so doing, Paul would mature in his character, and he would be drawn nearer to God. In this context, the Lord saw fit for the thorn to remain. It would be more helpful for Paul for it to remain than for it to be taken away. When Paul recognized that, he said, "Most gladly, therefore, I will rather boast about my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may dwell in me." Many would prefer the thorn to be removed and regard that as an indication of the Lord's blessing, rather than learn deeply in the midst of the pain from the thorn. (Let us note that when Paul says "my weaknesses" in this context, he is not referring to moral weaknesses, or sins in his life, but to the physical suffering, the weakness in the flesh experienced in the afflictions and difficulties he encountered.)

Hence Paul responded, "Therefore I am well content with weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong." What he means is that although people may persecute and harass him, and he had to go through all kinds of difficulties and pressures, he would know the strength of the Lord Jesus Christ in the midst of his weaknesses and helplessness. He would therefore rejoice, trust the Lord and find His grace sufficient for him.

Summary

We have considered some principles from this passage on the rich man and Lazarus.

The main principle is that what we do today, the choices that we make, the way that we live our lives, will have consequences in eternity although this may not be very obvious to us.

We have also seen that it is not riches in themselves that caused the rich man to suffer but it was his wrong attitude towards God, towards riches, towards others and towards himself.

We considered the external and the internal consequences arising from our moral choices: where we will be and what we will become in eternity.

We also saw that God gives to us the opportunity for repentance now but in eternity that opportunity will no longer be the same and when we regret, it will be too late. Let us therefore make full use of the time that we have now to live a life of diligence, carefulness, and faithfulness to God, with deep and intense pursuit of spiritual and moral qualities. In times of difficulties, we should remember that our choice will affect the outcome and God is willing to help us.

The primary issue is not our material possessions or our status in society or our natural abilities but our choice, our attitude, our approach in life. Whether rich or poor, it is our moral response that God looks for. However, if we have much in terms of what the world looks for and appreciates, it can be a snare to our lives, it can be a great danger to us if we are not careful. We must ensure that we are pursuing the right treasure, which directly affects the quality of our heart.

God will execute justice in full. Whatever a man sows, he shall reap. Let us not be deceived by the evil one nor by our own desires; God will bring every deed to account.

Let us not concentrate on the supernatural or the spectacular, but on what is morally good for eternity: quality of heart and deep oneness with God, in the light of His revelation.