Jesus: Hell and Eternal Torment
Luke 16:19-31

Over the summer we're looking at some of the hard sayings of Jesus - those sayings that unsettle the way we see life, or leave you thinking, 'Jesus, did you really mean that?'

And today we're looking at Jesus' parable from Luke 16 about the rich man and Lazarus, and today's hard saying is v23, where Jesus says that the rich man was "in Hades [in hell]… in torment". Because if you're not yet a Christian, the idea that God sends people to hell for all eternity sounds objectionable, and if you are a Christian you may also struggle with it. After all, if one of the central theses of Christianity is that God is Love, how do you reconcile that with people being tormented in hell for ever?

But if you read the gospels, one of the startling things is that Jesus - who was accused by his opponents of welcoming the kind of people everyone else thought deserved hell - spoke more about hell than anyone else. So… why?

Well, we can't cover everything, but we're going to look at two things this parable teaches us about hell: What is it? And why do we need it? What does Jesus tells us about hell, and why does it matter?

Hell: What is It?
Jesus presents us with two men who in life were totally different from each other. It's as if they inhabited different worlds. One had everything, the other had nothing. But they have one thing in common - they both die.

PD James, the English crime writer, wrote a great sequel to Jane Austin's Pride and Prejudice called Death Comes to Pemberley. Well, here Jesus reminds us that death comes to everyone. High born or low born, rich or poor, educated or uneducated. Death comes to everyone. It's a sobering thought that one day there will be a funeral with your name on the order of service.

But in our current culture we tend to hide from that truth. It makes us uncomfortable. In the past you lived with death. A sibling wouldn't survive childhood, grandparents would die at home. But today, we tend to hide death from view. We don't like to be reminded of its existence, because our current culture is all about life.

But Jesus reminds us here that death is the great leveller.

Except he doesn't. What Jesus says is that everyone dies, but after death all is not equal. Everyone's experience is not the same. Some find themselves experiencing the eternal joy of heaven, and others the eternal torment of Hell.

Now, we might squirm at that, but look how many times Jesus describes hell in those terms:

Verse 23, our hard saying, 'In hell… being in torment.' Verse 24, the rich man says, 'I am in anguish in this flame.' Verse 25, Abraham to the rich man, 'you are in anguish.' Verse 28 'this place of torment.'

So what does Jesus mean by that? And in Mark 9:48, Jesus describes hell as the place where 'their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.' What's the fire that never goes out, what's the worm that keeps eating away? What's the anguish? What's the torment?

Well, you can interpret that literally, but I think there's reason to interpret what Jesus says here metaphorically - that the fire and the worm are pictures of something else. And you might hear that and think, 'phew, that's a relief!' Except, if it is a metaphor, it's a metaphor of something far worse. It's about *identity*, it's about *intransigence* and it's about *isolation*.

Firstly, the anguish of hell is to do with a person's **identity.**

Of all Jesus' parables, this one stands out because it's the only one where he gives a character a real name, and it's the beggar, Lazarus. In none of his other parables does Jesus do that. And so if the beggar, Lazarus, has a name, you'd expect the rich man to also have a name. Except he doesn't. Jesus simply calls him in v19, 'the rich man.'

Now, when we first moved here and the girls were much younger and we were trying to get to know our neighbours, we came up with names for them so we all knew who we were talking about. There was Mr Piano, whose wife taught piano in our apartment block; there was Mr Grumpy, who never seemed to smile; and there was Mr Pookie, who whenever he took his dog, Pookie, for a walk would end up yelling at it 'Pookie! Bad Pookie!'

And Jesus doesn't give the rich man a real name, because *rich man* is his name. That's his identity. It's the most important thing you can say about him. That's how everyone knew who they were talking about, Mr Rich Man.

And Jesus tells us, v19, he 'was clothed in purple and fine linen.' And purple cloth was made from an incredibly expensive dye. So this was like him wearing the latest luxury brand. And commentators reckon that the fine linen was his undergarments. So he even wears branded underwear.

Plus, v19, he 'feasted sumptuously every day.' A friend of mine who works in the city of London tells me that he and his colleagues will pay vast amounts to have one of the world's top chefs cook for them and a client, and he'll explain about all the food, and the very best wine that goes with it. And that's great (maybe!) once in a lifetime, but Rich Man lives like that every day. He has all he wants in life and he enjoys it.

Plus, Jesus tells us in v20 that he has a gate. Do you have a gate? Because this is not just your average little wooden gate into your back garden, it's the word for a city's gate, or the gate to a temple, or a palace. It's a gate gate! So he lives in a mansion, topped out with CCTV and a gate. And you know you've made it when you have a gate, don't you.

But that's the point. It's his wealth, his riches that define him.

How different was Lazarus the beggar. He doesn't have a mansion - he's on the street. Verse 20, 'At his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus.' And the verb is passive, he's laid there by someone else, so he's probably disabled. And the rich man is rich, but Lazarus is poor. The rich man is clothed in purple, Lazarus, v20, is 'covered with sores'. Mr Rich Man feasted sumptuously, but

Lazarus, v21, ‘desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table’ - he would have been happy to just go through the rich man’s trash, or have the scraps thrown to the dogs.

And talking of dogs, Jesus says, v21, ‘even the dogs came and licked his sores.’ Over the years, some commentators have suggested that Jesus is saying that even stray dogs showed him more care than Rich Man. But I suspect Jesus means something else. Dogs were unclean. But even they lick him. He’s fallen lower than a stray mongrel, that’s the measure of his wretchedness.

And as you look at these two men, who’s life would you want? Which of them would take a photo of themselves, stick it on instagram and add hashtag ‘blessed’?

Yet when they die it’s Lazarus who enjoys the bliss of heaven, and the rich men who ends in torment.

And it’s not because he’s rich. As Martin Luther King Jr said, ‘the rich man’s wealth was not his sin, his wealth was his opportunity.’ And Abraham, who welcomes Lazarus into heaven, was almost certainly far richer. As Jesus makes clear later, it’s because he hasn’t listened to the Bible. It’s because he’s lived by bread alone and not by the word of God. The meaning of his life, his identity, is wrapped up in his own self, his own pleasure, his wealth. And God plays no part in who this man is. He’s lived for himself alone.

Look at v25, where Abraham says to him, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received *your* good things and Lazarus in like manner bad things.’ The rich man has already received the stuff he most wanted out of life, his highest good, the stuff that he thought ‘this is the life’ - and God and love of neighbour played no part in that. He’s living his best life now - and that’s what defined him.

What is that for you? What are your good things? What’s your identity wrapped around? Or what would they be if you could have them?

You see, if your ultimate ‘good’, your ultimate ‘best thing’, is anything other than God, even if it’s a good thing, it will begin to eat away at you. It could be wealth, but it could be your appearance, reputation, family, power. Wrap your identity around it, who you are, and it will slowly consume you.

In Romans chapter 1 Paul writes ‘The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.’ But then he tells us the form that wrath takes, v24, ‘Therefore *God gave them up* in the lusts of their hearts to impurity’; v26, ‘*God gave them up* to dishonourable passions’; and v28, ‘*God gave them up* to a debased mind.’ It’s as if God looks at humanity and says, you want to live your life with no reference to me; you want to find your meaning, your identity in all these other things. Ok, if that’s what you want, you can have it, I give you over to it.

And in hell, we see this rich man given over to what he’s always wanted - to a life of never-ending self-centredness. But it will gnaw away at him.

You see, look how he speaks to Abraham and Lazarus. Verse 24, ‘He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.’ And when that’s declined, he suggests Lazarus go as his errand boy to his still-alive brothers. You know, one of the dangers of wealth is that you begin to think of yourself

as above others and others are there to do your bidding. And the rich man's in hell, but he still thinks Lazarus is his servant.

Erwin Lutzer, pastor of Moody Church in Chicago, wrote of meeting a guy outside his church wearing a t-shirt that said, 'worship me and we'll get along just fine.' But that's what this man had given himself to - a life of self-worship. In Milton's Paradise Lost, satan says, 'it's better to reign in hell than serve in heaven'. And the rich man has spent his life reigning. And in hell, God gives him over to that, to a never ceasing, ever growing desire to be number 1, to be the centre, to be the king, the desire to reign. But it's a desire that will never be realised. Think of the slowly growing, unrelenting mental anguish of that.

Or think of what any of our character flaws, or sins would look like if left to grow over a hundred, a thousand, a million years. Our irritability. Our anger, or self-pity, or suspicious nature, or self-centredness. It may seem small now, but what if that were left unchecked to grow. What if God gave someone over to that? Think how like a worm it would eat away at someone emotionally and physically.

And so an identity - who you are - centred on anything other than God as your ultimate good - it's like lighting a fire that will steadily consume and destroy. It's hell, Jesus says.

Secondly, what Jesus tells us here is that the anguish of hell is to do with a person's **intransigence**, the insistence that they're right.

Did you notice how the rich man never asks to leave hell? He just wants Lazarus to join him. He just wants the temperature turned down a bit. And there's zero repentance. Instead, there's denial and blame-shifting. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, and Abraham says, they've got the Bible, let them listen to that, and the rich man says, v31, 'No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

What's he saying? 'Hey, I wasn't given enough information. It's not my fault I'm here' and by implication, it's God's.

And did you notice that little word, 'No'. 'No father Abraham'. He's spent his life saying 'no', hasn't he? 'No' to people in need, like Lazarus begging at his gate. 'No' to the pricks of his conscience, 'no' to the promptings of the Spirit, no to repentance, no to mercy, no to generosity, no to grace.

And now, God gives him over to endless years of saying 'no', always insisting he's right and God is wrong. Always railing against the injustice done to him. Endless years of refusing to acknowledge he's wrong. But the verdict has already been given. And that will endlessly consume him.

But thirdly, look at his ***isolation.*** Lazarus, v22, 'was carried by the angels to Abraham's side' or literally 'to his bosom'. The picture's of Lazarus reclining at table, at the feast of God's people, surrounded by all that is good.

But the rich man's alone. His wealth has finally bought him what he wanted: independence, an eternity unencumbered by anyone else. Timothy McVeigh, the man behind the 1995 Oklahoma bombing, was interviewed by a journalist while on death row. And in one of his interviews McVeigh

said, ‘If I'm going to hell, I'm going to have a lot of company.’ Except Jesus says that’s one thing he won’t have: company. It’s an endless estrangement, a never-ending isolation. An eternity of turning in on one’s self. From which there is no escape.

But just knowing what hell is, doesn’t mean you embrace it as a doctrine. So I want to suggest why you should.

Hell: Why we need it.
Firstly, you should believe in hell for the sake of **justice**.

This parable’s a tale of injustice, isn’t it? A man with Gucci underwear and a beggar at his gate with nothing. But how do you fight injustice and oppression without becoming the oppressor? You see, if your identity is tied up with fighting injustice, how do you treat those who disagree with you without shaming or marginalising, or de-platforming, or cancelling them?

We need a basis for justice that humbles us, that leaves us knowing that we too are accountable, that there’s a judge who looks down on rich and poor alike. And the Christian doctrine of hell gives you that, because it tells you there will be a final reckoning, so you can fight for truth and justice but you don’t need to oppress others as you do.

Secondly, you should believe in hell for the sake of **breaking the cycle of revenge and violence**. In Romans 12 Paul writes, ‘As far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, “Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.” To the contrary, “if your enemy is hungry, feed him.”

If you’re a white, western liberal, what are you going to say to the victims of war and genocide and ethnic cleansing or racism? How are you going to tell them the sin done against them matters, but they don’t need to take revenge? How are you going to break the cycle of violence? Paul says, it’s by knowing that vengeance is in God’s hands.

Miroslav Volf is professor of theology at Yale, and he’s Croatian and knows a thing or two about violence and ethnic cleansing. And in his book, *Exclusion and Embrace,* he argues that it’s only a belief in a God of vengeance that can break the cycle. Listen to what he writes, ‘My thesis that the practice of nonviolence requires a belief in divine vengeance will be unpopular with many Christians, especially… in the West. To the person who is inclined to dismiss it, I suggest imagining that you are delivering a lecture in a war zone… Among your listeners are people whose cities and villages have been first plundered, then burned and levelled to the ground, whose daughters and sisters have been raped, whose fathers and brothers have had their throats slit. The topic of the lecture: a Christian attitude toward violence… Soon you would discover that it takes the quiet of a suburban home for the birth of the thesis that human nonviolence corresponds to God’s refusal to judge. In a scorched land, soaked in the blood of the innocent, it will invariably die…. [along with] many other pleasant captivities of the liberal mind.’

In other words, it’s not the idea that God is all about love and never forces himself on anyone that will enable you to forgive and not take revenge - that’s a suburban captivity of the liberal mind. It’s knowing that sin does matter and God will take revenge that frees us from revenge taking, and in its place enables us to love our enemies.

But thirdly and finally, you should believe in hell to begin **to understand the depth of God's love for you**.

The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers, and Abraham replies, v31, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.'

But why won't his brothers hearts be changed if someone like Lazarus came back from the dead,? I mean, surely if Lazarus pitched up saying 'I've just come from your brother - he's in hell, and he's telling you, you've got to change' surely they'd listen to that, wouldn't they? Sure. But they'd do it out of self-preservation, out of fear. They'd clean up their act, they'd even start noticing beggars on the street, but they'd be doing it for themselves, not for God and not for others. It wouldn't change the fundamental structure of their hearts. It would simply be another expression of the self-centredness, the self-absorption, that has brought their brother to hell.

And Abraham's saying, they need to hear a different message, and it's Moses and the Prophets. It's the Bible, the law of God that tells us we can never be good enough, but that God has provided sacrifice to atone for our sins. It's the Prophets promising that One will come as the ultimate sacrifice to bear our sin. As the prophet Isaiah looked ahead to one who 'was pierced for our transgressions… crushed for our iniquities, upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed… and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.'

And as Son of God, Jesus was the ultimate rich man, but he became poor for us, so that at the cross he could bridge the chasm between us and God, between the heaven we need and want and the heel we deserve. And at the cross, Jesus gave himself over to the wrath of God for our sins. The one who spoke more about hell than anyone else went through the hell of separation and isolation from God for us. And when you see that, and when you know that three days later he did rise from the dead, your heart fills with love and wonder, not fear. And you'll build your identity not on riches, or academic output, or family, or career, but on him. And his love shown to you when you most needed it will spill over in your love and care for those laid at your gate.

But as we finish, why do you think Jesus calls the poor man 'Lazarus'? Why pick that name? Because Lazarus means, 'God helps.' And he ends up in heaven not because he was financially poor, but because he knew he was spiritually poor. Because he wasn't trusting in himself but in God. He knew he had nothing to bring to the table, which is why he ended up at the table. And Jesus is saying, think you're rich and you're in trouble. Know you're poor and that God's the One you need, that he's your helper, and the joy of heaven awaits.