

## A Word about Hell

Luke 16.19–31

### *Sermon*

It's grad season & around this time at HSs all over our country students will dust off an old Robert Frost poem & include it in commencement celebrations: "The Road Not Taken." § Reason it's qtd so much: seems to speak of not following crowd, cutting your own path, free-spirited indiv. Nothing more Amer. How I understood poem growing up, until an Eng prof in college ruined it for me. Told me how Frost wrote poem about indecisive friend whose fear of regret kept him from making decisions. So yes in 2ndary sense poem about taking road less traveled, but if that's all you see, you've actually missed the point of it. & if you hear what author says, you'll see my teacher was right all along.

What's true for students w "Road Not Taken" often true of Xians w parables of J. § Throughout 2017, giving attn to J's parables as recorded in Lk's gos in series we're calling Transf Stories. Not every parable is a story, but today's certainly is. Story of rich man & Laz, one of best-known of J's parables in Scr. But what is it about? What is point? Seems quite clear: it's about hell. Perh every serm I've ever heard on this psg has zeroed in v 24 §: *agony, fire*. Whole serms built on those two words. But as I've reflected on this parable, I think that focus actually misses the pt. Not saying it isn't about hell, saying it's not main point. & like "Road Not Taken," if you listen carefully to what Auth of parable says (not only w/in text itself but also in context), I think you'll agree.

But before we ask what story is about, need to ask a more fund q 1st: what is this story? Quite a bit of debate as to whether this story actually is a parable. § Def of parable: memorable analogy, metaphor, or story that engages the imagination, inspires self-exam, & compels some response. This story meets all those quals. But some point out & for good reason that this story dift from other stories. § E.g., doesn't begin

w statement, *J told them this parable* (Lk 15.3). But many parables don't (e.g., dishonest manager), so inconclusive. Perh best argument that this not parable in v 20 §: *named Laz*. If this is a parable, only one where a pers is specifically id'ed. I want to suggest that beggar is named not bc this a true story but bc J has other ends in view. But if you say, Not sure this should be included in a series on parables/simply a true story J recounting, I und. But even if a true story, § J telling it as representative example to do same thing he does w parables: engage imag, inspire self-exam, compel response.

So what is this story about? Normally I like to work inductively/Socratically/lead to an aha moment. But bc I'm arguing that peo often miss main pt of this parable, going to put it out there 1st & let you see if it makes sense of whole. I think what J is talking about here is actually something that our soc talking about a great deal/topic that is currently dominating convos on univ campuses/stirs up great debate in our increasingly polarized world. Story of rich man & Laz not primarily about hell (tho it does inform us) but is about privilege. Now in pres debate about privilege (racial/econ/soc), a sharp divide. Generally speaking some argue that privileged peo need to confess their privilege & somehow turn away from it. [Parul Sehgal](#): "It's the fumbling hope that acknowledging privilege could offer some temporary absolution for having it." On other hand many of those accused of being privileged deny there is such a thing or (if there is) deny they possess it (e.g., response to "die-ins" [w #takeusdown](#)). Two options: renounce or deny.

Now I suggest this is what J talking about & I think you'll see it from very 1st vs where J draws § a stark contrast bet rich man & Laz (19–20). At least three ways rich man enjoys privileges Laz does not:

- 1st & most obv, econ privilege. *purp* (outer garments), *linen* (under garments), *luxury* (feasting/partying/plenty), *every day* (not just occasional but continual). § Contrast w Laz couldn't be more stark: *was laid* (phys disabled), *sores* (very poor health), *longing* (hungry),

- familial privilege. § Comes up at end (27–28): *my fam* (not alone), specifically mentions *five bros*. Apparently living same kind of luxurious life if he feels compelled to send a warning to them. § Meanwhile who does Laz have? Just *the dogs* (not a welcome sign, immobile, couldn't escape them, made him ceremonially unclean, insult to injury). No fam, no friends, no one.
- spir privilege. Gets lost sometimes that rich man not simply a worldling/common, run-of-the-mill wealthy pagan. He's a member of Jewish nation §: *Fath Abr* (24). & lest we conc that rich man isn't being truthful, note Abr's response §: *Son* (25). & if not enough, when rich man asks for Laz to be sent to his fam, § Abr replies, *They* (five bros) *have Moses & prophets* (29). To whom do Moses & prophets belong? To peo of G/children of Isr. Rich man not a pagan but a member of cov community. Ergo can't just deny privilege.

Makes it all the more striking § when rich man ends up in hell (23). *hades* a translit of Grk word, doesn't always mean "hell" but in NT often refers simply to "grave." Thus translators use Grk term to let readers define it as they see fit. But I think it's pretty easy to make case that this refers to hell: both Laz & rich man have died/went to "grave," but rich man § *in torment*. Now what are we to make of this torment? § Is hell literally fiery place, or is fire an image? Not as easy q as we might initially think. On one hand, *fire* seems to mean fire. But prob w that is that this story (if true story & not parable) speaks of period after death theologians call § intermediate state. [Explain slide.] In that state, body hasn't been raised, ergo a spir existence/not phys. How could fire affect? Ergo some: fire metaphorical. But even if so, how do metaphors function? Use something that we know a lot about to show us something not easily explained. So if fire is metaphor, how horrible the reality! § Ergo *agony* (24). J's point is clear: don't want to go there.

& yet here's this privileged pers in hell, someone whose wealth would have indicated G's favor not his judgment/whose life was spent under

G's word through Moses & prophets/who was part of cov comm. So why is he there? § v 25 points to reversal of fortune: *good things* vs. *bad things*. But need to be clear here: rich man isn't in hell bc he's rich, nor is Laz in hvn bc he was poor/rich man isn't in hell bc he's privileged, nor is Laz in hvn bc he wasn't. Tempting conc, but that'd be wrong. How do I know? Bc while Laz did not enjoy econ priv/familial, he did enjoy spir priv. § He too a child of Abr/member of cov comm/Jewish. IOW prob not w priv itself, prob lies elsewhere. So those who say you should confess priv & renounce it are also incorrect. Issue is not priv itself but what you do w your privilege/blessings/wealth. What did rich man do w his priv? § Spent it on himself (19), even tho a disabled pers lay at his front gate. & don't assume rich man was unaware of beggar §: he knew him by name (24). That's one reason I think J told us Laz's name: to show us rich man's callousness. Did nothing for him, except maybe for a few crumbs here & there. He knew what he was supposed to do for him. § Moses (Dt 24.19–22), § Isa (58.6–7). J not saying “Deny that privilege exists” nor “Renounce it & take vow of poverty.” Saying exactly what Heb Scrs said: use what you have for good of others. Take your blessings & invest them in other peo. But he didn't & his fate was sealed §: after death, no return.

A stern word of warning to all of us. One lesson from this parable: all of us have some privileges, even Laz for all his destitution still had one privilege. Part of prob of our soc's discourse is we speak as if there are privileged peo & peo wo priv, but J saying that everyone shares dift privileges & we have them to invest in others. Our prob: no one does. Invest in ourselves, pursue our own joys, run over anyone who gets in our way. True whether you're in power or marginalized. We're setting same course as rich man.

Any hope? Must be since Laz in hvn. 2nd reason for name, Eleazar: “G helps.” Only hope if G does something for us & he has. J came, only One to invest his privilege for sake of others. § 2Cor 8.9.