



Sermon delivered by
The Rev. Dr. James Goodloe IV
Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church
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"Do They Not Hear?" (Amos 6: 1-7, Luke 16: 19-31)

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.” No! “Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” No! “Father Abraham . . . if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” No! These three desperate requests from hell, too little, too late, and the three unequivocally negative answers from heaven, certainly capture our attention. If we have failed to listen to the teachings of Jesus before, I hope and trust that we are listening now. In an indulgent age which would like to believe that heaven always says “Yes” to every human request, this is sobering and startling to say the least. No, No, and No! What can this possibly mean? And where is the good news in this?

Proclamation and Explication

As is so often the case, the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ, forms the unspoken presupposition, the unseen but necessary foundation, underlying what is actually written in Scripture. Let us look for that good news underneath what is written here. First (1), Abraham said, “Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.” That is to say both (a) that there is a reversal of circumstances from this life to the next, and also (b) that that reversal is itself irreversible. Again, there is (a) a reversal of circumstances from this life to the next, a reversal of apparent blessing and curse here and now with real curse and blessing then and there, and (b) once that final reversal has occurred, it can never be undone again. Well, Jesus certainly has my attention now! I live a life of significant ease and comfort, in a nation of great wealth. I live in a warm home, I enjoy good food, and I have wonderful medical

care. Yes, Jesus certainly has my attention now. This teaching of an irreversible reversal of circumstances is more than unsettling. It is frightening.

And yet, the foundation of what is being said here about the final reversal—the underlying good news even for us, the gospel embedded here—the foundation of what is being said here about the final reversal is that the God and Father of Jesus Christ, Creator and Redeemer of the world, will not put up with evil forever. There shall be a day of reckoning. There shall be a day of justice. There shall be an end to all that opposes God. And yes, that is good news. As written in the hymn we learned so long ago, “This is my Father’s world: Oh, let me ne’er forget That though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the Ruler yet.” The wrong in our world does seem incomparably strong. The wrong in our churches is more than we can admit. The wrong even in our lives is more than we can bear. But one day, the wrong shall be undone. One day, the wrong shall be defeated. One day, the wrong shall be put away for ever and ever. Thanks be to God!

The difference between us and the rich man in the teaching to whom this word was told—the one difference between us and him is that it was too late for him. He had missed his opportunity. How are we doing? After poor Lazarus died and went to heaven, “The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.” Suddenly he realized that something was wrong. Finally, perhaps for the first time ever, he asked for help. But it was too late. “Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.’” I doubt that remembering did him much good. In fact, I am certain that it did him no good at all. He had had his heaven here on earth, so he did not have it afterwards. What does this have to do with us? We are allowed to overhear his exchange with Abraham precisely so that we can come to this realization now, in this life, while there is still time for us to change, while there is still time for us to help those in need, and so that we can avoid going to hell later. So this is a dire warning, but it is also a gracious invitation.

Note carefully that there is nothing in this teaching to suggest that there is anything wrong with being rich as such. Father Abraham himself was wealthy, and there he was in heaven. However, such wealth does bring great opportunity and therefore great responsibility. And wealth today, compared to what is going on in much of the world—wealth today means having food, water, medicine, clothing, shelter, and electricity. The rich man’s problem was not that he was rich. Wealth is a blessing. The rich man’s problem was that he was stupid.

More than that, the rich man's problem was that he was heartless, faithless, and uncaring. Fortunately, there is a cure for all of that. There is a cure for such stupidity, heartlessness, faithlessness, and lack of caring. And that cure is found in the word of God. That cure is found in the word of God. That cure is found in the word of God, and in the word of God alone.

Thus, second (2), Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." This was after the second time that the dead, rich man, in hell, thought that maybe Father Abraham could get Lazarus to run a couple of errands for him. Such arrogance, in and of itself, is absolutely astounding. "Could you have Lazarus run down here and bring me a little water?" No! "Then, could you have Lazarus run back home and warn my brothers?" No! The second answer here includes the very words of life: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." Here we have come to the heart of the matter. By "Moses" Abraham indicated the first five books of the Old Testament, and by "the Prophets" he meant most of the rest. That is to say, they have the Bible! This is the underlying good news here. They have the Bible. Let them read, study, absorb, and inwardly digest that. Let them hear, believe, and obey that. That is all they need, the word of God, written, read, and preached. Can you imagine? In the midst of a final conversation about life and death, about eternal reward and punishment, Abraham pointed the unbelieving brothers toward the underlying good news of what we in the church call the ordinary means of grace: the reading and preaching of the word of God. Yes, that was what they needed, and that was all they needed. They did not need Lazarus to return to tell them. They needed to listen to the reading and preaching of the word of God that they already had.

So, what was the problem? The problem was that they, like their deceased brother before them, scorned the word of God. They rejected the word of God. They ridiculed the word of God. They belittled the word of God. They absented themselves from worship and therefore from the reading, preaching, and hearing of the word of God. Does any of this sound familiar? It was too late for the dead man. But this teaching is not for the dead man. Jesus told this story for the living, so that they might hear it before the great reversal. And Luke has recorded it for us, so that we might hear it before the great and irreversible reversal, so that we might hear it in time, so that we might hear it in this life, so that we might learn from and avoid their problem, so that we might hear the word of God, and so that we might hear it today. Do we? Do we hear it? Again, this is a dire warning, and at the same time it is a gracious invitation. We have the word of God. It has been given to us in print. It is preached right here every Sunday. Do we hear it?

Third (3), and finally, Abraham said, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.” The formerly rich but currently dead man wanted something more for his unbelieving brothers, more than the Bible—can you imagine?—he wanted something spectacular, a miracle, such as a resurrection from the dead. If only Abraham would send back Lazarus to them! Surely that should get their attention! No! Why? If they do not believe the very word of God, neither will they believe any miracles. That is to say, for us yet today, we have all that we need in the word of God. What a wonderful gift! Let us not neglect it.

Note carefully what is accomplished by this third and last teaching, which itself has two parts. For starters (a), Abraham again affirms the sufficiency of the ordinary means of grace, the reading and preaching of the word of God, which we do right here every Sunday morning. These are what we need to get right with God, if we want to use that language. These are what we need to turn our lives around. These are what we need to love and care for one another. The word of God is good, important, and more than sufficient. At the same time (b), a note of irony is introduced with this last teaching. We realize, of course, that not very long after this Jesus Christ himself did come back from the dead, and, true to his word here, many still did not believe in him, even then. Those who had already rejected the written and preached word of God continued to reject him, also, the embodied and resurrected word of God, even after Easter. But what these two teachings, taken together, mean for us yet today—what they mean for us as a third foundation of good news underlying this reading—is that we do not have to see the resurrection, we do not have to witness the risen Lord Jesus Christ, in order for us to believe in him as the risen Lord Jesus Christ precisely as testimony is made to him in the reading and preaching of the very word of God, right here, every Sunday morning. That is to say, yes, the word of God alone is sufficient for our salvation, and what that word of God tells us is that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is the promise of our own. Thanks be to God!

Application

How does this hard saying of Jesus, with both its dire warning and its gracious invitation, apply to us and to our lives today? Consider that we are, in effect, the living brothers, still today. We are the ones for whom this teaching was given and for whom it has been preserved. We are the ones who mercifully still have time both to hear and to believe the word of God and also to repent and to obey the word of God. What is this word of God? What does it say to us? You know this. The God and Father of Jesus Christ created us, and we are

not our own. This life is good because God made it, and yet this life is not all there is. There is also a life beyond this one, and it is largely shaped by our decisions here. If, here, we want to keep things all to ourselves, we will eventually, there, be all by ourselves. If, here, we are willing to care for others, we will eventually, there, be cared for ourselves. This is not to say that we do not all need forgiveness. Forgiveness is why Jesus came, why Jesus died, why Jesus rose, and why Jesus will come again. And this is not to say that we can earn our salvation. There is nothing in this teaching that says that Lazarus was good or righteous or deserving. I suppose that is suggested. But there is no indication that he was charitable toward others, since, of course, he had absolutely nothing with which to be charitable. The one thing he did give, if we can understand it this way—the one thing he did give the rich man was an opportunity to help. That is valuable indeed. But this teaching is not really about Lazarus. This teaching is, instead, about the rich man who squandered his opportunity to help Lazarus and so left him to fulfill his name, which means “Helped by God.” And this teaching is about the rich man only to the extent that it is intended to warn us against making the same mistake that he made and the same mistake that his brothers made. Lord, help us! Grant us the grace both to hear and to believe and also to repent and to obey! Grant us the grace not to squander the opportunity set before us.

So, while part of what this teaching does is to urge us to hear and to believe, another part of what this teaching does is to urge us to repent and to obey. And our obeying is specified as caring for those in need. Those of us who have the means to help those in need are being given an opportunity to show that we love God more than money, to show that we love neighbor more than money, to show that we care, to show that we have heard the word of God read and preached, and to show that we do believe in the resurrection to new and different life. That is to say, we have an opportunity to help Lazarus today. A poor man has been laid at our door step. We dare not neglect him. We should note that while Christianity is a religion of forgiveness and therefore of many chances, it is not a religion of infinite chances. The chances are limited to this life. Now is the time to hear. Now is the time to believe. Now is the time to repent. Now is the time to obey. Now is the time to respond. Now is the time to give. But when this life is over, there are no more opportunities. No! No! And No!

When Albert Schweitzer was a young, Christian, medical student, he was confronted with this very teaching of Jesus Christ. He came to the conclusion at that time that the entire continent of Africa was Lazarus for him, lying at the doorstep of Europe. So, instead of practicing medicine in Europe, he went to Africa, built a hospital, and spent his life there. That

is to say, the word of God in this very teaching turned his life around. And now it is our turn both to hear and to believe and also to repent and to obey. In the providence and wisdom of God, this reading from the word of God, this reading about hearing the word of God and learning from it to help those in need, this reading has been brought into our hearing and into our worship today, to encourage us all to help those in need. We who have ample resources have an opportunity today to help those who have none.

“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.” No! “Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” No! “Father Abraham . . . if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” No! These three desperate requests from hell, too little, too late, and the three unequivocally negative answers from heaven, certainly capture our attention. If we have failed to listen to the teachings of Jesus before, I hope and trust that we are listening now. In an indulgent age which would like to believe that heaven always says “Yes” to every human request, this is sobering and startling to say the least. No, No, and No! But the gospel foundation undergirding this three-fold No from Abraham is the Yes, Yes, and Yes of God. Yes (1), God’s justice shall be served and be served eternally and irrevocably. Yes (2), God’s word is sufficient for us and for our salvation. And Yes (3), Jesus Christ has been raised from the dead, and his resurrection is the promise of our own. The living God and Father of Jesus Christ is speaking to us—even us!—in and through his word yet today. (1) Do you and I hear this ancient word of the living God to us today? (2) Do you and I believe, today, right now, the gospel of Jesus Christ, including the resurrection from the dead? (3) And if so, and you and I ready to repent and to obey, specifically in terms of helping those in need?

To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

© Dr. James C. Goodloe IV, Executive Director Foundation for Reformed Theology
4103 Monument Avenue Richmond, Virginia 23230
Telephone (804) 678-8352
goodloe@foundationrt.org

