

## Stories of the Master

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### SM050 The Beggar at the Gate

When Jesus told stories, he was always aware of the climax he was trying to achieve in the story. Sometimes he would tell a story and leave it unfinished. He would leave it to the crowd to figure out the meaning. Such was the case with the parable of the Farmer, the Seed, and the Soil. After Jesus told this story he said to the crowds, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” This was a call for the people to seek God and to search for understanding of the meaning of life and God’s kingdom.

At other times, Jesus would tell a story and leave the people hanging for the conclusion. Such was the case when he told the story of the prodigal son and his older brother. The older brother refused to come into the celebration when the younger brother returned. The father had to walk out to him and plead with him to come into the party – and the story ended. Jesus left the crowd hanging. Jesus never said what the older brother did. Did he come in to celebrate or not? Everyone knew who the older brother in the story represented – the religious leaders who had refused to celebrate the return of sinners to God through the mercy of Jesus. Would they now come in and celebrate with Jesus and the sinners who were repenting? Only time would tell, and that’s why Jesus left that story hanging.

Then, there were times when Jesus would tell a remarkable story and give application points. So important was the story that those who heard must understand or they would continue a path to destruction. Such was the case with the story of the servant who tricked his master.

Jesus had told the story of an estate manager who had betrayed the trust of his master and squandered his possessions. The master fired him on the spot, but in a desperate attempt to save his life, he figured out a way to use his master’s wealth to bless the entire village and save his job. Jesus then exhorted all who heard to use their wealth in the same way, not in a selfish way, but to bless others. Wealth would end. People would not. It was imperative that people not let wealth control them. They must be controlled only by their love of God and neighbor.

When Jesus finished the story of servant who tricked his master, he said:

“Use your worldly resources to benefit others and make friends. Don’t use your wealth for yourself. One day your earthly possessions will be gone. Then, what will you do if you have used them only for yourself? You will have nothing and no one. Use your wealth to bless others, then, when your possessions are gone, you will have friends who will receive you and care for you with God’s love.

“If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are not righteous in little things, you will not be righteous with greater responsibilities. Do you not understand this? Money is such a little thing. It is here today and gone tomorrow. But if you are faithful with money, this small thing, then you will pass the test and God will know that you will be faithful with the more important things.

“Again, if God cannot trust you with the wealth of this world, do you think he will trust you with the true riches of heaven? Remember, it all belongs to God. He is the creator. Did not David say, “The

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earth is the Lord's and all that is in it?' If you are not faithful with what belongs to God, do you think he will trust you with things of your own?"

Jesus paused and then with great earnestness said to everyone. "No one can serve two masters. For you will hate one and love the other or you devote yourself completely to one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money."

But the Pharisees, the religious leaders would not hear this. They scoffed at Jesus. Some laughed out loud. Others lifted their heads and arched their brows in pride, looking down their noses at him in a condescending way. They did this because in their heart of hearts, they loved money more than anything.

Jesus let the laughing subside. He waited until they were finished looking down upon him in arrogance, and then, with great courage he said, "You look really good on the outside. You appear to be very religious. Others think you are right with God, but God knows your hearts. He knows what you love. He knows that you care for money more than anything, but what you care for and what you honor is detestable in the sight of God."

There was no going back now. Jesus knew these men would hate him for what he had said, but Jesus had to say these things. Their lives were in peril of missing the kingdom of God if they did not have their sin exposed. They were like the servant who squandered his master's wealth, but with this difference, they never cast themselves upon the mercy of the master for their wrongdoing. They continued in their selfish, money-loving ways and refused to turn to God.

With one last effort, Jesus said, "Let me tell you one more story." Could it be that Jesus had yet another story to tell? He had told the story of the lost lamb and the heroic shepherd, the woman who diligently sought for her lost coin, and the father who compassionately received back his rebellious and lost son and who reached out to his hard-hearted son. He had told the story of the servant who cast himself upon the mercy of the rich landowner. But now, Jesus had one more story to tell.

All eyes were riveted upon him. Jesus looked upon the poor in his presence. He looked upon all the villagers. He looked upon the wealthy, religious leaders and then he began.

"There was a rich man who lived in great luxury. So rich was he that he dressed in purple daily. As you know, only the very wealthy can buy purple robes and this man was so rich that that is all he wore. He wore it for his own satisfaction. He wore it to show others how great he was. And to top it off, he also wore the finest linen underwear that came from Egypt. Inside and out this man was dressed in the finest, and he let everyone know."

The sinners at the table with him and his disciples laughed at the picture Jesus had painted of this man. When he mentioned the linen underwear, they knew he was presenting a comical picture of a man who was proud of every detail of his life – even his underwear! Jesus continued,

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“Every day this man would have his servants prepare a sumptuous banquet – even on the Sabbath, refusing to let them rest on the Sabbath and worship. His needs were first, and he cared not for what Moses and the prophets said, nor did he care for God’s people.

“His house was beautiful with many rooms, and his gardens fragrant with flowers and fruit trees. A wall surrounded his palace and guard dogs protected his riches from unwanted intruders. Outside his gate was one such man. His name was El Lazar which as you know means, ‘one who is helped by God,’ yet his name hardly seemed true. He was poor and from a poor family. His family tried to care for him as best they could, but every day all they could do was carry him from their home in the poor districts of town to the place where the wealthy lived, and they would lay him at the gate of this rich man to beg. Perhaps the rich man would have mercy upon him and care for his needs. The poor man could not walk. He was very weak. He, like the rest of his family, was hungry, and the poor man was covered in sores. Perhaps the rich man would see his miserable condition and have pity upon him and help him and his family. But every day the rich man would pass by and not even look his way. It seemed as if poor old El Lazar was invisible. It was as if he did not exist.

“Day by day El Lazar weakened, and the only help that came his way were disgusting dogs who belonged to the rich man. But they would come and lick his sores. At least the dogs had compassion upon him! How El Lazar longed to fill his stomach with the scraps of food that fell from the rich man’s table that the dogs ate. He could at times hear the banqueting and the laughter that went on inside the gates. He could smell the rich food, he could hear the wine being poured. But nothing was given to him.

“One evening, El Lazar’s family came to pick him up. As they approached the place where he lay, at the gate of the rich man, they heard loud wailing and crying coming from inside the gate. They heard voices and shouting. “Someone go for help. Someone go to the doctor. Our master has fallen.” But then another voice cried out, “It’s ... it’s too late. He is dead.”

“The poor family was shocked. Even though the rich man had never once helped them or El Lazar, they sorrowed to hear the news of the death of the rich man and then they said, “Perhaps El Lazar heard something. Perhaps he will know what has happened. But when they arrived at the place where their loved one begged, they noticed that he was not moving. His eyes seemed to be fixed on a faraway place, and a smile rested upon his weary face. El Lazar was dead. He and the rich man entered eternity at the same moment, and while the important people of the village would come to pay their respects to the rich man, no one would notice that El Lazar’s family wept. They gently picked up his body and took it home to wash and to bury.

### Interlude

The rich man awoke as if from a dream. “Where am I,” he said. “Why is this place so dark? Where are my beautiful robes? Where is my food, my friends, my family? Where are my servants? Why am I so cold, and yet so hot? Why do these fires burn around me yet the fires do not give off light?”

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The rich man was in Hell. But as he lifted his eyes he noticed a light in the distance – a peaceful light, a light that seemed to beckon, a light that gave warmth and peace of heart, and he walked toward the light and his eyes were amazed at what he saw.

There were angels, thousands of angels, beautiful and strong angels, but his eyes focused on two who were carrying a man. The man looked familiar. He was old and sickly looking but with each moment the man appeared to be getting younger and the sores that covered his body were healing. It was El Lazar, and the angels were taking him to Paradise! The angels placed him gently amid many people, and the light on El Lazar's face shone with wonder and great joy. Then, another old man, and yet not an old man, a man who seemed wise and strong, walked to El Lazar and embraced him. It was Father Abraham.

“Welcome my son. You have suffered much in life, but enter now the eternal joy that our loving God has prepared for all whose hearts are his. Recline with me at table and let us feast in the presence of our loving Maker.” And El Lazar sat with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He was given the place of highest honor at Abraham's right hand and as they reclined, El Lazar would lean back and rest his weary but healing soul upon Abraham's chest.

The rich man could not believe it. El Lazar, the beggar at the gate, was in Paradise and he was not. Had not **God** blessed him with an abundance of things in his life? Surely, he had been blessed with great riches because he was favored of God, and El Lazar was cursed with poverty and sickness because of his sins. Why was El Lazar in Paradise and he was not?

“Father Abraham, father Abraham! Look upon me. Father Abraham! I am in this place of torment, and I do not deserve to be here!”

The feasting stopped. Abraham turned to the voice that spoke so near to them, and yet so far away, and Abraham said, “God is the judge, and he determines the destiny of every man. Do not tell me what you deserve or do not deserve.”

“But Father Abraham! All my life I was blessed. Surely this was a sign of God's favor upon me. This cannot be right. There has been some mistake!”

But Abraham said, “There has been no mistake.”

The rich man continued, “Father Abraham, listen to me! Look at me! I am in this place of torment. At least ... at least send someone, send El Lazar to fetch some water for me that he may refresh me for I am in anguish in this place.”

But Abraham said, “My child, remember, in your life you had everything you wanted. What was it you wanted – wealth? Pleasure? Banqueting with your friends all the time? The finest clothes? That is what you wanted and nothing else. And that is what you received. But now, those things are gone.

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“And what did El Lazar want? Yes, he wanted food – to ease the pains of starvation. Yes, he wanted clothes to warm him at night and protect him from the heat of the day. But in his heart of hearts what he wanted more than anything was the love of God. And now El Lazar is receiving what he wanted and you are finished with the things you wanted. He was the beggar at your gate, and now, you are the beggar at his gate.”

The rich man was stunned. How could this be? How could there have been this reversal of his good fortune? At that moment, El Lazar, humble El Lazar, growing stronger and younger by the moment whispered something to Abraham and gestured toward the rich man. Abraham smiled and said, ‘No, my child, you may not. You cannot,’ and then he got up from his table and walked toward the rich man.

“Sir, those who would come to serve you, cannot come for there is a great chasm between us and you. Those on that side cannot cross to here, and those on this side cannot cross to there and help.” And the rich man looked, and to his horror he saw that he was standing upon the edge of a cliff with a great gorge between him and father Abraham. The gorge seemed to be a bottomless pit of fire, darkness, and anguished cries of the fallen.

The rich man screamed in horror. He was trapped and he began to weep and sorrow filled his heart. But it was not sorrow for his sins. It was only sorrow over the terrible turn of events. The rich man was sobbing, and he lifted his voice again and said, “Please, Father Abraham, please send El Lazar to my family. Let him go to my father’s home. I have five brothers. He must warn them about this place of torment.”

And Abraham said, “All those years you never once lifted a finger to help El Lazar. He was always beneath you, not important, cursed of God you thought, yet he was beloved of God. Now you want him to dip his finger in cool water and come to you? You still treat him as if he is your servant. All those years you never once checked on his welfare or gave him a word of greeting or a scrap of bread, and now you want him to take a journey back to the land of the living as if he is your errand boy?” Abraham shook his head gravely. “Even now, you do not understand your own heart. Such is the way of those who turn from God in life and enter eternity with a heart of stone.”

“No, El Lazar will not go. Your brothers have the words of Moses and the Prophets. Let your brothers listen to them.”

The rich man choked upon Abraham’s words. It was all true. He had seen but ignored El Lazar all those years, and he and his brothers had ignored the word of God to love him and to love their neighbor. They had forsaken God and his people for their life of luxury. They had not listened to the words of God, and their heart had grown hard to the things of God.

With one final effort, the rich man said, “Father Abraham! You must send him. If someone from the dead comes to them they will repent of their sins and turn to God.”

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But Abraham shook his head and said, “No. If they will not listen to Moses, if they will not listen to the Prophets, they will not listen to one who comes back from the dead.” And Abraham turned away from the rich man and went back to the table and reclined with El Lazar, and the rich man was left to himself.

Jesus was finished with the story. All was silent in the room. The sinners at the table where they had reclined with Jesus, hung their heads and tears filled their eyes as they thought on the mercy of God to them. The disciples looked upon Jesus and wondered at his courage to tell such a story to the rich religious rulers who seemed so far from God. The religious rulers looked at Jesus and with hardened faces and cold hearts of stone walked out of the room and continued their path to destruction.

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Oh friends, what stories Jesus told that night and what a story to end the evening with – a story to give sweet dreams to some and nightmares to others. We know this story as the Rich Man and Lazarus, his name being El Lazar in the language of his people, he who is helped of God. And helped of God he was.

What can we learn from this story? What must we learn from this story? First, we must listen to the word of God while we have opportunity. The rich man did not listen. He never went to the synagogue to hear the words of Moses and the Prophets. He was too busy with his life of luxury. His brothers were the same. They did not listen to the word of God, and because they did not care, their hearts grew cold and hard, and even if God sent someone from the dead to speak to them, they would not listen. What about you? Do you listen to God’s word? Are you softening your heart to hear and obey? Have you heeded the warnings of God’s word and embraced the forgiveness of Jesus who bids you to come to him?

Second, we learn that God’s opportunities for us can sometimes come in strange disguises. If the rich man would not take time to listen to God’s word every Sabbath, then God would place a daily reminder at his gate. El Lazar was a daily reminder of the fragile nature of life and that all that we have comes from God. He was a reminder to reach out in kindness and mercy to those who were less blessed. But the rich man paid no attention. Do we? God reaches to us every day in new ways to turn our hearts to him and to turn our lives from selfishness to a life of loving him and serving those in need.

Third, we learn that our eternal destiny depends on how we respond to God, and we never know when eternity will come for us.

Jesus told this story, not so much to give us details about what happens after death. In his day and after, even to our own day, many such stories circulated. Jesus’ immediate concern was to warn the leaders of Israel that if they did not turn from their rebellious ways, if they did not listen to what Moses and the Prophets were really saying, the fires of judgment would come to the nation. And indeed, the fires of judgment did come to Israel when Rome sacked the city 40 years later and

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burned the Temple to the ground. But Jesus also looked ahead and saw the eternal fires of judgment that awaited all who would reject the words of Moses, the words of the Prophets, and the words of Jesus himself.

My friend, what will you do? Will you turn away from the word of God, or will you turn to Jesus and feast with him, and with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom?