

The title of this morning's sermon is, *"What Happens to Unbelievers When They Die?"*ⁱ

On Sunday mornings we're working our way through Luke's gospel verse by verse, and we find ourselves at **Luke 16:24**. We are in the account of the rich man and Lazarus.

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As you know, religions have different beliefs about what happens when you die. I looked up the beliefs of the top five religions...

Sikhism is fifth. Sikhs do not believe in an afterlife, such as heaven or hell. They believe in reincarnation and the way you live in this life determines your form in the next life.

Buddhism is fourth. Buddhists also believe in reincarnation, and they believe people who attain a state of enlightenment can enter Nirvana, the highest state of perfect peace and happiness where suffering and desires do not exist.

Hinduism is third. Hindus also believe in reincarnation. People are reincarnated based on their karma, or how they lived their previous life.

Islam is second. Muslims believe everyone will be resurrected into either paradise or hell based on their obedience to the Five Pillars.

Christianity is first, largely because it includes all religions that call themselves Christian, including those we consider to be cults. Among the cults there are different beliefs about the afterlife. For example...

Mormons believe there are different levels or kingdoms: the celestial kingdom, the terrestrial kingdom, the telestial kingdom, and outer darkness.ⁱⁱ People go to different kingdoms depending on what they believed and how they lived this life.ⁱⁱⁱ

Jehovah's Witnesses do not believe our souls are immortal: they believe our souls cease functioning just like our physical bodies. When people die, they experience soul sleep. Unrighteous people remain dead for eternity, or are annihilated, but the righteous are resurrected.

Seventh-day Adventists also believe in soul sleep and annihilation. When Christ returns, He will awaken believers to go to heaven with Him while unbelievers cease existing.

Catholics believe people go to heaven, hell, or purgatory.

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This account shows us what actually happens to unbelievers when they die, and it completely conflicts with the views of these religions.

There are 13 verses in this account and most of them focus on the rich man. Aside from being told Lazarus was in comfort at Abraham's side, or bosom, there's nothing else said about him. Instead, almost all the attention is on the rich man and his experience as an unbeliever.

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Last week we made it through **verse 23**. This morning we will pick up at **verse 24**, which describes the rich man's experience and helps us understand what happens to unbelievers when they die.

Luke 16:24 And 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.'

This is the first of two times the rich man tries to get Lazarus to serve him. He ignored Lazarus during his earthly life, but now he pays special attention to him because he wants something.

Look at Abraham's response...

Luke 16:25 But 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.'^{iv}

This is an example of perfect justice. The rich man ended up being treated exactly like he treated others. He did not show compassion to others during his earthly life and now no compassion is shown to him in the next life.

And this brings us to the first part of lesson one...

Lesson One: When unbelievers die (Part One) they are in torment.

This account doesn't only show us what the afterlife includes, it also shows us what the afterlife excludes. Briefly take your minds back to the religions I just mentioned and their views of the afterlife. We see that Scripture disagrees with all of them.

First, the afterlife does not include soul sleep. The rich man and Lazarus are completely conscious, aware of their situations, and capable of feeling comfort and intense pain.

Second, there is no reincarnation. The rich man and Lazarus are not coming back as different forms based on the way they lived their earthly lives. Lazarus is not coming back as a rich man, and the rich man is not coming back as a poor man, or worse, some animal or insect.

Third, the afterlife does not include annihilation for the unrighteous. The rich man remained very much in existence.

I told you last week that death occurs when our soul leaves our body. Hades is the location souls go when people die, while their bodies are somewhere else.

In this account, the rich man and Lazarus's souls were in Hades, but their bodies were somewhere else:

- The rich man was buried, so his body would be wherever he was buried
- Lazarus did not receive a burial, so more than likely his body would be above ground somewhere

Because their souls were separated from their bodies, we might be tempted to think that they didn't feel or experience anything, because we typically associate feeling with our physical bodies.

But we see that is not the case at all. Even though their souls were separated from their bodies, they still experienced strong feelings of comfort and torment.

There are 13 verses in this account and most of the verses focus on the rich man's torment. Notice the theme:

- **Verse 23 says he is in torment**
- **Verse 24 he says he is in anguish**
- **Verse 25 Abraham says he is in anguish**
- **Verse 28 he says he's in a place of torment**

And if you want to understand how bad the torment is, consider the rich man wanted Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue, but he couldn't even receive that relief.

I take this to mean that the torment in Hades doesn't even allow the smallest pleasure. To think that hell itself, or the lake of fire, is worse is almost unimaginable.

Some people foolishly mock the torment of hell. They act like it won't be that bad or they go even further and say it will be a place they can join their old friends...like it is a party or celebration. Some people will even say, "*I don't mind if I go to hell. I will have lots of good company.*"

The rich man did not see it that way. In a moment he will try to prevent his brothers from joining him.

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One of the reasons some commentators don't view this account literally is **verse 23** says the **[rich man] lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side.**

They don't think the rich man should be able to look up and see Abraham and Lazarus, but this is not the only place in Scripture telling us this happens. Briefly turn a few chapters to the left to **Luke 13:27**...

Luke 13:27 But He will say, 'I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity.' 28 There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when YOU SEE ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB AND ALL THE PROPHETS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD, and yourselves thrust out.

Again, we see evidence that somehow the unrighteous in torment can see the righteous in comfort.

And it seems to be this knowledge that contributes to the **weeping and gnashing of teeth.** Notice how it is written...

There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when YOU SEE ABRAHAM AND ISAAC AND JACOB AND ALL THE PROPHETS IN THE KINGDOM OF GOD, and yourselves thrust out.

Part of the torment in Hades and then in hell is the knowledge of the blessedness and comfort the righteous dead experience that the unrighteous dead forfeited.

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This past week I received a comment on my blog from someone I don't know. I want to share what he wrote, because it captures the common view of annihilation. Here's part of what he said...

"You won't find eternal torment one time in the Old Testament."

This is not true. We talked two weeks ago that eternal punishment is veiled in the Old Testament compared to the New Testament, but it is mentioned in at least one verse...

Daniel 12:2 Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some TO SHAME AND EVERLASTING CONTEMPT.

He continues...

"Jesus never talked about hell, not once. He talked about Gehenna (the Valley of Hinnom). And in the [rest of the] New Testament you can't validate eternal conscience torment from one verse in Revelation speaking of the lake of fire."

If I understand him, he is saying that we can't support eternal conscious punishment from only one verse in Revelation about the lake of fire.

Hopefully you remember the verses from **Revelation 20** about the lake of fire, and there are multiple verses, not just one.

And there is another section of Revelation that describes eternal conscious punishment...

Revelation 14:10b [Those who worship the beast and its image, or for anyone who receives the mark of its name] WILL BE TORMENTED with burning sulfur in the presence of the holy angels and of the Lamb. 11 And the smoke of their torment will rise FOR EVER AND EVER. THERE WILL BE NO REST DAY OR NIGHT FOR [THEM].”

As far as Jesu never talking about hell, He made 16 direct references to hell. For example:

- **Matthew 5:29 If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and cast it from you; for it is more profitable for you that one of your members perish, than for YOUR WHOLE BODY TO BE CAST INTO HELL.**
- **Luke 12:5 I will show you whom you should fear: Fear Him who, after He has killed, has power TO CAST INTO HELL; yes, I say to you, fear Him!**

And Jesus made 17 indirect references to hell. These would be verses using other words like fire or destruction:

- **Matthew 7:13 Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it.**
- **Mark 9:44, 46, 48 Where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.**

The point is, the account with the rich man and Lazarus annihilates the idea of annihilation for the unrighteous, and plenty of other places in scripture do as well.

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Look at **verse 26** as we learn more about the afterlife...

Luke 16:26 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.’

Earlier the rich man and Lazarus were close. Lazarus was laid at his gate in front of the rich man’s house. Now there is **a great chasm** between them.

And notice how it’s worded: **a great chasm HAS BEEN FIXED**, versus **a great chasm [exists]**.

The phrase **has been fixed** means someone put or fixed the chasm there, and that Individual is God. God set up the afterlife in such a way the righteous and unrighteousness remain separated.

And this brings us to the next part of the lesson...

Lesson One: When unbelievers die (Part Two) they receive no second chances.

Last week after the sermon someone came up to me and made the point that they could understand why someone would want to pass from the place of torment to the place of comfort, but they were surprised it also said nobody could pass from the place of comfort to the place of torment...because nobody would want to do that. Maybe it lets us know righteous people are not able to cross the chasm if they wanted to deliver a loved one from the place of torment.

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This lesson is important because it answers the question...

Can unbelievers who die somehow make their way from the place of torment to the place of comfort?

This account tells us the answer is no, but many false religions teach the opposite.

The most well-known example is the Catholic Church. They do not believe that all our sins are paid for when we put our faith in Christ. Instead, people must regularly go to confession to a priest to confess the new sins they commit after supposedly coming to Christ.

When people die with sins that have not been confessed to a priest, they are not good enough to go to heaven, and if they are not bad enough to go to hell, they must go to purgatory. When they have suffered enough for their unconfessed sin they can go to heaven.

The Catholic Church also teaches that if you want to get a loved one out of purgatory faster to end their suffering, you can give the church money. This was known as indulgences, and if you are familiar with the Reformation, you know this was one of the last straws for Martin Luther.

When my brother passed away, I can remember the masses, or Catholic Church services, and indulgences that were offered for him to shorten his suffering in purgatory.

But in this account, the rich man is not working off his sins. There is no indication his torment will ever end, or that once he has suffered enough, he will be able to go to heaven.^v

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The other religion that teaches that there are second chances is Mormonism. They believe that living people can be baptized in lieu of a person who has died as a means of making a public profession of faith on that individual's behalf. Basically, the living person is baptized in the dead person's place.

When I was a schoolteacher, I became good friends with a Mormon and I remember him telling me that he was convinced I would go to heaven even if I didn't embrace all their beliefs, because someone would be baptized for me after I died.

Now listen to this verse that could almost sound like it argues for the baptism of the dead...

1 Corinthians 15:29 **Otherwise, what do people mean by being baptized on behalf of the dead? If the dead are not raised at all, why are people baptized on their behalf?**

The context of this verse is incredibly important. If **1 Corinthians 13** is the love chapter, then **1 Corinthians 15** is the resurrection chapter. Paul is arguing for the resurrection, and he makes the point that if there is no resurrection, or no life after death, why would people in false religions be baptized for the dead if there is no life after people die?

Paul is not arguing for baptisms for dead people.

Hebrews 9:27 **It is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment,**

In other words, there are no second chances for unbelievers after death.

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Look at **verse 27** as we learn more about the afterlife...

Luke 16:27 **And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—28 for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.'**

Quite the reversal:

- Lazarus was the beggar looking for the rich man's help during their earthly lives.
- Now the rich man is the beggar looking for Lazarus's help in the next life.

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Here's a quote I read this past week...

"If the living knew what the dead knew, the whole world would follow Jesus."

This is true and if you wanted biblical support for this quote, you've got it with the rich man. He was convinced if his brothers knew what he knew, they would not follow him to **this place of torment**.

When I officiate the funerals of unbelievers, I can't tell the friends and family in attendance that their loved one is in a better place. What I say instead is, "If your loved one was here right now and could speak to you, this is what he or she would say." And the rich man supports this!

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Notice the rich man remembered Lazarus, his father, and his brothers from his earthly life...and this brings us to the next part of Lesson One...

Lesson One: When unbelievers die (Part Three) they remember their earthly lives.

This answers one of the most common questions we have about the next life...

Will we have knowledge of, or remember, our earthly lives?

The rich man did not receive a new consciousness or have his memory wiped clean. Instead, he remembered quite a bit from his earthly life.

Abraham reminded him about the good things he received during his earthly life...

Luke 16:25 Abraham said, 'Child, REMEMBER THAT YOU IN YOUR LIFETIME received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things.'

The rich man could remember his earthly life, and he remembered his father and brothers.

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One other question we have is...

In the next life, will we recognize people from our earthly lives?

It seems so. The rich man recognized Lazarus.

And interestingly, even though the rich man never met Abraham, he recognized him too, which implies we will have greater – versus lesser – knowledge in the next life than in this life.

The end of **1 Corinthians 13** supports that our knowledge will be increased in the next life...

1 Corinthians 13:9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part, 10 but when the perfect comes, the partial will pass away...12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known.

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The mention of the **five brothers** is the first indication that the rich man thought about anyone but himself.

Unfortunately, his concern came too late to do any good, as Abraham says...

Luke 16:29 But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.'

Notice that not only would Abraham not allow Lazarus to communicate with his brothers, he also would not allow anyone from the dead to communicate with them. And this brings us to Lesson Two...

Lesson Two: The living shouldn't communicate with the dead.

I am a black-and-white person. I wanted to be able to say that the living CAN'T communicate with the dead, and I tend to think we can't, but if you remember last Sunday's sermon we talked about one example of the living communicating with the dead and that was the medium King Saul visited communicating with the prophet, Samuel.

So why do I say that I tend to think the living can't communicate with the dead, even though it happened once in Scripture?

Because it only happened once in Scripture. I might be wrong, but I think it was an isolated event that God allowed to judge Saul. I don't think it is normative.

But regardless of whether the living CAN communicate with the dead, I can tell you that we should NOT communicate with the dead. It is strictly forbidden in Scripture, which could be why Abraham would not allow it.

Listen to this...

1 Chronicles 10:13 Saul died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and ALSO CONSULTED A MEDIUM, SEEKING GUIDANCE. 14 He did not seek guidance from the Lord. Therefore the Lord put him to death and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.

If you are familiar with Saul's reign and you had to name the failure that led to him losing the throne, you would probably say:

- He offered the sacrifice that Samuel was supposed to offer...
- Or he failed to exterminate all the Amalekites...
- Maybe you would even say he repeatedly attempted to murder David, the Lord's anointed.

But none of these sins are mentioned.

Instead, the chronicler mentioned him consulting the medium. This is why he was dethroned, and his dynasty was cut short. That's how serious it was for him to try to communicate with the dead.

And there are plenty of other verses in the Old Testament that condemn attempting to communicate with the dead:

- **Leviticus 19:31 "Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them"**
- **Leviticus 20:6 "If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people."**
- **Deuteronomy 18:10 There shall not be found among you anyone who burns his son or his daughter as an offering, anyone who practices divination or tells fortunes or interprets omens, or a sorcerer 11 or a charmer or a medium or a necromancer or one who inquires of the dead, 12 for whoever does these things is an abomination to the Lord. And because of these abominations the Lord your God is driving them out before you.**

Mediums and inquiring of the dead are called abominations, are compared with child sacrifice, and are listed in the reasons God would drive His people out of the land. That's how serious of a sin it is.

Last verse on the subject...

Isaiah 8:19 When they say to you, "Inquire of the mediums and the necromancers who chirp and mutter," should not a people inquire of their God? Should they inquire of the dead on behalf of the living?

I spent much of my Catholic life doing exactly what this verse forbids: inquiring of the dead on behalf of the living, whether it was Mary or saints. It was a sinful thing for me to do and it is sinful for anyone else to do as well.

God's people have no business attempting to communicate with the dead using mediums, Ouija boards, séances, or anything similar.

Let me conclude with this...

When I was a schoolteacher one year a Jehovah's Witness was an aide in my class. She was probably in her seventies, and I would say we became close friends. Even though we had considerable theological differences, she appreciated my heart for my students to come to know Christ, and there were many things I appreciated about her.

Occasionally we would have biblical discussions and one time we talked about hell. She believed largely like the man who commented on my blog that the Bible does not teach eternal conscious torment. I showed her some of the verses that I mentioned in the sermon, and she said she would get back to me. Soon after, she came back with a copy of the Watchtower Magazine, the publication of the Jehovah's Witnesses. The magazine took the verses about hell and turned them into annihilation.

I can understand why people would want these verses to be about annihilation versus eternal torment. I could almost wish that was the case. But we serve a perfectly holy and just God and this is the punishment for people who die without Christ.

During one of our conversations, she said to me...

"How could a loving father send his children to hell?"

I said, *"A loving father wouldn't send his children to hell. The people who go to hell are not God's children."*

God doesn't send His children to hell. If you want to avoid eternal punishment, then you must become one of God's children...

John 1:12 To all who did receive [Christ], who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, 13 who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

Seeing as to how we know this is the truth about hell how? How can we not share the gospel?

John Piper's son, who is now an atheist, said Christians don't believe in hell, otherwise we would be sharing the gospel regularly.

If we believe the gospel's power to save, how could we not share it with the people we love?

If you have any questions about anything I shared this morning, or I can pray for you in any way, I will be up front after service and I'd consider it a privilege to speak to you.

Let's pray.

ⁱ Done:

- JM
- Nelson
- EW
- HCC
- Wiersbe
- Moody
- ESV Study Bible

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- ESV expository commentary

ⁱⁱ Mormon Doctrine, p. 348

ⁱⁱⁱ 2 Nephi 25:23; Articles of Faith, p.79

^{iv} Three times in the sermon on the Mount Jesus talked about people who received their reward in this life versus the next life:

Matthew 6:1 “When you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, THEY HAVE RECEIVED THEIR REWARD...5 “When you pray, you must not be like the hypocrites. For they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, that they may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, THEY HAVE RECEIVED THEIR REWARD...16 “When you fast, do not look gloomy like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces that their fasting may be seen by others. Truly, I say to you, THEY HAVE RECEIVED THEIR REWARD.

The rich man is a good, practical example of what it looks like to receive a reward in this life.

^v Interestingly, because purgatory is a supposed temporary location until people go to heaven, it resembles Hades, which is also a temporary location until people go to heaven.

But ironically this account completely argues against anyone moving from a place of torment to a place of comfort as Abraham said to the rich man.