

## Willow River Parish: Clear Lake, Deer Park, and Faith Family

### Title: What Is the Rich Man's Name?

### Lesson: Luke 16:19-31

<sup>19</sup> “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. <sup>20</sup> At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores <sup>21</sup> and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

<sup>22</sup> “The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup> So he called to him, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.’

<sup>25</sup> “But Abraham replied, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup> And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

<sup>27</sup> “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

<sup>29</sup> “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

<sup>30</sup> “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

<sup>31</sup> “He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”



(Slide 1) The work you are seeing now is a painting called “**The Rich Man and Lazarus**” by Bonifacio de’ Pitati, an Italian painter active during the Renaissance. The painting is very large—about 172 inches wide and 80 inches high—and is

currently on display at the Accademia in Venice, Italy. I have not seen this painting in person, but I hope I will have an opportunity to do so someday. The painting is based on the biblical story and is depicted against a sixteenth-century Venetian Renaissance backdrop. Unlike today, in medieval Europe when few people could read, religious paintings were one of the most effective ways to teach the lessons and stories of Scripture.

Before we look at the painting together, I'd like to point out one thing for us to consider. In Luke 16 we read the story of the rich man and Lazarus; the painting you see on the screen is also titled *The Rich Man and Lazarus*. If you look at the painting, you will probably quickly see who is the rich man and who is Lazarus. Right? So who is Lazarus? That's right. On the right side of the painting there is a man leaning on a staff with his right hand and extending his left hand, asking for help. That is Lazarus. And who is the rich man? Yes—the man seated at an elegant table between two women, wearing a black hat and purple clothing. Those two women beside him were likely wealthy as well.

Here's the next question: what is the rich man's name? Does anyone know? While we look at the painting, think about what his name might be, and later when I ask again, try to answer.

If you look at the painting, you'll first notice many ornate marble columns. We cannot see the rich man's entire house, but the numerous columns suggest that his home was grand. It feels almost like peeking into a royal household. Around the house many servants bustle about quietly doing their work.

**(Slide 2)** Opposite the rich man and the two women there are musicians performing. In front of the musicians there is a little boy who appears to be turning the pages of their music—like a page-turner for them. If you look closely, the boy is missing his left shoe. Even this child seems to volunteer to be a page-turner to earn a little money, which suggests he comes from a poor family. In any case, the musicians and the little boy are providing music eagerly to please the rich people.

But what about the expressions of the wealthy? They are busy talking among themselves rather than listening to the music; one woman looks bored. None of the rich people seem grateful to those who provide the music and work for them; they appear to treat these people merely as a means to relieve their boredom or to display their wealth. The rich have a grand home, many servants, and abundant wealth. Yet at their table there is only one bowl—and it is empty. It is as if, although they possess many things, their souls are spiritually empty.

**(Slide 3)** Now let us turn our gaze to the right and look at the other main figure of today's story: Lazarus. His clothing is noticeably different from the others. While the others are fully covered from arms to legs, Lazarus wears clothing that does not properly cover him—his arms and legs are exposed. The white cloth wrapped around his forehead shows how humble and shabby his condition is. He hobbles on a staff to the columns where the rich are and stretches out his hand, begging for help, but no one pays attention. The only one who approaches him is the rich man's dog, wagging its tail and licking his wounded body, offering some comfort. People decide who is important by situation, status, and class, but a dog shows no prejudice; it simply wags its tail and offers compassion to anyone.

**(Slide 4)** Finally, look at the upper right of the painting. I'm not sure how clearly you can see it on the screen; it may appear quite dark. That darkness is smoke from a tremendous blaze. The great fire is slowly burning the trees on the hills around the rich man's house and is coming to consume his home. Sadly, it seems that no one in the painting notices this danger.

Now I will return to the question I asked before we looked at the painting: what is the rich man's name? Please raise your hand if you know—and tell me. I would like to know, too. No matter how carefully you search Scripture, the rich man's name is nowhere to be found.

Isn't that interesting? Despite the rich man's grand house, many servants, and great wealth, Scripture gives him no name. On the other hand, the poor man who had nothing—who was sick, hungry, and ignored by people, and whom only the dogs comforted when he begged—has his name clearly recorded: Lazarus. Jesus often tells stories without naming individuals; typically He speaks of the owner of the vineyard, two sons, ten bridesmaids, and so on. This story is a little different. The rich man remains unnamed, while the poor Lazarus is named. This may be unique among Jesus' parables.

Friends, in this world people know and remember the names of the rich. Who is the CEO of Tesla and SpaceX? Who founded Amazon? Who founded Microsoft? Who founded Ford Motor Company? Everyone can know and remember the names of the wealthy; if you don't, a quick search on your phone will tell you. But when it comes to a homeless person on the street or someone who is poor, people often do not want to know their names—or think it unnecessary.

But remember this: in God's kingdom things are completely the opposite. Scripture records no name for the rich man, but it clearly records the name of poor Lazarus.

Through this story we should learn that the way God remembers and values people is entirely different from ours.

From the rich man's point of view, when his time on earth ended and he found himself in suffering, he might well have felt it unfair. He might have said to God, "God, what did I do wrong? I used the gifts you gave me and worked harder than others, and as a result I accumulated much wealth. Lazarus, on the other hand, only begged and did nothing." There is some logic to his thinking. To gain his wealth he probably worked harder than others and lived diligently. He likely obeyed the law and stayed away from illegal activity. Because of that he earned people's trust, accumulated wealth, and received respect—perhaps even envy.

However, his suffering after death was NOT because he had committed some particularly serious crime. While he was alive there were many opportunities—through his wealth—to help others, especially those like Lazarus who were poor, sick, and in need. Yet whenever those opportunities came he was indifferent and only interested in people who were useful to him. The rich man's one fault was that he treated others' suffering as if it were none of his concern.

The name Lazarus means "God has helped." Looking at Lazarus' situation in this story, he was someone who could not have survived even a single day without God's help. By contrast, the rich man lived every day in abundance and with few worries. But after they were buried and stood before God, their destinies were completely reversed.

I hope that in the coming week we will continue to meditate on this passage. Let us carefully look for the Lazaruses who live around us—those who are hungry, unclothed, and in difficult circumstances—look upon them with warm and compassionate eyes, and, if we can help, offer whatever small assistance we are able to give. I earnestly pray that as we keep these words in our hearts, we too will remember those whom God remembers and spend the coming week sharing small acts of love. Amen.