

# Our Spiritual Reality: The Word and the Spiritual World

A Sermon by the Rev. Malcolm G. Smith  
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## Readings

*Psalm 33:6-15 (Kempton Translation, modified)*

- 6 By the word of Jehovah the heavens were made,  
And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth.
- 7 He gathers together the waters of the sea as a heap;  
He lays up the deep in storehouses.
- 8 Let all the earth fear Jehovah;  
Let all who dwell in the world revere Him.
- 9 For He spoke, and it was done;  
He commanded, and it stood fast.
- 10 Jehovah brings the counsel of the nations to nothing;  
He overthrows the thoughts of the peoples.
- 11 The counsel of Jehovah stands to eternity,  
The thoughts of His heart to generation and generation.
- 12 Happy is the nation whose God is Jehovah,  
The people He has chosen for an inheritance for Himself.
- 13 Jehovah looks from the heavens;  
He sees all the sons of men.
- 14 From the established place of His dwelling,  
He views all who dwell on the earth;
- 15 Forming their heart together;  
Understanding all their deeds.

*Luke 16:19-31 (Kempton Translation, modified)*

<sup>19</sup> [And Jesus said to them,] "And there was a certain rich man, and he wore crimson and fine linen, and he made merry every day in a splendid manner. <sup>20</sup> And there was a certain poor man named Lazarus, who was laid at his gate with sores, <sup>21</sup> and longing to be satisfied from the crumbs which fell from the table of the rich man. But instead, the dogs came and licked his sores. <sup>22</sup> And it came to pass that the poor

man died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. And the rich man also died, and was buried. <sup>23</sup> And in hell, lifting up his eyes, being in torments, he sees Abraham from far off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

<sup>24</sup> "And calling out he said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in pain in this flame.' <sup>25</sup> But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you received your good things in your life, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, but you are in pain. <sup>26</sup> And besides all these things, between us and you a great chasm is fixed, so that they who will to pass from here to you cannot, neither can they cross over from there to us.'

<sup>27</sup> "And he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come into this place of torment.' <sup>29</sup> Abraham says to him, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' <sup>30</sup> And he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' <sup>31</sup> And he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rose again from the dead.'"

### ***Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture 114***

Without the Word No One Would Have Any Knowledge of God, of Heaven and Hell, of Life after Death, and Still Less of the Lord

### ***Apocalypse Explained 118:4***

The poor man is described as "laid at the rich man's gate, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table," because by "to be laid at the gate" is meant to be rejected, and to be deprived of the opportunity to read and understand the Word; and "wishing to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table" means to long for some truths from the Word.... As the poor man was in that longing, which is the same as the spiritual affection of truth, it is said of him that "he was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom," by which is signified to be raised into an angelic state in respect to intelligence and wisdom....

## Introduction

- We're doing a series of sermons on our spiritual reality and today we're talking about the parable of the rich man and Lazarus because it's one of the best stories for understanding some important, basic ideas about our spiritual reality.
  - For example, it's one of the few stories that has heaven and hell and a place in between.
- But it's also an uncomfortable story.
  - There's a man that goes to hell in the parable and he is tormented there.
  - It seems that he ends up in hell because he has an abundance of wealth and food and is unwilling to share any of it with the poor man at his gate.
  - How many of us have more than enough food, while there are plenty of people in the world who do not have enough?
- The goal is not to make you feel uncomfortable but, if we just talked about some of the ideas in this parable and did not also grapple with what makes it uncomfortable, that would not feel right.

## Outline

- We're going to go through the story and, as we do, we're going to keep 3 questions in mind:
  - 1. What is our spiritual reality?
    - This isn't the focus for today but we can still learn a few ideas about how things are set up and why they're set up that way.
  - 2. How can we know about our spiritual reality?
    - How do we learn about heaven and hell and what's in between?
    - What do we need to do to learn more?
    - We're going to use this parable as a kind of test case because it doesn't work to just take every detail as a literal description of reality.
  - 3. What do we do with this knowledge?
    - This story makes it clear that it is not enough just to have a wealth of knowledge: we need to do things with it.
      - We'll be trying to understand how to use knowledge of our spiritual reality in the ways the Lord that the Lord would like us to.

## The Rich Man

- Let's start with the description of the rich man: he was rich; he wore crimson and fine linen; and he "made merry every day in a splendid manner."
  - Another translation says that the man "fared sumptuously every day" and another says that he "entertained himself magnificently."
  - You get the point.
- The teachings of the New Church help us to understand that this is all about people who have the benefit of having the Word.
  - When the Lord came into the world, it was the Jews who had the privilege of access to the Lord's Word in the Old Testament.
  - One passage says that the crimson and fine linen that the rich man wore symbolizes "the Word's goodness and truth, crimson its goodness and fine linen its truth" (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 40:3).
  - And the man making merry every day in a splendid manner means the Jews "taking pleasure in possessing the Word and reading it" (*Ibid.*) and in "hearing many things from it in their temples and synagogues" (*True Christian Religion* 215:3).
- This is us, guys.
  - We have what the Jews had and so much more!
    - We have the New Testament and we have the teachings of the New Church with such a wealth of information about our spiritual reality and many other topics.
  - We "fare sumptuously" all the time.
    - In some ways we're doing it right now as we get to read, reflect on, and digest teachings from the Lord's Word.
    - And afterwards when we're talking about the ideas with other people, we're having a feast together.
- Without the Lord's Word we would be like Lazarus, begging for crumbs.
  - That's what our first lesson from the teachings of the New Church said: "Without the Word No One Would Have Any Knowledge of God, of Heaven and Hell, of Life after Death, and Still Less of the Lord."
  - And this is the first and obvious answer to one of our questions: how can we know about our spiritual reality? From the Lord in His Word.

- He made the spiritual reality that we live in and He reveals it to us in His Word: "By the word of Jehovah the heavens were made, And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth" (Psalm 33:6).
- When we know that what makes us spiritually rich is having the Lord's Word, it's clear that it is *not* a bad thing to be spiritually rich.
  - It is not bad to be spiritually rich, clothed, and well-fed.
  - The Lord wants that for all of His people.
    - In one of His letter at the beginning of the book of Revelation He says, "I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich; and white garments, that you may be clothed..."
    - And in the Psalms we read that the Lord opens His hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing (145:16).
- The Lord wants us to have spiritual food, spiritual clothing, and even spiritual riches.
  - The issue is whether we are willing to share what we've been given.

## Lazarus

- Now let's talk about the poor man, Lazarus.
  - He was laid at the rich man's gate, covered in sores, and "longing to be satisfied from the crumbs which fell from the table of the rich man" (Luke 16:20-21).
- The teachings of the New Church tell us that Lazarus means people who did not have the Word and who, when the Lord was on earth, were despised and rejected by the Jews (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 40:3).
- These people, because they did not have access to the truth, were "plagued by many false notions" which is symbolized in the parable by Lazarus being full of sores (*True Christian Religion* 215:3).
  - The dogs that came and licked his sores mean good people outside the church who try to help people with their problems as best they can (like a dog licking someone's sores) but can only do so much because they lack the truths of faith (*Arcana Coelestia* 9231:3).
- Another passage tells us that they were "deprived of the opportunity to read and understand the Word" but they longed for some truths from the Word which is why it says that Lazarus longed to be satisfied from the crumbs which fell from the table of the rich man. (*Apocalypse Explained* 118:4).

- We can imagine a young woman outside the church who has a family member die suddenly.
  - She's dealing with the shock and the grief of that loss but she is also really hurting because she doesn't know if she'll ever see the person she loves again.
  - Her friends might come and try to offer her support by saying things like, "I'm sure they're in a better place," and "The memory of them will live on in you."
    - But those ideas are kind of like the dogs licking Lazarus' sores.
    - Imagine if instead the young woman could have some food from the rich man's table and some oil and wine and medicine and bandages for her sores.
      - Imagine if she could hear about the vision of heaven revealed in the teachings of the New Church!

### ***Lazarus Within Us***

- We can see Lazarus in people out there in the world around us.
- But we can also find Lazarus in the world within us.
- When we're talking about how the Lord through His Word can reveal spiritual reality to us it's also this – it's also how He can reveal our spiritual states to us.
  - He can help us see the poor, ignorant, sore-ridden beggar within us.
  - He can also help us see the self-centered, greedy, stingy rich man in us.
    - These are both part of our spiritual reality and the Lord can help us to see both of them within us and many other characters too.

### ***Laid at the Gate***

- It's also worth reflecting on the significance of Lazarus being laid at the rich man's gate.
- We don't know how Lazarus came to be there but the fact of the matter was that he was at that particular rich man's gate.
- The rich man, rich though he was, certainly did *not* have enough food to feed all the poor people in the world and may not even have had enough to feed all the poor people in his town, but he certainly *did* have enough to feed Lazarus.
- It can be overwhelming to think of all the poor and suffering people in the world and we do not have the resources to help all of them.
  - Can we help the people at our gates or on our doorsteps?

- Wise people say that the Lord seems to put certain people in our path for us to help.
  - We can't help everyone but maybe we can try to help the person in front of us.
- What does that mean for your life?
  - I don't know.
  - At this stage of your life, it might just be showing up in a generous way for your spouse and children, or for the people you work with, or for your immediate neighbors.
  - Or maybe you're at a stage of your life where the Lord would like you to stretch a bit further to find people in need.
  - I recommend taking some time praying to the Lord about who He'd like you to be serving right now.
- Another way of looking at the significance of the sore-ridden beggars who find their way to our gates is the poor and hurting parts we find within ourselves.
  - We might not have chosen to have those particular character flaws, or hurts from our past, or issues to deal with and yet there they are on the doorsteps of our hearts.
  - We have a responsibility to feed them and try to nurse them back to health.

## In Abraham's Bosom or in Torments in Hell

- In the parable, Lazarus dies and is "carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom" and the rich man ends up in tormented in flames in hell (Luke 16:22, 23).
- This highlights one of the challenges of using the Lord's Word to learn about our spiritual reality.
  - How much of this description in the literal sense do we take as a literal description of reality?
  - Here we are very lucky to have the teachings of the New Church which are pretty blunt about this story:
    - In this parable, as in others, the Lord spoke by correspondences...[. T]he "rich man" does not mean the rich, nor does "Abraham" mean Abraham,... nor does the "flame" mean flame, for in hell no one is tortured by flames (*Apocalypse Explained* 455:7).

- And another passage helps us understand how the pieces of the stories in the literal sense can serve as containers for the truth of the matter.
  - The truths in the literal sense of the Word are in part not bare truths, but appearances of truth. They are like similes and comparative analogies taken from appearances in the natural world. Thus they are adapted and brought down to the level at which they may be understood by simple people and even children. But because they are at the same time correspondences, they serve to receive and make a home for genuine truth. They are containers in the sense that a crystal cup is a container of vintage wine....

People who possess Divine truths, and believe that the Word inwardly in its depths is something holy and Divine, and more so those who believe that the Word is like this because of its spiritual and celestial senses, these people, when they read the Word and receive enlightenment from the Lord, see Divine truths by natural light. For the light of heaven, which illuminates the spiritual sense of the Word, exerts an influence on the natural light which illuminates its literal sense, and enlightens a person's intellectual... faculty, enabling it to see and recognize Divine truths, whether plain to view or hidden. The light of heaven has this effect upon people, sometimes even without their knowing it.

*(True Christian Religion 215:1, 4)*

- In this story we have heaven (described as being in Abraham's bosom), hell (described as being in torments in flame), and a great chasm or gulf between them.
- The teachings of the New Church explain that people in heaven are not literally lying on Abraham's chest and people in hell are not burning in literal flames but there is a heaven which is a place of love, connection, and safety and there is a hell where people do experience the punishment that is inherent in their selfish desires and there is a place between those two called the world of spirits.
  - The teachings of the New Church reveal a tremendous amount more about each of those places.
  - You can read about it in the book *Heaven and Hell* and we'll also talk about it in future sermons too.
- For now, we're going to keep going with the parable and see what other things we can glean.



## The Rich Man's Requests

***"Send Lazarus, that he may cool my tongue."***

- In the parable, the rich man cries out to Abraham from hell and first asks Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue with water but Abraham tells him that this can't happen.
  - We might think, "Well, why not? Surely angels would want to help a person who is suffering?"
  - The teachings of the New Church reveal the symbolism of the rich man's longing for water: it is his "thirst and eagerness to pervert the truths that are in the Word" (*Apocalypse Explained* 455:7).
    - That is why he is not allowed to have access to water.
    - And evil spirits in hell, in the same way, are not allowed access to the truth so that they can't misuse it.
  - And Abraham's explanation also contains more of the explanation of why it's not possible.
    - Between them there is a great chasm.
    - The state of evil spirits in hell is extremely far away from the state of angels in heaven (*Arcana Coelestia* 8918) and a person can't just travel from one place to another.

***"If someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."***

- After his first request is denied, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to his father's house to tell his five brothers to repent so that they don't also end up in torment.
  - Abraham replies, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them" (Luke 16:29).
  - The rich man insists that, if someone from the dead were to talk to them, they would repent but Abraham says, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rose again from the dead" (Luke 16:30, 31).
- The teachings of the New Church explain that, if someone who rose from the dead talked to us, we might be convinced by it for a short time but, because it would deprive us of our rational function, it would not last and it would not have a good effect (*Divine Providence* 143b).
  - So attempting to talk to people who have died is not a good approach to learning about our spiritual reality.

## ***What About Swedenborg?***

- If you've been around the New Church for a bit you might be thinking, "What about Emanuel Swedenborg, then?"
  - He talked to people who had died – angels and evil spirits – why was that allowed?
- Imagine if your grandmother died and then, from beyond the grave, spoke to you about life after death.
  - That would be quite terrifying and you would not exactly feel as though you had freedom to believe what you wanted about the after life.
- Contrast that with reading the books that Swedenborg wrote.
  - It's not a terrifying experience.
  - Reading the books in no way forces you to believe.
  - They encourage you to engage your rational mind and think things through.
  - And, in a lot of ways, what they do is point you back to Moses and the Prophets.

## **The Power of Moses and the Prophets**

- If you tell people who are wondering about life after death to go and read the Word, it can feel to them like a bit of a cop-out.
  - Like, "If you want me to believe this stuff, why do you not just have a person who has died contact me and prove that life after death is real?"
- They don't realize that reading the Word actually does give us a chance to be connected with people who have died.
  - Swedenborg writes,
    - [W]henever I have read the Word in its literal sense, a communication with the heavens has occurred, now with one society of them, now with another; and that what I have understood in accordance with the natural sense, spiritual angels have understood in accordance with its spiritual sense, and celestial angels in accordance with its celestial sense. And this in an instant. (*Doctrine of the Sacred Scripture* 64).
  - This happens for us too.
    - As we've been reading this parable there have been spiritual angels and celestial angels with us who each understand it at their level.
- As for the rich man and his five brothers, they had the Word and yet seemed to know nothing about life after death and the consequences they would experience for the lives they lived, even though they had angels with them.

- Or maybe they knew the ideas but never really took them to heart and certainly never took them to heart enough to change their behavior.
- We have Moses and the Prophets and a tremendous amount of knowledge about our spiritual reality available to us.
  - Will we take the time to learn it?
  - Will we take it to heart?
  - Will it be enough to change our behavior?

## Recap & Conclusion

- Let's recap.
  - Using this parable, we learned some things about spiritual reality.
  - We also explored how we can learn about our spiritual reality.
    - We worked our way through a test case of how we can learn about the spiritual world from the Word.
    - We learned that talking to dead people is not a good method.
    - And we learned how reading the Word can connect us to enlightenment from the angels in heaven.
- And we gained a sense for our responsibility to use what we know.
  - At minimum we'd better listen to Moses and the prophets for ourselves.
  - And then we also need to look out for the people the Lord is putting at our gates, those spiritually hungry people in our lives with whom we can share the incredible wealth?

### *Connection to Holy Supper*

- As a final thought and a lead-in to Holy Supper, it's worth realizing that all of the wealth and food that the rich man had actually belonged to the Lord.
- And so He gets to decide who has a right to it.
- Those Lazarus parts of you might not be invited to the selfish rich man's table but they certainly are invited to the Lord's table.
- He wants to feed you, and heal you, teach you about spiritual reality, and invite you into His home so that you can do the same for others.
- *Amen.*
- If you would like to talk more about this topic, get in touch with Malcolm at [malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org](mailto:malcolm.smith@brynathynchurch.org).