



THE BEGGAR AND THE BILLIONAIRE

When Abi was little, she asked me, "Dad, are we rich?"

To which my reply was: "Well, it depends on who you're comparing us to."

E.g. here is a list of the 10 richest people in the world (according to Forbes 2021), along with their net worth:

- 10) In petrochemicals, Mukesh Ambani (\$84.5 billion).
- 9) Sergei Brin, co-founder of *Google* (\$89 billion).
- 8) Larry Page, co-founder of *Google* (\$91.5 billion).
- 7) *Oracle's* Larry Ellison (\$93 billion).
- 6) *Berkshire Hathaway's* Warren Buffet (\$96 billion).
- 5) Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook fame (\$97 billion).
- 4) Bill Gates of *Microsoft* (\$124 billion).
- 3) LVMH's Bernard Arnault of France (\$150 billion).
- 2) Elon Musk of Tesla / SpaceX (\$151 billion).
- 1) *Amazon's* Jeff Bezos (a staggering \$177 billion).

"Are we rich?" Abi asked. When compared to these guys, nowhere near! But when compared to humanity as a whole? Think about it this way: if the world's population = 100 people, 53 of them would live on less than \$2 a day.

All of which brings us to today's parable (and it's scary): the Mysterious Story of the Beggar and the Billionaire.

Luke 16:19-31

So what is this parable really all about? Is it poverty and wealth? Generosity and greed? Or is it Heaven and Hell? The answer is: all of the above! But the overriding theme is wealth, as in what it is. And Jesus gives us 3 answers:

1) Wealth Is Who You're Trusting. Who are the 2 principle characters in this parable? A billionaire, with everything money can buy; and a beggar, with only the dogs to lick his sores and keep him company.

But notice, the beggar has a name: Lazarus. Lazarus or *Eliezer* in Hebrew means 'my God is help', and the first use of the name is Abraham's servant in Genesis (bear that in mind – it'll help us understand what happens next). Now at first sight, this might seem a bit of a sick joke. Friend of Abraham, helped by God? You gotta be kidding, right?

Actually, no. Jesus is turning a common assumption on its head. You see, the Pharisees of Jesus' day believed that wealth = God's blessing; poverty = God's curse. But here, the poor man knows God, he has a name, and when he dies he is welcomed into Heaven; the rich man, on the other hand, is godless, nameless, and goes straight to Hell.

The point being: you can have absolutely everything this world has to offer and be as poor as poor can be; conversely, you can have very little, and be a billionaire.

Because in God's eyes, wealth is who you're trusting.

2) Wealth Is What You're Giving. When he dies, Lazarus is taken by the angels to Paradise, the Garden of God, where he gets to eat with ... Abraham. The rich man, on the other hand, ends up in Hades, where he stays until Judgement Day. And a conversation starts up between Abraham and the rich man, across this enormous chasm.

What's the point? That if we have the means to close the gap between wealth and poverty and don't, that gap will become an eternal one – but with the roles reversed.

Robert Murray M'Cheyne, a 19th century Scottish Pastor who died of Typhus aged 29, said this about the wealthy:

I am concerned for the poor, but more so for you. I know not what Christ will say to you in that great day ... I fear there are many hearing me who may know well that they are not Christians because they do not love to give ... Oh my friends! Enjoy your money; make the most of it; give none away. For I can tell you, you will be beggars throughout eternity.

Scary stuff. Now some people will say, "But I thought we were saved by our faith, not our works!" And yes, we are. But a true, living faith will always be shown in what we *do*. What we do when we're confronted by poverty on our

doorstep; what we do when we're confronted by poverty somewhere else. It's always in what we *do* - hence why Lazarus wants to do for the rich man what he never did for him (vs26).

Wealth is not about what you're getting, but what you're giving.

3) Wealth Is Where You're Going. Now this is obviously a parable, with a bucket-load of imagery to boot. But there are certain things we *are* supposed to take literally here:

- Heaven is a place of kindness, peace, and joy.
- Hell is a place of selfishness, torment and grief.

How can I believe in something as horrific as Hell? Well, if we look at the mess human beings can make of things, when left to their own devices, we can get a glimpse of it (on the plus-side we can get a glimpse of Heaven, too).

But more importantly, Jesus talked about it. Around half of Jesus' parables (13% of His teaching) refer to judgement. And OK, it may not have been His favourite topic (I'm always worried when it is a favourite topic), but it sure got a mention.

The point being: final destination trumps present situation. It's not about the here-and-now; it's about where you'll spend eternity.

The Moral Of The Story ...

Now I need to make something clear: Jesus is not saying that God loves the poor and hates the rich. But He is saying that the poor are more likely to reach out to God – and find Him. And you can see this played out time and again in various parts of the developing world: in the shanty towns of sub-Saharan Africa, the barrios of Latin America, the rural villages of SE Asia. But in the affluent west, spiritual poverty is rife. Material wealth can be a good thing, but it can also be so dangerous that even Jesus rising from the dead wouldn't be enough to change us.

So, what are we to do with this? We need to take a look ...

- **At our lifestyle.** Where does God fit in?
- **At our world.** Where are the Lazaruses?
- **At our future.** Where are we heading?

To close, I'd like to introduce you to one more face today. His name is Alfred, he comes from a small village in W Uganda, and for the past 15 years he's been our sponsor child through Compassion International. And he's just completed his first semester of nursing training. Now Alfred is unlikely to ever make the Forbes List – but Jesus knows who he is! And because of that, Alfred has a better idea of what true wealth is, too. Hence the verse he included in his latest letter: Acts 20:35.

So ... who is the beggar? And who is the billionaire?