

# The Sufficiency of the Gospel

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*Luke 16:27 Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: [28] For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. [29] Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. [30] And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. [31] And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.*

Although this passage forms the conclusion of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, it deals with an essentially different question. The parable opened here on earth where we meet the rich man who was upright in all his walk as far as the outward demands of the law were concerned, but who was inwardly covetous and a servant of mammon. This sin became evident in his scorn for Lazarus, the poor beggar thrown at his gate. The scene soon changed to eternity where the rich man is seen lifting up his eyes from hell to behold Lazarus in Abraham's bosom. The point was made that both the blessedness of Lazarus and the torment of the rich man were illustrations of the justice of God who never judges outward appearance.

While the first request of the rich man was denied him, he now has another request to make. This does not imply that there is a possibility of discussion between those in heaven and those on earth. Jesus is speaking a parable. And through this request of the rich man a very important truth of Scripture is emphasized. This important truth is made over against objections that are still raised today against the preaching of the gospel. Although it takes on many forms, the objection basically is that the gospel is really not enough to accomplish salvation. More is required and if only God would somehow give a special sign from heaven or do something unusual, then the wicked would be brought to repentance. But the parable emphatically makes the point that the gospel is sufficient to accomplish all of God's purpose in salvation. In that gospel we must put our trust.

These brothers with whom the rich man is concerned evidently lived the same life as their rich brother who is now in hell. They too were natural children of Abraham, brought up in the sphere of the covenant. They too were undoubtedly wealthy, highly esteemed of men and praised for their deeds. But within their wicked hearts they also were vain and arrogant, hypocritical and self-righteous, afflictors of the poor and despisers of the humble. Their sin also was the sin of covetousness and service of mammon. Their lives were apparently closely intertwined with the life of their departed brother. They too knew of Lazarus who had been laid at the gate. The request of the rich man in hell seems to presuppose that if Lazarus would return they would recognize him.

The request of the rich man seems to be filled with genuine concern for his brothers' well being. But if we examine this request closely we will be forced to the conclusion that it was very wicked. Although there were various reasons why it was wicked, the chief reason is that the request was really a sly and subtle accusation of God and a covert attempt at self-justification. The rich man is apologizing for his brothers and saying in effect that his brothers walked the way they did because they had not been sufficiently warned. There is more that could be done for them than what God has already done. The rich man knows better what his brothers need than God does. And he complains bitterly, but subtly that God is not doing enough. And in doing this he is really attempting to justify himself. He means to say that he did not receive sufficient warning about the life to come and about his calling in the world. And therefore His punishment is unjustified.

This excuse of the rich man is really not so foreign to us and is often found even in the church. When covenant children go astray, they are easily persuaded to blame others. They claim their parents were too strict or not strict enough. They blame others for leading them in evil paths. So also wayward husbands blame their wives. Wayward wives blame their husbands. Sometimes the church is blamed. It is said that the preaching is over the head of the listeners. It is either too doctrinal or too practical. It is dry and hard to understand and does not hold one's interest. Or, perhaps, the church is too small, too filled with bickering, not socially minded enough, and the people are not friendly enough. Everyone is to blame but themselves.

Abraham's answer to the request of the rich man to send Lazarus back is short and to the point: "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." By speaking of Moses and the prophets, Abraham refers to the Old Testament Scriptures which contained the law and the promise. But both law and promise pointed ahead to Christ who was the fulfillment of all that was spoken. All the sacrifices and ceremonies of the law, as well as all the words of the prophets, pointed ahead to the coming of Christ, the seed of the promise. Moses and the prophets were servants of God who revealed the salvation He had prepared for His people. This Word was the means whereby Abraham saw the day of Christ and rejoiced. Because of this Word heroes of faith who died not having received the promises, nevertheless saw them afar off and were persuaded of them and embraced them. Hebrews 11:13-16.

This same Scripture was also the possession of the rich man and his brothers, for they were brought up in the generations of the covenant. In this scripture the way of salvation was clearly defined. Christ is the way. And by repentance and faith in Christ God's people are brought to their everlasting salvation.

There are two fundamental truths implied here - truths which are still in effect today. In the first place, we cannot emphasize strongly enough that God binds Himself to the use of means. Even as the body has need of food for its natural life so the soul has need of heavenly bread for its life. These means are appointed by God, are the only way in which God saves His people, and are therefore sufficient for all of salvation. In the second place they are the only means. There is no other name given under heaven among men whereby we can be saved. Christ works only through His Word to bring His people to conscious faith and salvation. By means of that Word and through the operation of the Spirit the people of God are saved.

This Word is preached to all whom God in His good pleasure sends it. By it all men are brought to know that the way of salvation is the way of the cross of Christ, and thus the way of repentance and faith. On this point the gospel is very clear. There can be no mistake about it. All men are placed before the solemn obligation to turn from their evil way, forsake their own works, and repent of their deeds. All men are told that Christ is the way and the truth and the life. Faith in Him is the road to salvation. The consequence of ignoring this is always hell.

But all the rich man denies. He wants something more than the Word of God. He is not satisfied with Moses and the prophets and with God's ordained way. It is, in his opinion, insufficient to warn and rebuke and save. He wants Lazarus to return from the dead and witness to his brothers. He knows that they will remember Lazarus and he thinks if Lazarus would witness to heaven and hell and speak of the consequences of sin this will be enough to bring his brothers to repentance. He wants something unusual and startling, something spectacular, a voice from heaven, an apparition from the grave. This is far better than the means which God has determined.

And this request of the rich man is, after all, not so strange. Already in Jesus' day the Jews asked for a sign in proof of the claim that Jesus was the Christ. They were surrounded by signs of Jesus' wonderful works, but nevertheless always they wanted another sign beyond what Jesus had already given. It is this way today. Men ask for something startling and drastic to happen in the hopes that the impenitent will be converted. They do not think the Word of God is enough. This lack of trust in the Word takes on many different forms. Sometimes it leads men to seek for the assurance of their salvation outside the Word in some unusual experience. And if this unusual experience does not come, God has not given them sufficient faith to attain to it. Sometimes men try to alter the contents of the Word to bring about more spectacular results. This often happens especially in missionary or evangelistic work. Those who bring the gospel to the unconverted are not happy because in their estimation insufficient converts are made. They quickly blame the Word for this. And the result is that the sharp truths of the Word are toned down and the distinctive doctrines of the Scriptures are altered in the hopes that a watered down gospel will be more appealing. Or they substitute for the preaching alterations in liturgy and entertaining programs in the hopes that the empty pews will be filled. Sometimes they seek assurance in unusual happenings. This is particularly characteristic of neopentecostalism. But it is still the age old clamoring for a sign. And this clamoring for a sign is rooted in discontent with the Word. Men seek the dramatic and unusual. A faith less and wicked generation seeks after a sign. Send Lazarus from the dead. Then we will repent. But there shall no sign be given them...

Abraham's answer is: "The gospel is enough. If they will not believe Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded though one should rise from the dead." This is a fundamental point. The gospel as the God ordained way is always enough. In God's Word, God speaks of Himself and of His work of salvation. Who can speak better of this or more authoritatively of this than God Himself? Can Lazarus? How is that possible? God alone can speak of

salvation. And of this salvation God speaks in His Word. If men will not believe His Word they will not believe anything. If they will not receive the Word they will not receive a special sign, a voice from heaven, an apparition from the dead.

But this is because God always accomplishes all His purpose through the gospel. The gospel is, after all, the power of God unto salvation. But the gospel is also two edged. Indeed, through the gospel God places all men before the command to repent. But the same gospel is the sovereignly ordained means in the hands of God to harden the wicked in their evil way. The fact is conclusively proved by history. Unbelief always will and only can reject the Word of God. Already in Jesus' day this was true. John the Baptist came neither eating nor drinking, and the wicked Jews condemned him for this. Jesus came both eating and drinking, and they condemned as being a gluttonous man and a wine bibber, a friend of the publicans and sinners. They asked for a sign, but they would not believe the sign of Jonah the prophet. They saw Jesus mighty miracles as beautiful signs of the gospel, but they explained them away and claimed that He cast out devils by Beelzebub. The rich man said his brothers would repent if Lazarus would come forth from the grave; but another Lazarus did come forth from the grave and they believed not. And when Jesus Himself arose, they piously said that the disciples stole the body.

So it is true in our day. Never while the world lasts will men without faith believe God's Word. And because they will not believe God's Word they will not believe any signs that may be given. They may clamor after signs but the signs they will not see for they are rebellious and hard of heart. The fault lies not in the gospel but in them. They are wicked and obdurate. No, the rich man cannot have what he asks. The gospel is enough.

But faith always believes. As the power of God it believes Moses and the prophets and hears them. It believes that God saves His people through the blood of the cross. It believes in such a way that faith brings about repentance and sorrow for sin. It believes because God says so. Hence the applied admonition of the text is: trust the gospel. Do not doubt that it will always accomplish God's purpose. It is always enough. We need not add to it. God will, through the gospel, perfect His own good work.