

Spiritual Real Estate

Rev. Thomas A. Orquiza-Renardo

We have two very different scriptures today. We have Jeremiah purchasing some land. Then we have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. At first, I was thinking what do the two of these have to do with each other? In one we're talking about land. In the other we're talking about the after life where one person went to hell and the other person went to heaven.

So I thought, Ok, we can talk about the different ways we perceive Hell. There's the most common perception of fire and brimstone. You live a bad life where there's nothing redeemable about your character. You forsake God and, in turn, you are eternally punished in a lake of sulfur along with the devil and his minions (Figure 1).



Figure 2: Hades on his throne with Cerberus

There's the understanding of Hell in Roman-Greco mythology, where Hades, or Pluto, is lord over the underworld, and the three headed dog Cerberus keeps any wayward souls from escaping their due punishment. A punishment based on what kind of life they lived and malice they wrought (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Condemned souls falling into the sulfur lakes of Hell.

Another more chilling idea of Hell comes from a Robert Frost poem entitled *Fire and Ice*. He writes,

“Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.”



Figure 3: An icy depiction of what Hell might look like.



Perhaps we've all heard of Dante's *Inferno*, the first part of Dante Alighieri's 14th century epic poem *Divine Comedy*. Some modern perceptions of Hell have pulled from this literary piece the idea of Hell as having levels or layers. The type of life you lived, such as lustful or violent or greedy and so forth, determined which level of Hell you were condemned to suffer in for eternity (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Four of the nine levels of Hell referred to in Dante's Inferno.

Then there's the perception of Hell as simply nothing. The idea that we are here, then gone. We live brightly for a time only to have all our experiences and everything we have become snuffed out. We cease to exist at all but in the memories of those closest to us (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Hell as simple non-existence.

And that's all I'm really going to say about Hell today, because I'm really not a fire and brimstone kind of preacher.

Moving to the text from Jeremiah though, there's a lot of details in the passage to more or less explain what's happening. Details like, "My cousin Hanamel came to me... and said to me, 'Buy my field that is at Anathoth in the land of Benjamin...'" Jeremiah signed the deed in the presence of Hanamel and other witnesses. He sealed it and the purchase price was weighed out in shekels. And so on and so forth.

The really important part we need to pull out of this scripture passage is the very beginning. "The Lord came to me and said..." and God gave Jeremiah instructions to buy the field. Also, the end of passage when God told Jeremiah, "Take these deeds... and put them in an earthenware jar, in order that they may last for a long time. For thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land."

The idea the passage is getting at is hope. Jeremiah, at this point, has been imprisoned in the court of the guard in the palace of the king of Judah by King Zedekiah himself. This courtyard had pretty much become his world. Yet, he's still prophesying from the courtyard. The word of the Lord is still coming to him, telling him to do things like buy a field from his cousin.

Jeremiah's actions in buying the field are in stark contrast to the reality the people of Judah are facing at this point. While Jeremiah is under lock and key in the court of the guard, most of the rest of Judah is in exile. No one from Judah is buying or selling or building in Judah during this time. It has been conquered by Babylon and expropriated. All the people who owned any real property live in exile far away from Judah.

Jeremiah, despite the reality of exile, is buying land in a country no longer controlled by Judah. Why? It doesn't make sense. Especially since, before this, Jeremiah prophesied to the people they should be working for the welfare of the city where God had sent them (Jeremiah 29). They were instructed to take wives and have children and buy homes and make a living in the places they now lived. They were told they were going to be in exile for a long while.

Jeremiah is now adding to that prophesy. He's saying, "Yes, live and work and plant roots, but also know this. There will come a time again when we will be in our own land. We will sow and reap in our own land. We will marry, have children and families, build houses, grow crops, and live in the light of God in our own land." Jeremiah is letting the exiles know that land in Judah will once again have value for them. This is where the clay jars come in to play.

How many of you have heard of the Dead Sea scrolls of Qumran? The Dead Sea scrolls were hidden in the Qumran caves and were found by accident. Some kids were playing near a cave throwing rocks and they heard something shatter. They went in to investigate and found a number of clay jars full of ancient scrolls. When the scrolls were examined it was found they were preserved hand written copies of scripture and writings from the Qumran community. It was

because of the clay jars the parchment scrolls were so well preserved. They had been preserved for centuries.

Jeremiah, by purchasing this land and sealing the deeds in a clay jar, is giving the exiles hope. It's the hope of, someday in the distant future, returning to their home country. It's the hope of again being able to live and own property in their own land. Yes, the exiled people of Judah need to get comfortable where they are and live productive lives. But now... now they have a reason to keep moving forward. They have a promise of better days ahead. They have assurance that God has not forgotten them.

Jeremiah is spreading the good news that being in exile is not all of who they are; it will not be permanent. There is a hope and inspiration that will allow them to keep going, keep living, keep being the people of God, even in the foreign lands where they reside. Because they will again return home. What Jeremiah is giving them is something deeper to invest in communally and spiritually.

Now, Lazarus and the rich man is a bit of a different story. But, in a way, it's also very similar. It's talking about how people have lived their lives. When we're talking about investments, normally we're talking about cash, land, stocks and bonds; real property. That's what Jeremiah did. He made an investment in land for the future. Yet, when Jesus is teaching about Lazarus and the rich man, there's still a discussion there about how we invest.

Quick recap of the story. We have two gentlemen here. On the one side we have the rich man. On the other side we have Lazarus. The rich man is someone who has enjoyed his life. He's been able to feast on food of every kind. He's taken all he can out of life and enjoyed it thoroughly. But... the gospel doesn't say anything about how he lived other than he enjoyed life. It doesn't say he gave to the needy. It doesn't say he was compassionate. In fact, it paints a rather negative picture of him because at his very gate is Lazarus. Lazarus is a poor starving sick homeless man just looking for any scraps that might fall off the rich man's table. Lazarus is so sick that dogs are licking at his open infected sores. Basically, the dogs are just waiting for him to die. On the other side of the gate, the rich man has everything he could want and more.

The day comes where they both die; the rich man in his luxury and Lazarus in his misery. This is where the great reversal comes into play, where the first shall be last and the last shall be first, the least shall be the greatest and the greatest shall be the least. Lazarus is taken up to "Abraham's bosom," or heaven, and rests in peace at Abraham's side. The rich man in contrast goes to Hades where he is tormented. This is what leads me to believe that while the rich man enjoyed his life, it was a very self-indulgent enjoyment. There was nothing redeemable about this man where God was able to say, "You showed compassion to your neighbors when you clothed the naked, fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, and visited the sick." There was nothing of compassion for others in his life.

The rich man goes so far as to beg Abraham to let Lazarus come with a drop of water on his finger to drip on the man's tongue. He's seeking even some infinitesimal relief from his torment, fleeting as that relief might be. And Abraham, perhaps with pity in his voice, gives the tormented man the bad news that such a thing would be impossible, reminding him of the good things he experienced in life... but did not share. All this while Lazarus suffered and lived his hell on earth.

To bring this back into connection with the Jeremiah passage let me say this. The thing that these two passages have in common is they are ways of investing in the future. Jeremiah speaks of investing in property for a future return to the homeland. Jesus speaks of investing in compassion for a future spiritual reward.

Going back to Abraham's conversation with the man now being tormented in Hades, it's as if Abraham is saying, "You have what you invested in. This is what your life of self-indulgence has earned you. Lazarus lived his life looking forward to a day without pain, seeking out good where it could be found. You lived your life in luxury, giving no thought to how your wealth could create a fuller life for those around you and the blessings that would bring."

So the former rich man tries tactic number two. He asks Abraham to at least send Lazarus to his brothers. But it's another dead end. Abraham tells him his brothers already have Moses and the prophets and the scriptures. They already have all they need to make the wise spiritual investments for their spiritual futures. If they don't believe the witness God has already made plain to them, the spiritual data, statistics, trends, the spiritual Dow Jones index of the law and the prophets, they will not believe a man even if he returned from the grave. They need to invest spiritually rather than investing worldly.

Again, we talk about investment and we're usually talking about money, land, property, that which you can buy, sell, or trade, Wall Street, bankers, brokers, all those words we use and throw out there to talk about how we manage our finances or our portfolios in the material world. Jesus is saying, "Stop worrying about the material world." He's telling us rather than talking about land and cash, we should be talking about souls. Bring the conversation away from investing in self and around to investing in relationship with God.

Whatever you bind up on earth, you'll only be able to use it here on earth. Whatever treasure you save and store in heaven, that investment will be eternal. That investment will be long lasting. That investment will be what gets us to where God wants us to be.

The thing is, investing in heaven and our spiritual future, not just our worldly future, goes so much farther. This is because we don't have to wait until we die to see the results of those investments. When we invest in spiritual things, the things of God and showing the love of Jesus to everyone, doing justice, loving kindness, and walking humbly with God, the reward is immediate. When we work to heal the sick, clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and take care of those in need, we are building an investment in heaven, storing up eternal treasure. But it's not a delayed reward. When we invest in God, we can change a person's world in that moment.



When we give to programs like Backpack Buddies, giving elementary students experiencing food insecurity a bag of weekend food, we change those students' world. Because out of that blessing of food comes strength and physical nourishment. That physical nourishment brings mental preparedness so on Monday, instead of being exhausted and malnourished, those students

are awake and alert and ready to learn. When we help in programs and ministries that give medicine to the sick, we change people's world. When we help people find affordable housing so maybe mom and dad, or single parents, don't have to work three jobs each, we change that family's world.

That's what the passages are about this morning. They're about investing in hope. They're about investing in the Jesus-inspired Christian lifestyle. That way of life that's stands up against oppressor, that provides a way, that puts deeds to hope in clay jars so hope is preserved for years and years and years to come.

How do we invest in our future? We serve. We pray. We work towards healing and no more hunger. We work a world where even the poorest of us can be considered rich. We act like the people we are called to be, citizens of the City of God; that kingdom while being yet to come is also here and now.

Jesus in the scripture talked about how prostitutes and tax collectors and the poor were entering the kingdom of heaven before the pharisees. To be clear, Jesus didn't say they were going to enter the kingdom first. Jesus said they are entering the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of heaven, while it is something we look towards, it is here and it is now. It is here because Christian love is real and is to be spread. Christian love is not something that is sterile. It moves forward, continuing, growing, reproducing. And when it is inspired and faithfully lived Christian love brings in new people every day because lives are being changed. That is the people we are.

We are not called to be the rich man sitting at the table paying little or no attention to the hurting ailing beggars at the gate. We are the people called to go to Lazarus and bring him comfort even in some small way. Let us be the people who go forward with a Christ-inspired mission to change the world and make our communities better and stronger. And in that work, may God go with us, guiding, teaching, empowering, and inspiring.

In Jesus name, Amen!