

## **“What does God’s blessing look like?” Luke 16:19-31**

**“There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.” But Abraham said, “Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.” And he said, “Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house-- for I have five brothers-- so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” But Abraham said, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.” And he said, “No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” He said to him, “If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead.””**

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

What does God’s blessing look like? How could we describe it? How would you describe it, if asked? Today’s Gospel reading gives us some ideas. And, I have to say, this is one of those teaching which are difficult to stomach.

As Jesus’ listeners, past and present, use to say: “This is a hard saying, who can listen to it?!” But in a way this is even worse with our God. One thing is that you may not like to listen to His hard sayings, you may turn away, or you may leave.

But it is different when our God puts us in real-life situations, where we can’t run away, we can’t quit the circumstances of our lives, we have to endure through and see what He will do through all of that. So, what does God’s blessing look like?

It’s interesting what our minds store and then suddenly bring to the surface. Reflecting on this question I remembered that time when the Triune God invaded our life. A group of our friends from Pentecostal background was quite instrumental. This is how they shared the Christian faith with us. This is how they described to us God’s blessings.

“You see, God is your Father in heaven. He surely wants to bless you. He wants you to be happy. What sort of God would He be if He didn’t want you to have good things? Surely, He wants you to have good health.

Surely, He wants your business to go well. Surely, He wants to you to prosper and achieve your goals. Surely, He wants to give you things that make you happy, otherwise, what sort of loving Father would He be?” What a sweet message!

So, then this is what God’s blessings look like? He helps us to get what we desire... Great message! Speaks straight to the heart. Everyone can relate to it. This is what most religions teach, this is what, sadly, we can hear in many churches as well.

And to be honest, isn’t this how we all, at least to some extent think about God’s blessings? When we get what we want. When things go great. No afflictions. No sufferings. And we have one such person in the parable that Jesus told.

The rich man. Who wouldn’t want to be the rich man from the parable? Honestly! Just think about it! He probably had worked hard; he had put in his time and energy and knowledge to build his business and now he had succeeded.

His prayers were heard and the hard work and long hours have paid off. He wasn’t some lazy bum. He deserved some rewards; he deserved to enjoy the fruits of his labour. His mansion was majestic. Surrounded by beautiful garden and high walls.

Good security. His whole family was doing well, they cared for one another. He knew how to appreciate beauty. His style was elaborate, his cloths came from the best high-end designers. His celebrations were exquisite. His chefs were among the best.

You cannot have a party every day and have the same food and same drinks. Diversity, variety, versatility. He was successful, he was accomplished, he was influential, he had made it. He was not boring; he knew how to enjoy those blessings!

Furthermore, if the setting of that parable was today, that man would be identified as... a Christian. That’s right. As we can see later in the parable, he calls Abraham “father”, he believes that he is a child of Abraham, a true believer. One of God’s people. More, even Abraham addresses him as: “Child!”

A wealthy Christian man, so to speak. So many good things in his life. Who wouldn’t want all of that? And, of course, if we had all of that, we would certainly go one step further and take care of the poor Lazarus as well. We certainly would...

But what happened? What went wrong? How did those good gifts of God become a trap for him, for his soul? How did he become so self-focused? So arrogant and self-righteous? He had abundance of God’s gifts. He could have not only taken care of Lazarus; he could have eliminated poverty in that town!

How did that happen, that all the good gifts of God were used for never-ending, never satisfying pursuit of happiness and pleasures? How did those gifts become more important than the Giver? Or maybe they always were more important.

Maybe he was one of those “believers” for whom God is only means, and God’s gifts are their true goal. “You shall fear and love and trust... in God’s gifts above all things.” That seems to be the rich man’s first commandment.

All that he had were good gifts of creation. Unfortunately, we are not very good at receiving those gifts properly. Whatever good they are, they seldom do good to our souls, to our characters. We seem to be too weak to receive them as blessings.

Anyhow, he dies, and finds himself in the Hades, that’s another name for hell. He still has the same character. Arrogant and self-righteous. Sadly, not a slightest sign of repentance. Not when this life is over. What’s amazing, he knows Lazarus by name.

And he still treats Lazarus as nobody. “Send him to help me, I am a bit uncomfortable here. I thirst. No? Okay, then send him to my brothers to warn them. No? Whatever!” There he goes, a nameless person, seemingly so blessed, now destined to oblivion.

**What does God’s blessing look like? What about Lazarus?** Who would like to be like Lazarus? The very opposite story, living in poverty, in scarcity of food, exhausted by quite an unpleasant sickness, sores all over his body, of low status, a beggar.

The name is significant. Lazarus. Do you know what it means? It means “one whom God helps”. One whom God helps... Isn’t this interesting. Such a name and how exactly is God helping him? You may know the famous verse from Paul’s letter to Romans:

“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good.” (Rom 8:28) For those who love God, for those whom God helps, all things work together for good. Surely, Lazarus’ situation sucks. Who would want to be in his place?!

But not all is bad. He still has his friends who bring him to the gates of the rich man. Obviously, they care for him, they haven’t abandoned him. He probably gets some food, even if not enough. Despite all his afflictions, he may be quite a likable person.

Some theologians have pointed out that even dogs, who may be guardian dogs for the rich man’s property, treat him as their friend and try to heal him licking his sores. He is humble and unassuming, grateful for every next day. One whom God helps...

When Lazarus is taken to the place of honour, and when the rich man arrogantly asks Abraham to send Lazarus over, it seems that Lazarus actually wouldn’t mind to go and help, he doesn’t hold any grudges against the rich man; it is Abraham who explains that no one can cross that chasm... so, that is off the cards.

What does God's blessing look like? It's clear that Lazarus suffered a lot, and it seems not so much from sickness or scarcity of food, as from disappointment seeing injustices of this world. Abraham doesn't say that Lazarus was hungry and how he will eat to his fill. He doesn't say that Lazarus was poor and now he will be so, so rich. No!

Abraham says that now Lazarus will be comforted. Remember the beatitudes from the Sermon on the Mount. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied."

Was Lazarus blessed?

What does God's blessing look like? It's not about being rich, and able to spend your days in pleasures. It is not about being poor and sick and suffering daily either. It is about being one whom God helps, looking upon God trusting in Him above all things.

When that happens, when our Lord assures that He is always with us, when we seek the Kingdom of God first, then whatever else happens in our lives, will indeed work together for good. Our Father may choose to pour His generous gifts upon us, sure.

He often does. But the abundance of good gifts – good work, prosperity, success, influence, pleasures, etc. – they seldom shape us in a good way. Unfortunately. Afflictions and sufferings, on the others hand, whatever hard it is to admit it, they tend to be God's finest tools to make us more like Jesus. Humble, gracious, thankful.

Even our Lord Jesus Christ was made perfect through... yes, through sufferings. The same goes for us. Sufferings without God as our helper won't help much, but if we know God as our God, as our loving Father, as our Redeemer and brother, that's different. Then they bring us closer to God, purify us, mould us in the likeness of Christ.

**So, what does God's blessing look like?** What about this description? When you are like Lazarus, when God helps you. When He convinces you that regardless of who you are, and what your circumstances are, you are precious to Him. That He delights in you.

When you experience His presence, the peace that He brings, despite what your life may look like at that moment, when you can be at peace and put all your trust in your Father in heaven, even when the world may seem a hopeless place.

When even being at your lowest and most desperate, you know that your Lord can relate to you, that He has suffered as much as you do and so much more, that He was rich and that He left His heavenly glory, He emptied Himself. Why? For you.

We are blessed when we get to experience God's all surpassing goodness like Job did, when he proclaimed: "I had heard about you, but now I have seen you, now I have experienced your presence and I rest my case. If only I have you, I have everything."

When we can say with Paul the apostle: “We consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” “For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.” (2 Cor 4:17)

We are blessed when our hearts and our moods and our outlook at our lives and ourselves is not ruled and defined by what we have or have achieved, or by what we lack and wish to have, but by the knowledge that we are valued beyond our comprehension by our Creator and Redeemer. That’s what true blessing looks like.

**Concluding just one last question – how can we obtain this wonderful assurance?**

How can we be trusting like Lazarus, regardless whether our lives look like a disaster, or abundantly filled with God’s good gifts?

Abraham gives us the answer in this parable. “Listen to Moses and the prophets.” Listen! In our case it would be – listen to the prophets and the apostles, listen to the Word of God as we have received it in the Holy Scripture. Listen and let it fill you!

For this living Word is what renews our heart, this life-changing Word is what makes us desire the Kingdom of God more than anything. That is how we receive God’s greatest blessings. Ultimate blessings. Everlasting blessings.

When the Word of God together with God’s Spirit brings us into the very presence of the Triune God. As we listen... And how privileged we are, dear brothers and sisters, to still have this Word – proclaimed, taught, accessible, being able to share God’s wonderful message with our friends and family members. How blessed we are!

May the Spirit of God help us to discern what true blessings are. May the Spirit of God help us to appreciate and rejoice in God’s Word and keep it and cherish it so that it leads us through this life and then as on angels’ wings into the very presence of our Lord to feast with Him forever.

Amen.