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Gospel of Luke 16:19–26 New King James

¹⁹ *“There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. ²⁰ But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, ²¹ desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.*

²⁴ *“Then he cried and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’*

Gospel of John 6:35-44, ESV

³⁵ *Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst. ³⁶ But I said to you that you have seen me and yet do not believe. ³⁷ All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never cast out. ³⁸ For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. ³⁹*

⁴¹ *So the Jews grumbled about him, because he said, “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” ⁴² They said, “Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, ‘I have come down from heaven’?” ⁴³ Jesus answered them, “Do not grumble among yourselves. ⁴⁴ No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.*

Limbo and grace.

There is a Greek word that appears multiple times in the New Testament. It is “kolpos”. It is a bit of a difficult word to translate. In a literal sense, it refers to the upper front part of the traditional garment worn by people in biblical times. It can also refer to a gulf or a bay. Kolpos can also refer to the upper front of the human torso, or the breast area, or the upper chest of a human being. It’s the place where a woman holds a baby to nurse. But the word is sometimes used in the Bible in a literary fashion to refer to a place of love or honor, or a place close to someone’s heart. So, in a figurative sense, kolpos is the place where we might seek refuge in someone’s love or caring. In our Bible passage today, we see the sentence: ²²*So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom.* The word bosom in our sentence is actually the word “kolpos” in the original Greek versions of the New Testament.

Let’s look at our passage. Jesus is preaching and he is telling the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. It’s important to note that this is indeed a parable; Jesus is not trying to tell us a little piece of history. It is a made-up story that Jesus used to convey a theological concept. In this story, there is a rich man who dressed in fine linen and purple. Now, linen was expensive and so was purple dye, and so the fact that this man wore linen and purple every day meant that he

was displaying his wealth for all to see. But there is a poor man named Lazarus who shows up at the rich man's gate, looking for handouts. Lazarus is the Greek version of the Hebrew name Eleazar, which means "God helps" or "God supports" or "God provides for". Clearly, by naming this person Lazarus, Jesus is saying that God cares more for this poor man than God does for the rich man. But to the rich man, Lazarus is just another beggar. God may love Lazarus, but humans apparently do not. The day comes when Lazarus dies. Angels carry him to be in Abraham's kolpos or bosom, as our translation says. By the way, some Bible translations say that Lazarus was carried away to be at Abraham's side, but this is not right. It is really an abstract statement meant to suggest that Abraham, one of the oldest and most loved characters of the Old Testament, will now care for Lazarus. Next, though, the rich man dies. Our wealthy guy ends up in Hades, which is a Greek word that is very similar in meaning to the Old Testament Hebrew word Sheol. They both mean "the place of the dead" and can refer to something as literal as a grave. But more commonly, these words refer to the afterlife – but they do not mean Hell. In Scripture, Sheol or Hades is a temporary or intermediate place between life and either Heaven or Hell. But to more properly understand these words, we have to realize that they date to a period when Jews did not have a firm idea of what happened when we die. Sheol or

Hades was where the dead went. It wasn't a good thing. It meant that you were dead, and in an age when there was thought to perhaps be no afterlife, it wasn't good to be there. I'm going to get back to this passage.

Let's look at our second quote. It's from the Gospel of John, Chapter 6. Jesus is attending the Passover festival, where Jews would come from the areas surrounding Jerusalem. Jesus feeds five thousand people. He walks on the sea. Then, in our scene, Jesus uses a metaphor, calling himself the bread of life. He is spiritual bread, of course, and he feeds all who come to him. The people, however, doubt Jesus' right to consider himself an equal to God. After all, this is just the son of the builder named Joseph. Jesus sticks to what he has been saying and simply tells these people: *"No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him."*

What I want to talk about today is tradition. As Christians, we like to say that we are biblical people, that we don't add to the Bible. We believe what Jesus taught. We believe what appears in Holy Scripture. But the truth is that this is not completely true. We also add tradition to our beliefs. Usually, our traditions augment Scripture in very subtle ways. We don't wholly invent wild and crazy ideas. What we do is take bits of Scripture and tuck them under arm – and sort of run with them. We see how far we can stretch an idea. It's a natural thing to do.

We're intelligent, thinking creatures. We want to develop a deep interpretation of Scripture. Let's look at two examples of tradition, of taking Scripture and interpreting it in a way that many believers think is too much, that it extends the Bible so much that it really can't be considered good theology.

The first has to do with our first quote. Our rich man ends up in Hades. Sounds fair enough. But our poor man ends up in the "bosom of Abraham". He is in some sense, being cared for or residing at the side of the great Israelite father, Abraham. But it doesn't actually say that he's in Heaven. Mind you, the people of this age didn't have a firm concept of Heaven like we do, like we derive from the New Testament. This passage about the bosom of Abraham has led some Christian denominations to in a sense extend Scripture, to interpret it in a deep way and to, in the minds of many, go too far.

Consider my mother. As most of you know, my parents were Catholics. When I was born, I was very sick. The medical people told my mother that I might not survive. This horrified my mother – because Catholics at this time believed in a place called Limbo. Some say that it is a medieval notion, created long, long after the life of Christ, and that it has no true biblical root. This isn't really true. What is true is that Limbo is a traditional belief, held by Roman Catholics and other Christians, but that it is derived from a number of biblical passages, in

particular, the one we have been looking at. The argument is that Abraham's bosom couldn't possibly be Heaven – and surely, this decent poor man didn't go to Hades like his wealthy, selfish counterpart. So, there must be some place that innocent people go to that is between Heaven and Hell. It became known as Limbo and the belief arose that innocent people, like newborn babies, who died without being baptized as Christians ended up in Limbo. My mother did not want me in Limbo, so she told a nurse that she needed a small glass of water. My mother took that water, and before she would let the nurses whip me off to the neonatal ICU, she splashed some water on my forehead and baptized me. Catholics, and many other Christians, believe that any believer can, in an emergency, baptize someone. Many people consider this Limbo stuff to be ridiculous, and in fact, the Catholic Church does not require its members to believe in the concept of Limbo. But it is a very strong tradition among Catholics.

Let's move to our second quote. Jesus is laying claim to being God. In fact, he very boldly declares: *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.* As Methodists, we should look at this passage very carefully – because this passage, along with others, has led to a very strong Methodist tradition, something that is indeed an extension or interpretation of Scripture. Here is a little background. The Bible talks extensively about grace, especially in

the New Testament. But various Christian denominations vary significantly on this notion of grace. We know that it is an unearned gift from God, that it is what allows us to be freely forgiven and to have our souls cleansed of what we have done wrong. But the traditional Calvinistic and Lutheran belief is that people are predestined to either be saved and go to Heaven, or to eventually die and go to Hell. In other words, God knows in advance who will eventually be saved, and specifically, God identifies some people as being unsavable – from birth. Christians who believe this, as a direct result, also believe that grace is “irresistible”, meaning that once God touches you with grace, you will not be able to reject it – and you will be saved no matter what. This means that some people receive no grace whatsoever.

We, as Methodists, do not believe this. We believe that all people get grace, and we get this notion from John Wesley. He preached about what he called “prevenient” grace, that is, grace that is inside every single human. Since not all people end up good people who go to Heaven, the implication is that this grace doesn’t succeed with everyone. In other words, grace is not irresistible as believed by predestination-minded Christians. Where does our notion come from? Do you know why we are called Methodists? It’s because John Wesley believed that we should use our human minds to be deliberate and logical about

our faith. He and his brother Charles founded a Holy Society, as they called it, at Oxford in 1729. Since the brothers preached this strong notion of being very deliberate and thoughtful about their faith, other Oxford Christians sarcastically called them Methodists, because they were so hell bent on being methodical in their faith. The brothers took the insult and used it with pride – and they adopted the term Methodist for their form of Christianity. At the core of being a Methodist is that all people can use their hearts and their minds to embrace God and be good people who live like Jesus. In other words, grace is given to everyone, but it is not irresistible. The people who resist grace are not predetermined to not be saved – they use their minds to deliberately choose to not accept Christ and be followers of Jesus.

Where did Methodists get evidence of their belief in this kind of grace, the kind that everyone gets? Well, from some passages in the Bible, including our second one, where Jesus says that *No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him*. In other words, God draws people toward them. He doesn't decide in advance who will be saved; rather, he draws them toward him, and they have the opportunity to say yes or to say no.

So, there you have it. Christianity is indeed very deeply rooted in the Bible, in both the Old and the New Testament. But we interpret everything we read or

hear, and this includes the Bible. That is the basis for tradition, which is that part of our faith that is in essence an extension or interpretation of the Bible.

Christians differ on how they interpret the Bible. I believe that we should indeed embrace our traditions. One of them is prevenient grace – and this is why I decided in a very deliberate fashion, using my mind, to become a Methodist. We believe that God talks to all people, that no one is born as a condemned person. Furthermore, we are never alone. We are never abandoned. God is always there, inside of us, in the form of grace, actively working to draw us toward God, just as it says in the Gospel of John. We should respect the beliefs, the traditions, of all Christians. But I happen to think we have a very special one that is absolutely correct. We do need to remember, however, that people are right when they say that prevenient grace is not in any way laid out in the Bible in a clearly obvious fashion. We have to accept that part of our faith, our theology, is rooted in tradition. As Methodists, though, our tradition recognizes the right of every person to turn to God and to choose on their own to live in the image of God, to model their lives after the life of Jesus. Please pray very briefly with me.

God, help us understand your Word, your Scripture. Help us use our minds to interpret it correctly. Thank you for leaving us such a deep, thoughtful, rich body of holy knowledge that we can use as the basis of our faith. Amen.