

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

[caption id="" align="alignright" width="350"]



English: The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, painting by Bartholomeus van Bassen, ca. 1620-30 (Photo credit: Wikipedia)[/caption]

During Jesus' ministry, He was appealing to the humble downtrodden people who recognize their guilt and confess their sin, like the woman who came to Jesus in Luke 7:37-50. She was weeping and worshipping Jesus by cleaning His feet with her tears. It doesn't get more humble than that. Therefore Jesus said to her "your sins are forgiven...your faith has saved you, go in peace." This outraged the Pharisees because she was a known sinner, and Jesus had the audacity to say her sins were forgiven when only God can do that. For this reason the religious leaders were rejecting Jesus because they saw salvation as something they alone had earned. Their elitism and fierce pride would mean their doom. In 1Cor. 10, Paul gave the church the example of Israel in the wilderness after the Exodus as a warning to all who are prideful and unbelieving. Israel had seen many miracles done on their behalf, and they left Egypt showered in all the gold and riches of Egypt. God led them out and met their every need with manna from heaven, water, and leading them with the pillar of fire in the cloud. God gave them His Law and set them apart as a favored nation. Then God promised them a new home---a land flowing with milk and honey. But it all went to their head, and in their pride they disobeyed God so that He had to discipline them severely. Out of the millions who left Egypt only two humble believers got to go into the Promised Land. Paul then told the church at Corinth, "Let him who thinks he stands, take heed lest he fall".

People may not admit it, but most have an entitlement problem, they think they deserve Gods favor. When people are successful and all is going well, they are in the biggest danger of presuming upon God. We tend to think that we are deserving, and like the theology of Israel we think our hard work and good life has given us our wealth and our blessings from God. My favorite scene from the movie "Patton" is when he is walking away at the end, and the voice over says, "After winning their great battles, the Romans had victory parades, but there was always one odd fellow standing next to the conqueror whispering 'all glory is fleeting". In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, found in Luke 16, the rich guy found out the hard way that this is true. He thought he had it made, and he had no regard for the poor needy Lazarus, but when they passed away there was a severe reversal of fortune.

Lifestyles of the Rich and the Desperate

Every parable Jesus taught was provoked by a question or a situation in which Jesus' audience was clueless, and therefore Jesus explained a spiritual truth they didn't understand by telling a story they could understand. The context of the parable can be found in Luke 16:13-14. The Pharisees were lovers of money meaning they had put money in the place of God, and they were "scoffing at Jesus" for teaching that sinners could be saved and faithful stewardship was expected by God. The Pharisees even taught that their position and wealth came to them because they were righteous. Jesus told them that they "justified themselves", but God knows their hearts and the things esteemed by men are detestable to God. This begs the question about what is esteemed by men, but detestable to God. Success, wealth, power, social position, and self indulgence are all esteemed by the human race, but love of these things is detestable to God. All of these things are wonderful blessings to be enjoyed, unless people love them instead of God. Loving anything in the place of God is idolatry and a violation of the first commandment.

Therefore Jesus told the parable in Luke 16:19-31 in order to explain God's view of the Pharisees' love of money. The parable has two scenes--first the earthly circumstances of the two men, and then the second scene is in the afterlife when there is a great reversal of fortune. In verses 19-21, the emphasis is on the great contrast between the two different lives of the rich man and the poor man. Clearly the rich man represents the Pharisees in Jesus' day, and Lazarus represents the repentant sinners that are coming to Jesus for forgiveness. We see a clear dramatic difference in their lives now. The rich habitually dressed in the most lavish expensive clothes, had a constant pursuit of pleasure and luxury, and was "gaily living in splendor". For me this presents a problem because this sounds very appealing to me. I have seen many polls that ask questions like "What do you want out of life? Or, what is the purpose of life?" The prevailing answer is always "I want to be happy". Therefore I am not alone in seeing the rich man's life as appealing. Nevertheless, the real meaning of life is to love God and serve Him and glorify Him. The rich man in the parable has committed no specific sin like adultery or murder, but his lifestyle of self indulgence and indifference to others reveals his idolatry.

On the other hand, poor old Lazarus had it really tough. He was very poor, diseased, and neglected. These two characters were truly on the opposite sides of the spectrum, which was Jesus' purpose in further dramatizing the contrast. The name Lazarus in Hebrew means "He whom God helps", which is a good thing because nobody else did. He was habitually hungry, so much so he was grovelling on the ground eating crumbs. Later we find out the rich man knew of Lazarus, so he was just ignoring him. This situation may sound absurd in America, but if you have been in a third world country, you know it is common. You can see outrageous wealth living right next to abject poverty. There is something enticing and deceiving about living in luxury like the guy in the parable. He can shelter himself from the dark realities of life, and busy himself so that he suppresses disturbing realities. This is the nature of man. Our real problems are concealed from us by our busyness from current remarkable prosperity. A more dramatic contrast cannot be imagined than the rich man and Lazarus. Clearly the rich man is the villain in the story, a first century Ebenezer Scrooge ignoring appropriate decencies.

Scene Two--Heaven and Hell

In Luke 16:22-26, Jesus made the second great contrast. Both men die, but they go to different places. Lazarus was met by angels who carried him away to be at "Abraham's side (or chest)". I remember the image of John at the last supper with Jesus, and in his intimacy with Jesus, he leans up against Jesus during the meal. So this expression of Abraham's side is a beautiful way of saying that Lazarus was exalted to a position of the highest honor in heavenly fellowship with the great Patriarch of Israel in Paradise. This is one of the great reversals of fortunes ever imagined. Lazarus has gone from the gutter to heaven's table of honor. Meanwhile, the rich man dies and is just buried, and he awakens in Hades, the abode of the wicked dead. Seeing Lazarus in honor and glory compounded his torment. The rich guy had assumed that he was the son of Abraham. Even now he seems spiritually blind and unrepentant. He still sees Lazarus as a servant, so he begs Abraham to send Lazarus to help him. Abraham very nicely replied that the rich man had practiced his own form of religion that was self serving and self indulgent, but his materialistic life was of no use now. The man had a choice on earth to believe in and follow Jesus, but he had chosen his own way. Choices were made, and now justice is done. Besides that, Abraham made it clear that the situation was irreversible. He had his entire life to believe in the truth, but now it was too late.

In verses 27-31, the rich guy acted as if he had not had any warning. He was treated unfairly, so he begs him to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. This is the usual human nature of shifting the blame. If his brothers just had enough evidence, like a dead man rising from the grave, then they would believe. Abraham corrected him by saying that if they would not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they would not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead. This probably had a double meaning of also Jesus' resurrection from the dead that had no effect on the religious leaders. Confronted with the empty tomb, they just made up a story to cover it up and bribed the guards to lie. The Word of God is sufficient witness, but he simply refused to believe and went his own way. Judging from the witness of Israel in the wilderness, as attested to by Paul in 1 Cor. 10, how much evidence is enough? Did he need the Red Sea parted? Did he need fire from heaven? How about the miracle of feeding the 5,000, or all the healings Jesus did? Hard hearts can never get enough evidence.

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So what can we say? If you have trouble now, believe in Jesus and your hope will be validated in the future. If you are wealthy, healthy, and wise, remember who created you and gave you everything you have. Enjoy everything you have, but give all the glory to Him and serve Him now, instead of yourself. Remember Colossians 3:17, "Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of The Lord Jesus." The rich man was in hell because he did not listen to the Word of God, he had not believed God's truth. It was not his wealth that condemned him, but unbelief. The certainty of judgment is fixed, and if we do not believe in Jesus and fix our hope in Him, then it is not safe to die.

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