

STUDY ON THE PARABLES OF CHRISTIAN LIVING

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Read Luke 16:19-31

Is it a Parable?

There is some question as to whether this story is a true, real-life account or a parable, since two of its characters are named (making it unique among parables). Parable or not, however, there is much we can learn from this passage:

Introduction

In all the Bible, I do not believe there is a story more stirring or more disturbing than that of the rich man and Lazarus. It is stirring for its description of two men, one rich and one poor. They are set in contrast, and the contrast is not only because their circumstances in this life but also between their destinies in the life to come. The later contrast is sharp, absolute, and permanent. The parable is disturbing because of its portrayal of the rich man's suffering. It is the only passage in the entire Bible that describes the actual thoughts, emotions, and words of somebody who is in hell. Hell, itself is described elsewhere. There are warnings against it. But this is the only description of a person suffering in hell.

The Story:

This parable contains the account of an extraordinarily rich man who lived a life of extreme luxury. Laid outside the gate of this rich man's house, however, was an extremely poor man named Lazarus who simply hoped "to eat what fell from the rich man's table" (v21). The rich man was completely indifferent to the plight of Lazarus, showing him no love, sympathy, or compassion whatsoever. Eventually, they both died. Lazarus went to heaven, and the rich man went to hell. Appealing to "Father Abraham" in heaven, the rich man requested that Lazarus be sent to cool his tongue with a drop of water to lessen his "agony in this fire." The rich man also asked Abraham to send Lazarus back to earth to warn his brothers to repent so that they would never join him in hell. Both requests were denied. Abraham told the rich man that if his brothers did not believe in Scripture, neither would they believe a messenger, even if he came straight from heaven.

The Contrast:

The first contrast is an obvious one: the rich man "who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day" and the poor man, Lazarus, who was "full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, the dogs came and licked his sores." (Luke 16:19-21).

It is important to recognize that there is nothing here or elsewhere in the parable that condemns the rich man for being rich or praises the poor man for being poor. It is true that the rich man's riches had hold of his mind and undoubtedly worked to his hurt, for he apparently lived for those and nothing else. It is hard for those who love money to enter heaven.

"For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness and pierced themselves through with many sorrows." (1 Timothy 6:10)

"But know this, that in the last days perilous times will come: For men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boasters, proud, blasphemers, disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unloving, unforgiving, slanderers, without self-control, brutal, despisers of good, traitors, headstrong, haughty, lovers of pleasure

rather than lovers of God, 5 having a form of godliness but denying its power. And from such people turn away!" (2 Timothy 3:1-5)

It is the case that nothing in the parable praises Lazarus for his poverty or condemn the rich man for his wealth. This is merely a description of two men: one rich, one poor. It is the way things were, and It is the way things are. There are always rich men, some of whom go to hell and some of whom go to heaven and this has nothing to do with how wealthy they are. There are always poor men, some of whom go to heaven and some of whom go to hell and for clarity purposes, being poor is not a passport to heaven.

The man who was rich in this world's goods was poor spiritually, while the poor man was rich spiritually. From God's perspective, this is a contrast between a poor rich man and a rich poor man, between one who did not have God although he had much else and one who had God although he lacked all else.

DEATH

The next stage (second contrast) in the story is the death of the two men: "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." (v22). The rich man's burial must have been a fine thing. He had been favoured in life, and some of the trappings of his earthly life must have followed him to the tomb. There would have been great pomp, great wealth, great heaps of flowers, great crowds of mourners. So far as Lazarus is concerned, it is not even said that he was buried, though he may well have been - unceremoniously, without pomp, unattended. But whether rich or poor, both died. In both cases, earthly life was terminated.

That brings us to the third of the parable's contrasts, for according to this story the true riches of Lazarus were enhanced in the life to come, while the true poverty of the rich man was intensified. The rich man had lived without God in this world, so he died without God and had none of Him in the life beyond. On the contrary, he had suffering. We are told that "And being in torments in Hades..." (v23). Lazarus had lived with God here and had even more of Him in heaven. He was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. At that point we have a poor rich man growing poorer and a rich poor man growing richer. Not only did the rich man, who had no share in God, lost God-forever, he lost even those fine things (clothing, housing, and food) that he had. Lazarus not only had God forever, but he also found other blessings besides.

That is what makes hell so terrible and heaven such a blessing. It is not merely that hell is a place of suffering, though it is. It is that the loss of those in hell becomes ever more acute and the desperation of the lost ever more desperate. In heaven, the pleasures of the saints increase forever.

THE MOMENTS AFTER DEATH

Up to now the contrast between the rich man and Lazarus has followed opposite but parallel lines:

1. Earthly riches versus earthly poverty,
2. True poverty versus true riches,
3. An increase in true misery versus an increase in true blessing.

But here the contrast varies. What happened to Lazarus and the rich man in the moments after death? Were they surprised, startled? Were their values in life challenged or reversed? The answer is that Lazarus's outlook remained essentially unchanged. He had known God in life, and God did not disappoint him afterward. If there was any difference in his experience, it was merely in a growing awareness and appreciation or what he already had.

With the rich man, it was quite different. Death for him was a rude shock, the rudest of all awakenings. It overthrew his value system entirely and introduced him to thoughts he never believed he would have. We may say of the poor rich man that he became richer in knowledge while he became poorer in his spiritual state.

He became richer in three areas. First, we are told that in Hades *"he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom"* (v. 23). The rich man had never looked up to heaven in this life. If he even believed in heaven, it was with that kind of head knowledge that the devils have and do not profit by; and he may actually have doubted heaven's existence. He might have said, as many do today, "The only heaven that exists is the one I am able to make for myself here, and the only hell that exists is the hell some of us endure on earth." How that changed in the first moments after death! The rich man may have thought that dying was itself a hell, his only hell. But when he died, he discovered that, far from being hell, even death was heaven compared to what he was now suffering. Lifting up his eyes he saw Lazarus and Abraham in heaven *"afar off."*

I do not know whether our Lord means to teach here that those in hell can literally see those who are in heaven and that those in heaven can see those who are in hell. He may mean that. But again, it may be only figurative language. But what does it matter? If it is not a literal seeing with the eyes, it is at least a seeing with the understanding. And it means that in the moments following death, though the rich man may not have had any thoughts for heaven in this life, he now learned that there was a heaven as well as a hell and knew that he was not in heaven.

The second area in which that poor rich man became richer in knowledge was prayer. Not only did he come to know something that he did not know before, but he also did something that he had not done before. He began to pray, being convinced now that there was a reason to pray and something to pray for. He made many mistakes in prayer, as one would expect from a man who had not spent his life seeking and serving God. He prayed to Abraham instead of to God the Father. That was worthless because only God answers prayer.

Again, he asked for the impossible: *"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."* (v24). When Abraham replied that this was not possible (*"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"* v26), the rich man asked for another impossibility: *"Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'" (vv27-28).* That also was useless (*"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."* v31). Still, despite of his errors about the only true object and nature of prayer, that was at least a genuine and heartfelt spiritual petition.

I do not mean to suggest that the rich man never did in life what we sometimes call praying, that is, "saying his prayers." He may well have. He was a Jew. He was probably an outstanding member of his community, and such people generally act religious. The rich man probably went to the synagogue and did what was expected of him. He would have recited prayers. But in all his life the rich man had not really prayed. No genuine, heart-rending, honest, God-seeking prayer had ever fallen from his lips. Yet now he was dead, and in the first moments after death he prayed. He prayed with more passion than he had ever shown for anything before.

The third thing the rich man learned is tragic: that his prayer was too late. In learning that, he must have suffered the extremes of despair. It is hard to imagine a tragedy greater than this one. To miss an opportunity is bad. To miss the greatest opportunity of all—the opportunity for life with God in heaven is

terrible. But to miss that forever and to know that you have missed it is a tragedy almost beyond endurance. Yet that is what Jesus said the rich man experienced. That was his fate.

In that we are introduced to one last contrast. The final contrast: between the hopelessness of the rich man's condition after death and the hopefulness of his condition before. After death, there is no possibility of change. But in this life, there is, and therefore we can rightly say "where there's life, there's hope," spiritually speaking.

This is the note on which I end: the opportunity that all who hear this parable still have, rather than on the end of opportunity that will come when death takes us. No matter who you are or what you may or may not have done, you are not yet in the position of the rich man who prayed but who, because he prayed in hell, prayed too late. For you it is not too late. You can pray; you can find God now. You can turn from sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ as your Saviour. You can come to Christ in many ways, but it is only through Christ that you can come to heaven (John 14:6).

Do not wait for signs. Do not wait for miracles. Abraham said that the brothers of the rich man would not believe even "*if someone should rise from the dead.*" You have the Scriptures, the Bible, and the story says. "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them" (v29). Listen to that word. Jesus said, "These are the very scriptures that testify about me" (John 5:39 KJV).

If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ, I commend this Word to you. I urge it on you for your soul's sake.

Summary & Conclusion

1. Jesus teaches here that heaven and hell are both real, literal places.
2. When believers die, they are immediately in the conscious fellowship and joys of heaven. When unbelievers die, they are just as immediately in the conscious pain, suffering, and torment of hell.
3. There is no consolation or opportunity to repent in hell. The rich man knew there was no escape. He was eternally separated from God, and Abraham made it clear to him that there was no hope of ever mitigating his pain, suffering, or sorrow. Those in hell will perfectly recollect missed opportunities and their rejection of the gospel.
4. The scripture (word of God) is God's message to His world. There are consequences of believing or not believing it. Abraham's words in verses 29 and 31 referring to "Moses and the Prophets" (Scripture) confirms that understanding the revealed Word of God has the power to turn unbelief into faith (Hebrew 4:12; James 1:18; 1 Peter 1:23).
5. Eternal life is only found in Christ. "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life" (1 John 5:11-12). The truth is, if we wish to live apart from God during our time on earth, He will grant us our wish for eternity as well.

