

Luke 16:19-31 The Rich Man and Lazarus

In *The Weight of Glory*, C. S. Lewis wrote that “there are no ordinary people . . . it is immortals whom we joke with, marry, snub, and exploit - immortal horrors or everlasting splendors.” Everyone we meet, everyone we see, everyone we talk to, is an everlasting being.

Jesus talked often of eternity, and when He did, He usually spoke of Hell. He said that it was a place of eternal torment and, rather disturbingly to many, He insisted that *most* people would go there when they died.

“⁴⁹This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:49-50).

“If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out” (Mark 9:43).

“Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able to” (Luke 13:24).

“If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned” (John 15:6).

While many argue that it is unfair for God to create beings and then either send, or allow, them to go to Hell, we need not defend God. His nature is perfect, His plan is perfect, and His ways are perfect. No one is in Hell who does not deserve to be there, and God is under no constraint to be gracious and merciful to everyone. Rather, such a truth as Hell ought to embolden the believer to be vigorous in sharing the gospel.

The reality is that most Americans believe in Heaven, and most who believe, think they are going there. In fact, most people are going to Hell. That means that most people will awaken in eternity to a great, and tragic, surprise. “²²Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ ²³Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (Matthew 7:22-23).

To the Jews of Jesus’ day, riches were certain proof of God’s special favor. We remember that illness or tragedy was a sign of God’s disfavor and implied that the person concerned was sinful. Conversely, if one was wealthy and enjoyed health and material blessings, it was a sign that they were spiritually upright and worthy of what God had bestowed upon them. This was one reason why Jesus’ teachings on wealth were so difficult for the disciples to understand. Jesus taught that material possessions in this world actually made it *less* likely that a person would be among the saved. “²³Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘how hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!’ ²⁴The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, ‘children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God’” (Mark 10:23-25).

With our passage today, some have pondered whether Jesus was telling a parable or teaching about a real event. In no other parable do we have Jesus using a specific name. Yet, there is nothing out of place with the use of a name in this story, especially since the names of Abraham and Moses are used as well. And the specific choice of the name Lazarus had other implications for the audience. Also, that Jesus began with “now there was a rich man” (v. 19) is indicative of storytelling. In addition, there is a connection between this passage and that which precedes it in Luke’s narrative. Chapter 15 contained three parables that spoke to the Pharisees having the wrong attitude toward sinners. In chapter 16, Jesus has talked about having the wrong attitude toward possessions. The main character in this story was certainly someone who had enjoyed great wealth. He was, no doubt, highly regarded by men. Yet, as we learned recently, “what people value highly is detestable in God’s sight” (Luke 16:15).

This was a story of contrasts. One character was rich, the other poor. One lived in a large home, the other was homeless. One was presumably healthy (at least until he died) and the other was infected with disease. One could move about as he pleased, the other was physically unable to walk. One man had no needs, the other had none of his needs met. One was honored, the other mocked and scorned. One was considered blessed, the other a worthless sinner. One man had dignity, the other shame. And then they died.

And the contrasts continued. One was eternally happy, the other eternally in pain. One was comfortable, the other in torment. One sat at a Heavenly banquet, the other could not quench his thirst. One was satisfied, the other suffered. One no longer had any needs, the other was eternally longing and unsatisfied.

In Life

The man was indeed “a rich man” (v. 19). Yet this was not the issue. God has no problem with wealth. Abraham, Isaac, David, Solomon, and Joseph of Arimathea were all wealthy men. They all had vast estates and some even kingdoms at their command. The problem was the way this man displayed his wealth for all to see. He “habitually dressed in purple and fine linen” (v. 19).

The purple dye was obtained from sea snails. It took a great deal of labor (and snails) to produce the dye, so naturally it was very expensive. So much so, that purple was considered the color of royalty in the Roman empire. The linen undergarment was also valuable as it would have been made from cotton imported from Egypt. Clearly he “gaily lived in splendor every day” (v. 19). The implication was not just that the man was wealthy, but that he was ostentatiously so.

In contrast, there was “a certain poor man named Lazarus (v. 20). This word for poor describes someone in the most extreme state of poverty. The wretched man was absolutely destitute. Mark used the same word to describe the poor widow who put in two copper coins as her offering (Mark 12:42-44). Paul used the word in writing to the Galatian church to portray things of this world as worthless (Galatians 4:9). Jesus gave the man a name which means “God has helped.” Certainly it might not have seemed so at the time, but the story was not yet finished.

The poor man had been “laid at the gate” (v. 20) of the wealthy man’s estate. This showed he was unable to walk, perhaps paralyzed and abandoned by those who no longer could, or wanted to, care for him. He

was “covered with sores” (v. 20). That is, he had either a skin condition, or some more extensive physical illness that infected his entire body. He must have found it difficult to find a comfortable position, lying in the dirt and exposed to the elements. “Even the dogs were coming and licking his sores (v. 21). These were not our cute little domesticated pets, but rather wild scavengers who roamed the streets looking for scraps.

He poor man “longed to be fed with the crumbs” (v. 21) that fell from the rich man’s table. These crumbs would be dry crusts of bread that dinner guests would be given to wipe their hands on and then be tossed to the floor. That the man ‘longed’ for these scraps implied that he did not even receive this handout from the wealthy man. Instead the pieces were simply swept up and thrown into the garbage.

We can immediately appreciate that a person’s worldly condition is not an indicator of their standing with God. In the last day, men are not weighed according to their income, influence, or possessions, but according to the grace they have been given by God.

“²⁶For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; ²⁷but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong” (1 Corinthians 1:26).

“²³Thus says the Lord, ‘let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; ²⁴but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things,’ declares the Lord” (Jeremiah 9:23-24).

This was uncomfortable news to the Pharisees who were listening. As we have come to understand, to Jews earthly blessing was a sign of righteousness and worldly troubles a sign of sinful character. We have learned better. We know that just as wealth is not a mark of God’s special favor, neither is poverty a sign of His disapproval. If we are poor we should not complain or envy. If we are rich we should not be prideful or become complacent.

In Death

Eventually both men died. There is no evidence that the poor man was buried. If he was it must have been a dingy affair. Instead, Jesus said that “he was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom” (v. 22). There is no biblical precedent for angels performing such a duty, and the phrase “Abraham’s bosom” appears only here in Scripture, so we may conclude that Jesus is using a literary convention to enhance the story, not describing a literal act. It was to describe the poor man as being taken to a place of honor - to a place of intimacy with God. To recline in Abraham’s bosom conjures up the intimacy of John the evangelist doing the same with Jesus.

But again, the illustration was not meant to be literal. The place to which we go is an unknown country. Books have been written, and Scripture gives some hints, but the reality of Heaven or Hell is beyond our human understanding. It is an eternal place. What we do know for certain, and what we can rejoice in and look forward to, is that we are with Christ, “but I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better” (Philippians 1:23).

When the rich man died, no doubt he was buried with all the ceremony his station merited. There would have been hired mourners and a great public display of grief. Many would have attended, just to be in the company of the well-to-do. No expense would have been spared. The man died as he had lived - ostentatiously.

Another immediate application is that everyone dies. This is obvious, yet so many people live as if it were not true. Despite what Scripture clearly teaches and what we experience personally, people live today as if they would live forever. Yet we know that “¹⁹for the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. ²⁰ . . . All came from the dust and all return to the dust” (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20).

In Eternity

The rich man awakened in eternity to find himself “in Hades” (v. 23). The popular view of Hades is that it is where all people go after death - believers and unbelievers alike. It is seen as the equivalent of the Old Testament place called Sheol, where believers and unbelievers alike resided after death. However, in this passage it is clear that the place is one of suffering and torment. Also, in the account of Luke 10:15 “and you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You will be brought down to Hades!” Hades is contrasted with Heaven. In New Testament passages, Hades is the place where the damned abide until their final judgment and sentence.

The wealthy man “lifted up his eyes” (v. 23). When he did so “he saw Abraham, far away, and Lazarus in his bosom” (v. 23). Again, this is a parable, and not a geographic accounting of the afterlife. Seeing Abraham, “he cried out and said, “father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue” (v. 23).

He called to Father Abraham for pity, though he, himself, had never extended such to the poor beggar at his gate. He cried for mercy, though he had never shown any. Furthermore, he still saw Lazarus as beneath him socially; Lazarus was no more than a servant. Lazarus was so insignificant that he ought to leave Heaven and come to Hell just to serve the rich man. What calloused and unrepentant behavior!

Also, notice that the rich man does not appeal to God, but simply to Abraham. He does not deny his guilt or question his eternal placement. He makes no self-defense. He wants only pity and immediate relief from suffering. We know that everyone eventually comes to believe. There are no atheists in Hell. Many may be surprised to be there. Many may understand what Esau felt when he squandered his birthright for a bowl of stew. It is worth considering that there is a sense in which we can understand that people in Hell do not convert. They do not change their wickedness. They may regret, but they do not repent.

Consequently, we must never forget that Hell is as real as Heaven. “⁷The Lord Jesus will be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, ⁸dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus” (2 Thessalonians 1:7-8). The rich man was “in agony in this flame” (v. 24). Flame is the most often used biblical reference to the torments of Hell.

“Sinners in Zion are terrified;
Trembling has seized the godless.
Who among us can live with the consuming fire?
Who among us can live with continual burning?” (Isaiah 33:14).

“His winnowing fork is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clear His threshing floor; and He will gather His wheat into the barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Matthew 3:12).

⁴³If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than, having your two hands, to go into hell, into the unquenchable fire, ⁴⁴[where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] ⁴⁵If your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame, than, having your two feet, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁶[where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.] ⁴⁷If your eye causes you to stumble, throw it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than, having two eyes, to be cast into hell, ⁴⁸where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:43-48).

“Just as Sodom and Gomorrah and the cities around them, since they in the same way as these indulged in gross immorality and went after strange flesh, are exhibited as an example in undergoing the punishment of eternal fire” (Jude 7).

“He also will drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is mixed in full strength in the cup of His anger; and he will be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels and in the presence of the Lamb” (Revelation 14:10).

But the rich man’s request was both improper and impossible. “Abraham said, ‘child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony’” (v. 25). Abraham called him son as an indication of their genetic relationship. Abraham was seen by the Jews as the father of all believers. Yet, despite this filial relationship on which the Pharisees built their theology, the rich man had no basis for his request. He was getting just what he deserved. He had made wealth his priority and he had enjoyed that wealth. He had chosen a life of pleasure and self-satisfaction and God had allowed him to have it. But now that was of no use. He had not stored up treasures in heaven.

Furthermore, the request was impossible. Abraham continued, “besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, in order that those who wish to come over from here to you may not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us” (v. 26). The request was impossible because there is a vast chasm between Heaven and Hell. The geography of the region was lacerated with gorges and ravines, getting across which was impossible. The audience understood and appreciated the illustration. Jesus was embedding in the minds of His audience that eternal states are fixed. There may be deathbed conversions, but there are no conversions after death.

The Meaning

The man made one final plea. ²⁷He said, ‘then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father’s house - ²⁸for I have five brothers - in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment’” (v. 27-28). But this, too was denied. “Abraham said, ‘they have Moses and the Prophets; let

them hear them” (v. 29). The man countered, “no, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!” (v. 30). But Abraham was unconvinced and remained adamant, “he said to him, ‘if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead’” (v. 31).

Even here we must wonder at the wealthy man’s motives. Was he concerned for his brothers or merely making an excuse for himself, suggesting that if only he had been warned he would have lived differently? Perhaps he wanted to warn his brothers so they would not blame him when they died and found themselves in the same miserable condition. It is worth noticing that he is not concerned for mankind in general, but only his five brothers.

We must remember that the man was not sent to Hell because he was rich, or even because he lived splendidly. While it may be more difficult for the rich to enter the kingdom of Heaven, that is due to the complacency and self-sufficiency that riches allow rather than the riches themselves. Being wealthy is no offense at all and while living ostentatiously may be a sin, it is certainly not one that would, of itself, keep a person from Heaven.

The man obviously was religious. He was familiar with the Old Testament and its laws. He even understood the need to repent, as he referenced his five brothers. There is no evidence that the man had committed any terrible sins. He clearly ignored the opportunity to do good to the poor beggar at his gates, but Jesus gave no indication that the man was otherwise more wicked than anyone else.

In fact, even if the man had been generous to Lazarus, would he still have wound up in Hell? Could his good works have saved him? Some might argue that such is the point of the story, that the rich man was in Hell because of his actions toward Lazarus. But is not that an example of works religion? Is a person’s eternal destiny determined by what he or she does? I do not think Scripture teaches that.

The point of the parable is that the man deserved Hell because he had refused to believe in, and act on, the truth he was given. That is the only reason anyone goes to either Heaven or Hell. The rich man needed to:

Believe in what the Old Testament says about a sovereign, holy Creator God,
“Your eyes are too pure to approve evil,
And You can not look on wickedness with favor” (Habakkuk 1:13).

Understand the need of repentance,
“Therefore I will judge you, O house of Israel, each according to his conduct, declares the Lord God. Repent and turn away from all your transgressions, so that iniquity may not become a stumbling block to you” (Ezekiel 18:30).

Recognize that salvation came by God’s sovereign grace,
“And He said, ‘I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the Lord before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion’” (Exodus 33:19).

Appreciate that God’s salvation and forgiveness was appropriated by faith,

“Then he believed in the Lord; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness”
(Genesis 15:6).

And finally, he needed to believe that both Moses and the Prophets pointed to a coming Messiah,
“The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your
countrymen, you shall listen to him” (Deuteronomy 18:15).

⁴“Surely our griefs He Himself bore,
And our sorrows He carried;
Yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken,
Smitten of God, and afflicted.

⁵But He was pierced through for our transgressions,
He was crushed for our iniquities;
The chastening for our well-being fell upon Him,
And by His scourging we are healed.

⁶All of us like sheep have gone astray,
Each of us has turned to his own way;
But the Lord has caused the iniquity of us all
To fall on Him” (Isaiah 53:4-6).

The story of another Lazarus (John 11) bears out the truth that a visitor from beyond the grave is not a great evangelistic tool. After the raising of that Lazarus news spread (as you would expect it might) to the local religious leaders. Their response was predictable, ⁴⁷“Therefore the chief priests and the Pharisees convened a council, and were saying, “what are we doing? For this man is performing many signs. ⁴⁸If we let Him go on like this, all men will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation” (John 11:47-48).

And even when Jesus, Himself, was raised from the dead, hearts did not soften,

¹¹Now while they were on their way, some of the guard came into the city and reported to the chief priests all that had happened. ¹²And when they had assembled with the elders and consulted together, they gave a large sum of money to the soldiers, ¹³and said, ‘you are to say, “His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we were asleep.” ¹⁴And if this should come to the governor’s ears, we will win him over and keep you out of trouble.’ ¹⁵And they took the money and did as they had been instructed; and this story was widely spread among the Jews, and is to this day” (Matthew 28:11-15).

We learn lastly that no amount of signs and wonders can move the hearts of men if they will not believe the Word of God. Scripture contains all that we need to know. It contains all that man has ever needed to know. It is not more evidence that is required, but more faith.

Takeaways

Yes this is a parable, but still there is truth here though. There is truth in the fact that in eternity people are conscious. The rich man was “in torment” (v. 23). And it is true that some are saved and others are not. The rich man and the poor man are eternally separated. And finally, it is also clear that the eternal condition is fixed and unchangeable. In light of these truths, may God empower us to share the truth of His Word enthusiastically, consistently, and honestly.