

LUKE 16.19-31: THE PARABLE OF THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

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Did you hear the story of the three men who died in a car accident Christmas Eve? They all find themselves at the pearly gates waiting to enter Heaven. Peter standing at the gate says that they must present something relating or associated with Christmas.

- The first man searches his pocket, and finds some mistletoe, so he is allowed in.
- The second man presents a cracker, so he is also allowed in.
- The third man pulls out a pair of stockings. Confused at this last gesture, St. Peter asks, "*How do these represent Christmas?*" Answer... "*They're Carol's*"

Just as we have our stories about heaven and Peter at the pearly gates, so too the Jews had their stories about heaven and Abraham.

It has been suggested that Jesus himself borrowed one such story and adapted it.

Whether or not that is true, Jesus did on one occasion tell a story about a rich man and a beggar meeting Abraham in heaven.

A STORY OF CONTRASTS

The parable of the rich man and the beggar is a story of contrasts.

The first contrast relates to names

- The rich man surprisingly has no name. True, traditionally he has been called *Dives*, but that name is simply taken from the Vulgate, the first official Latin translation of the Bible. There the Latin word for a rich man is simply '*Dives*', meaning a rich man
- The beggar, on the other hand, has a name. He is called **Lazarus**. The very fact that he had a name would have come as a surprise to some of Jesus' listeners. As far as they were concerned, the poor – well, there were so many of them, they were nameless. But the poor man in this story is given the name of **Lazarus**. The name '*Lazarus*' may well have been significant. It '*God helps*'. A reminder that although he may have been poor and miserable, God was actually on his side. Indeed, the thrust of both Old and New Testaments is that the poor have a very special place in the heart of God.

A second contrast relates to wealth

- The rich man clearly was loaded. The parable implies that he lived in veritable mansion. This however is not clear in the GNB, which speaks of Lazarus being brought to the rich man's "**door**" (v20). The NRSV & other versions bring out the fact that Lazarus was brought to his "**gate**" (so NRSV): i.e. the rich man lived in a mansion surrounded by a wall designed to keep the poor at a distance.
- By contrast Lazarus had no money. He appears to have been disabled – do notice that he had "**to be brought**" to the rich man's door. He clearly couldn't walk, and therefore he couldn't work. All he could do was to beg. In those days there were no disability benefits.

A third contrast relates to clothing.

- The rich man was “**dressed in the most expensive clothes**” (v19). Literally, he “**was dressed in purple and fine linen**” (NRSV). ‘**Purple**’ was rare and therefore expensive because of the difficult process of obtaining the best dye from marine snails. It therefore tended to be the mark of royalty. Perhaps in our terms we might say that he was dressed in a Savile row suit.
- By contrast Lazarus is described as being “**covered with sores**” (v20). Presumably he was dressed in rags – but it was his “**sores**” rather than his rags which were noticeable. Indeed, we are told that “**Even the dogs would come and lick his sores**” (vv20,21). Incidentally, in those days dogs were not kept as household pets – these dogs were almost certainly scavengers seeking nourishment.

A fourth contrast relates to diet

- The rich man “**lived in great luxury every day**” (v19): or as the NRSV more accurately renders this phrase: he “**feasted sumptuously every day**”. He never had to make do with baked beans on toast and a cup of tea – rather the best of meats and the best of wines were his.
- Lazarus by contrast had to make do with **the bits of food that fell from the rich man’s table**” (v21). These “**bits of food**” were not the odd pea or piece of meat that the rich man and his guests failed to spear properly. Jesus was not referring to messy eaters. You have to remember that in Jesus’ day people didn’t use knives, forks and serviettes – instead people used their hands to eat. Rich people used to wipe their hands on pieces of bread and then throw them under the table. It was these dirty pieces of bread which Lazarus was reduced to eating.

A fifth contrast relates to their fate in the afterlife:

- “**The poor man died and was carried by the angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven**” (v22). I.e. Lazarus, who had never had a proper meal in his life now finds himself at a heavenly banquet. What’s more, at this banquet he is given a place of honour – he finds himself sitting next Abraham himself
- The rich man, by contrast, when he died, finds himself not in heaven but in what Jesus called ‘**Hades**’ (v23), hell in our terms. There he was racked by thirst and tormented by flame. While Lazarus is living it up with Abraham, the rich man has nothing to drink – let alone to eat. The tables have been well and truly turned. In the afterlife it is not Lazarus who is the beggar, but the rich man. He is reduced to begging Abraham to help him.

Jesus’ hearers would have been greatly surprised by this ending. They would have assumed that riches were a sign of God’s blessing – and that therefore in the after-life God would have continued to bless the rich man. Similarly, they would have assumed that Lazarus’ disability was a sign of the presence of sin – and that his poverty was a sign of God’s curse upon his life. The fact that he ended up with Abraham in heaven would have really thrown them.

Well, enough of the story. What was Jesus trying to teach through this parable?

1. THE RICH NEED TO CARE FOR THE POOR

It is important to make clear that Jesus did not condemn the rich man because he was rich. The rich man did not go to hell because of his wealth.

True, Jesus said: “**How hard it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God! It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle**” (Lk 18.24,25). But Jesus did not say it is impossible for rich people to enter God’s Kingdom – just hard. It is hard in the sense that rich people, precisely because of their wealth, are more easily tempted to be self-sufficient, in the sense of believing that they can live life without God.

But riches in themselves do not prevent people from entering the Kingdom of God.

Similarly, although it may be easier for poor people to recognise their need of God, this does not mean to say that they inevitably enter God’s Kingdom. Lazarus, for instance, could have rejected God – he could have become bitter and cursed God.

As it is, his very name suggests that he trusted God to help him in his need.

Here we have a reminder that the circumstances of life are never ultimately responsible for shaping us. This is where we are different from the animals.

Each one of us is responsible to God for the people we are.

When the day comes when we have to give an account of our lives to God, we cannot point to our home background or to the way in which life has treated us as an excuse for not acknowledging and obeying him.

Ultimately our fate is in our hands!

No, the rich man did not go to hell because he was rich – but because he neglected a poor man like Lazarus.

To be fair to the rich man, he wasn’t cruel. He didn’t object to Lazarus taking the bread which had fallen from his table; he didn’t kick Lazarus and tell him to get out of his house.

For all we know he was a God-fearing man who went every Saturday to the synagogue. His sin was that he never really noticed Lazarus, he accepted him as part of the landscape. As far as he was concerned, there are rich people and there are poor people – and if you are poor, well then hunger and pain are your lot.

He failed to take note of the teaching of Lev 19.18 to “**love your neighbour as you love yourself**” (Lev 19.18). And in particular he failed to take note of the teaching of Scripture that we should care for the poor. In the words of Deut 15.7,8,10: “**If... there is a fellow-Israelite in need, then do not be selfish and refuse to help him. Instead, be generous... Give to him freely and unselfishly**”

The rich man’s sin was that he did nothing. His was a sin of omission.

The parable does not attack wealth ‘per se’, but rather wealth that does not see poverty and suffering. It attacks the idea that possessions are for one’s own use and that they are owned without responsibility to God and other people.

The parable does not tell us how the wealthy are to assist the poor, but it insists that the poor are brothers and sisters of the wealthy; and that the injustice of the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty are not to be tolerated.

I confess that I find this a very difficult parable – as indeed, I would imagine we all do. For the fact is that we are more like the rich man than we are like Lazarus.

OK, we may not earn top city salaries, we may be feeling the credit crunch, we may be worried about how we are going to pay our food bills and our bills for heat and light, but compared to millions of people in this world we are rich.

The things that we deem to be necessities are luxuries as far as they are concerned – our food, housing, health, education, & transport bear no comparison with the food, housing, health, education and transport which most people in this world experience.

Many years ago Albert Schweitzer, the great theologian left his studying and his organizing to go to Africa, and said of his fellow Europeans: “*We are Dives* (i.e. the rich man).... *Out there in the colonies, however, sits wretched Lazarus*”.

The situation has not changed – in the Western World we live luxuriously, while many live only at subsistence level.

Jesus makes it clear in this parable that it is not enough to be religious – it was not enough for the rich man to be ‘**a son of Abraham**’; or in our terms, it is not enough to go to church – we need to care for the poor.

2. **WOE BETIDE US IF WE DO NOT CARE FOR THE POOR**

If we do not care for the poor in this life, God will not care for us in the next. Just as in the parable of the sheep and the goats, those who didn’t care for the hungry and the thirsty were sent away to “**eternal punishment**” (Matt 25.46), so the rich man who was indifferent to the needs of the beggar outside his house is sent to hell.

In this respect, let me draw your attention to four things.

First, Jesus believed in the reality of hell.

Hell is not an invention of the medieval church. Time and again Jesus talked about their being two ways – the one which leads to life, and the one that leads to death.

Most Christians today find it hard to talk about hell. Indeed, because of the excesses to which some Christians have gone in describing the fate of those who have turned their back on God, some Christians refuse to talk about hell at all.

But the fact is that if this is a moral universe, then ultimately justice has to be done: one day our past and present will catch up with us.

For those who turn their back on God and his ways, the outlook is grim.

Secondly, hell is a place of pain.

Three times in the parable hell is described as a place of “**pain**” (v23, v24, and v25), and twice the adjective “**great**” is used to intensify this sense of pain (v23, v25). Other versions speak of it being a place of “**agony**” and of “**torment**” (so NRSV).

True, we mustn’t press every detail. We are dealing here with a parable. Jesus is using picture language. He is telling a story – but a story which expresses truth.

I personally don’t believe that those in hell are literally racked by thirst and tormented by flame. But even if there is no physical pain, the pain of lostness will be immense.

The clear teaching of Jesus is that hell is going to be a highly unpleasant place. Jesus on many occasions spoke of it being a place where “**people will cry and grind their teeth**” (Matt 13.50).

Thirdly, hell is a place of consciousness

On the basis of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus hell would appear not just a place of oblivion. Rather, the story suggests that hell is characterised by a continuing consciousness of surroundings and a memory of one's past.

The rich man did not simply die – rather in the afterlife he became aware of what he was missing out upon. He could see Lazarus sitting beside Abraham at the feast in heaven (v22). Helmut Thielicke, the great German theologian and preacher of a past generation, wrote: “*The opposite of the peace of God, and thus of the fulfilment of life, is not the silence of extinction, which may be what the poor suicide is looking for... The opposite of eternal rest and security is to be compelled to endure that state in which everything is forfeited forever, in which the splendour of the eternal majesty no longer lights but consumes us*”. I.e. Hell is to be forced to see the glory of God and to have no access to it.

Fourthly, hell is a place of no second chances.

Between Lazarus and the rich man there was “**a deep pit (chasm)**” which nobody could cross (v26). The rich man wasn't in purgatory, being gradually cleansed of his sin: he was well and truly damned.

The fact is that eternity is determined by how we live in this life.

If we don't take seriously God and his demands in this life, it will be too late in the next.

It is a sobering picture of the after-life which Jesus draws

3. DO SOMETHING ABOUT THE POOR NOW!

The story is a call to action – and in particular, it is a call to us to take action.

It is important to realise that the parable doesn't finish at v26 where the Rich Man is in torment, but at v31 where the focus is on the Rich Man's five brothers.

Indeed, the second part of the parable is probably more important than the first.

As a result we could argue that we should not call this the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, but rather ‘the parable of the six brothers’.

But at the end of the day the focus is neither on Lazarus nor on his brothers – but rather upon us. Or to put it another way – we are the five brothers. We are the living – and it is our future that depends on how we respond again to God and his Word.

Listen again to the parable: “**I beg you, father Abraham**”, said the rich man, “**send Lazarus to my father's house, where I have five brothers. Let him go and warn them so that they, at least, will not come to this place of pain**” (vv27, 28)

But Abraham refuses: “**Your brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them; your brothers should listen to what they say**”.

The fact is that just as Abraham refused to give the brothers extra proof of what God demands, so God refuses to give us extra proof.

God has made his will abundantly clear, not just in the Old Testament, but also in the New. It is not enough just to believe in God – we need to put our faith into action.

Faith without action is not faith at all.

- As James wrote in his letter: “**Suppose there are brothers or sisters who need clothes and don't have enough to eat. What good is there in your saying to**

them, ‘God bless you! Keep warm and eat well!’ – if you don’t give them the necessities of life? So it is with faith; if it is alone and includes no actions, then it is dead” (Jas 2.15-17).

- **John in his 1st letter says much the same thing: “Rich people who see a brother or sister in need, yet close their hearts against them, cannot claim that they love God. My children, our love should not be just words and talk; it must be true love, which shows itself in action” (1 John 3.7,18)**

Special signs are not required to know the will of God.

God has already made his will known – in the teachings of Scripture in general, and in the teaching of Jesus in particular. From this we see that any gospel that is not good news to the poor is not the gospel of Jesus.

Let’s go back to the Rich Man. He thought he was OK because he was a Jew – because he could trace his ancestry back to Abraham. Three times he addressed Abraham as his “**father**” (vv24, 25, 27) – he thought perhaps he could do a deal with Abraham.

But a family connection even with God himself is not enough.

We need to be personally connected with God and with his son Jesus Christ.

A sign of that connection is that we love the people whom Jesus loves – and Jesus loves the poor, the disabled, the marginalised.

If we would be saved the fate of the Rich Man, then we need to open our eyes and see Lazarus and his fellows at our gate!

Yes, the parable is a call to action – a call to action now!