Text: Luke 16:19-31
Title: The Rich Man and Lazarus
Truth: God expects us to repent when we hear the testimony of the Bible.
Date/Location: Sunday 7/2/2017; revised 12/1/2024 at FBC

Introduction

This is a story of two men and a book. The men had quite different stations in life. They had different deaths. They have different experiences in eternity.

Is this a parable or a report of an actual occurrence? I take it to be a parable, but one that is so reflective of real life that it may be like a historical fiction where just the names have been changed to protect the innocent (or guilty). One indication that it might be reflective of real life is that Jesus *names* the poor man—Lazarus—something He does not do in any other parable. In all other parables, the characters are generic, unnamed individuals. In any case, the story is effective because it transports us right into the events so it might as well be real for us, because it will be real for every human some day.

I. The Different Life Situation of Two Men, v. 19-21

A. The rich man did not have to concern himself with food or clothing because he had plenty. He lived in a gated home (v. 20 indicates this). He was dressed to the nines and ate a feast every day. He did not eat utilitarian meals. He fared sumptuously *every day*. In other words, his basic needs were easily met, and much more. Despite a ready-made opportunity for benevolence, he did not help Lazarus who was daily at his gate.

Jesus does not name the rich man. This makes him less personal, but still applicable to anyone who sits in the lap of luxury (like many of us).

B. The beggar is named Lazarus. The name makes his situation more personal. He is not the same as the Lazarus in John 11–12. He had a severe physical problem in which sores covered his body. The language “he was laid at the gate” uses a rare verb form called a pluperfect passive. It is not just "he was there" but "he *had been laid* there" at a time prior to the beginning of the parable. He was there all the time, perhaps every day, or 24x7 in the closing days of his life. This "laying" was done by someone else to Lazarus, indicating that he was unable to move about on his own power. I picture a situation where he was "put" there by others who hoped help would be forthcoming. He was

"relegated to the corner." Also, he was *outside* the rich man's home. Agonizingly close to relief and tasty food, yet he was far enough away that all he could hope for was crumbs. He would gladly have picked out of the dumpster some table scraps to eat if he had the physical capacity to reach into the dumpster.

The situation was even more pathetic, Jesus says, because dogs came and licked the man's sores. At least the dogs were compassionate to the man, but this just shows how low he was.

Note: "Wound licking" is instinctive in animals. The action of the animal's tongue can remove debris from the wound. And there are some healing properties in the saliva of animals. But there can also be bacteria and other contaminants that can have negative effects.

II. The Different Deaths of the Two Men, v. 22

A. Given his condition, it is no surprise that the beggar died. He perished without money, probably hungry, and all alone except for perhaps the dogs.

Jesus says it matter-of-factly. That is the way of life. We all know that our turn is coming. We try to avoid thinking about it too much. We might do some preparing for it; others ignore it altogether with the idea that when they are gone, someone else will take care of them and they will not have to worry.

B. The Lord indicates that among the ministries that angels perform (Hebrews 1:14), attending the death of a believer is one assigned task. Although the text of Scripture does not explicitly say that this happens for *every* believer, I believe that such is the case. What the angels did for Lazarus was transport his spirit from his body into the presence of Abraham in paradise, which is also known as Abraham's bosom. The angels see to it that when we die and become absent from the body, our spirits are immediately ushered or transported into the presence of Christ. They accompany and/or carry us there. This is a metaphysical event that cannot be measured with scientific (naturalistic) instruments, and so the only way we can know it is through divine revelation.

There are no comforts or encouragements in death itself, but with faith in Christ and angelic attendants, there is some comfort for a Christian at her passing.

C. In the course of time, the rich man also died. His sumptuous meals and fine clothing did not prevent him from reaching his end. He arrived at

death more comfortably than Lazarus, full of food, with plenty of money, and perhaps surrounded by a loving family. But what we read shows that the pleasures he experienced in his earthly, temporary life were far outweighed by his misery in the afterlife.

D. Note that the beggar was *carried by the angels* while the rich man was just *buried*. The difference is enormous. Both men's bodies were certainly disposed, probably by burial. (I hope that the beggar's body was not left exposed to be eaten by animals.) But burial of the body is all the good the rich man experienced in his death. His family may have had an elaborate funeral for him, but he did not know it because he was absent.

Because the text of Scripture is silent about the “how” of the death of an unbeliever, I do not know if angels securely transported him to his destination, or if God requires such a person to make the dark but brief journey on his own. I shudder to think of what that is like.

III. The Different Eternities of the Two Men, v. 22-26

A. First, a note about the Old Testament and New Testament destination of souls. The beggar did not go to heaven immediately in the way we think of it—because he was an Old Testament saint.

1. Instead, he went to a lower paradise called Abraham's bosom because he believed in God. Today, those who believe in God through Jesus Christ are rescued from the darkness of afterlife apart from God.

2. Unbelievers at that time went to Hades. This "bad compartment," as v. 26 indicates, is separated from the good compartment by a huge impassable expanse. No one in Hades can get to paradise, nor can someone in paradise get to Hades. There is no third place called purgatory! One interesting thing is that Jesus portrays communication as crossing that gulf.

3. After the resurrection of Christ, all believers in Him, when they die, are immediately transported (by angels) to the heavenly paradise in the presence of God.

4. All those who *were* in Abraham's bosom have *now* been transported to the heavenly paradise by Christ. This is a deduction from the fact that when Paul went to paradise, he was caught *up* to the third heaven where the Lord was, 2 Cor. 12:4. The Old Testament presents the afterlife as happening "down" in Sheol—the grave and beyond.

5. The location of Paradise is far less important than the fact that to be there is a place of comfort and blessing with the Lord Jesus Christ and God the Father, and the angels and the deceased from before.

B. Second, we must ponder for a moment why the rich man landed in Hades. Was it *because He was rich*? No. Riches are dangerous, but they do not make it impossible to be saved. Was it because *He did not help* the poor beggar? Not that either. He should have helped, and he could have helped, and the fact that he did not pointed to something deeper—he loved not God but himself. His pronouns were I, me, and my, the default for every human being. He did not believe in God, he did not love God, he did not repent of sin like His Jewish holy book taught him to do.

We should also note that the poor beggar was not bound for paradise *because he was poor*. He was going to Heaven because he believed in God with his whole heart. The poor man was a believer. He was not permitted into paradise because he was poor, but because he trusted in God.

From the final destinations of the two men, we know that the rich man was, like many rich people, not a believer in God. The poor man did trust in God, but did not have the basics he needed to survive. This serves as a reminder that in this life, it is not the case that believers automatically prosper. Sometimes they suffer terribly. God permits it to be so now but corrects the situation later in heaven.

C. The Lord speaks of the post-death situation in a straightforward way. For the believer, there is comfort (v. 25). For the unbeliever, there is torment in Hades (v. 23). The word for torment is used for severe pain or torture. It is an unpleasant idea, indeed. It is particularly distasteful to our world where the overriding philosophy is that all people are good, and those that are not can be educated or talked into good behavior. The fact is that none of that is true, and that eternal punishment *is* true. We believe it for at least five reasons:

1. First, because Jesus teaches it very plainly in dozens of texts. For example: Matthew 5:30, 10:28, 23:33.

2. James and Peter speak of Hell: James 3:6, 2 Peter 2:4.

3. The Old Testament speaks of it also: Deuteronomy 32:22, Psalms, Proverbs, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos, and Habakkuk.

4. Fourth, it is a destiny terrible enough to send Jesus to the cross. Since Jesus *died*, we know that the thing He is saving *from* must be *really* bad.

5. Fifth, if there were no post-death punishment for sin, there would be no ultimate justice. People could literally “get away with murder” and not be punished for it ever. God is a just God and will not permit sin to go unchecked.

D. Hades is a temporary holding cell before the final place of punishment that we call Hell or the Lake of Fire. The two are distinct from one another, like a county jail is a temporary holding place before a person is sentenced to the state penitentiary.

E. The torment is so severe that the rich man’s first request was help for himself. He was suffering in flame and wanted cool water to help him. What a terrible condition. He was able to see Abraham and Lazarus and asked them for help. The fact that he could see others in a place of blessing would only make his mental torment worse.

The idea of torment can do two things to us. First, it could drive us away from the doctrine of Hell and into liberalism. Or it can drive us to urge people away from Hades by believing in Christ. Let us take the latter path, the one Jesus wants us to be on.

F. What are the conditions of a soul in that place? He or she is not dead or annihilated or asleep. Rather:

1. He feels things physically like pain.
2. He has emotional misery. The crying out, the begging. He probably has regret.
3. He remembers things from his lifetime. He knew Lazarus by name.
4. He knows people beyond his life experience. Somehow, he knew Abraham.
5. He speaks to others.
6. He loves others and fears for them, wanting them to avoid his fate.
7. He understands the need for repentance, though now too late for him, but not too late for his brothers.
8. He learns it is eternal: “nor can those from there pass to us.”

The miseries of Hell are exceedingly difficult to contemplate. They touch every department of one’s life: physical, emotional, spiritual. How the “flame” works I cannot fully say. I am convinced there is a literal heat source. I can also see why others suggest that the flame is deep remorse and despair, something like “burning shame.”

G. Abraham points out the ironic reversal of the situation between Lazarus and the rich man. Their "fortunes" were reversed at death so that Lazarus became free of sores, dogs, and hunger. The rich man lost all his earthly comforts. The roles have swapped so that the rich becomes beggar and the beggar becomes rich. What Abraham says indicates that this is justice, and the rich man does not protest. He knows God is right.

Note also how Jesus's words in 16:15 show up here again: the rich man was highly esteemed *by men*, but not by God. Furthermore, he had not been a good steward of his money. He had not used it shrewdly to make friends who would receive him into his everlasting home (16:8). He failed to "make friends" with Lazarus who could have welcomed him into paradise (16:9).

IV. The Different Approach to Holy Scripture, v. 27-31

A. The second thing that the rich man asked is for someone to be sent to his home to warn his family so they avoid going to Hades. He has five brothers and he loves them enough to not want them to go through the same misery he is experiencing. In this case, misery does not *want* company.

B. Abraham's response is sensible and powerful. He says that such testimony has *already* been given in book form—in the Bible. At that time, Moses and the prophets were available. If the living at that time took heed to its testimony, they would be saved. Since the end of the first century AD, we have nearly 29% more chapters than our Jewish brethren had up to 400 B.C. and so we have even *less* excuse!

C. The rich man objects by saying that if someone—Lazarus in this case—goes to them from the dead, by resurrection, and tells them of Hades, they will repent. A spectacular event will *reall*y convince them. Signs and wonders will do the job, he says, sounding like Matthew 12:39.

1. Notice how the rich man knows that the key issue is *repentance*.

2. The rich man did not repent during his life, recognizes that he should have, and implicitly understands that here is no second chance for him to repent now. There are no second chances. There is only one life.

3. The story of the rich man and Lazarus points out that some of the most ardent proponents of evangelism are in Hades right now. They were unbelievers before they died, but now that they have died, they are convinced of the importance of evangelizing their family. Some

unbelievers who have gone to Hades desperately want to evangelize their loved ones so they avoid coming to the place of torment. But they cannot be resurrected to proclaim the truth to the living.

4. The same is true for Christians. If you do not take the opportunity to evangelize now, you will never be able to after your life is over.

5. Notice how the rich man does *not* acknowledge the Bible as the key to the whole thing. He takes a different approach to the Bible. He does not now embrace its truth, and he did not during his earthly life take the Bible seriously either. He rejected the word of God for himself. The result is what he got.

D. Abraham responds that if someone will not pay attention to and obey the Scriptures, then they will not be convinced by someone who rises from the dead. That shows you what hardness and deception sin produces in the human heart. It also shows that if you reject God's word, there is nothing left for you. No miracles, no stupendous signs, or anything else will convince you of the truth and the need for repentance. You are left with no excuse.

E. What Abraham says are no idle words. The fact is that someone *has* risen from the dead—Jesus Christ—who commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30-31). And *still* most people are not convinced. He gave them the sign they demanded, and Abraham's words were fulfilled: "they will not be persuaded."

F. This means that you do not need special tricks or miracles to evangelize the lost. In fact, these will not help at all with the depravity problem. It is only the word of God which is the power of God to salvation. Signs and wonders are not the power of God to salvation. This stands in clear contradiction to the "power evangelism" fad that started in 1986 with John Wimber's book by that title. He claims that you need to exercise signs and wonders to influence people to believe in God (see the Vineyard movement). The fact is that the testimony of the Bible has sufficient power to persuade and convince someone to salvation, and if they are not convinced by that, *nothing* else will work and in fact nothing else *can* work because nothing else has that power operating under the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion

This parable is not really about what the afterlife looks like. Jesus's purpose is to awaken us to the significant truth that how we choose to live in relation to God will have a massive impact on us later. Death is coming.

There is no second chance at salvation. The choices you make today, like the rich man and Lazarus, will have an impact in the future. It is Hades and torment for the lost, paradise and comfort for the believer.

God will right all wrongs in this life. The problem of evil, like that evil that happened to Lazarus, is indeed vexing. But God will straighten it out.

The Bible is the instrument God gives to convince people of the need to repent. He is not a performer who persuades people through extraordinary signs and wonders. In a run-of-the-mill way, He uses flawed vessels like this one to speak the truth, so that you, another flawed vessel, know that it applies to you too.

The Lord gives each of us a job to do regarding this message. God charges me to warn the wicked to turn from his ways and to warn the righteous to not turn away from righteousness (Ezekiel 3:17-21). God commands you to hear the word and not be rebellious.

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