

Lazarus and the Rich Man

Luke 16:19-31

With Study Questions

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There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. ²⁰ But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, ²¹ desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. ²² 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. ²³ And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. ²⁴ "Then he cried and said, '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.' ²⁵ But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. ²⁶ And besides all this, 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.' ²⁷ "Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.' ²⁹ Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.' ³⁰ And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' ³¹ But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead' (Luke 16:19-31).

Introduction

"What would you say to someone who said...?" is a common question I hear. Of course the answer is often "It all depends." Not that I'm a relativist or that I think opposing answers can both be correct, but that questions generally have some background. The kind of relationship you have with a person can dictate what you might emphasize.

Is the person you're speaking with a Christian, atheist, pagan, etc.? Was the question asked privately or in a group setting? Who might be listening to your answer? So, even though your message as a Christian ought to be biblically consistent, the things you might emphasize can be

radically different. The message Jesus emphasized when confronted by self-righteousness was significantly different than what He emphasized when confronted by a broken and contrite spirit.

The above story is given in the midst of numerous parables: In the Parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin (Luke 15:1-10) Jesus taught of the joy of bringing sinners to repentance; in the Parable of the Lost Son He taught of the father's joy of the wayward son coming back, as it were, to life (Luke 15:11-32). Jesus then gave a parable of the Unjust Steward which spoke of serving the proper master (Luke 16:1-13). Prior to the story of Lazarus and the Rich Man we're given a little insight regarding the mentality of His listeners:

Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. ¹⁵ And He said to them, "You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts. For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God (Luke 16:14, 15).

So their hearts are full of avarice, while seeking to justify themselves (appear as righteous) before men. Jesus will make a stark contrast between that which is precious to God and that which is highly esteemed among men.

Lazarus

Jesus will compare a wealthy unnamed man with a beggar named Lazarus. The rich man, we are told wore royal clothing and feasted every day. Lazarus, conversely, was diseased, laid at the rich man's gate (likely because he was incapable of transporting himself), longed after the crumbs from the rich man's table, but had to settle only for the comfort that would come by dogs licking his sores.

One thing not readily apparent in the English reading of the account is what the name, Lazarus, means which is "God has helped." Here we have yet another example of how we must be careful not to assume that difficulties in this life are necessarily associated with God's disfavor. Clearly the rich man enjoyed a life of comfort and Lazarus a life of toil. But it was Lazarus who God has helped.

The Sin of Indifference – Death the Equalizer

We might also note the rich man's indifference to the beggar at his gate. We might think he would have been shamed into offering a crumb when seeing the dogs licking Lazarus' wounds.

That feasting ourselves and our friends, and, at the same time, forgetting the distresses of the poor and afflicted, are very provoking to God and damning to the soul. The sin of this rich man was not so much his dress or his diet, but his providing only for himself.¹

Jesus, seeking to grant His listeners perspective, conveys that they both died – let it be noted from today's perspective that they've been dead much longer than they were alive. Be that as it may, death is the great equalizer. Bill Gates will be as naked in his death as a bum in the streets.

Can *anyone* teach God knowledge, Since He judges those on high? ²³ One dies in his full strength, Being wholly at ease and secure; ²⁴ His pails are full of milk, And the marrow of his bones is moist. ²⁵ Another man dies in the bitterness of his soul, Never having eaten with pleasure. ²⁶ They lie down alike in the dust, And worms cover them (Job 21:22-26).

People may try to keep their earthly esteem intact with the pomp of a huge funeral and/or pricey burial sight. While driving up the 405 I always see Al Jolson's (famous actor and star in first talking movie in the 1920s) impressive domed marble burial sight with water fountain. I can't help compare this to John Knox, the great reformer, who is buried beneath a parking lot in Scotland. Point is, when it comes to this world's offerings, the worms have covered them both.

Abraham's Bosom/Hades

¹Henry, M. (1996, c1991). *Matthew Henry's commentary on the whole Bible : Complete and unabridged in one volume* (Lk 16:19). Peabody: Hendrickson.

We are told that Lazarus is carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom while the rich man ends up in the torments of Hades. Why Abraham? It is not as if Abraham has a special office in heaven. But the listeners of Jesus, at least publicly, would have viewed Abraham as the epitome of true religion. To be carried to Abraham's bosom indicates favor and intimate presence – it's like a hug. We read of John leaning on the bosom of Jesus at the Lord's Supper (John 13:23) of Jesus "in the bosom of the Father" (John 1:18).

Calvin taught that the bosom becomes a metaphor for where the children meet with their father "when they all return home in the evening from the labors of the day."²

The rich man, we are told, is buried and ends in the torments of Hades. Hades³, at least in this context, means the abode of the unsaved dead prior to the great white throne judgment. It is a place of torment. I have found that I haven't the skill to properly describe the joy of heaven or the anguish of hell.

The Scriptures utilize either the best or most awful available images for both. Heaven is a place with streets of gold where all tears of wiped away (Revelation 21:4; 21) and hell is compared to a Gehenna (the Valley of Hinnom" which is where the idolatrous worship of Molech lead to child sacrifice (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). **"Subsequently, the valley appears to have been used for the burning of the city's refuse and the dead bodies of criminals."**⁴

Another image used by Jesus (three time in succession in in Mark 9:44, 46, 48) is the description found in Isaiah 66:24:

**And they shall go forth and look Upon the corpses of the men
Who have transgressed against Me. For their worm does not
die, And their fire is not quenched. They shall be an
abhorrence to all flesh (Isaiah 66:24).**

The image given here is of a worm gnawing away at the heart of a man who never dies. Jesus describes the torment as such that the rich man

²Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

³ □□□□^a, □□ m: a place or abode of the dead, including both the righteous and the unrighteous (in most contexts □□□□^a is equivalent to the Hebrew term Sheol)—³

⁴Elwell, W. A., & Comfort, P. W. (2001). *Tyndale Bible dictionary*. Tyndale reference library (517). Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers.

simply wants to Lazarus (whom he ignored in life) to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue. Suffice it to say that Jesus is teaching of the perfect torment of the one compared to the perfect bliss of the other. The response to such imagery should range from comforting to disquieting to horrifying. The dialogue in the afterlife ensues.

Father Abraham – A Great Gulf

The rich man cries to Father Abraham for mercy. From this we learn of the utter worthlessness of any ethnic connection to Abraham as a means to find favor with God. John the Baptist made this all too clear

Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as *our* father.’ For I say to you that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones (Luke 3:8).

We learn also of the finality of judgment at the end of this life – **“as it is appointed for men to die once, but after this the judgment” (Hebrews 9:27)**. Jesus teaches of a **“great gulf fixed”** so there is no passing from eternal death to eternal life in the afterlife. But Jesus, with great mercy, utilizes this story to reveal to the Pharisees their current problem – which really amounted to an undue love of money, self, and praise of man.

A Comparison of Heavenly and Earthly Treasures

It should not be thought of an ‘I told you so’ moment, but rather an ‘I’m telling you now’ moment. There are numerous dangers to those who set their hopes and hearts upon the here and now – especially in this case as it relates to earthly riches.

But woe to you who are rich, For you have received your consolation (Luke 6:24).

They spend their days in wealth, And in a moment go down to the grave (Job 21:13).

You have lived on the earth in pleasure and luxury; you have fattened your hearts as in a day of slaughter (James 5:5).

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).

As a pastor in twenty-first century America, which is almost entirely populated by people who would be considered rich by all historical and geographical standards, I must qualify the statement; because if riches are inherently evil, we have a serious problem, not only with our own goods, but with those in Scripture who maintained both riches and faithfulness. Calvin reasons thus by appealing to Augustine:

On the contrary, as Augustine has judiciously observed, poor Lazarus was carried into the bosom of rich Abraham, to inform us, that riches do not shut against any man the gate of the kingdom of heaven, but that it is open alike to all who have either made a sober use of riches, or patiently endured the want of them.⁵

At this point the listeners of Jesus are called to examine just what it is that is standing between them and eternal peace with God. We might be wise to consider the same. Coming to realize his utter hopelessness, the rich man continues to intercede for his five brothers.

Send a Testifier

The rich man wants Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers that he might testify (the word meaning to strongly tell – a strong testimony is desired) to them of the reality of hell. Abraham responds to this request by informing the rich man that they have “Moses and the prophets.” In other words, they have the Scriptures, which Paul will later teach “**are able to make you wise for salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus**” (2 Timothy 3:15).

⁵Calvin, J. (1998). *Calvin's Commentaries: The Harmony of the Gospels : Calvin's Commentary on Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; Calvin's Commentaries. Albany, OR: Ages Software.

The rich man assumes his brothers need more; ‘the Scriptures are fine but insufficient’ according to the rich man. His brothers need to be impressed! He informs Abraham **“if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.”** Abraham obviously has a more accurate understanding of human nature than the rich man. He answers that **“If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.”**

It was only a short time after Jesus had actually raised a man named Lazarus from the dead that the chief plotted to kill Jesus and Lazarus as well (John 12:9-11). The entire book of Acts reveals the response of the hard-hearted to the resurrection of Christ, which was a current and undeniable reality. I have, in light of these things, never been impressed with the efforts of apologists to prove the resurrection of Christ apart from Scripture.

According to Abraham (which is really according to Jesus) the ability to do miracles or prove the reality of miracles is a little avail. It can easily be argued that the two generations in Scripture which saw the most miracles were the least faithful.

It is the gospel that **“is the power of God to salvation” (Romans 1:16). “Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17). “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (1 Corinthians 1:21).**

The stark and sudden reality of eternal bliss or torment should ever beckon our hearts to believe in the atoning work of the cross of Christ and live for a God who holds the keys to both. And we should avoid indifference, both to the plights of those who surround us in this world, but more importantly to the eternal souls of those by whom we find ourselves surrounded. Our greatest disposition of love is to care for their souls and our greatest act of love is to ever bring the message of the gospel – that Jesus saves sinners by the power of His own blood.

Questions for Study

1. What are some things to consider when people ask us questions about our faith (pages 2, 3)?

2. What is the context of the story of Lazarus and the Rich man (page 3)?
3. What does 'Lazarus' mean (Page 3)?
4. What can we learn about God's favor from Lazarus (page 3)?
5. What were rich man's transgressions (page 4)?
6. How is death the great equalizer (page 4)?
7. What is meant by Abraham's bosom (page 5)?
8. Discuss the comparison of Hades to Abraham's bosom (pages 5, 6)?
9. Why does the rich man call Abraham father (page 6)?
10. Can people move from Hades to heaven? Explain the ramifications of this (page 6).
11. What are some things to keep men from seeking God (pages 6, 7)?
12. What is the most powerful testifier for God's plan of salvation (pages 7, 8)?