

## Beyond the Grave—The Rich Man and Lazarus

by Brett Hickey

The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus is one of the most famous and one of the most gripping stories of the gospels. Chaucer, Shakespeare, Melville, and Dickens refer to the story in their writings. A host of songwriters and poets over the past four centuries do as well. The story is as controversial as it is fascinating and familiar. Scholars I respect and preachers in our fellowship are confident in their differing understandings. Some say it is a parable; others insist that it is not and suggest that it is a literal depiction; still others say that it is an imaginary illustration. I like what Leo Boles writes in his commentary. He says, “It does not matter whether it is regarded as a parable or not; the lesson taught by Jesus remains the same. There is no change in the points or in the lesson taught by regarding it as a parable or regarding it as a simple narration in real life.”

We read in Luke 16:19-31,

There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. 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."<sup>1</sup>

The Rich Man and Lazarus, after our song...

It appears to me that everything Jesus teaches in Luke 15 and 16 is in response to what happened in Luke 15:1-2, “Then all the tax collectors and the sinners drew near to Him to hear Him. And the Pharisees and scribes complained, saying, ‘This Man receives sinners and eats with them.’” 3 So He spoke this parable to them...” The text clearly says that the Pharisees, annoyed by Jesus’ kind reception of the lowest class of Jewish society—tax collectors and sinners—verbally criticized him for eating with them.

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The purpose of the three parables in Luke 15 (the lost coin, the lost sheep and the lost son) is to demonstrate how extremely important every individual is to God; a truth that seemed to escape the religious power brokers. The Pharisees considered themselves the “in crowd”—everyone else was out. Then, in Luke 16, Jesus seems to expand on His response by issuing a criticism of his own against the Pharisees (and, as we’ll notice later, perhaps the Sadducees, though not specifically mentioned) for *not* receiving and reaching out to the poor. He does this subtly with the parable of the Unjust Steward and bluntly in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Jesus signals this contempt in Luke 16:14-15: “Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him. 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...’” Some tend to believe that material prosperity guarantees that God approves of one’s life. Preachers of the prosperity gospel are famous for promoting this. This story indicates that that is not necessarily the case.

Verses 19-21: “There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, 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.”

We see life is pictured in verses 19-21. This side of the grave it seems like this is all there is. We are presented with two contrasting characters: “*a certain rich man*” and “*a certain beggar*.” Now, when we say beggar, keep in mind that they had no welfare safety net as we do in America. Jesus says this beggar is named Lazarus. One of the arguments raised against this passage being a parable is that no other parable mentions anyone by name as we find in this story. It is interesting that he would mention the beggar’s name and not the rich man’s. As a result, men have assigned various names to the rich man. Hultgren, in his commentary on the parables, notes that a third century manuscript gives him the name, Neues; a fourth century writer, Priscillian, names him Finees; and the Latin Vulgate, also in the fourth century, gives him the name Dives which means rich man. Suffice it to say, Jesus left him nameless, calling him simply a rich man.

Jesus did name the beggar, Lazarus, which is the same name essentially as Eleazar. It is fitting that the name Lazarus means “God is help” because this beggar could not expect relief from the rich man.

Notice the contrast: as Jesus summarized in verse 25 from a material standpoint, the rich man enjoyed the good things in life while Lazarus endured evil things. When you look at the rich man, you were impressed by the fact that he wore the finest, most fancy clothes around. He didn’t wear purple because it was his favorite color; he wore purple because it was expensive and set him apart as a “somebody.” When you looked at Lazarus, you noticed that he was full of sores. The rich man feasted every day: Cracker Barrel for breakfast; Colton’s for lunch; Outback for supper. Meanwhile, as far as we know, Lazarus didn’t even get to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table, but notice he “desired” to do so. Perhaps being laid at the rich man’s gate indicated that Lazarus was banned from getting close enough to the rich man even to eat the dirty breadcrumbs that the dogs were given. He apparently, in the story at least, knew Lazarus

because he called him by name in verse 24. Lazarus was outside the gate and treated as if he were lower than a dog. In fact, even the dogs tormented him by licking his sores. If you take the dogs' action as comforting, then the dogs treated him with more kindness than the rich man. But, remember, this is simply man's view on this side of the grave. God's view is completely different. And, in this life, this is how things appear to be in contrast to how they really are from God's perspective. This truth is unveiled beginning with the contrast in verse 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."

We have Death presented in verse 22. Death is the great leveler, isn't it? No one likes to think about death or talk about death, do they? Talk about your 800 pound gorilla! We naturally think about death more as we grow older because we know it is getting ever closer. Consider how atheism and agnosticism seem to work pretty well for those folks when, in the prime of their lives, they are healthy, active and distracted, but when the reality of their mortality sets in and they must confront the eternity there must be a nagging uneasiness about the afterlife.

We fear the unknown. That's part of the reason for our apprehension and anxiety over the uncertainty of illness. In the back of our mind, we know that death awaits us all. God teaches us that we do well to think on our end down here. Jesus forces this upon his audience in this story. Oh, as James tells us, "Our life is but a vapor..." (James 4:14) Hear Solomon in Ecclesiastes 7:1-4

"A good name is better than precious ointment, And the day of death than the day of one's birth; Better to go to the house of mourning Than to go to the house of feasting, For that is the end of all men; And the living will take it to heart. Sorrow is better than laughter, For by a sad countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning, But the heart of fools is in the house of mirth."

At death, our story reminds us, no one has *anything* on *anyone* else from a material standpoint. We're all equal; we're all the same. Our story gives the impression, though, that even at death, a distinction is made between the righteous and the unrighteous. The rich man died and was *buried*; the beggar died and was *carried*. Sad, isn't it, from a human perspective that Lazarus didn't even get a decent burial? But folks, Lazarus was not confined to that disease-laden, food-starved body. I'd rather be *carried* than *buried* any day. Did you catch that? I missed it or at least did not pause and reflect on that until recently. What a pleasant thought, metaphor or not. The way Jesus tells the story, at death, Lazarus was "carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom."

Already, in verse 22, the role reversal places Lazarus at great advantage. He was carried by the angels. I like to think of loved ones in the faith now departed being carried away by the angels. I think of my Dad, My wife's father and other dear ones being "carried away by the angels." Of course, their physical bodies were not transported in any event. The work of angels is a great mystery to us, and we must be cautious about speculating where there is no word from the Lord. Hebrews 1:14 does tell us of the angels: "Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?"

The contrast continues in verse 23-25, "And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. 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.' But Abraham said, "Son, *remember* (we could preach a sermon on that one word – *Remember*) that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented."

This story suggests that our next awareness after death is either extremely positive or extremely negative. The rich man was tormented; Lazarus was comforted. The rich man said he was "tormented in this flame" while Lazarus was comforted in Abraham's bosom. This hell is Hades; this is the unseen realm of the dead. We cannot see beyond the grave with the naked eye and yet, in this story, Jesus gives us a little peek into the afterlife. You remember in Luke 23:42-43 what the thief on the cross said to Jesus, "Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom." And Jesus said to him, "Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise." That was a reference to this same place—Abraham's bosom.

On earth, the rich man appeared completely *indifferent* to Lazarus' miserable existence while Lazarus outside his gate salivated over the filthy crumbs that fell from his table. Now, though, it is the rich man who gazes longingly from afar at Lazarus. The Rich man sees Abraham, but only in the distance. Now, it is not Lazarus, but the rich man who wants mercy. This is one of the *biggies* with Jesus and the rich man never got it. Jesus hammers this repeatedly in the Sermon on the Mount. He said in Matthew 7:2, "For with what judgment you judge, you will be judged; and with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you." Earlier, Jesus issued the same message in a more positive way in Matthew 5:7, "Blessed are the merciful, For they shall obtain mercy." Then, the most blistering rebuke ever to flow from Jesus lips may be in Matthew 23:23, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

Now it is the rich man who is begging. He wants Lazarus to "dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue." Thirst and pain are suggested by the metaphor. Some say that the request for only a drop of water demonstrates that this is a parable not a literal event. At any rate, this is one desperate man, but there is no relief, no escape. There are no more chances. Verse 26 reads, "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." Our fate is sealed at death. He was rich, but his sin was not being wealthy any more than Lazarus was righteous because he was poor. The rich man's sin was his indifference to those in legitimate need of his help. He showed no mercy. This reminds me of Matthew 25:31-46, "Inasmuch as you did it not to the least of these my brethren, you did it not unto me." Indifference to those in need cost them their souls. Now that the Rich man knows he is beyond help, he thinks of his family. He might not care about anyone else, but he cares about his family. He waited too late, though, to start thinking of others.

Verse 27 reads, "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.'" As self-centered as the rich man was, he didn't want his family to endure this suffering. Place of torment does not harmonize with the eternal nap that some associate with the unrighteous dead. We're talking suffering and punishment.

Ever wonder why Jesus didn't say the rich man's brothers and sisters, but the rich man's *five brothers*? Some suggest that this reference was directed to Annas, the wealthy and powerful high priest, who had five brothers.

What did the rich man request? He asked that Lazarus would testify (witness, preach) to his family. Listen to the response. Verse 29: "Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'" What did he mean by Moses and the prophets? He meant the Bible, the word of God, in its current form. He was saying, "If they do not listen to the word of God, nothing will convince them."

Jesus continues in verse 30, "And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'" Sounds like people today who say the Scriptures are not enough; they need something sensational, something magical, something miraculous. Abraham held his ground. The word will convict them or they cannot be reached. Verse 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.'"

Lo, and behold, if Jesus does not raise a man named Lazarus from the dead in John 11. Did it convince the critics? No, not even after Lazarus had been dead for four days. The text says in verse 53, "Then, from that day on, they plotted to put Him to death."

So, as we look back over this amazing story, we should take three major truths with us.

1. We will all need mercy one day. If we want to receive mercy in the hereafter, we had better extend mercy in the here and now.
2. We need to come to terms with the fact that there is life after death and that we will either be rewarded or punished based on our words, actions and neglect in this life. Eternal nap taking is not in harmony with the New Testament teaching on hell.
3. The key to preparing for eternity is not to look for great signs and wonders, but in hearing the word of the Lord. At the time Jesus told this story, there was no New Testament—only Moses and the prophets. At the transfiguration in Matthew 17, the Father indicates a change when Jesus stood amidst Moses and Elijah, and said, "This is my beloved Son; hear ye Him!"

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*Sermon delivered by evangelist Brett Hickey over "Let the Bible Speak"*  
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