

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Opening Hymn: #111 --My Redeemer Lives

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is not a favorite of Bible Students. It comes closer to supporting the idea of hell fire than almost anything else in the scriptures. When we try to explain it, we may find we're a little unsure of ourselves.

For a long time my favorite explanation came from a commentator whose thought is contained in a footnote in the Diaglott. He notes that it is not directly said that Jesus did use the parable and finds that it is abruptly introduced into the narrative. Another Diaglott footnote says that the Jews have a parable much to the same purpose as this one. I used to like the idea of dismissing the parable by saying it probably was never said by Jesus at all, but now I've changed my mind.

Matt. 13:34 All these things spake Jesus unto the multitude in parables and without a parable spake he not unto them.

Some have pointed out that the parable we're considering in the 16th chapter of Luke is not called a parable. That's true. But neither are the parables that preceded it.

Let's take a look at the context of this controversial lesson.

Luke 15:1,2 Then drew near unto him all the publicans and sinners for to hear him. And the Pharisees and scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them.

This was a mixed multitude. So Jesus started out by using the parable of the lost sheep (15:3-7). This one is definitely called a parable. Then he spoke of the lost coin (vs. 8-10) and the prodigal son (vs. 11-32). Neither are called parables.

Let's consider the parable of the prodigal son for just a moment. We have an elder son who stays in his "Father's house" and who despises anything the Father might do for the younger brother. Clearly this was a rebuke to the scribes and Pharisees who objected to any association with "publicans and sinners."

The opening verses of Luke 16 (vs. 1-13) contains the parable of the unjust steward. This is also not called a parable, but it is commonly accepted as one. Note that it starts with the words "a certain rich man", the same words which start the parable we're about to consider. One of the main lessons of the parable of the unjust steward is in...

Luke 16:8 And the lord commended the unjust steward because he had done wisely: for the children of this world are in their generation wiser than [*those who consider themselves to be*] the children of light.

What had the unjust steward done that was so wise? He reduced the debt owed by others so that he would have an easier time when his circumstances changed. What about the scribes and Pharisees? Did they help the people with their burdens?

Luke 11:46 And he said, Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers.

Those who are rich and powerful all seem to have one characteristic in common: they want to keep what they've got. The message of Jesus was not to their liking. If they associated with the poor of Israel, why who knows? Before long, they might be poor also and their power would be gone.

Consider an experience shortly after these chapters:

Luke 18:18,22 And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life? Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me. And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich.

Now it was necessary for the scribes and Pharisees to find a way around the regulations in the books of Moses, for they were expressly told to care for those less fortunate among them:

Deut. 24:14,17 Thou shalt not oppress an hired servant that is poor and needy whether he be of thy brethren or of thy strangers that are in thy land within thy gates. Thou shalt not pervert the judgment of the stranger nor of the fatherless, nor take a widow's raiment to pledge.

Yet one of the criticisms Jesus directed at the Pharisees was that they "devoured widows' houses" (Luke 20:47).

These teachers of the people developed their own traditions to handle such difficulties. It is said that they taught the people that suffering was permitted by God to develop them. If they were rightly exercised by their experiences, they would be welcomed into the after life with honor. The *Companion Bible* states that at death the Pharisees would say, "This day he sits in Abraham's bosom." But since God was directing the experiences, the Pharisees claimed it would be improper for them to do anything to relieve the suffering because that would be interfering with God. Jesus rightly condemned their traditions:

Mark 7:9 And he said unto them, Full well ye reject the commandment of God that ye may keep your own tradition.

So this was the background of what was happening with the leadership of Israel. They were rich and intended to stay as rich as they could. They had convinced the poor that they should not complain because in the next life they would have it good. And most of the poor believed what they were told. We read of no uprising of the people against those in power. They seem to accept their lot.

The Parable Itself

We're now ready for the parable itself. Verses 16-18 are out of place, and are better placed at the end of the chapter. Let's start at Luke 16, verse 14 and skip 16-18.

Luke 16:14,15,19-31 (Phillips) Now the Pharisees, who were very fond of money, heard all this with a sneer. But he said to them, "You are the people who advertise your goodness before men, but God knows your hearts. Remember, there are things men consider perfectly splendid which are detestable in the sight of God! There was once a rich man who used to dress in purple and fine linen and lead a life of daily luxury. And there was a poor man called Lazarus who was put down at his gate. He was covered with sores. He used to long to be fed with the scraps from the rich man's table. Yes, and the dogs used to come and lick his sores. Well, it

happened that the poor man died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried....

Let's stop for a moment. So far there is nothing here that conflicts with the teachings of the Pharisees. The poor man was expected to do the best he can because God is directing his experiences. When he dies the Pharisees would say, "This day he sits in Abraham's bosom." But what's supposed to happen to someone who is not suffering in this life? Suppose you're rich and favored like a Pharisee? What kind of life are you supposed to have in the next life? The Pharisees never talked about that, so Jesus takes their own doctrine and shows the only alternative that could possibly exist. And notice that Jesus himself does not do the preaching; he puts his own words into the mouth of Abraham!

(starting at verse 22) The rich man also died and was buried. And from among the dead he looked up and saw Abraham a long way away, and Lazarus in his arms. 'Father Abraham!' he cried out, 'please pity me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham replied, 'Remember, my son, that you used to have the good things in your lifetime, while Lazarus suffered the bad. Now he is being comforted here, while you are in agony. And besides this, a great chasm has been set between you and us, so that those who want to go to you from this side cannot do so, and people cannot come to us from your side.' At this he said, 'Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house for I have five brothers. He could warn them about all this and prevent their coming to this place of torture.' But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets: they can listen to them.' 'Ah no, father Abraham,' he said, 'if only someone were to go to them from the dead, they would change completely.' But Abraham told him, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they would not be convinced even if somebody were to rise from the dead.' "

There's lots of interesting things here

THE RICH MAN: He has no name. His sin is not that he's rich but that he's indifferent to the needs of those around him. Lazarus wants to be fed with the table scraps, but there is nothing to show that he got any.

LAZARUS: This is the only parable where Jesus used a name. Lazarus means "God is my help" which is exactly the way the Pharisees taught it. "God is your help, not us!" There is another reason for this name, but that will have to wait for a moment or two.

ABRAHAM'S BOSOM: To the Pharisees, this was the special person above all others:

Matt. 3:9 And think not to say within yourselves, We have Abraham to our father...

John 8:32,33 Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free. They answered him, We be Abraham's seed, and were never in bondage to any man: how sayest thou, Ye shall be made free?

It's important to point out that Abraham is not in heaven. Abraham is simply an illustration of what we might call "bliss" because that's what the Pharisees taught.

John 3:13 No man hath ascended up to heaven but he that came down from heaven, even the Son of man.

HELL:(vs. 23) The Greek word is *hades*, the place of the dead. The picture is not pretty. Here's where a Pharisee might start to feel uncomfortable. If the poor in this life are to be rewarded in the next life, it follows that the rich in this life must be punished in the next. Of course the Pharisees never talked about this. It was the Pharisees that set up the "great chasm" between themselves and the sinners. And there was no contact across this abyss. There's only one other place outside of this parable where the Greek word rendered "torment" (vs. 23) is used:

Matt. 4:24 And they brought unto him all sick people that were taken with divers diseases and torments.

The absurdity of the situation is shown when the rich man asks merely for the touch of a wet finger on his tongue. Clearly if one is going to get one wish, perhaps one might request a glass of water or even to get out of that unfavorable state. The contrast, of course, is with the crumbs from the rich man's table.

FIVE BRETHREN: The rich man thinks about his brothers and he's told they have "Moses and the prophets." And who did this include? I believe it was the various leadership groups within Israel: Sadducees, doctors of the law, scribes, lawyers, and the like. These were the people who always tried to tempt him by asking for some supernatural "sign":

Matt. 12:38 Then certain of the scribes and of the Pharisees answered, saying, Master, we would see a sign from thee.

So how did they react when they received signs?

John 5:8,16 Jesus saith unto him, Rise, take up thy bed, and walk ... And therefore did the Jews persecute Jesus and sought to slay him because he had done these things on the sabbath day.

Notice that they did **not** believe on him because of the miracle. All they wanted was an excuse to find fault.

John 9:32-34 Since the world began was it not heard that any man opened the eyes of one that was born blind. If this man were not of God he could do nothing. They answered and said unto him, Thou wast altogether born in sins and dost thou teach us? And they cast him out. (vs. 28) Thou art his disciple but we are Moses' disciples.

Yes, they had Moses and the prophets but they could not acknowledge what was happening before their eyes. There was absolutely no sign they would ever accept, even if one should rise from the dead!

Lazarus of Bethany

The events of Luke 17 take place, then at the end of chapter 18 Jesus says he's on his way to Jerusalem where he will be put to death. So he knew he spoke about the rich man and Lazarus before the events in John chapter 11 take place. Those events are most important in this study:

John 11:43-46 And when he thus had spoken, he cried with a loud voice, Lazarus come forth. And he that was dead came forth, bound hand and foot with grave clothes: and his face was bound about with a napkin. Jesus saith unto them, Loose him, and let him go. Then many of the Jews which came to Mary and had seen the things which Jesus did believed on him. But some of them went their ways to the Pharisees and told them what things Jesus had done.

How do you suppose the Pharisees reacted? Surely this would be the most conclusive “sign” they could ever want. Some of these Pharisees might even have been in the audience when Jesus gave his parable about a poor beggar named Lazarus. Some may have heard that the “five brethren” would never believe anything even if one rose from the dead. And amazingly, here is someone named Lazarus who has returned from the land of the dead. Surely they will believe!

John 12:10,11 But the chief priests consulted that they might put Lazarus also to death because that by reason of him many of the Jews went away and believed on Jesus.

There is no way the chief priests are ever going to believe on Jesus. It really doesn't make any difference what he does.

Another application of this same lesson may be applied to Jesus himself.

Matt. 27:41,42 Likewise also the chief priests mocking him with the scribes and the elders said, He saved others, himself he cannot save. If he be the King of Israel, let him now come down from the cross and we will believe him.

He did precisely that when he rose from the dead three days later. And what reaction did this have?

Matt. 28:11-13 Now when they were going behold some of the watch came into the city and showed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night and stole him away while we slept.

They blinded themselves. We surely can understand why Jesus reserved some of his strongest words of condemnation for them:

Matt. 23:33 (Rotherham) Serpents! broods of vipers! how should ye flee from the judgment of *gehenna*?

Gehenna is a picture of second death from which there is no resurrection. And it was a place of fire and destruction. Thus the rich man in the parable is shown as in *gehenna* [even though *hades* is the word used in the text].

I believe the Pharisees understood it was **them** he was referring to. They hated him all the more because of it.

What About Today?

Notice how James puts things into perspective:

James 2:19 Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe and tremble.

...and they remain devils! The scribes and Pharisees said they believed in Moses and in Abraham. But they certainly didn't **do** anything to put those beliefs into practice.

James 2:14-17 What doth it profit, my brethren, though a man say he hath faith and have not works? can faith save him? If a brother or sister be naked and destitute of daily food and one of you say unto them, Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful to the body; what doth it profit? Even so faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone.

Supernatural signs may intrigue, terrify, or impress the mind. But they are soon forgotten. When we see the Lord's hand in our lives, we must make our commitment and follow in the footsteps of the master. We can't continue to go about our business as though nothing had happened. Nor can we say after a few years that it was all a mistake.

Heb. 10:35-39 (Phillips) Don't throw away your trust now--it carries with it a rich reward in the world to come. Patient endurance is what you need if, after doing God's will, you are to receive what he has promised. For yet a little while, He that cometh shall come, and shall not tarry. But my righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrink back, my soul hath no pleasure in him. Surely we are not going to be men who cower back and are lost, but men who maintain their faith until the salvation of their souls is complete!

Faith is so important the scriptures show that our relationship with God can't even begin without it. Buried within that great "faith chapter" of Hebrews 11 we read:

Heb. 11:6 But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

This belief in God and that it makes a difference whether or not we serve him can only be considered a matter of faith. Most of the people of the world have no interest in God at all. It's just like the days before the flood: they eat, drink, marry and give in marriage. But like Noah, we should remain within our ark of faith.

About the only thing the Pharisees had faith in was in themselves. They believed that all that mattered was the outward appearance and to them that looked good. Jesus taught otherwise:

Luke 12:15 A man's life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.

Perhaps we do well to remind ourselves that the outward prosperity we have been given means nothing in the sight of God. The question is, How do we appear when our hearts are examined?

Near the end of the 10th chapter of Luke, our Lord gave that powerful parable of the Good Samaritan. The Samaritan drew no artificial barriers between himself and someone in need. The same could not be said for the priest and the Levite--they thought they had more important things to do than worry about someone who they didn't even know. Like the Pharisees they may have thought that God had let the poor traveler fall into the experience in the first place, let God get him out of it. But that was not the point of the parable. The whole thing started with the man who asked Jesus, What must I do to inherit eternal life? After the parable, Jesus asks the questioner:

Luke 10:36,37 (New English) Which of these three [the priest, Levite, or the Samaritan] do you think was neighbor to the man who fell into the hand of the robbers? He answered, "The one who showed him kindness." Jesus said, "Go and do as he did."

The rich man had no feelings for Lazarus at his gate. He loved the things that he had and lived as though there would never be a day of reckoning. That was a mistake for the Pharisees who heard these words, and it would be a mistake for us today.

2 Peter 1:10,11 (Weymouth) Brethren, be all the more in earnest to make certain of your calling and election; for, so long as you practice these things, you will never stumble. And so a triumphant admission into the eternal Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ shall be accorded to you.

May we all maintain our faith steadfast unto the end!

Closing Hymn: #198—"More Likeness to Thee"

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