

THE PARABLE OF LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN—WHAT DOES IT MEAN?



Question: Would you please explain the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man? I cannot understand it. My wife says the rich man was sent to Hades because he didn't help the poor man, but that doesn't make sense to me. Below are my verse-by-verse comments. As you will see, I don't understand this.

Luke 16:19 There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. Comment: Being rich is not a sin; it was God who blessed him.

20 *At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores* Comment: Being poor is not a sin—but is it a virtue?

21 *and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.* Comment: Desiring food is not a sin—but neither is it a virtue. And what does the reference to the dogs mean?

22 *The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.* Comment: What did Lazarus do to go to Abraham's side?

23 *In hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.* Comment: Verse 22 says the rich man was buried. How was he able to "look up" without a living body?

24 *So he called to him, "Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire."* Comment: What good would that have done? One drop of water wouldn't quench his thirst.

25 *But Abraham replied, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony."* Comment: Why was Abraham talking to the rich man instead of God? Abraham tells the rich man "in your

lifetime you received your good things. Is being blessed by God a sin? Lazarus must have done evil things—yet he was rewarded.

26 *"And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us."*

Comment: Is this to be taken literally? What did the rich man do to deserve to go to hell and what did Lazarus do to go to heaven? I don't think this can be taken literally. Is the rich man's failure to give Lazarus food a crime worthy of suffering in hell for eternity?

27 *He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."* 29 *Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."* 30 *"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."* 31 *He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."*

Answer: The first and most important key to the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man is to remember that it is a *parable*. But before we talk about this passage as a parable, we need to take another important step. What did this parable mean to its original listeners and readers? *It must have a meaning then before it can have a meaning now.* The meaning of any specific passage may be the same to its original audience as to us today or it may have some modification given the time in which we live.

But most importantly, we should not jump into interpreting any

pas-
sage

for "our day" until we first place ourselves in the original culture, realizing the original author / speaker / teacher's intent—and the original audience being addressed. What was the historical context, and what was the cultural context?

When we consider the original audience, we should also think about the form of communication that God inspired to pass on the teaching inherent within the passage we are studying. In order to understand the original meaning, in addition to considering the his-

Before we talk about this passage as a parable, we need to take another important step. What did this parable mean to its original listeners and readers? It must have a meaning then before it can have a meaning now.

torical and cultural context, we must then consider the literary context.

Historical context of this passage: The time of Christ—Palestine—there was a "great chasm" (to use the words of Luke 16:26) between the rich and the poor. How was that time different from ours? There was really no middle class, lower or upper, as exists in 21st century North America. You were either rich or poor. Palestine was a land under the military occupation of Rome, which added to impoverishment.

Cultural setting: Being rich was often seen as a sign of corruption or of cooperation with the Roman occupation—or both. The grinding poverty experienced by most resulted in seething resentment of the rich.

Literary setting: Jesus is using a parable, one form of relating truth. Like much of his teaching, what he taught is of course true, but we must determine the primary message of any passage from the con-

text and the literary form of language used. Jesus taught by using many figures of speech—metaphors—many of them familiar to his audience, such as sheep, birds, vines, trees, agricultural implements and activities. When he did so he was not talking about literal trees or sheep or vines, but metaphors of some spiritual reality. *A metaphor is a figure of speech in which one thing represents another thing.* For example, when he said, “I am the bread of life” we understand he was not talking about a literal loaf of bread, but of a spiritual truth. While he is not literally the bread of life, the truth of that spiritual reality is deeper and more profound that any literal communication can convey.

Jesus also used *similes, which are also figures of speech, but figures of speech in which one thing resembles another thing—similes often use the words “as” or “like.”*

Luke 16:19-31 is a parable. What is a parable? A parable is an extended figure of speech, usually an extended simile. A parable thus uses physical realities—objects, individuals, life situations—and compares them to a spiritual reality—the objects used resemble spiritual truth, but they themselves are not the point.

Parables teach spiritual truth by telling a fictional story that closely resembles ordinary life, but may include elements that are far out of the ordinary. So when we read and study a parable it is important that we have some understanding of the key elements or characters of the parable, understanding them the way the original listeners / readers / audience did, for if we don’t, we may unwittingly miss the point, or even twist and distort the point.

Parables usually tell one main lesson, or perhaps two. They may use many different elements or characters, but the literal elements and characters are not the focus—the spiritual truth they combine to resemble is the point. *Many people mistakenly try to literalize every constituent part of a parable, having every element or character resemble some spiritual truth (and when that*

happens people are allegorizing). In such cases, people try to see a parable as conveying many different lessons. But parables convey one major lesson, or maybe two, but they are not intended to be understood as conveying a multitude of lessons.

Sometimes the “moral of the story” (the major lesson of the parable) is given, perhaps at the end, like the moral of a fable, but the main point is not always given so overtly. When we fail to understand the “moral of the story” and/or when we try to insert many different lessons into a parable, many misunderstandings result.

The focus of most of the parables of Jesus is the present and future rule of God (usually called “the kingdom”)—the relationship that those who accept Jesus enjoy both now and forever.

Now, to our parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man—what’s the point? The major point of this parable, if we carefully read the greater context, is to illustrate and reinforce the truth of the “moral of the story” of the first parable of Luke 16—the Parable of the Shrewd Manager. What is the point of that parable? In that parable, Jesus gives the “moral of the story” in the last sentence of the parable, Luke 16:15: “What is highly valued among men is detestable in God’s sight.”

This is the guiding principle, the foundational truth being conveyed in the next major parable in Luke 16—the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31). What is this parable not attempting to do—and ironically, what is one of the biggest mistakes made today as it is read and taught?

The parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man is not attempting to give us details about life after death, but rather it is teaching the fact that kingdom life in the here-and-now does not depend on physical circumstances in which we find ourselves—nor do the physical circumstances in which we find ourselves now necessarily have a direct bearing on our eternal home.

What else doesn’t it teach? It doesn’t teach that being rich is always a *de facto* proof that rich people will go to hell, and that a life of poverty guarantees eternal life in God’s

presence. After all, in this parable while Lazarus, a beggar, was in heaven, so was Abraham—whom the Bible clearly records as a wealthy man here on earth.

Lazarus and Abraham are both depicted as being in heaven, while the rich man is in hell. The rest of the Bible does not allow us to assume this to be a literal description of heaven and hell, for the Bible tells us that while Abraham’s spirit/soul is in heaven, his body is both dead and buried. This parable has him in heaven, bodily—but we know, from 1 Corinthians 15, that our bodies are not glorified and made immortal until the Second Coming of Jesus. So again, this is a parable. We are not talking about literal descriptions of eternal realities.

Many sincere preachers and interpreters, trying to use this parable to admonish and warn people about the dangers of hell, talk about the agony the rich man is enduring in the fire (verse 24). But again, this description is not intended as literal. How do we know that? First of all, this is a parable. If we ignore the fact that we are reading a parable, we may conclude that hell is filled with fire. But many passages in the Bible speak of hell as darkness. Fire and darkness are mutually exclusive. They can’t both be literally experienced at precisely the same time and place.

This parable teaches that Lazarus, though he was impoverished and miserable in his physical life on earth, enjoyed a close and intimate relationship with God. God did not deliver him from his misery and suffering here on earth (an important consideration we can glean in this day of health-and-wealth preachers who claim that those who are really close to God will be healthy and wealthy). This parable commends Lazarus, or rather the relationship he had with God, because Lazarus, though he suffered grinding poverty, is not depicted as being resentful or bitter about the physical life that God allowed him to endure (again, the moral of the story—those things that humans regard highly are not held in the same esteem by God). □

—the Editors