

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

By

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Basic to the New Testament doctrine is an understanding of the change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant associated with the demise of national Israel and the creation of a new nation made up of believers. This changeover is the subject of many of the parables and one reason the Pharisees so quickly built up a strong resistance to Christ.

The story of the rich man and Lazarus is such a parable (Luke 16:19–31). Unfortunately the story is most often told with the intent of proving something else, and the point Jesus made of it is ignored. Since there are so many who base their understanding of a life after death on this story, it becomes necessary to show that it is indeed a parable and not a case history. To begin with, a few preliminary comparisons are in order.

1) The book of Luke is a book of parables, most of them directed against the Jews. For example, Luke 16:14, “And the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, heard all these things, and they scoffed at Him.” Most of the parables presented are not designated as parables in the text. We identify a parable by its context and application.

2) If this were a case history and not a parable, it would contradict many scriptures which teach that judgment is reserved until the last day. “God has appointed a day in which He will judge the world” (Acts 17:31). Other scriptures teach that judgment and execution of the wicked takes place at Christ’s coming, not before.

3) If this were a literal story, it would portray a view of Abraham not found elsewhere in the Bible, and contradictory to other Bible teaching. It shows Abraham as judge, leaving out Christ and God. Nowhere else in scripture is “Abraham’s bosom” mentioned as man’s ultimate destiny. Also, in the story, Abraham accepts the term “father” without objection, contrary to Christ’s command that we should call no one Father except God (in a religious sense).

4) As a true case history, this would set a precedent for prayer to the dead. If the dead—Lazarus and the rich man—could pray to Abraham, certainly the living could do so. By interpreting this story as an actual case history men have opened the door to all kinds of queer doctrines, such as purgatory, prayers to the dead, spiritualism, and concepts of death contradictory to all the rest of the Bible.

5) If it is a literal case history, the language is impossible to understand, for we have one man dead and buried, yet lifting up his dead eyes and asking for water to cool his dead and decaying tongue. In the same story the other dead man is not buried at all, but rather taken by angels to Abraham. (Abraham has not yet received his reward, according to Hebrews 11:39).

I conclude that this story is a parable and that, like all other parables, the value of it is in understanding the moral, which, in this case, is plainly stated in verse 31.

A great amount of Jesus’ public ministry brought him into conflict with the Pharisees who finally were instrumental in bringing about His death (See John 8:44 and context). The story of the rich man and Lazarus was spoken especially for the benefit of

the Jews and they had no trouble in identifying themselves init. Consider these comparisons:

Verse 19. “A certain rich man, clothed in purple and fine linen, faring sumptuously every day.” According to their won law, the priest was to be clothed in purple and fine linen (Ex. 28:1–8). All of Israel was represented by the priests. Israel was the most favored people of the world (Rom. 9:3–5). The Pharisees gloried in their origin an loved to “set all others at nought,” and advertise their religious status before men (Luke 18:9, 16:15).

Verse 20. “And a certain beggar named Lazarus.” Lazarus means “helpless,” “destitute of help.” Until the gospel came, the Gentiles were strangers from the covenant, having no hope, and without God in the world (Eph. 2:11–12). Lazarus represents the Gentiles.

Verse 21. “Crumbs from the rich man’s table” and the reference to dogs sets forth the contrast in which the Jews viewed themselves in relation to the Gentiles. Jesus Himself used the expression in conversation with the Canaanite woman of Luke 15:21–28.

Verse 22. This verse sets forth the reversal of the two conditions. It is not the act of a physical death, for one does not go to “Abraham’s bosom” at death, but (in the case of a Christian) is asleep in Christ until He comes and raises him up (I Thess. 4:13–17, I Cor. 15:51–52). Were this to be taken as a literal case, it would have one man carried physically away and the other man physically buried. Lazarus being received into Abraham’s bosom represents the fact that through Christ the Gentiles may become children of Abraham and heirs of the promise, which the Jews thought to be exclusively theirs (see Gal. 3:6, Eph. 2).

This is the main thrust of the parable, that through Christ, who is Abraham’s seed, all the world should be blessed, while those of the fleshly descent would be shut out because of their own self-righteousness and rejection of the humble Savior.

Verse 23: The King James Version uses the word “hell” where the proper translation from the Greek reads “hades,” which simply means hidden, and generally has reference to death or the grave. It is this mistranslation and a literal interpretation of it that gives many the idea of a present purgatory, where God is punishing all the people who ever lived, except Christians, with horrible burning. But the rich man was not in the lake of fire, as we will see in a moment, but was in “hades,” the place of death. He represents Israel which originally was a part of the Abrahamic covenant, but who was to be cut off because of unbelief, and would never enter into the benefits of that covenant, those benefits having to do with salvation in Christ. Thus he does not enter into Abraham’s bosom, while the Gentile does. “Salvation is come unto the Gentiles to provoke them (the Jews) to jealousy” (Rom. 11:11–15). “Jealousy is cruel as the grave: the coals thereof are coals of fire which have a most vehement flame” (Solomon 8:6).

With the death and resurrection of Christ, the old covenant was dead and buried (Heb. 8:13, 9:15). The nation of Israel was destroyed in 70 AD, a fulfillment of Deuteronomy 28, Matthew 23:37–39 and Luke 19:42–44. To this day there is a wailing wall where Jews weep over the loss of their once exalted position.

Verse 24. The rich man calls Abraham “Father,” as the Pharisees often boasted of Abraham as their father, even though Jesus plainly told them that such was not the case. (See John 8:39–45, 53, 56).

Verse 25. Abraham calls the rich man “son,” acknowledging the fact that he is a descendant, a son in the flesh. Were this a story to depict the state of the lost, the condemned man could not be called “son.” The point of the remark is that conditions have been reversed. Gentiles who receive the gospel are comforted by the blessings and the hope therein, while the Jews have been dispersed, and suffer the consequences of their own rebellion.

Verse 26. The fixed gulf is that division made by the acceptance or rejection of Christ. “He that has the Son has the life; he that obeys not the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him” (John 3:36). “If you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). To be in Christ, one must make a full break with the old covenant (Gal. 5:4).

Verses 27–29. The rich man insists that one rise from the dead to take the message to his brothers. This could not be a story of final judgment, for at that time there will not be any left to hear the message. It plainly refers to the Pharisees. Having rejected Moses and slain the prophets, the Jews were then confronted with John the Immerser and finally the Messiah Himself. Repeatedly they challenged Jesus for a sign. Moses, the prophets, John and Jesus were not enough. Jesus said, “There is one who accuses you, even Moses...for had you believed Moses, you would have believed me, for he wrote of me” (John 5:45–46).

Verses 30–31. The final appeal is made for a resurrection. “If one go to them from the dead, they will repent.” Abraham then makes the application of the entire story. “If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if one rise from the dead.” These words of Jesus proved to be prophetically true, for after His resurrection the Jews, save a small remnant, not only rejected Him, but became His chief enemies, persecuting Him through His church.

This is the story of Israel in the flesh. They rebelled against Moses, then rejecting the rule of God, insisted on a King. Under the kings of Israel and Judah they became idolatrous, until God delivered them up to the Babylonian captivity. After their restoration to the land of Judea they continued in rebellion, even to the point of crucifying the Son of God. They not only refused to believe the resurrection of Jesus, but sought to eradicate the very idea from the minds of men. “They gave large sums of money to the soldiers, saying, say His disciples came by night and stole Him away while we slept” (Mt. 28:11–15).

The story of the rich man and Lazarus, when taken as an actual case history, requires the wresting of scriptures from their general meaning and presents concepts found nowhere else in the Bible but, in fact, contrary to other passages. When taken as a parable it presents no such contradiction and fits the application that is made in the final verse.

I am convinced that it is not given as an illustration of the state of the dead, but as an illustration of the end of the old dispensation and the beginning of the new, with believers of all nations entering into Abraham’s promise.

Lazarus means me, and every other believer, coming as sinners, destitute and hopeless, beggars with no worth or merit of our own, then dying to this world, to all

claims upon it and to all its claims upon us. “Even so reckon you also yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 6:11). Then, through Christ, we are brought into Abraham’s bosom to receive all the benefits of the promise, blessings in this life, and in the next, immortality.

As to the punishment of the unrepentant, there are plenty of scriptures that teach that they will perish by fire in the day of judgment. There is no need to distort the meaning of this parable to get that point across.

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