

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

Turn to Luke 16 please. Jesus tells a story about a rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. This story is sometimes called “Dives and Lazarus,” because dives is Latin for “rich man.”

This is the only parable where Jesus gives one of the characters a name, “Lazarus.” Some have wondered if it is not a parable at all, since someone has a name, maybe it’s a real story, but the experts are all agreed that it is indeed a parable.

We’ll read right through the parable, and make a few comments, then we’ll go through the parable again more carefully. Let’s read the parable right through.

Luke 16:9-31 *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen, and celebrated in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. 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.’

“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. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’

“He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

“Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

“‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ ‘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.’”

[“Celebrated in luxury” v19. The NIV has “lived in luxury,” but the Greek word rendered “lived” is usually translated “make merry” or “celebrate.” I do not know why the NIV and some other translations reduce it to “living” in luxury. Late in Luke 15 this word occurs three times, and NIV renders it “celebrate” every time. Why not here as well?]

The story is blunt and frightening. The situations of the rich man and Lazarus in this life are completely reversed, and there’s no changing anything about that afterward. The rich man is tormented in fire. The first became last, and the last became first. [See appendix]

And there is no clear reason given for the verdict. It does not say the rich man was wicked, or the beggar was righteous. In some ways this is deliberate. The emphasis is not on what they did right or wrong, but just on how completely they went from bad to good, or good to bad.

This parable is *not* teaching that all beggars go to Abraham and all rich people go to torment. No parable is complete in itself. We learn elsewhere how God judges people. Just being rich or poor does not decide the matter.

And the beggar is probably named, the only time Jesus uses a name in a parable, to show that beggars are real people, they have names. That is the effect. “Lazarus” is the short form of “Eliezer” (Abraham’s servant, Gen 15:2) or “Eleazar” (third son of Aaron). These two variations mean the same thing: “God helps.” “Lazarus” was a common name in Jesus’ time.

Extreme Contrast The contrast between these two people’s lives could hardly be greater *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen, and celebrated in luxury every day. ²⁰At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.*

Lazarus was placed there, he was laid there, which means Lazarus was a cripple. He cannot walk. He was covered with sores, he was diseased. He was very hungry.

Rich people used pieces of bread as napkins, to wipe their hands, and then they threw the bread on the floor. I assume servants cleaned up after, threw it out. Lazarus longed for that bread, but did not get it. These dogs are not licking his sores out of compassion. They are strays, and lick his sores for the food value, to put it discretely.

Lazarus was at the rich man’s gate. They spent every day close to each other. The rich man, dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day, celebrated in luxury every day, walked past Lazarus several times every day, leaving his house and returning.

Then they both die. 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. ²³In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.*

The rich man died and was buried. The angels did not come to carry him, we are intended to catch that. But if angels did not come to carry the rich man away, then apparently Lazarus was not buried, either. Lazarus’ body was taken away like the garbage. The rich man got burial, and Lazarus got angels.

As I said, Jesus does not explain why Lazarus was blessed and the rich man received torment. The parable is deliberately incomplete. What we DO know is that things will be very different after we die. Expect big change!

One thing is already clear: a long life of troubles is no sign of God’s rejection, and a long life of blessing is no sign of God’s approval. Most in our circles reject the health and wealth teaching. That’s the teaching that if believers trust and obey God, God will make them healthy and rich.

We reject that teaching, and we are right to do so, because too often the Bible teaches us differently. But most of us, me included, still hang on to a little bit. We interpret blessing as God’s reward for our faith, for example.

This parable wants none of that. Lazarus could hardly have had a more miserable life, and yet at the same time his life pleased God. The rich man could hardly have had a more comfortable enjoyable life. And to be sure, all the rich man’s good things came from God.

But all that time when the rich man enjoyed God’s generous blessing, he in turn offended God greatly, and God sent him into torment. We simply cannot argue from troubles in this life back to God’s disapproval of us, or from health and prosperity back to God’s pleasure with our lives.

Don’t push the details of this story on what the afterlife is like. It is a parable, a story told to teach truth. Whatever we know about life after death will need to come from Scriptures that are not parables.

On the other hand, Jesus does talk about judgement, and about flames and fire, and weeping and gnashing of teeth. He speaks about these things more than anyone else in the Bible, and most of it not in parables.

We have to imagine Jesus in Palestine, looking around at how people were living, Jews who were confident that they God’s people, but they lived in rebellion to God’s ways. Jesus feared for them, he could see what was coming to them, and they could not. So he told stories like this, and warned about severe judgement to come, so people would think, and repent, and follow God.

This is the Jesus who came to give his life a ransom for many. He took no pleasure in scaring people. He wanted to help them. So a part of that was showing people what God’s ways were like, and another part was warning them what would happen if they did not turn to God.

Abraham’s first answer: ²⁴ *So the rich man 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.’* 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. ²⁶ And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.’*

The rich man calls Abraham “father Abraham” two times, and “father” another time. And Abraham in return calls him “son.” The rich man is a Jew, and from his biblical name we know that “Lazarus” is a Jew also. At the beginning of Luke, John the Baptist said,

“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance, and do not begin to say to yourself, ‘we have Abraham as our father.’ For I tell you, that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham.” Luke 3:8. (See also Luke 13:28-30.) John knew people were ignoring God’s ways, and thought they would be fine because they were descendants of Abraham.

Abraham: *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.* Abraham does not sound very compassionate, does he. To Abraham, that the next life would make up for the wrongs of this life is only fair. How else could it be, Abraham seems to think.

Jesus is NOT being clear about everything, which highlights what he IS clear about. Clearly, there is this life, and there is the next life, and both are real. And this life shapes the next life, what happens in this life matters a lot for the next life.

To live wisely, we need to know that, and we need to think about this age and the coming age. Making this life comfortable is one of the worst priorities a person can have; about that Jesus leaves no doubt. He’s watching people live like that, then and now, people who think they live under God’s blessing, and he’s warning them from his concern.

Abraham’s second answer: ²⁷ *“The rich man answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸for 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.’*

Now we learn a bit about where the rich man failed, which we sort of guessed all along. We will assume that the five brothers are like the rich man. What would have kept this man out of torment? Moses and the Prophets. Jesus in the parable asks no more than that.

A rich Israelite may NOT ignore a poor begging Israelite at his own gate. Moses was very clear about that, especially in Deuteronomy, and so are the prophets. God gives wealth to be spread out. God gives unevenly and expects people to even it out between them.

The prophet Amos gives his first five chapters to just this topic: how Israelites with money and power neglected the poor Israelites among them. Most of the prophets speak about this.

Inside the gate, the rich man feasted joyously every day; outside the gate, crippled and diseased Lazarus starved, the rich man walked in and out of his gate and did nothing. The rich man, like his five brothers, had known about Moses and the Prophets, and he ignored them.

The rich man was in trouble, not because he ignored John the Baptist and Jesus, but because he ignored Moses and the Prophets. Jesus saw Jews around him living like that.

John the Baptist said, “produce fruit in keeping with repentance.” That is not a call to perfection, it is a plea for evidence. “Give God some evidence, give God something to go on,” says John, “to show you mean to live in his ways.” Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

Back in in Luke 3, three groups of people then asked John what they should do, and in every case John talks about possessions. Meeting God changes how we view money and possessions.

Abraham’s third answer: ³⁰ “No, father Abraham,’ the rich man 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.’”

Hardness goes deep. What God wants is not hidden, it is not a mystery, it is known. If we don’t respond to that, Abraham says, we won’t respond to anything.

This story is 13 verses long. Two describe this life, two more how this life ends and the next begins, and then nine verses take place in the next age. The next age lasts a long time. Much longer than this one. Do not make comfort in this life a high priority.

We never do find out what Lazarus did right. Simply being poor is not enough. There are poor people who are greedy and vicious and displease God. Other people in terrible situations still make noble choices. We assume Lazarus in that group, but the parable says nothing about it.

We do begin to find out, though, what got the rich man in trouble. The parable has extremes.

- 1, The rich man is wonderfully rich and celebrates every day.
- 2, Lazarus has many severe troubles, wants small relief, does not get any.
- 3, They live right next to each other, they see each other every day.
- 4, When Lazarus dies, he goes to a wonderful place.
- 5, When the rich man dies, he goes to a horrible place, wants small relief, does not get any.

Just from that, it is not hard to see the point of the story. Lazarus was so close to the rich man, and both Jews, and the rich man still did nothing. This brings God’s judgment, make no mistake.

The parable of the unrighteous steward is just a few verses earlier in this same chapter. The unrighteous steward used money *now* in a way that made God his Eternal Friend! That is exactly what our rich man did not do.

The rich fool (Lk 12) who built bigger barns made the same mistake. He took care of his money in this life, and his comforts in this life, but handled his money as if the next age did not exist. Money and possessions in this life shapes our next life. Jesus said that many different ways.

This is the third parable we’ve covered in which Jesus teaches us to use wealth in this life with a careful look at eternity. Jesus wants us to do well, to live wisely. So he’s telling us the big story, so we will know how to look at life and money.

Our response to people much worse off than we are matters. We meet beggars from time to time. Think about what you are going to do. We cannot help everybody. But we need to give God significant evidence that we are not like this rich man.

We have repented, we have decided to live in God's ways. So let's be generous, and compassionate, not holding on to our stuff tightly, not making comforts of this life a priority. Let's ask God to help us, to make us generous, and to make us eternally wise. Amen.

Appendix: There are three particular earlier texts in Luke that this parable continues.

Luke 3:7-9 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptized by him, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire."

Luke 13:28-30 Jesus: There will be weeping there, and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, but you yourselves thrown out. People will come from east and west and north and south, and will take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God. Indeed there are those who are last who will be first, and first who will be last.

Luke 16:1-9, the parable of the dishonest steward, which is a little earlier in the chapter. The dishonest steward used unrighteous money to secure his future, exactly what our rich man did not do.