

4 November 2007

The Permanent Reversal

Reading: Luke 16:19-31

You may be interested in hearing an interpretation of this parable, but may well assume that it has little or nothing to do with you. You are not destitute like Lazarus nor are you as rich as the wealthy man described here. The parable was certainly spoken into a particular situation but, as we shall see, it has a relevant word to speak to us today.

I IN FACT, IT SPEAKS TO EVERY ONE OF US ABOUT THE MOST IMPORTANT MATTER IN LIFE.

A. First, I need to briefly recount it.

1. Jesus introduces us to two men. The one was exceptionally wealthy and highly ostentatious. Stated crudely, he was filthy rich and something of a show off. William Hendriksen translates verse 19: "Once there was a rich man who was in the habit of dressing up in purple and fine linen and living in dazzling splendour day in, day out."
2. The other lived in abject poverty. He was disabled, he was covered in festering sores, and he frequently felt the gnawing pangs of hunger. To exacerbate his miserable condition, the mangy scavenger dogs came and licked his sores.
3. The rich man was well aware of the plight of the beggar at his gate, but didn't even spare the leftovers from his lavish table to feed him.
4. Both men died. We are not even told a word about the beggar's funeral. Perhaps he didn't have one. The bodies of down-and-outs were sometimes dumped rather than buried. But angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died. We are told that he was buried, and no doubt he was given an impressive funeral. But he found himself in torment in Hades.

B. I think a brief explanation is called for.

1. The purpose of the parable is not to give us a detailed description of life after death. We derive our teaching concerning this subject from the whole of Scripture.

2. The revelation God has given us is progressive.¹ In the Old Testament the realm of the dead is called ‘*Sheol*.’ But, originally, it was simply the place of the dead. It was a shadowy realm and we ought not to read the later understanding back into earlier statements about *Sheol*.² The Greek equivalent of *Sheol* is *Hades*.
3. During the inter-testamental period, the concept was developed and *Sheol-Hades* was seen as a place of consciousness in which people awaited the final judgment (cf. the Pseudepigraphical Book of Enoch 22:1-14).
4. Linking with this understanding, Jesus paints a graphic picture for us.
5. Instead of arguing about how literally we ought to take this description, we ought to focus on the important principles:
 - There is a major difference between the position of the righteous and that of the wicked.
 - There is an impassable chasm between them.
 - The situation is irreversible after death.

C. Let’s continue the story.

1. The rich man requests Abraham, whom he addresses as ‘Father Abraham,’ to send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water to cool his tongue because he is tormented in the flame.
2. Significantly Abraham addresses the rich man as ‘Son,’ and explains that this would be inappropriate. Besides, a great impassable chasm had been fixed between the righteous and the wicked so that it was as impossible for Lazarus to come to him as it was for him to go to Lazarus.
3. The rich man then begs Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them so that they too do not land up in Hades.
4. Abraham replies that they have Moses and the Prophets (in other words, the Old Testament Scriptures) and that they should listen to them.
5. “No, father Abraham,” he said, “but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will **repent.**”

¹ C. S. Lewis explains the spiritual significance of the gradual revelation of details concerning life after death. C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1958), 34-43. See Addendum.

² As the word is used in the Old Testament, the meaning moves between the grave, the underworld and the state of death.

6. Abraham's response is highly significant: "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

It's not hard to see that the parable is loaded with significance for the first hearers, but we need to ask:

II WHAT EXACTLY DOES IT HAVE TO SAY TO US?

I can think of four related truths.

A. In the first place, God gives us enough truth and light for us to follow him.

1. The latter half of the parable is particularly pertinent. Remember, the rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his brothers. Abraham informs him that they have Moses and the Prophets. "No," protests the rich man, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."
2. Some time after this parable, another man called Lazarus did rise from death. Instead of believing, Jesus' opponents wanted to kill Lazarus so as to dispose of the evidence. When Jesus himself rose from the dead, rather than believe it, they bribed the guards to tell a story which could not possibly be substantiated: "His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep" (Mt 28:11-15).³
3. But Abraham insists that if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. How true his words proved to be!
4. There is a simple principle here. It is enunciated in John 3:19-21,

This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. All those who do evil hate the light, and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But those who live by the truth come into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God.

Consider for a moment that you are in a dark tunnel, so dark that it is frightening. You cannot see your hand ten centimeters in front of you. You don't know what is around you; there is an eerie echo, a musty smell and the sound of trickling water. You desperately want to get out of that dark and confined place into the daylight and

³ The most they could say was that while they were asleep, the body disappeared. Since, according to their account, they had been unconscious, they were in no position to say *what* had happened to the body.

the fresh air. So you glance anxiously to your left and, in the distance, you see what looks like a pinprick of light. It is so far away that you wonder whether your imagination is playing tricks on you. It could be an illusion or it could be an opening to the tunnel, which is so remote that it seems to be no more than a speck. You deduce that if you make your way toward that tiny spot, you may eventually escape the darkness of the tunnel and come into the light. But as you look in the other direction you are able to see a shaft of light. The aperture seems to be the size of a 'toonie' (two dollar coin). You conclude that there must be an opening to the tunnel and that it is well within reach. If you really want to come to the light, you head for the toonie.

God gives us light. He had given the rich man and his brothers light. And the rich man assumed that if they had greater light, they would be sure to respond differently than they had done to the lesser light. It doesn't work like that! Abraham never knew Jesus (not as we know him). Yet he responded to the light God had given him. Had he lived at the time of Jesus, he would have been a follower of Jesus. That's why the Lord could say, "Your father Abraham rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad" (John 8:56).

Most telling of all is the fact that the when the light shone at its full intensity, the rejection was marked. The light shone in the darkness but the darkness did not understand it. Someone did return from death and this did not result in a change of attitude.

Of course, it is impossible to reject the greater light and yet say that one is responding to the lesser light.

B. It really is about the essential orientation of your life.

The rich man did not find himself in torment in Hades because he was rich. Lazarus did not find himself at Abraham's side because he was poor and was being compensated in paradise for his poverty on earth. Lazarus means "God has helped." The assumption is that he was trusting in God despite his dire circumstances. And, of course, Abraham, himself, was rich. The rich man wanted his brothers *to repent* so that they would not join him in Hades. That was a tacit acknowledgement that he had not done so. It was not his wealth but the condition of his heart that sent him to hell.

Which way are you facing? It's not a question of how much you have or don't have. It's whether you have repented and are trusting God.

C. The orientation of your life is manifested in the way you behave.

1. The opulent man regarded himself as one of God's children. He addressed Abraham as "Father Abraham." And Abraham addressed him as, "Son." How sad is this? We only have to consider the conversation between Jesus and the Jewish authorities in John 8 to know how much store they placed by being children of Abraham.
2. The point is: he wasn't acting as a child of God should. God's word was crystal clear about how one should treat the poor and disadvantaged (Lev 19:10; Deut 10:18). Moses and the Prophets contain numerous exhortations to care for the poor.
3. A few half-hearted handouts would not have made a difference to the rich man's destiny. It's a matter of the heart. As someone has stated: "You can give without loving, but you can't love without giving!"

D. In the final analysis, actions always speak louder than words.

1. When, in the dim and distant past, I arrived at Bible College, I was the youngest student on campus. The president of the student body, who was considerably older than I, took me under his wing. I shall never forget a simple observation he made. We were required on two afternoons a week to work in the gardens. He pulled me over and said, "Ellis, I want to show you something. This is where you see the real quality of a person's spiritual life. It's not in the pious expressions or the volume of the 'Hallelujahs,' but in the way they acquit themselves in the gardens." Sure enough, some were shirking, waiting for the two hours to pass, pushing wheel barrows as slowly as they possibly could, trying to look industrious, but getting out of as much work as possible.
2. The prophets, whom Abraham cited when he spoke to the rich man, were quite clear. Take Isaiah, for instance.

"Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice
and untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free
and break every yoke?"

Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter—
when you see the naked, to clothe them,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood.

Then your light will break forth like the dawn,
and your healing will quickly appear;
then your righteousness will go before you,
and the glory of the LORD will be your rear guard.

Then you will call, and the LORD will answer;
you will cry for help, and he will say: Here am I”
(Isa 58:6-9).

3. And what about John?

“If any one of you has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you? ¹⁸ Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth” (1 John 3:17-18).

4. As we have worked on our strategic plan, we have spoken much of “no-strings-attached” service to the community. That kind of attitude is not a super deluxe brand of Christianity. It should be normal. By God’s grace, that’s what we need to be. We don’t, for one minute, imagine that we can earn a place in heaven by finding a beggar and feeding him, but if we are Gods children, how can we possibly walk past a Lazarus?

Conclusion

So, God gives us enough truth and light for us to follow him. How we respond to that light determined the essential orientation of our lives. This orientation is manifested in the way we behave. And our actions speak louder than our words.

How we live here determines what happens to us later. We can’t miss the intentional teaching of the parable. There is a fixed chasm; it is impassable and it is permanent. Our response to the truth God gives us here and now determines our eternal destiny.

Addendum

One Reason God’s Revelation Concerning Life after Death is Progressive

C S Lewis points out that one can desire “heaven” and fear “hell” for entirely selfish reasons. “God” would then be no more than a means to an end. So the order has to be right. Listen to his argument.

For the truth seems to me to be that happiness or misery beyond death, simply in themselves, are not even religious subjects at all. A man who believes in them will of course be prudent to seek the one and avoid the other. But that seems to have no more to

do with religion than looking after one's health or saving money for one's old age. The only difference is that the stakes are so very much higher.

It is surely, therefore, very possible that when God began to reveal himself to men, to show them that he and nothing else is their true goal and the satisfaction of their needs, and that he has a claim upon them simply by being what he is, quite apart from anything he can bestow or deny, it may have been absolutely necessary that this revelation should not begin with any hint of future Beatitude or Perdition. These are not the right points to begin at. An effective belief in them, coming too soon, may even render almost impossible the development of (so to call it) an appetite for God; personal hopes and fears, too obviously exciting, have got in first. Later, when, after centuries of spiritual training, men have learned to desire and adore God, to pant after him "as pants the hart", it is another matter. For then those who love God will desire not only to enjoy him but "to enjoy him forever", and will fear to lose him. And it is by that door that a truly religious hope of heaven and fear of hell can enter; as corollaries to a faith already centred upon God, not as things of any independent or intrinsic weight. It is even arguable that the moment "heaven" ceases to mean union with God and "hell" to mean separation from him, the belief in either is a mischievous superstition, for then we have, on the one hand, a merely "compensatory" belief (a "sequel" to life's sad story, in which everything will "come all right") and, on the other, a nightmare which drives men into asylums or makes them persecutors.

C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1958), 40-41