

## STORIES THAT PACK A PUNCH

### Study 8

## The Permanent Reversal (Luke 16:19-31)

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is about much more than life after death.<sup>1</sup> It is one of two parables in Luke 16. In the first, we are told to use our worldly wealth in such a way as to make "friends" who will welcome us into eternal dwellings. In the second we are introduced to a man who did exactly the opposite!

### WHAT?

#### 1. The Parable

Jesus describes the main characters in graphic detail. The first was filthy rich and also seems to have been 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." By stark contrast, a beggar was laid at his gate. He had a name and an identity, but his condition was pitiable. He was covered in sores and he longed to eat the scraps that fell from the rich man's table. To exacerbate his miserable condition, the mangy scavenger dogs came and licked his sores. He eventually died. We are not even told he was buried. But we are told that angels carried him to Abraham's side.<sup>2</sup>

The rich man died and was no doubt given a splendid and impressive burial. The contrast in the situations of the two men after death was even greater than the

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<sup>1</sup> You may have heard somebody say that the story of the rich man and Lazarus cannot possibly be a parable, because Lazarus is mentioned by name. There is no reason why Jesus should not mention a name (Lazarus comes from Eleazar, which means, "God has helped") in a parable. William Hendriksen suggests that possibly Jesus gave the beggar a name in order to indicate that, in all his distress, he placed his trust in God. [William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Luke* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 783]. There may also be another good reason for Jesus' use of this particular name in a parable. He may well have known that another Lazarus would be raised and that this would not result in repentance. Those who vehemently protest that this is not a parable usually do so because they base their teaching on life after death on the passage. This is unnecessary since we ought to base our teaching on the subject on the whole of Scripture. In any event, there is no reason why the essential truths contained in a parable should be considered to be inaccurate.

<sup>2</sup> In other words, the soul (the real person) survived the death of the body.

contrast they experienced in life. The rich man (or Dives, as he is sometimes called) found himself in hell (Hades) and was in torment. To make matters worse for him, he could see Abraham in the far distance and Lazarus was at his side. The fact that he could recognize him and knew his name indicates that he had been aware of the identity of the beggar at his gate whom he had never bothered to feed. Ironically he asks Father Abraham (indicating, of course, that he regarded himself as a member of the covenant nation) to send the beggar, whose plight he had consciously ignored, to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool his tongue because he was in agony in the fire.

Abraham told him that this was out of the question for two reasons. The first is that it would be *improper*: "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." The second is that it is *impossible*: "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."

The parable could have ended right here, but it doesn't! The rich man asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his five brothers to warn them so that they do not also come to this place of torment. Abraham replies: "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."

But this hadn't worked for him, so he continued to plead. His reasoning was that if someone were to return from the dead and warn them, they would most certainly repent. In a highly significant statement Abraham assured him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

## 2. Points of Importance

- The rich man is not blamed for being rich. Abraham, at whose side Lazarus found himself, was also rich.
- In the Old Testament *Sheol* was the place of the departed. A careful study of its usage tells us relatively little about it. We should not read back subsequent teaching into the passages where *Sheol* is mentioned. *Hades* (here translated Hell) is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew, *Sheol*. By the time Jesus told this parable, there had been significant development in the people's understanding of *Sheol-Hades*.

- The primary purpose of this parable is not to provide us with detailed teaching on life after death. We refer to the teaching of the whole of Scripture to ascertain this.
- The parable is such that Abraham and Dives have to be able to converse with one another. Rather than attempt to draw a picture of exactly how things are or talk of the 'paradise and torment compartments of Sheol-Hades,' we should note the really important truths that are conveyed. For example, there *is* life after death; there is a *major difference* between the post-death situations of Lazarus and Dives; there is a *huge impassable chasm* between 'the saved' and 'the lost'; the situation, after death has occurred, is *irreversible*. Not much is said about the experience of Lazarus, except that he is at Abraham's side and is comforted.
- We would be misreading the parable if we took it to teach that one is punished in the hereafter for being rich and rewarded for being poor. Neither the rich man, nor his brothers, who were presumably equally affluent, had heeded the teaching of Moses and the Prophets (16:29-31). The rich man realized he was in Hades because he had failed to repent (16:30).
- Jesus was accused of being opposed to the Law and Prophets (John 9:28-29). Here is one of many instances in which he identified with the teaching of the Old Testament Scriptures (cf. John 5:39-40, 45-46).
- In particular, both Moses and the Prophets speak of the need to show compassion towards the poor (Ex 22:22, 25; Lev 19:10; 25:25-47; Deut 10:18; 14:29; 15:4; 16:11; Is 14:32; 25:4; 29:19; 58:6-7; Dan 4:27; Amos 2:6, 7; 4:1; 5:11-12; Jonah 4:11; Micah 6:8; Zech 7:10-11). James and John make compassion on the poor an *essential* part of being a Christian (James 2:14-26; 1 John 3:17-18). Paul concurs (Gal 6:9-10; 1 Tim 6:18-19).
- The latter half of the parable is highly significant. Jesus, of course, knew that he would one day rise from the dead (Luke 9:21-22). We cannot say whether he knew, at this stage, that he would raise another man called Lazarus from death (John 11:11-15, 43-53). The reaction of Jesus' opponents to the raising of Lazarus' indicates that once people have made up their minds to reject the truth, no amount of evidence will induce them to change. In fact, they wanted to dispose of the evidence (John 12:9-10). And when Jesus rose from the dead, they were so determined to deny his resurrection that they resorted to dishonesty (Mt 28:11-15). There is continuity here. Since Jesus came in the fulfilment of prophecy, it was not

possible to say, "I am a genuine follower of Moses and the Prophets, *but I reject Jesus.*" (Luke 4:16-21; 24:25-27; John 5:39-40).

### 3. The Main Point of the Parable

Why did Jesus tell this parable in the first place? To answer that question we need to ask, "Who do Lazarus and the rich man represent?" Lazarus is undoubtedly a child of God, though many would have seen his condition as an indication that God's favour did *not* rest on him. Dives (the rich man) seemed to be enjoying God's blessing, but he was in for a huge shock. In particular, he represents the Pharisees (Luke 16:14-15), but he also represents any who do not live according to the light God has given them. He was exceptionally rich and instead of using his wealth in the service of God and humanity, he squandered it on himself. He ought to have heeded the proverb: "Those who are kind to the poor lend to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done" (Proverbs 19:17).

So the message is not just: "Be nice to those in need!" as important as that is. It is **a message about the orientation of our lives.** If we really live for God, it shows in our lives, not least in our attitude toward the poor.

The parable does not present a kind of compensatory belief that "those who have it bad down here will be recompensed in the next life." This crippled beggar was God's child and the self-centred, ostentatious man at whose gate he was dumped was not. Of course, this does not mean that all rich people are bad or that all poor people are good. Clearly, we cannot make poverty *in itself* the basis of a special claim on God's favour. The poor and those that mourn (in Jesus' beatitudes) do not simply make a virtue of necessity. "(They) are those who have nothing to expect from the world, but who expect everything from God. They look towards God, and also cast themselves upon God; in their lives and in their attitude they are beggars before God."<sup>3</sup>

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.

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<sup>3</sup> Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 76.

## SO WHAT?

1. What would you say was the rich man's real mistake?
2. Although the main purpose of the parable is not to give us a literal or exhaustive insight into life after death, what basic truths concerning life after death can we identify?
3. Why, in the latter half of the parable, did Jesus include a discussion about one returning from the dead?

## NOW WHAT?

1. Like Lazarus and the rich man, each one of us has to die. If it is true that Lazarus never landed up at Abraham's side because he was poor and the rich man never found himself in hell because he was rich, what would have been decisive in determining their destinies? How sure are you about your destiny?
2. In global terms, we are all well off. The rich man could not be blamed for failing to alleviate the plight of all of the world's hungry, but he recognized Lazarus, who had been laid at his gate. What are you doing to help the needy people within your sphere of influence?
3. Respond to this argument that was once put to me by affluent Christians who underpaid their domestic workers (by simply giving them the 'going rate', which was exploitative). "This is the way the economy works. (Implied: You are a naïve and idealistic pastor, and don't understand the real world). We are doing these people a favour by employing them. They work hard but they are uneducated. We can't afford to pay them more than we do. (Implied: Lavish meals out, expensive entertainment and top model cars are a given in our situation)." Are you prepared to make some reasonable adjustments to your lifestyle in order to help the poor and disadvantaged? Why would you do this?