

Heaven or Hell?
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Luke 16:19-31 Common English Bible (CEB)

¹⁹ “There was a certain rich man who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day. ²⁰ At his gate lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores. ²¹ Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores.

²² “The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. ²³ While being tormented in the place of the dead, he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ He shouted, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I’m suffering in this flame.’ ²⁵ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain. ²⁶ Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us.’

²⁷ “The rich man said, ‘Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father’s house. ²⁸ I have five brothers. He needs to warn them so that they don’t come to this place of agony.’ ²⁹ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them.’ ³⁰ The rich man said, ‘No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives.’ ³¹ Abraham said, ‘If they don’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.’”

I’m sure that many of you have heard this parable before. And even if today is the first day that you’ve heard it, I want to ask you, what is the basic gist of it? If you had to say **what** this parable is about, what would you say it is in one sentence?

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For me, it was always about HEAVEN and HELL. Do good and you’ll go to heaven. Do bad and you’ll go to hell. That’s what I was taught to take away from this story. I think it’s safe to say that that’s what many people either take away or are taught.

It’s great when the Word can be that simple and direct, but even when you think it is that simple and direct you should dig deeper. Is there more? Could there be more? I believe that the answer is always yes.

While the ideas of heaven and hell can be pulled from this parable, let's see if there is more. Let's ask some questions. What is this parable all about?

Before we begin, I want to remind us all that this is a parable, a simple story with a moral or spiritual lesson. It is not considered historically factual. It is not a documentary about real people. Is it possible that Jesus or the Lukan writer(s) **based** this story's details on real-life people and events? Perhaps. But we need to approach it as it is intended; a parable – a story with a moral lesson.

- There was a certain rich man...
 - Not just any old rich man, a **CERTAIN** rich man. Certain because he's known for sure. This isn't some remote, eccentric guy, living far outside the city. He's part of the community.
 - Yet in the story he's referred to as "a rich man," versus say, James or John. Why isn't he given a name? What might that signify?
- ... who clothed himself in purple and fine linen, and who feasted luxuriously every day."
 - The scene is set with "the rich man." We know that he's not just well-off, but he's REALLY rich. He doesn't wear just any color of cloth, but purple cloth, which was considered the finest and most regal because it was the hardest to get. Today, he'd probably be wearing an Armani suit.
 - He didn't just eat – he feasted luxuriously. We've all feasted luxuriously, right. Say on your birthday or at a special party; we've eaten rich, tasty food – most likely our favorite. And we've probably been a bit gluttonous; "Oh my, I couldn't eat another bite." And what's so wrong with that? Nothing. It's your birthday! But that's not what the story says. "The rich man" ate that way **EVERY DAY**.
- At his gate...
 - We know more about the rich man now. He was SO RICH, that his home had a gate. Then, people's home didn't typically have gates. A gate would indicate a secure property. So, the rich man was SO rich that he needed security OR his home was so large that it was like a compound with security gates to keep certain people out. Is this the only gate or are there more? It says "at **HIS** gate," – and if it was a security thing, then he probably had only one gate.
- (At his gate) ...lay a certain poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores.
 - Not just any poor man, a **CERTAIN** poor man. Just like the rich man, this poor man was "certain" because he was known for sure. He's part of the community and people either know him or know OF HIM.
 - AND ... if the rich man had only one gate, the rich man had to walk OVER Lazarus or AROUND Lazarus to go in and out of his house. CERTAINLY these two knew of each other, right?
 - AND – the poor man has a name. His name is Lazarus. The poor man has a name and the rich man does not.
 - How many of you know the play by Arthur Miller, *The Crucible*? For those who don't know, it's a play about the Salem witch trials in the late 17th century, using true life events. There were fears of witchcraft and sorcery

happening in the town of Salem. The protagonist, John Proctor, had an affair with a girl named Abigail. Abigail plays into the fears and begins to target her enemies by accusing them of witchcraft. Still in love with John, she accuses his wife, Elizabeth. In order to save his wife's life, John admits to the town and authorities of his affair with Abigail, which she denies. In an effort to save his wife and other friends he tells the judges that he practiced witchcraft himself, but with no one else. The judges accept his confession, but take it further. They want it in writing so as to hang on the church door for all to see. Everyone must know of his confession. John refuses, not wanting his wife and three sons to be stigmatized by such a public confession. In response to their request for John to sign his name, John refuses saying, ***"Because it is my name! Because I cannot have another in my life. Because I am not worth the dust on the feet of them that hang! How may I live without my name? I have given you my soul, leave me my name!"***

- Look to Bible. We've all read (or tried to read) through those BEGATS in Genesis that seem to go on forever.
 - Adam begat Cain, who begat Enoch who begat Irad who begat Mehujael, etc. etc.
 - It's in Matthew, Luke and Ruth as well
 - WHY?
- Because names are important. Having a name, being named substantiates value, existence and that one is a part of a lineage, a community. You are _____, not just some guy who attends UCB.
- Lazarus – why the name Lazarus?
 - Usually, when asked about Lazarus in the Bible, most people think of Lazarus of Bethany; the brother of Martha and Mary, in the gospel of John. Lazarus who died before Jesus could get there. Lazarus, over whom Jesus wept. Lazarus, whom Jesus raised from the dead four days later.
 - Lazarus of Bethany was resurrected – is that supposed to be important for this Lazarus?
- ...He laid at the rich man's gate and was covered in sores.
 - How did Lazarus get there? His physical state is so bad that apparently all he can do is LAY at the rich man's gate. Before laying at the gate, what did Lazarus do? Was he always poor and a beggar? Did something happen to make him that way? How long has Lazarus been like this? How old might he be? Is there no family or friends to help him? (apparently not) Is he able to move or DO anything else other than lay there? The next verse gives us insight.
- Lazarus longed to eat the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. Instead, dogs would come and lick his sores.
 - **He longed.** With his physical limitations, we know that he had at least one emotion – that of longing. Longing simply to fulfill the basic need to satisfy hunger. Not too much to ask or expect, right? A crumb to help those stomach pains subside.

- Did he ever actually encounter the rich man? Was he ever able to talk with him, to say, “I’m starving – I only ask of you the scraps that fall from your table?” Just scraps – that which you don’t want or even need.
- Lazarus is SO POOR and pitiful, that instead of getting a crumb, the dogs would come and lick his sores. This is quite extreme and graphic. The image is both disgusting and horrifying. Can you imagine being so ill, so destitute, so abandoned..... What condition could be so debilitating?
 - And there’s this sense that Lazarus didn’t stop the dogs from licking his sores. That he actually LET them do it. Is he physically unable to stop them or is his spirit so beaten down that he simply doesn’t care any more? He just doesn’t have the energy to care.
- We are SUPPOSED TO HAVE THE EMPATHETIC REACTION HERE OF – HOW COULD ANYONE ALLOW SUCH A THING TO HAPPEN? HOW COULD ANYONE SEE THIS AND LET IT CONTINUE?
- The poor man died and was carried by angels to Abraham’s side.
 - We don’t know **how** Lazarus died, just that he did. As for his body, what happened to it? After laying there ignored and decomposing, was it buried? Was it left to the dogs? What it thrown on the fiery dump heap known as Gehenna?
 - His soul was taken to Abraham’s side, by angels. We understand this to mean “heaven.” He was escorted by angels after all. “He died and went to heaven.” Why didn’t Jesus just say heaven or paradise? If that is what we’re supposed to get out of this story, wouldn’t it be better to just say it plainly? Are we meant to question it?
- The rich man also died and was buried.
 - How much time passes between Lazarus’ death and the rich man’s? It’s assumed that they happened closely together, maybe even the same day. Does it matter how much time might have passed?
 - He was buried – we are told this about the rich man. What does this say? There was someone in the rich man’s life who cared enough for him to bury him? Or, with as rich as he was, he had enough money to pay someone to bury him? Or, he was seen as **valuable enough** that someone took care of making that happen. Society cared enough about a rich man to respect his body and bury him.
- While being tormented in the place of the dead...
 - This tells us that the rich man did NOT go to Abraham’s side (or heaven) – he went to “the place of the dead.” In the Greek it says he went to Hades. In Hebrew the word is Sheol. We understand this to be “hell.” He died and went to hell. But there are lots of contrary commentaries and discussions about what Hades or Sheol really is. If Hades isn’t hell, where did the rich man go when he died? Hmmm....
 - Whether this is hell or some other “place,” it says that the rich man is being tormented. We’ll find out more in the next few verses about this torment, but what we know is that torment is bad. No one wants to be tormented.
- ...he looked up and saw Abraham at a distance with Lazarus at this side.
 - So – from Hades/Sheol/Hell, one can see “heaven” and vice versa. Are these “places” literally so close together....or just figuratively for the story? The rich man sees Abraham and Lazarus and they see him.

The rest of the story is a dialogue between Abraham and the rich man; between heaven and hell. It's more than half of the story. A conversation that is simple and direct, but also complex and full of unspoken, implied subtext.

- He shouted, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me.'
 - The rich man not only recognizes Abraham, but he calls him Father. That tells us more about the rich man. He's likely Jewish or he knows enough Hebrew scripture and history that Abraham is the founding father of the covenant between God and the Jewish people.
 - He wants Abraham to show him mercy.
 - The rich man clearly doesn't understand why he's in Hades and not where Lazarus is. And he believes that Abraham has the power to change this by showing him compassion. Then the rich man TELLS Abraham HOW he should show mercy....pretty gutsy, right?
 - Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I'm suffering in this flame.
 - So – the rich man feels so privileged that he thinks he can tell Abraham how to show him mercy....
 - THEN he has the audacity to tell Lazarus to serve him. The rich man knew that Lazarus was poor, laying at his gate, covered in sores and dogs licked at them. Even in the next phase of life, the rich man feels he's so much better than Lazarus that Lazarus ought to serve him. This is beyond gutsy – it's privilege.
- But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received good things, whereas Lazarus received terrible things. Now Lazarus is being comforted and you are in great pain.
 - Abraham names the rich man, "child." This bonds them in a relationship and confirms his own title as "father." The title "child" is endearing of the rich man in spite of his demands on Abraham, but it also acknowledges him as a child of God.
 - Then Abraham responds to the rich man with a gentle review of "how it is" – during your life you received good things and Lazarus received terrible things. Now, Lazarus is being comforted and you are in pain. Abraham doesn't chastise the rich man for doing anything bad or wrong. He never places blame. Nor does he praise Lazarus.
 - In fact, this is a good time to review – WE INTERPRET THE RICH MAN AS **DOING BAD** AND LAZARUS AS **DOING GOOD** (OR AT LEAST NOT DOING BAD), BUT THE STORY NEVER EXPLICITLY SAYS THIS. Abraham's response tells us what the two of them RECEIVED during their lives on earth – not what they did. It's left to us explore and discuss.
- Moreover, a great crevasse has been fixed between us and you. Those who wish to cross over from here to you cannot. Neither can anyone cross from there to us.'
 - Abraham continues by responding to the rich man's request, again telling him "how it is" – there's a great crevasse between us that can't be crossed.

- This crevasse – are we to understand it as an actual, physical crevasse or a figurative one? Does it really matter? There are two sides separated by a great crevasse – on one side one receives comfort and on the other one receives pain. Is that a description of earthly life or of life after death?
- “The rich man said, ‘Then I beg you, Father, send Lazarus to my father’s house. I have five brothers. He needs to warn them so that they don’t come to this place of agony.’
 - The rich man still doesn’t get it. Again, he’s telling Abraham what to do. Despite being told “how it is” and accepting he’s in a place of agony - he still sees himself as privileged and better than Lazarus – as though he deserves to have Lazarus serve his needs. Tell Lazarus to warn my brothers – MY FAMILY; not to warn everyone – just my family. He’s selfish. He doesn’t care at all for Lazarus. Or humanity.
- Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets. They must listen to them.’
 - Does Abraham not care about the rich man’s family? Does he not want them saved from the torment the rich man is experiencing?
 - I think that Abraham is continuing to tell him “how it is” without any judgement. They have Moses and the Prophets. Who else do they need? We hear though, the underlying context of “they have Moses and the Prophets – **just like you did.**” They must listen to them – **like you should have.**
- The rich man said, ‘No, Father Abraham! But if someone from the dead goes to them, they will change their hearts and lives.’
 - Why does he say, no? Is it because he knows the truth? They aren’t listening to Moses and the Prophets and they likely won’t. The rich man continues with his selfish pleas to save his family.
 - He suggests that if someone known, like Lazarus, returns from the dead – people will take them seriously....and they will change their hearts and lives, so that they can avoid “the place of the dead where there is pain and torment.”
 - Two things of interest here:
 - This confirms beyond a shadow of a doubt, that the rich man knew of Lazarus – no denying it....AND SO DID HIS FIVE BROTHERS. AND THEY DID NOTHING TO HELP HIM.
 - And...the second thing --- Abraham says in his response to the rich man
- Abraham said, ‘If they don’t listen to Moses and the Prophets, then neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.’”
 - Jesus rose from the dead and according to the gospels, as well as reports in 1 Corinthians and the book of Acts, in the 40 days following Jesus’ resurrection, more than 500 people on 12 separate occasions saw him. We can be assured that those 500 told hundreds – and they told hundreds, etc. etc. etc. And you have been told.

We’ve now gone through this parable line by line. What more do we know now than we did 15-20 minutes ago? Can we now say that this parable is only about heaven and hell? Maybe, but I want to challenge you to consider more.

JESUS’ messages specifically spoke to social revolution – challenging rich vs. poor, giving vs. having, clean vs. unclean, wealth vs. community, heaven vs. hell.

Think about how important it was for those first century Christians to hear about the possibility of resurrection. The gospel that Jesus teaches is about a death that leads to life. The rich man is dead, but he hasn't yet died....died to worldly wealth and selfish desires. Think about what it means... Something more than, something better than either / or. Eternal life is about equality and compassion. That's the kind of life that God wants for all of us.

Think about that crevasse; what is it that separates heaven and hell, the rich and the poor, the valued and the worthless?

This story warned Jesus' listeners (them and us) "to rethink how we view the world, because there will be serious consequences for ignoring the Lazaruses outside our gates. To reject the Lazaruses is to reject God" – Bell, pg. 76.

AMEN.