

Heaven or Hell? The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to religious critics and cynical opponents of Jesus. In this parable he gives a portrait of the kind of people that will be in hell, a picture that was not complimentary to his audience. This parable is a powerful story that Jesus tells to describe who will be in hell, and perhaps more importantly, *why* they will be in hell.

Follow as I read our Gospel reading **Luke 16:19-31**:

19 *“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. **20** And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, **21** who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. **22** The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. **23** In Hades, where he was being tormented, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. **24** He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in agony in these flames.’ **25** But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus in like manner evil things, but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. **26** Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ **27** He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father’s house— **28** for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ **29** Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ **30** He said, ‘No, father Abraham, 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, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’ ”*

In his famous book on the parables, Helmut Thielicke noted that this parable of the rich man and Lazarus is the kind of story, on the surface, that can be delightful to children and to everyone who likes a good, satisfying plot. In this parable the poor man’s and the rich man’s fortunes are dramatically reversed. At death, the poor, abused beggar is rewarded with heavenly riches, while the villainous rich man is punished in hell. But, as Thielicke says, the more we look at this parable it begins to look back at us and demands serious self-examination and reflection on the kind of people we are. How different, in fact, are we from the rich man that Jesus said is the kind of person who will be in hell?

Even to speak of hell is a bit out of fashion these days. Many Christians no longer believe in the reality of a place of punishment called hell, and some of our theologians are giving preference to the idea of temporal punishment and

eventual annihilation. A liberal Presbyterian and a conservative Baptist were arguing about the existence of hell. Said the liberal, "There aint no hell," to which the conservative replied, "The hell there aint!" I don't enjoy preaching about hell, but trust that the doctrine of hell as well as the doctrine of heaven are consistent with the holiness, justice, love and mercy of God. We can trust, as Abraham the Intercessor knew, that the judge of all the earth will do right (Gen. 18:25).

Have you ever heard it said of people, in the wake of their death or perhaps at their funeral, "If anyone makes it to heaven, she will, or he will"? Having been a pastor for over half a century, and in a former pastorate of 19 years when I conducted about 30 funerals a year, I have heard this cliché' many times. Of course, during ministry to the grieving is not the time to correct bad theology, but this saying reveals a serious deficiency in the understanding of grace.

The rich man in our parable must have had a splendid funeral. (The poor man probably had no funeral and his body was probably discarded on a garbage heap and eaten as carrion.) As the obituary was read at the rich man's funeral, recounting his religious devotion, his donations to the temple, and his impeccably respectable public behavior, many said these words: "If anyone makes it to heaven, he will."

From this parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Jesus says that in hell there will be the heartless. The picture Jesus gives in this parable is of extremes on the social-economic scale. The rich man is ostentatiously wealthy and extravagant in his lifestyle, with constant feasting and wearing the most expensive of clothing, *The Message* says the rich man was "expensively dressed in the latest fashions, wasting his days in conspicuous consumption." On the other hand, "A poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, had been dumped on his doorstep."

The Scriptures do not say that financial wealth and material riches are inherently evil. But outside of the grace of God the material can be a sinister and powerful force to be reckoned with. Success in acquiring wealth can easily and subtly become acquisitiveness and the materialism called "the love of money" (1 Tim. 6:10). Abraham, the father of all who believe, was rich yet he maintained a heart for God and the right perspective on his wealth.

But this rich man in the parable had become heartless and indifferent to the needs of others. The rich man did not go to hell because he was rich or for anything he had done. Rather, his sin was in his failure to do anything to help the poor man who "had been dumped on his doorstep" (v. 20, *The Message*).

We all know about the professional panhandlers that frequent our streets. Whatever we think of them, there are often truly needy people that God places before us and he clearly gives us the opportunity to share our resources with them. As with this rich man, God will place people in our lives with whom we can become involved in a meaningful, caring relationship, as we invest our time and material resources.

We are not saved by our works, but by grace alone through faith alone (Gal. 2:16, Eph. 2:9, etc.). But we also know we are saved by grace through a faith that also works and proves its validity by acts of love (Jas. 2:14-17; 1 Jn. 3:16-18). In Jesus' parable of the Good Samaritan we see his answer to the expert in the law who sought to justify himself as a law-keeper. Jesus answered by saying anyone who has received the free gift of eternal life will demonstrate the reality of that faith by obeying the Great Commandment to love God and one's neighbor (Lk. 10:25-37).

Day after day the rich man saw and yet failed to respond to the needs of the poor man, who longed to eat what fell off his table. He failed to care that scavenger dogs were allowed to abuse the poor man right before his eyes. The rich man failed to see that by neglecting this poor man, a man who obviously knew God, he was neglecting God himself. This was what motivated Mother Teresa to care tirelessly for the dying poor in India, her awareness that she was meeting Jesus in her ministry to the suffering and dying.

We are saved by grace through Christ's atoning death on the cross. Yet God is so confident that his grace will so transform our lives that he will judge us by our works (Matt. 7:15-23; 25:31-46). When we minister to the needs of God's people we are actually ministering to Christ himself, who abides in these, the least of his children. When we fail to love these that God has placed in our lives we are failing Christ and will give an account to him (Matt. 25:41-46).

The rich man was absorbed in self-indulgence. His clothing was the picture of "striking luxury" rarely known in this culture (J. B Green). His lifestyle of continual feasting pictures the epitome of consumptive, self-centered living. And all the while he perhaps entertained the notion that God was blessing him with wealth.

It was a common understanding among the Jews that material wealth was evidence of God's blessing and that poverty was indicative of God's curse for disobedience or punishment for ungodliness. In fact, we are to view our material blessings as gifts from God, but with blessings come responsibilities to God with the stewardship of wealth and prosperity. Without gratitude and stewardship, wealth itself is turned into mammon and takes a grip on our hearts and draws us away from God and turns money into our god. Then our wealth is not by God's blessing but is attributed to our greed, idolatry and misplaced priorities and our neglect in sharing with others.

We still have our "prosperity preachers," who make false promises that God wants everyone to be financially rich, healthy and successful and declare that the failure to claim temporal, material blessings is indicative of too little faith. This perversion of the true gospel of the cross is a bowing before the god of materialism and is an unbiblical excuse for selfish greed. The way of Jesus is the way of the cross of self-denial not the way of self-indulgence.

The Apostle Paul says tells us that the reason God allows some to prosper is for the purpose of sharing with those who are in need: “You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion....” (2 Cor. 9:11). Thus the rich man had become heartless toward Lazarus because of his indifference to his suffering and needs. Lazarus, on the other hand, had the perspective of eternity and was looking to God as his helper.

Because Lazarus knew God he was actually better off and more blessed than the rich man, something we can't comprehend. The rich man had it made—success, wealth and, because he represents the Pharisees, he even enjoyed acclaim from the religious world. He had the good life. By contrast, Lazarus lived in abject poverty and humiliating circumstances. He was ceremonially unclean, banned from temple worship, because he was covered with sores and scavenger dogs added to his affliction. Our text says that Lazarus was laid, lit. “dumped”, at the rich man’s gate, which tells us that he was lame and thus reduced to begging. To sincerely say that Lazarus was better off than the rich man requires a faith perspective. But indeed he was better off simply because he knew God and was named by and known to God. On the other hand, the rich man was, although rich, living on borrowed time as a condemned man.

Jesus forces us to answer the question “Which of the two was better off?” when we come to verse 22, because then death is introduced. First the poor man, Lazarus, died and then immediately thereafter the rich man died. In this case death is not just the great leveler but is also the great reverser. Lazarus is carried by angels into Paradise to Abraham’s side, a place of intimate fellowship with God and with Abraham, the father of those who believe (Rom.4:16). The rich man is buried and awakes in hell, the place of torment and separation.

Perhaps part of the suffering of hell will be the awareness of unfulfilled longing. The rich man lived in self-indulgence in an attempt to gratify his unidentified longings. In hell he begged to be alleviated from his torment and agony (v. 23-24). He soon realized that he was consigned to suffering that could never be mollified and to longings that never would be satisfied. Part of his suffering was to be able to see “in the distance” (v. 23) what he should have seen in his time on earth, that the source of satisfaction was with Abraham, i.e. living a life of faith and obedience to God. His suffering would be to understand and experience forever the consequences of his neglect and wrong choices in life.

Similarly we see that those in hell will be the hopeless who are sealed in character. The picture Jesus paints for us of the rich man in hell is his unchanged character in hell. He’s still the same self-centered, arrogant man he was in his mortal life on earth. Hell is not remedial, but rather means that forever the lost will live with the character that they have created on earth.

The rich man is sealed in his character as proud and unrepentant. If he ever thought of Lazarus at all, it was as a lowly underling, perhaps under God’s curse as evidenced by his extreme poverty and suffering. Notice how he asks Abraham to “send Lazarus” to serve him by cooling his tongue from the heat of the fire

(v.24). In eternity God will decree that unrepentant wrongdoers will remain forever wrongdoers and the vile will forever remain vile in hell, just as the holy will forever be holy in heaven (Rev. 22:11).

CS Lewis pictures the eternity-determining choice we all make of heaven or hell. In *The Great Divorce* he pictures the irrevocable choice people make to live in hell instead of accepting the free gift of everlasting life with God and his redeemed people. As Dallas Willard says, only those who want to be in heaven will be there. Hell is for those who choose to be there. Hell will be separation from all that is good and pleasant in this life, the kind of life God had in mind for us at Creation, and the life he's made possible for us through Christ's death.

The rich man asked Abraham for a miraculous appearance to warn his brothers, but is denied this request on the basis of the fact that because his brothers, like him, had been oblivious to the warnings in Scripture, they would be unconvinced by this appearance. God has amply revealed himself even in the creation as well as the human conscience, so that all are without excuse in disregarding a holy God to whom we must give an account (Rom. 1:18-2:4). We who come from church backgrounds can find ourselves familiar with the words of Scripture yet missing the main point—which is to know Jesus Christ as Savior and follow him as Lord. He is the only way to eternal life (Jn. 14:6).

Throughout his ministry Jesus refused to perform miracles upon request because he knew that faith doesn't come through seeing the miraculous but rather is the openness of the human heart to respond to the words of Jesus and to believe in him as the crucified and risen Savior. Thus Jesus said a wicked generation "asks for a miraculous sign! (Matt. 12:38-45). The gracious work of the risen Lord Jesus brings us from spiritual death and enables us to believe the word and receive the free gift of eternal life (Eph. 2:1, 8-9). And yet many continue to reject this witness of a living Savior and remain unconvinced in mind and heart.

A man who was very successful in the world of European government and politics asked me if I had any material to share with him about everlasting punishment. Because he is an avowed unbeliever and self-proclaimed agnostic I was delighted and encouraged by his request, since a good number of us, including his godly wife, had been praying for his conversion. His interest in the doctrine of hell demanded that I looked for something helpful. The very next morning I made a photocopy of an article on the doctrine of hell, written by a New Testament scholar. Some time after reading this article the man asked me if I believed he would be punished eternally in hell. I replied, "Friend, that depends on you. You alone can make that choice."

If Karl becomes a Christ-following believer, it will be because he's come to trust in Jesus, who is the way to heaven.