

## The Parables of Jesus Lesson 12

### The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

This familiar parable is a part of a collection of teachings on wealth, stewardship, and the kingdom. It immediately follows the Parable of the Shrewd Manager, which deals with money and eternal consequences. It's important to note that this parable comes as Jesus is addressing Pharisees specifically (v. 15) who are described in Luke 16:14 as "lovers of money." This aspect is critical to understanding the parable's challenge.

While this parable presents many questions and issues that surround the afterlife, this parable needs to be viewed first through the main message Jesus is trying to get the Pharisees to understand. In other words, Jesus is not giving this parable as a dissertation on hell and the afterlife, even though this is the setting, the main point of the parable comes from verse 31: *"If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."*

Some people conclude that this parable is not a parable at all but is a true story. This conclusion is drawn from the fact that this parable includes a proper name, 'Lazarus', which is unlike the other parables who do not use people's names. However, while unique, it is probably still best to view this as a classic parable in form and fashion.

### The Text of the Parable

Luke 16:18-31 NIV "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.<sup>20</sup> At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores<sup>21</sup> and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

<sup>22</sup> "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried.<sup>23</sup> In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.<sup>24</sup> 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.'

<sup>25</sup> "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.<sup>26</sup> 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.'

<sup>27</sup> "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family,<sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.'<sup>29</sup> "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'<sup>30</sup> "No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'<sup>31</sup> "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.'"

### Hades and Abraham's Bosom

Even though in our introduction we said that the issue of Hades and the afterlife were not the main point of this parable, it is the part that most people are interested in. It seems fitting to address this issue in the beginning before looking at the main point of the parable. While most Christians are familiar with the Christian concept of Hell, the terms 'Hades' and 'Abraham's Side (Bosom)', might not be as familiar. This is the only place in all of scripture where 'Abraham's Bosom' is mentioned. So what is this idea and where did it come from?

Let's take a moment and look at these words:

**1. Sheol** is a word that is used frequently in the Old Testament and does not depict the Christian concept of 'Hell'. Sheol is not equivalent to the Christian idea of eternal punishment, it is more like a neutral holding place where existence continues, but dimly and without distinction in fate. All people went to Sheol, whether they were righteous or wicked. It is defined as the 'realm of the dead' a place of silence and darkness, or simply, 'the grave'.

**2. Hades** is the Greek counterpart to Sheol. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), Sheol is translated as Hades. However, just as Sheol has its roots in Hebrew culture, Hades has its roots in Greek mythology, Hades was both: The god of the underworld, and the place of the dead, often divided into two compartments: Elysium/Fields of the Blessed (good), and Tartarus (torment).

**3. Abraham's Bosom** where the souls of the righteous reside separated from the wicked came from the ideas of Second Temple Judaism during the Intertestamental Period.

- The book of 1 Enoch describes a divided Sheol with separate areas for the righteous and wicked. Although Abraham is not named, the idea that souls await final judgment in compartments prefigures the bosom vs. torment structure in Luke 16.
- The Testament of Abraham (1<sup>st</sup> Century AD) is an apocalyptic Jewish writing that shows Abraham welcoming the souls of the righteous dead and he is seen as a gatekeeper or intercessor for souls.
- 4 Ezra Describes the afterlife in terms of comfort for the righteous and torment for the wicked.
- The Babylonian Talmud refers to the idea of "the bosom of Abraham" as a place of postmortem peace and righteousness, where it mentions that the righteous sit "in the Garden of Eden" and are "in the bosom of Abraham."

Resting in Abraham's bosom then evokes thoughts and images of righteousness and a place of right standing or special favor. In Jewish banquet culture, reclining "in someone's bosom" meant a place of special favor (John 13:23, "the disciple whom Jesus loved was reclining in his bosom"). It also symbolized covenant fellowship with Abraham (being a part of God's covenant and his true people). In the parable, for Lazarus to be 'in Abraham's bosom' was to say that he was truly a son of Abraham (not the rich man), and that he partook of the true blessing of the covenant, regardless of his social standing.

So Jesus then is using the popular imagery and the theological assumptions of his audience at the time to set the context for this powerful parable of reversal of fortunes. Therefore, in Luke 16, Jesus is not teaching a systematic doctrine of the afterlife but using well-known imagery to make a powerful point.

### Overview of the Parable

#### 1. Earthly Conditions Revealed v. 19-21

- The rich man lives in luxury (purple and fine linen = royalty or priestly garb – Jerusalem/Temple).
- Lazarus, covered in sores and starving, is laid at the gate. Lazarus is translated Eleazar in Hebrew. Eleazar means 'God is my help' and is also the name of Abraham's faithful servant in Genesis 15.
- The rich man feasts, while Lazarus longs for crumbs.

#### 2. Death and Spiritual Conditions Reversed v. 22-23

- Both die, but experience vastly different fates.
- Lazarus is carried by angels to Abraham's bosom (comfort, rest).
- The rich man is buried and is in torment in Hades—conscious and aware.

#### 3. The Conversation with Abraham v. 24-26

- The rich man still sees Lazarus as a servant—asks Abraham to send him to relieve his agony in the fire with water.
- This reveals his unrepentant heart posture even in judgment.

- Abraham reveals the reversal of fortunes: in life the rich man lived in luxury, and Lazarus begged, but now the roles are reversed, Lazarus in comforted and the rich man is begging.
- Then it's revealed that a great chasm is fixed and there is no crossing over.

#### 4. The Power of Revelation v. 27-31

- The rich man wants Lazarus to warn his five brothers so they will not end up in torment, separated from the covenant of God. (Five brothers could represent the priestly family of Annas, father-in-law of the High-Priest Caiaphas. Both are present and active in the New Testament narrative, and their names are central to the story of Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion.)
- Abraham responds: "They have Moses and the Prophets, let them listen to them."
- Then this is the 'punchline' and point of the parable: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone rises from the dead."
  - This is a prophetic allusion to Jesus' resurrection and the hardness of heart of the Pharisees.

The Pharisees refused to listen to 'Moses and the Prophets' and believe Jesus, even when he was there right in front of them. The Pharisees were blinded to what scripture really said. Abraham is reiterating that if the rich man's brothers harden their heart and fail to believe what Moses and the Prophets said about Jesus then, 'not even if someone is raised from the dead' will believe. This reveals the hardness their heart and the level of apostasy that the Pharisees had reached.

So the point of the parable is that the Pharisees refused to believe Moses and the Prophets and thus refused to believe Jesus, showing that they were not true children of Abraham and would be left out of the New Covenant while others (who they deemed less-than) would enter in.

Here are some scriptures throughout the Gospels that back up Jesus' point:

**John 5:39-47** *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me... If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me."*

**Luke 24:25-27** *"O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken!... And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself."*

**Luke 3:7-9 (John the Baptist)** *"Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' For I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children for Abraham."*

**John 8:37-44** *"I know that you are offspring of Abraham; yet you seek to kill me... If you were Abraham's children, you would be doing the works Abraham did... You are of your father the devil."*

**Matthew 21:31-32 (Parable of the Two Sons)** *"Truly, I say to you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes go into the kingdom of God before you."*

**Matthew 8:11-12** *"Many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into outer darkness."*

**Luke 13:28-30** *"There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God but you yourselves cast out."*

**Matthew 28:11-13 (they did not believe even after the resurrection)** *"While the women were on their way, some of the guards went into the city and reported to the chief priests everything that had happened. <sup>12</sup> When the chief priests had met with the elders and devised a plan, they gave the soldiers a large sum of money, <sup>13</sup> telling them, 'You are to say, 'His disciples came during the night and stole him away while we were asleep.'"*

## Conclusion

So you can see that in the context and given the audience, this was a very specific parable directed at the Pharisees that uses common Jewish apocalyptic imagery to drive home its point.

So now, we must ask the question, 'what insights can we gain from this parable today?'

**1. Religious Heritage Is Not the Same as Faith:** The Pharisees trusted in their ancestry ("We have Abraham as our father") and their external obedience to the Law. Yet, Jesus shows that heritage without heart is hollow. Being raised in church, knowing theology, or calling ourselves "Christian" means little if we lack genuine faith and a transformed life. The parable reminds us that externals don't equal eternal security.

**2. We Must Not Give Into Spiritual Elitism:** The pharisees created an 'us vs. them' religious hierarchy based upon works and self-righteousness. The rich man not only ignored Lazarus in life—he continued to treat him as a servant even in death ("*Send Lazarus...*"). He still saw himself as entitled and Lazarus as lesser. Spiritual elitism shows up when we measure ourselves against others and believe that our church, theology, or works makes us superior in God's eyes. But the gospel humbles all of us: we all come to God by grace, not merit. No one is "better" than anyone else in the kingdom.

**3. We Must Notice the Needs of Those Around Us:** Every day the rich man walked by Lazarus and did nothing. All Lazarus wanted were some crumbs and healing for his sores, and the rich man ignored him. Even in our own communities Christians live in comfort while others suffer nearby. The question isn't just 'who are we reaching but', but who are we ignoring. True faith loves neighbor, especially the poor and oppressed (James 2:14–17; 1 John 3:17).

**4. Scripture Is Sufficient—We Must Respond to It:** The parable ends with a powerful indictment: if people won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't believe—even if someone rises from the dead. We don't need more signs, revelations, or miracles—we need to believe and obey what God has already revealed in His Word. Many Christians today accumulate Bible knowledge but avoid repentance, justice, mercy, and humility.

**5. God's Kingdom Flips the Script:** This parable is part of a larger theme in Luke: the great reversal.

- The poor are lifted.
- The humble are honored.
- The outsider is included.
- The last become first.

We must re-evaluate what we celebrate. Success in the kingdom of God is measured by faith, love, and mercy—not position, power, or possessions. The kingdom of God is not about what we have, but who we trust and how we love.

**6. There Is an Urgency to Repentance:** The rich man realizes too late that his choices mattered. The chasm is fixed. The time to act was during life. There is urgency to respond to God's Word now, not later. Postponed compassion is still disobedience. Postponed faith is still unbelief. "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." – Hebrews 3:15