

THE PARABLE OF LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN

In another article about the parable of the unjust steward I started by mentioning that perhaps the two most difficult parables of Jesus to understand were two back-to-back parables found in Luke chapter 16. The first of those was the parable of the unjust steward which I went through in that other article. In this article I would like to explore the other of these two enigmatic parables – the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man.

On first impression the parable would seem to support the traditional mainstream christian views of heaven and hell and it is difficult to explain in light of the Church of God doctrinal understanding of what happens after death. Just what was Jesus trying to teach us in this difficult and sometimes controversial parable?

I'd like to quote from the gotquestions.org website which explains a typical mainstream christian view of what this parable is about:

“First of all, Jesus teaches here that heaven and hell are both real, literal places. Sadly, many preachers shy away from uncomfortable topics such as hell...The Bible is clear that every person who has ever lived will spend eternity in either heaven or hell. Like the rich man in the story, multitudes today are complacent in their conviction that all is well with their soul, and many will hear our Savior tell them otherwise when they die (Matthew 7:23).

“This story also illustrates that once we cross the eternal horizon, that's it. There are no more chances. The transition to our eternal state takes place the moment we die (2 Corinthians 5:8; Luke 23:43; Philippians 1:23). When believers die, they are immediately in the conscious fellowship and joys of heaven. When unbelievers die, they are just as immediately in the conscious pain, suffering, and torment of hell.

“Notice the rich man didn't ask for his brothers to pray for his release from some purgatorial middle ground, thereby expediting his journey to heaven. He knew he was in hell, and he knew why. That's why his requests were merely to be comforted and to have a warning sent to his brothers. He knew there was no escape. He was eternally separated from God, and Abraham made it clear to him that there was no hope of ever mitigating his pain, suffering, or sorrow. Those in hell will perfectly recollect missed opportunities and their rejection of the gospel.”

Is this viewpoint a correct understanding of this parable or is there a better explanation of what Jesus was trying to teach with this parable? Let's take a look at the parable over in Luke 16.

At the end of the parable of the unjust steward Jesus said in verse 13 that “No servant can serve two masters...You cannot serve God and mammon.” After that in verse 14 we read: “And being lovers of money, all the Pharisees also heard all these things.” Jesus had already given the wealthy Pharisees a serve about their love of money instead of serving God with a pure heart and He would do so with the next parable about Lazarus and the Rich Man.

In verse 19 Jesus starts off saying: “There was a certain rich man who was customarily clothed in purple and fine linen and making merry in luxury every day. And there was a

certain beggar named Lazarus, who was laid at his gate, full of sores and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. But even the dogs came and licked his sores. And it happened that the beggar died and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich one also died and was buried."

The rich man is clothed in purple. While he is wealthy like the Pharisees he is not identified as one. Lazarus and the rich man both die. Lazarus is carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. Protestants assume Lazarus was carried off to heaven the moment he died. Now the parable doesn't state the time that Lazarus is carried off by the angels. It is an assumption to say that it occurs when he dies if we were to take the parable literally.

Over in Matthew 24:31 Jesus describes events that will occur at His second coming. He then says: "And He shall send His angels with a great sound of a trumpet, and they shall gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of the heavens to the other." This gathering of the elect by the angels occurs not at the moment of physical death but at the second coming of Christ.

Going back to the parable in verse 23 we read: "And in hell he [the rich man] lifted up his eyes, being in torments, and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom."

The Greek word translated here as hell is "hades". It is the Greek word for the grave, though in Greek mythology it also used to refer to the underworld or the place of departed souls.

Continuing on from verse 24: "And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame."

The Greek word translated in here can also be translated as by. Translating it as "for I am tormented by this flame" appears to be a better translation. If he was in the flame already he would need buckets of water to stop the flame and torment. It is more likely he is aware of the punishment he is about to suffer in the lake of fire spoken of in Revelation 20. He is in mental anguish and his mouth has dried up and he is asking for a little relief from that.

If we were to take this parable literally when would this event be taking place? Let's see when in time the Bible places this over in Revelation 20. At the end of verse 4 its says speaking of the saints: "And they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years" and then in verse 5 its says "But the rest of the dead did not live again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection."

The Bible clearly speaks of a resurrection of the dead which is the opposite of the view that we either go straight to heaven or hell at the moment we die. After Satan is let loose briefly after the millennium and then is cast into the lake of fire we read starting in verse 12: "And I saw the dead, the small and the great, stand before God. And books were opened, and another book was opened, which is the Book of Life. And the dead were judged out of those things which were written in the books, according to their works...And death and hell were cast into the Lake of Fire. This is the second death. And if anyone was not found having been written in the Book of Life, he was cast into the Lake of Fire."

Revelation 20 clearly places the time that the wicked shall receive their punishment in the lake of fire after the end of the millennium and Great White Throne Judgment. Those Protestants who do believe in this final judgment at the end of the millennium see this judgment purely as a time of being sentenced based on what they did in this life. The English word judgment includes trying and testing not just being sentenced. We, in the Church of God, see this judgment as more than just being merely being sentenced. We believe that all those who were not chosen to be a part of the church in the time up to Jesus Christ's second coming will be raised to life and have their first real chance at salvation.

Going back to the parable in Luke 16 we read starting from verse 25: "But Abraham said, Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things. But now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this, there is a great chasm fixed between you and us; so that they desiring to pass from here to you cannot, nor can they pass over to us from there. And he said, I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house, for I have five brothers, so that he may testify to them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham said to him, They have Moses and the Prophets, let them hear them. And he said, No, father Abraham, but if one should go to them from the dead, they would repent. And he said to him, If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded, even though one rose from the dead."

They say that analogies break down at some point. What Abraham and the rich man say to each other here illustrates that point if we try and take this parable as a literal teaching of what happens after we die.

The time that the wicked are cast into the lake of fire is after the end of the millennium and the Great White Throne Judgment. Regardless of whether you believe the Great White Throne Judgment is a period of immediate sentencing or a lifetime of being offered salvation for the first time, all believers at this point of time will have been given their reward as spirit beings in God's Kingdom before the wicked are then cast into the lake of fire.

In contrast to that, the parable appears to say that the rich man's brothers were still alive at the time as the rich man asked for someone from the dead to be sent to his brothers to urge them to repent and be saved. Now Abraham in response doesn't say that they are up here with the other faithful believers or amongst the other wicked people about to go into the lake of fire. Abraham says that they can (present tense) read the books of Moses and that a person raised from the dead won't make a difference.

In the United Church of God booklet "The Truth About Lazarus and the Rich Man" we read:

"The New Bible Dictionary is correct when it states that Jesus' story 'is a parable which made use of certain Jewish thinking and is not intended to teach anything about the state of the dead'...Many other scriptures point to the fact that the dead are unconscious, awaiting a resurrection at a later time. Therefore it's clear that this parable was never meant to be taken literally — it's simply a captivating story meant to make a point about repentance and judgment...

"Jesus employed contemporary Jewish thought about the afterlife in this parable (which by this time was influenced by pagan mythology). Dr. [Lawrence] Richards wrote that Hades, the abode of the dead, was 'thought to be divided into two compartments' and

‘conversations could be held between persons’ in the abode of the righteous and those in the abode of the unrighteous” (p.10, 13).

Wikipedia in its article on the “Bosom of Abraham” further explains this faulty but widely accepted Jewish belief that Christ drew upon in this parable:

“Other early Jewish works adapt the Greek mythical picture of Hades to identify the righteous dead as being separated from the unrighteous in the fires by a river or chasm. In the pseudepigraphical Apocalypse of Zephaniah the river has a ferryman equivalent to Charon in Greek myth but replaced by an angel...The chasm is equivalent to the river in the Jewish version, but in Christ's version there is no angelic ferryman, and it is impossible to pass from one side to the other.”

The idea of this river being crossed by an angelic ferryman reminds me of the Chris De Burgh song in which he sings “Don't Pay the Ferryman, don't even fix a price until he gets you to the other side.”

So, with that background of the Jewish understanding of the afterlife it helps us to see that Jesus was not trying to teach doctrinal truth about the afterlife but, via a story, was using a widely accepted but faulty Jewish understanding of the afterlife to drive home some very important moral lessons.

One point that Jesus made in this parable is that miracles, such as someone being raised from the dead, are no guarantee that people will repent. The Israelites who saw all the miracles coming out of Egypt were certainly proof of that point. It comes down to everybody's individual choice to submit to and obey God and if we don't, regardless of how rich or powerful we are in this life, we won't receive eternal life. Like many people these days who buy into the “health and wealth gospel,” the rich man wrongly saw his material riches as evidence of God's love and blessing. Likewise, he believed the poor and destitute, like Lazarus, were cursed by God. Jesus blew this idea out of the water with this parable.

Our United Church of God booklet also says:

“The rich man chose to ignore the desperate needs of Lazarus while he personally lived a self-indulgent life. Even though he knew he should have helped Lazarus, and had every chance to do so, he simply ignored the beggar's hardship and suffering.

“Are we consumed with our personal interests, concerns and pleasures? Do we ignore those who need encouragement, support and a helping hand?...The apostle James mirrored Jesus' comment when he wrote, ‘If a brother or sister is naked and destitute of daily food, and one of you says to them, ‘Depart in peace, be warmed and filled,’ but you do not give them the things which are needed for the body, what does it profit?’ (James 2:15-16)” (p.19).

An equivalent today might be to saying that you will pray for someone but not giving any physical assistance when we are in a position to do so. Are we doing all that we reasonably can to help those whose path we cross in our daily lives, both those in and out of the church, or, if we are really honest with ourselves, are we just paying lip service to the idea of helping others?

In conclusion, the parable of Lazarus and the rich man has a strong message for all of us. It shows us the importance that God places on kindness and being focused outwardly toward helping others instead of being consumed with just our own lives like the rich man was. Salvation may be a gift but to qualify for that gift God requires a change in our hearts and our mind. We need to avoid being like the rich man who, in the end, realized it was too late to change.