

The Rich Man and Poor Lazarus

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. ²⁰ And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. ²² When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.’ ²⁵ Abraham replied, ‘My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. ²⁶ Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father’s house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ ³¹ Then Abraham said, ‘If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.’” (Luke 16:19-31)



The Poor Lazarus at the Rich Man's Door | James Tissot, 1886–1894 | Brooklyn Museum | PD-US

Rich Men and Lovers of Money

Recall that in successive weeks we have heard the parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32) followed by the story of the Dishonest Steward (16:1-13) – both stories featuring rich men and concern the handling of money (among other key topics). This week our reading again features a rich man but this time in contrast to the poor Lazarus (16:19-31). The in-between verses, vv.14-18, begin with the phrase, “*The Pharisees, who loved money.*” Jesus describes these people as an “abomination” (*bdelygma*) before God (v.15). Johnson (*Luke*, Sacra Pagina, 255) writes about this word:

Its first and most obvious reference is to "idolatry" in the biblical tradition. But the term is also used in two other important connections in Torah, once in condemning financial misdealing (Dt 25:16), and once in condemning a divorced man cohabiting again with his former wife (Dt 24:4). Idolatry, money, and divorce are joined by the term *bdelygma*.

This directly speaks to the Pharisees as ones who are ignoring the warning of v.13 “*You cannot serve God and mammon.*” Since they love money, they are not serving God. Allan Culpepper (*Luke*, 312) notes that vv.14-15 introduces the first part of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, while vv.16-18 in turn foreshadows the reference to the law and the prophets in the second part of the parable.

Perhaps our parable is better titled “Rich Men and Lovers of Money” in order to convey its thematic unity and serve as an apocalyptic warning to those who pursue the treasures of earth; they are “*an abomination in the sight of God*” (v.15). Certainly that is the fate of the rich man in our parable and the fate that awaits his five brothers. Tempting as the title is, the title then also runs the risk of losing sight of Lazarus, the parable’s protagonist who never speaks a word. While such an emphasis points to the rich man’s torment as a fulfillment of the earlier warning: “*His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*” (3:17) one may lose sight of the fulfillment that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor and the hungry (6:20-26).

A Drama in Three Acts

Culpepper well describes this parable as a drama in three acts (*Luke*, 316):

- Act 1 – a tableau during which the characters are introduced and their way of life is described, but nothing happens
- Act 2 – the rich become poor and the poor become rich as each character has died and received their eternal reward
- Act 3 – narration give way to dialogue, but between the rich man and Abraham, in three exchanges:
 - about the finality of judgment
 - about the witness of Moses and the prophets
 - about the blindness that prevents even the Resurrection from leading to conversion

Act 1 – The Tableau: The first three verses contain a sharp contrast in description between Lazarus and the unnamed “lover of money.”

- The rich man is clothed in purple and fine linen where Lazarus is covered with sores or ulcers
- The rich man “*dined sumptuously each day*” while Lazarus longed to eat what fell from the table, but couldn’t.
- The rich man lives a privileged life while Lazarus *ebelêto pros ton pulôna*, literally, “had been thrown before the gate” of the rich man’s house.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the first word in a Greek phrase is a position of stress, as is the last word in a phrase. Even the Lucan grammar seems to stress the contrast between the two men:

- The first word in v. 19 is *anthropos* = “a person” and the last word in the phrase is *plousios* = “rich”
- where the first word in v. 20 is *ptochos* = “poor,” the last word in the phrase is “*Lazarus*,” a name meaning “God helps”

Perhaps Luke is making the point that “the poor” were not considered “people,” as well the rich depend upon themselves whereas the poor depend on God.

The rich man is splendidly robed and feasts on the finest foods (see Note below re: v.19) – a clear echo of the parable of the Rich Fool who is well satisfied: “*Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!*” (12:19). As the parable makes clear the flash and pomp of the rich man’s life in no way reflects the eternal glory that awaits the faithful.

Lazarus is the only character ever named in a parable. As mentioned above, the name means “God helps” and thus foreshadows Lazarus’ liberation even as it ironically contrasts his life – no one in this life helps Lazarus. He has been cast away at the rich man’s gate. He is a cripple beggar covered with sores and in the end dies. Green [606] comments about names:

... the fact that this poor, crippled man has a name at all is highly significant. The poor man's only claim to status is that he is named in the story; this alone raises the hope that there is more to his story than that of being subhuman. The wealthy man, on the other hand, has no name; perhaps this is Jesus' way of inviting his money-loving listeners to provide their own!

In our tableau the two characters live with a “stone’s throw” of each other and yet they never meet, never speak, nor are in any way neighbors. One is reminded of Jesus’ question to scribe (scholar of the law) in the parable of the Good Samaritan: “*Which of these three [priest, Levite, Samaritan], in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers' victim?*” He answered, ‘*The one who treated him with mercy.*’ Jesus said to him, ‘*Go and do likewise.*’” Our two main characters lived entirely separate lives, divided at table and divided by a gate.

Act 2 – The Rich Become Poor and the Poor Become Rich The Act is briefly told and simply describes the fate of our two characters. “*When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and from the netherworld, where he was in torment...*” (vv.22-23a). We are not told how Lazarus died. Was it starvation? Again we are reminded of Jesus’ admonition to the Pharisees. “*Then he said to the host who invited him, “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”* (14:12-14). Was it exposure and hypothermia while the rich man slept nearby? Infected sores while the rich enjoyed baths and healing ointments? Perhaps weakened and unable to defend himself, the dogs took his life.

However his life ends, Lazarus is taken by the angels to the bosom of Abraham. Nothing is said of a burial which brings to mind the bodily translations of Enoch (Gen 5:24), Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) and Moses (Jewish legends) to their eternal rewards. Neglected by others, Lazarus is prized in the sight of God.

The rich man *also died* – again we are left to speculate by what cause – but notably, he is buried, perhaps “thrown” into his grave as was Lazarus at the gate.

Act 3 – Three Dialogues To a first century hearer of the parable, the fates of the two would have been surprising for it went against the grain of the common wisdom: blessings in this life were a sign of God’s favor while illness, poverty, and hardship were a sign of God’s curses. Yet the one well “blessed” in his lifetime is now tormented in the *netherworld* (see the Note on 16:23 below) where he can see Lazarus and Abraham across the great chasm that divides them (v.26).

The First Exchange. ²⁴ *And he cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.’* ²⁵ *Abraham replied, ‘My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. ²⁶ Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.’*

Some things never change. The rich man, who surprisingly knows Lazarus’ name, making his lack of charity perhaps worse, still thinks of Lazarus as someone below his station in life, someone to serve his personal needs: “*Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames*” (v.24). The rich man still thinks of himself as a “son of Abraham” since he addresses Abraham as “Father” (cf. 13:16; 19:9)

And he is. Abraham addresses him as “child” in v.25; however, such a relationship is no guarantee that one will dwell with Abraham in paradise. The theme of the Lucan “great reversals” (cf. Luke 6:20-26, the Beatitudes and other vv.) is now complete. Where table and gate once divided them in life, now a great chasm (v.26) separates them and confirms the finality of judgment – “*prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.*” In life indifference and apathy shut the rich man off from Lazarus and now no one can reach him.

"The irony of the story is that he now requests 'mercy' (eleos) who did not show mercy in almsgiving (eleemosyne) to the poor man" [Johnson, 252]. There are contrasting fates for both men in this section.

- The rich man had received good during his life, now torment. Lazarus had received evil during his life, now is comforted.
- The rich man had eaten his fill of good things during his life, now he can't even get the water that would drip off a finger.

The Second Exchange. ²⁷ *He said, 'Then I beg you, father, send him to my father's house, ²⁸for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.'* ²⁹ *But Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.'*

Here the rich man asks that Lazarus (again as servant) be sent back to warn the rich man's surviving brothers. Seemingly accepting his fate, he at least gives evidence of thinking of another person. “*But Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them'*” (v.29). Indeed, let us listen to them:

“If one of your kinsmen in any community is in need in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand to him in his need. Instead, you shall open your hand to him and freely lend him enough to meet his need” (Dt 15:7-8)

“This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

The Third Exchange. ³⁰ *He said, 'Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'* ³¹ *Then Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.'*

Apparently the rich man realizes that his brothers have little hope of repenting and turning from the very life that led to the rich man's fate. The call to repentance has been consistent within Luke's gospel. John the Baptist preached repentance (3:3, 8). Jesus calls people to repentance (5:32), even declaring woes upon Chorazin and Bethsaida for their failure to repent (10:13) when even Nineveh repented (11:32) Jesus warned the crowds that unless they repented they would perish like the Galileans at Pilate's hand or people in Jerusalem upon whom a tower fell (13:3,5). Even close at hand, the parable of the Prodigal Son is a call to repentance as is the parable of the Dishonest Steward.

The Pharisees who heard this parable (16:14-18) are the ones to whom this third exchange is directed, but the message extends to all who love money (mammon) more than God. The ones who will not hear the Word of God (via Moses and the prophets) or the Word of God enfleshed, they even rising from the dead will be convincing.

The question that lingers for Luke's church and our own – how could it be that one would rise from the dead and still some refuse to believe, repent and reform their lives?

Thoughts of the Early Church Fathers

Every so often it is good to “check in” with the Patriarchs of the early Church to see their reflections on

our gospel readings. Here is a sample of their thought

St. John Chrysostom (late 4th century AD) – often used this parable to warn that failing to aid the poor is itself a form of robbery. “Not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth, but theirs.” (Homily on Lazarus and the Rich Man, 1) Chrysostom He stresses that the rich man’s sin was not that he had wealth, but that wealth without mercy leads to condemnation

St. Augustine (late 4th and early 5th century AD) focused on the end of the parable: “*They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.*” (Luke 16:29). In his Sermon 115, Augustine warns that waiting for miraculous signs is foolish when the Word of God is already sufficient: “*If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe if one rises from the dead.*” (v. 31). For Augustine the matter that has always plagued humankind in our relationship to God is hardness of heart. The hardness of heart we display for those around has its own measure in the hardness of our hearts to follow the Word of God.

Just later in the same period, St. Cyril of Alexandria highlights the “great chasm” (v. 26) as symbolic of the irreversible separation between the righteous and the wicked after death. In his Commentary on Luke, he says this teaches that the opportunities for repentance and charity belong to this life alone: “For once we have departed from here, there is no longer time for repentance, nor can we cross from the place of torment to the bosom of Abraham.” Our realization of the great reversal will be too late and God’s justice final.

Modern Thoughts

Modern Christian commentaries — Catholic, Protestant, and ecumenical — generally see Luke 16:19-31 as a parable with several intertwined lessons that still speak directly to today’s spiritual and moral challenges. A summary of modern thought is reflected in the commentary herein as well as reflective of the thoughts of the early church. Some key points each of us are called to reflect upon include:

The moral danger of wealth without compassion - The parable is not an indictment of wealth itself, but of indifference to the suffering of others. Silence becomes its own kind of sin when the poor are close enough to see, yet unseen in the heart. We can’t let affluence insulate us emotionally from the needy; discipleship calls for active, intentional charity.

The great reversal in God’s kingdom. Many commentaries note that this parable echoes Mary’s Magnificat (Luke 1:52-53): God “*has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.*” Earthly privilege is just that “earthly.” Despite the assertions of “name it and claim it” Christianity” current comfort is no guarantee of divine favor; God’s justice upends human social orders.

As always there is an urgency for repentance in this life. Nothing too esoteric: the “great chasm” (v. 26) illustrates the finality of one’s moral stance after death. The time to change, reconcile, and act in mercy is now, not after death. Procrastinators beware. God’s mercy is offered in the present, and can not be indefinitely deferred.

Like Augustine and others, modern commentators uniformly point to the sufficiency of God’s Word. In the parable Abraham says: “*They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them*” (v. 29). Again it is a warning about procrastination. How many times have you said, “I need to get more into the Bible...”? The Bible is the Word of God and carries sufficient witness for leading a person to the Lord. Lack of faith can be many things, but too often it is a matter of will, not lack of evidence. Don’t wait for dramatic signs; respond to the truth God has already revealed.

A theme stressed more intensely in modern commentaries, perhaps reflecting our society, is personal responsibility for our neighbor’s welfare. In modern life, too often we do not know the name of our immediate neighbors - or even the people who sit in the pew behind us each week. It is often pointed out that the rich man knew Lazarus’s name (v. 24) — a subtle sign that he was aware of him in life and unless

he was blind, knew his needs. Modern interpreters stress that knowing about need and failing to act makes one accountable. One only need consider Matthew 25: when you did for the least of them, you did it for me. Faith demands a concrete response to the people whose needs are right in front of us.

Like the early writers, moderns also warn of the eternal consequences of our choices. Thus, the parable is more than a social commentary — it is an eschatological warning. What we do with our resources, time, and attention has lasting, eternal implications.

Notes

Luke 16:19 *rich man*: The oldest Greek manuscript of Luke dating from ca. A.D. 175–225 records the name of the rich man as an abbreviated form of “Nineveh,” but there is very little textual support in other manuscripts for this reading. The rich man is popularly known as “Dives” which is the Latin Vulgate’s translation for “rich man.”

***purple garments and fine linen*:** Cloth dyed purple was costly and made from the extract of shellfish murex. So prized was murex purple dye for its commercial value that the Hebrew term *argāmān* acquired the sense of “tribute” in both Ugaritic and Hittite. Hittite sources reveal that such payment was made in the form of purple garments for the king, queen, crown prince, and ministers of the court. Purple cloth would be used for the outer garment. The use of *fine linen* for the other garments indicates that the rich man enjoyed the ultimate in luxury. The phrase is reminiscent of Prov. 31:22, suggesting that he lived like a king.

***dined sumptuously each day*:** “Dining sumptuously” is not necessarily bad. The same word, *euphraino*, is used four times of the “celebration” the waiting father hosted for his prodigal son (15:23, 24, 29, 32). The emphasis in the phrase is its combination with “each day” and echoes Amos 6:4-7.

Luke 16:20 *lying at his door*: The Greek is *ebeblēto pros ton pulōna*, literally, “had been thrown before the gate.” The verb is passive, thus others (unnamed) dumped Lazarus at the rich man’s gate – perhaps other rich people who did want Lazarus at their gate? friends of Lazarus?

***poor man*:** the use of word *ptōchós* (poor, destitute) in such close conjunction with *plouḥsios* (wealthy, rich) gives us the suggestion that this parable is a narrative rendering of the first Beatitude and woe of Luke 6:20-24.

***Lazarus*:** The name of Lazarus, an abbreviated transcription of *El-azar* (“God helps”), appears in the NT only in the gospel of John and this parable. It is the only proper name to appear in a NT parable attributed to Jesus.

Luke 16:21 *would gladly have eaten his fill*: *epithymōn chortasthēnai* (literally, desired/lusted to be filled). Luke poignantly describes the poor man’s condition with graphic, illustrative terms. The root verb *chortazō* is derived from *chortos*, a Greek word for “grass, green crops, hay.” Normally *chortazō* is used to describe animals eating. It is used of people in case instances: (a) to describe Jesus’ miraculous feeding (Matt 14:20; 15:37; Mark 6:42; similarly 8:8; Luke 9:17; John 6:26) and (b) figuratively of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5:6; cf. also Ps 17:15). Elsewhere the word *brōsis* (to eat, eat a meal) is used.

***Dogs evenused...lick his sores*:** This reference echoes OT passages in which dogs consume the dead (cf. 1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:24; Ps. 22:15–16; Jer. 15:3)

Luke 16:22 *he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham*: The traditional translation takes *kólpos* (bosom, lap) to mean “bosom” although elsewhere (6:34) the term is translated as “lap.” The

expression “bosom of Abraham” is found only in Luke and may derive from the ancient Biblical idea of being gathered to one’s people at death (cf. Gen 49:3; Num 27:13; Judges 2:10) – especially pointing to Abraham the Father of the faithful.

In Jewish legends regarding the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons (2 Maccabees 7), the martyrs were brought to the bosom of Abraham, a place the legends regard as the place of highest bliss.

Luke 16:23 *the netherworld*: *hádēs* is normally a colourless term, signifying the abode of all the departed whether good or bad – most often used to translate the Hebrew *Sheol*, the realm of the dead. In the OT this term came to denote the place of temporary sojourn prior to resurrection (cf. Is. 26:19). In later Judaism, *hádēs* is the place the good were separated from the bad (Eth. En. 22) and where the good were finally thought to be comforted and content.

In the New Testament era the associations of *hádēs* with dead the continues but begins to be understood differently in the light of the Resurrection – the term is never used of the saved. Here it seems to be equivalent to Gehenna, the place of punishment, for the rich man was *in torment*. Nonetheless, one goes down into Hades (Mt. 11:23; 12:40), but stay is limited (Rev. 20:13). Sometimes all the dead seem to be in Hades (Acts 2:27), but elsewhere believers are in paradise, or with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), or under the altar (Rev. 7:9); *hádēs* is sometimes just the abode of the wicked (Rev. 20:13-14). Scripture is clear that Jesus is the Lord of Hades (Mt. 16:18; Acts 2:31). Distinctive here is that Christ preaches in Hades (1 Pet. 3: 19ff.) and that he has the keys of death and Hades (Rev. 1:18).

Luke 16:24 *water...cool my tongue*: This reference to thirst echoes several OT passages in which thirst is an image of divine judgment (cf. Isa. 5:13; 50:2; 65:13; Hos. 2:3; 2 Esd. 8:59; 1 En. 22:9)

Luke 16:26 *chasm*: *chásma* – In this only NT occurrence a figurative meaning of χάσμα ‘yawning,’ taken to be a deep, unbridgeable valley or trough between two points. The reference is to the impassable space between two parts of the supernatural abode of the dead.

Luke 16:30 *if someone from the dead*: The notion that the dead can contact the living, especially through dreams, echoes 1 Sam. 28:6–19; 2 Kings 21:6; Isa. 8:19.

Luke 16: 31 *If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets*: “Moses” means ‘the writings of Moses’, and in combination with “the prophets” points to the whole of Scripture. There is no shortage of OT citations for the biblical warrant of righteous treatment towards the poor – to list but a few: cf. Deut. 14:28–29; 15:1–3, 7–12; 22:1–2; 23:19; 24:7–15, 19–21; 25:13–14; Isa. 3:14–15; 5:7–8; 10:1–3; 32:6–7; 58:3, 6–10; Jer. 5:26–28; 7:5–6; Ezek. 18:12–18; 33:15; Amos 2:6–8; 5:11–12; 8:4–6; Mic. 2:1–2; 3:1–3; 6:10–11; Zech. 7:9–10; Mal. 3:5.

Sources

Commentaries

G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007) pp. 345

R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke in The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. IX (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) pp. 314-20

Norval Geldenhuys, *Commentary on the Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1952) pp.424-27. *The New International Commentary on the Old and New Testament*.

Joel B. Green, *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1997) pp. 598-610

Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke*, vol. 3 of *Sacra Pagina*, ed. Daniel J. Harrington (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991) pp. 249-53

Jerome Kodell, “Luke” in *The Collegeville Bible Commentary*, eds. Diane Bergant and Robert J. Karris (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1989) pp. 966-7

Leon Morris, *Luke: An introduction and commentary*. Tyndale New Testament Commentaries Vol. 3: (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988) pp. 269-71

Brian Stofregen, “Brian P. Stofregen Exegetical Notes” at www.crossmarks.com

Dictionaries

Gerhard Kittel, Gerhard Friedrich and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995, c1985).

J. Jeremias, *hádēs*, Vol. I:146-49

F. Hauck, *ebeblêto pros ton pulôna*, Vol. I:526-29

R. Meyer, *kólpos*, Vol. III:824-26

F. Hauck, *ptôchós*, Vol. VI:885-87

Horst Robert Balz and Gerhard Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1990-c1993)

chortazō, Vol. 3:470

David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1996, c1992)

Frederick W. Danker, *argāmān*, Vol. 5:557

Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament : Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible societies, 1996, c1989)

chásma, Vol. 1:11.

Scripture – Scripture quotes from *New American Bible* by Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. © available at <http://www.usccb.org/bible/index.cfm>