

## THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS

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Luke 16:19-31

For centuries Bible scholars have been intrigued and perplexed by this allegory or parable of the Rich man and Lazarus as told by our Lord. The reason for this difficulty is due to the fact that some try to take this story literally, but in so doing it contradicts the testimony of the entire Bible and of our Lord Jesus Himself.

God, the Author of the Bible, gave His word to the Prophets and Apostles through the direction of His Holy Spirit. The Apostle Peter clearly tells of this in 2 Peter 1:19-21: *"We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto you do well that you take heed, as unto a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day-star arise in your hearts: knowing this first, that no prophecy of the Scripture is of any private interpretation. For prophecy came not in old time by the will of man: but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit."*

God also spoke through the Apostle Paul these words: *"All Scripture, given by inspiration of God, is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect (mature), thoroughly furnished unto all good work."* 2 Timothy 3: 16, 17.

Our Lord Jesus Himself declared, *"Sanctify them through thy truth: thy word is truth"* John 17:17.

In Mark 4:33, 34 it is stated of Jesus, *"... with many such parables spoke He the word unto them, as they were able to hear it; and without a parable spoke He not unto them. And when they were alone, He expounded all things to His disciples."*

In Matthew 13:10-17 we read, *"And the disciples came, and said unto Him, 'why do you speak to them in parables?' He answered, 'because it is given unto you (my disciples) to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them (non-believers) it is not given.'"*

In a parable, the thing said is not the thing meant. For instance, when the Lord spoke of *wheat and tares*, or *sheep and goats*, we know He was not speaking of these things *literally*, but rather that He used these *figuratively* to represent different groups of people.

With these thoughts in mind, we would like to examine this allegory or parable with the intent of showing that Jesus is teaching about the soon ending of one dispensation and the beginning of another: namely, that the Law Dispensation or Jewish Age was closing and that the Gospel Age of Grace was commencing - with favor being transferred from Israel to the Gentiles.

Before commencing, however, we would like to show the absurdity of taking this parable literally. We quote the parable here in full:

**Luke 16:19-31** *"There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried. And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.' But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented. And besides all this,*

*between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.’ Then he said, ‘I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father’s house, for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to 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 goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ But he said to him, ‘If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.’ “*

**If this Parable were taken literally:**

**It would be contrary to God’s character of love and mercy.**

Consider what God said in regard to Israel sacrificing their children to Baal in Jeremiah 19:5: *“They have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as offerings to Baal—something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind.”*

**It would be contrary to the Ransom.**

Nowhere does it say that the rich man sinned, nor is it a sin to be rich. Even though all are sinners, the wages of sin is *death*, not eternal torment. God told Adam in Gen. 2:17: *“You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”* Because Adam sinned, Jesus paid the required ransom to buy back mankind from that penalty, *He died*. 1 Tim. 2:5-6 tells us, *“...there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time.”*

**It would be contrary to God’s Justice.**

If *eternal torment* had been the penalty for sin, then why did not God tell this clearly to Adam and Eve? Would it not have been dishonest and unjust on God’s part to conceal it from them?

**It would negate Scriptures that depict death, hell or the grave as a place of unconsciousness.**

Job 14:21: *“If his sons are honored, he does not know it; if they are brought low, he does not see it.”* The dead father knows nothing pertaining to his children. Psalm 6:5: *“No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave?”* Psalm 31:17: *“Let me not be put to shame, O LORD, for I have cried out to you; but let the wicked be put to shame and lie silent in the grave.”* Psalm 115:17: *“It is not the dead who praise the LORD, those who go down to silence.”* Psal. 146:4: *“His breath goes forth, he returns to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish.”* Ecclesiastes 9:5,6,10: *“For the living know that they shall die: but the dead know not anything, neither have they any more a reward; for the memory of them is forgotten.”*

Also their love, their hatred, and their envy, is now *perished*; neither have they any more a portion for ever in any thing that is done under the sun. Whatsoever, therefore, your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for *there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, where you are going.*”

**It would negate Scriptures that picture death as a sleep.**

Daniel 12:2: *“And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.”* John 11:11: *“...He (Jesus) said to them, ‘Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.’”* Acts 7:60: *“Then he (Stephen) knelt down and cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not charge them with this sin.’ And when he had said this, he fell asleep.”*

Acts 13:36: *"For David, after he had served his own generation by the will of God, fell asleep, was buried with his fathers, and saw corruption."* Acts 2:34 tells us that David did not ascend into heaven. 1 Corinthians 15:17-20: *"And if Christ is not risen, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins! Then also those who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable. But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep".*

#### **It would be based on Satan's first lie.**

In Genesis 2:17 we read that God said to Adam that in the day that he ate of the forbidden fruit, he would die (margin: dying thou shalt die"). Satan insinuated that God was a liar in Genesis 3:4-5: *"Then the serpent said to the woman, 'You will **not** surely die. For God knows that in the day you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.'"*

#### **It would be contrary to God's Righteousness.**

It should be noted that this parable does not state that the rich man was bad or that he had done anything evil. Being rich and wearing purple and fine linen, in itself, does not make one either good or bad, and certainly would not justify being punished in eternal torment even if such a place did exist. If this were the case, Abraham, who was very rich, would be disqualified for the very same reason, for Gen. 13:2 states: *"Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold."* There is nothing virtuous, either, about being hungry and poor, and nothing is said as to whether the beggar, Lazarus, was righteous or full of faith. To accept the literal view of why Lazarus went to Abraham's bosom (the place of favor) would be to believe that favor with God could be obtained by being poor and full of sores. Nothing is said about the *character* of either of the main characters in this allegory.

#### **It would make void the Abrahamic promise of Genesis 12:3.**

There God says that through Abraham's seed *all* the families of the earth would be blessed. Rich and poor men alike are part of the *all the families of the earth*. Jesus, the Seed of Abraham (See Galatians 3:16), gave His life a ransom for all men to be testified in due time (**1Timothy 2:5, 6**).

#### **It would present many other absurdities.**

How many poor beggars could Abraham's bosom hold? Is it reasonable to expect water to remain on the tip of Abraham's finger, if brought into such intense heat from this fire in which the rich man now finds himself? Could the "great fixed gulf" be a literal thing? "And besides all this, between us and you there is *a great gulf fixed*, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us" (vs. 26). If Abraham were in heaven, he would be a spirit being and spirit beings are not held back from crossing over any literal gulf or chasm.

#### **It makes Abraham a liar.**

Abraham tells the rich man that it would be useless to send some-one to his five brothers because even if one who was raised from the dead were to go to them, they would not listen. The Bible contradicts this literal interpretation in a number of places. Lazarus of Bethany was raised from the dead, and because of him *many* Jews came to accept Jesus as their Messiah (Lk. 11:43-45). When Peter raised Dorcas from the dead, Acts 9:42 tells us, *"This became known all over Joppa, and many people (Jews) believed in the Lord."* Since many had believed, because of the dead being raised, this would contradict the literal interpretation of this portion of the text.

**It would remove the parable from its Scriptural context.**

The question to be asked is: Who was present when Jesus spoke this parable? Was there a rich man or a poor beggar present? If Jesus meant this to refer to either man literally, it would seem logical this would be shown by the context. Verses 14 and 15 reveal to us who *was* present, and it was to *them* that Jesus directed this story, showing a hidden truth that would shortly come to pass. *"The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, 'You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.'"* The context reveals clearly that it is *the unbelieving Pharisees* to whom Jesus is directing this allegory.

***Let us now consider a reasonable and symbolic interpretation.***

**A certain Rich Man:**

The rich man, before he died, seems to well picture the Jewish nation, fleshly Israel, during the Jewish Age. He was clothed in purple and fine linen which would represent them as being God's Kingdom of Priests (Ex. 19:6) with all the promises given them exclusively, for purple and fine linen were that which royalty wore. They fared sumptuously, eating at the table of the LORD (which favor should have led them to Christ). The death of the rich man pictures Israel ceasing to be God's exclusive and specially-favored people *"You only have I known of all the families of the earth..."* (Amos 3:2), which was true throughout the Jewish age now ended. During the Gospel Age, as a nation and as God's favored people, they have been cast off, as shown by the rich man's death and his being consigned to Hades. In Matthew 23:38 we have Jesus' declaration to the Jewish nation, because they rejected him: *"Your house is left to you desolate..."* The Jewish nation was *"buried in hell (Hades)"* or oblivion. The nation was scattered and "hidden" among other nations.

**A Beggar named Lazarus:**

Lazarus, before he died, would aptly picture the God-fearing Gentiles throughout the Jewish Age. During that Age, Gentiles were not entitled to eat the spiritual food supplied by God to His favored people, Israel (the rich man). Though they longed for spiritual food, they were only allowed to eat *"the crumbs that fell from the table."* Lazarus *"laid at the gate,"* showing his heart longed to be blessed. Joshua 2:14; 1 Kings 10:3, 13; and 2 Kings 5:9, 10 show three Gentiles receiving such crumbs of truth, healing and/or favor. The beggar's sores might represent his sin-sickness which was not even typically covered or atoned for as it was for the nation of Israel... We are told that *dogs licked his sores.* These *dogs* might picture the Greek philosophers that tried to help and heal in humanistic ways, but failed. After Lazarus died he seems to picture the God-fearing Gentiles who have been accorded favor with God during the Gospel Age. This is shown by his being transferred from an inferior position to that of Abraham's bosom, a place of favor. We find an illustration of such favor as recorded in John 13:23: *"Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved."* John was one of the inner circle and was accorded this special place of favor.

**Father Abraham:**

Abraham is called *the father of the faithful.* We read this in Rom. 4:16: *"Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring—not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all."* As faith was the basis for Abraham's standing before God, likewise faith in the blood of Jesus is the means of our justification and standing before God. Rom. 5:1-2 tells us, *"Therefore, since we have been justified*

through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, *through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.*"

### ***The angels or messengers:***

These could well represent the Apostles as God's mouthpiece who carry Lazarus (the Gentiles) to this place of favor. When God sent His Son to be man's Redeemer, this set the stage for a change in God's favor. Jesus said in John 14:6, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me.*" This new way of coming to God is beautifully described in Col. 1:12-14. It was the Apostles who carried this wonderful message to all world, and through their word it has come down to us.

### ***The great fixed gulf or chasm:***

What is pictured by the *great gulf* or *chasm* that was a fixed separation keeping the rich man from having access to Abraham's bosom? Vs. 26: "*And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.*" This gulf or chasm between them was impassable. Those on either side could not cross over. This gulf that kept the rich man from crossing over could well represent...God's divine decree casting them off as His Kingdom of Priests (See Exodus 19:6, 7). Jesus came to His own, but His own received Him not. Israel, the rich man, would not be able to cross back over into the position of favor from the other side because, *as a nation*, they had rejected Jesus. They had been cast off from their position of favor, and their original design to be God's special treasure was forever lost to them because of their *disobedience and unbelief (although this is not actually pictured in this allegory)*. The casting off of the Jewish nation was obviously displayed in AD 70 when they underwent a fiery and brutal attack by the Romans. Millions were killed and many were crucified on the hillsides and walls of Jerusalem. Thus was fulfilled their own prophetic words, "His blood be upon us and our children." Those that survived would be dispersed (hidden in Hades) throughout the world to suffer anti-Semitic pogroms and persecutions down to this day. Thus, the *rich man* was in torment, enduring terrible persecutions and suffering.

**Note:** In vs. 25 the rich man is still called *son* and he still calls Abraham *Father*. He was not *fully* cast off forever, as Romans 11:26 plainly tells us.

### ***The rich man's five brothers:***

It has been suggested by some scholars of Scripture that since *only two tribes* (Judah and Benjamin) returned from captivity in Babylon, that the rich man could represent them. Proportionately then, since the one rich man represented two tribes, the five brothers could represent the ten remaining tribes. These ten tribes are often referred to as the *ten lost tribes of Israel*. The rich man's request that Lazarus be sent to warn his five brothers was denied by Abraham on the basis that since the twelve tribes in the past had not believed Moses and the Prophets, neither would they repent if one raised from the dead were to preach a warning to them. Not only had the Jews rejected Moses and the Prophets, but they had also rejected, persecuted, and crucified the Son of God himself. Israel had forever lost its opportunity to become a Kingdom of Priests unto God and be part of the Bride for His Son.

**In summary:** What this parable reveals to us seems to be a change in position and favor. The *rich man* goes from a place of *favor* to one of *disfavor* while *Lazarus* goes from *disfavor* to *favor*. Prior to Israel's rejection of Jesus, they were God's special people and often referred to Abraham as their father. After their rejection of Jesus as their Messiah, they no longer held that position of favor as a nation. At this point the believing Gentiles, who formerly were in *disfavor*, were transferred to a place of blessing. We see this transposition in Acts 10:34, 35. So, the main point this allegory teaches is to show a *change in dispensation and favor* from the nation of Israel to the Gentiles. The Jewish Age of favor ceased for the

nation of Israel and was now replaced by the Gospel Age of favor which took in all the Gentile nations. This did not exclude favor to believing *individual* Jews but it did to the nation as a whole.

## Addendum: JUST WHAT IS HELL?

Death has been an enemy of mankind almost since his creation. This penalty was pronounced upon Adam for his disobedience to God's command that he was not to eat of the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" or he would surely die (Genesis 2:17; 3:6).

According to McClintock and Strong's Encyclopedia of Biblical Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature, the English word *hell* was derived from the Saxon word *helan* meaning *to cover* and signifying *the covered or invisible place*. Vine's Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words says *hades* signifies *all-receiving* and is the probable derivation of *hado*. This authority also tells us that the Greek *hades* corresponds to the Hebrew *sheol*.

prisoners were thrown. At the time of Christ, it functioned as an incinerator whose continually burning fires consumed and destroyed all that was cast into it. It is used, metaphorically, to denote total destruction, *not a place of torture*.

To better understand our topic, we need to know about the condition that prevails at death. Jesus spoke of death as a *sleep*. When speaking of Lazarus, who had been dead and in the grave for four days, Jesus referred to him as *being asleep* (John 11:11). Hear the words of Job: “O that you would hide me in the grave, that you would keep me secret, until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me” (Job 14:13). Grave in this verse is the Hebrew word *sheol* that is translated *hell* in thirty-one other places. If *sheol* were a place of torment, Job would never have asked to be hidden there. We read in Eccl. 9:5 and 10: “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no further reward, and even the memory of them is forgotten. Whatever your hand

*finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the grave, where you are going, there is neither working, nor planning, nor knowledge, nor wisdom."*

How clear is this description of the condition of death! It totally agrees with Jesus definition that death is a sleep from which there will one day be an awakening. In John 5:28, 29 Jesus said, "*Marvel not at this: for the hour is coming, in which all that are in the tombs shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, unto the resurrection of life; and they that have done evil, unto the resurrection of judgment.*" The Bible teaches two resurrections here. There is the "*first resurrection*" for those who faithfully follow Jesus at this present time, during the Gospel age (Rev. 20:6), and there is *the resurrection to judgment* for the world during the earthly kingdom.

The resurrection is such an important teaching that the Apostle Paul said if there were no resurrection "then is our preaching and your faith vain" (1 Cor. 15:13, 14). Jesus died to redeem all mankind back from sin's penalty - death. 1 Tim. 2:5-6 tells us, "For *there is* one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus; who gave himself a ransom for **all**, *to be testified in due time.*" It is of that *due time*, when all mankind shall be resurrected to a time of judgment, that the Prophet Isaiah speaks "*...for when thy judgments are in the earth, the inhabitants of the world will learn righteousness*" (Isaiah 26:9). This is the very thing for which Christians have prayed for some two thousand years in what is known as The Lord's Prayer: "*Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*" This prophecy and prayer will indeed come true when Jesus returns with His church to establish His 1,000-year earthly kingdom.

The Bible tells us that "*God **is** love*" (1 John 4:8). Love would never sanction eternal torment. Those who with every chance refuse to obey, God will, in love, destroy. Let us exonerate the Name of our Loving God!

## WHAT IS TRUTH?

"Jesus answered, '***I am** the way and **the truth** and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me*'" (John 14:6). The Bible finds its focus in the Son of God. He is the main feature from beginning to end. In the Old Testament He is the long-promised Messiah pictured in the animal sacrifices of the Levitical types. In the New Testament He is the Light of Truth and reality of all the Old Testament types.

In John 8:12 Jesus said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." Before Jesus ascended to heaven, He promised that He would have

### ***His Father send the Holy Spirit to His disciples that would guide them***

into all truth. "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only

what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (John 16:13). In John 8:32 and 36 we read, "*Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.....So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*" In John 6:28, 29 we read, "*Then they asked him, 'What must we do to do the works (plural) God requires?' Jesus answered, 'The work (singular) of God is this—to believe in the one he has sent.'*" It is on the foundation of this truth, then, that we find the basis and substance for knowing God and His purposes. See also Romans 10:10.

We are living in the day of great deceptions. Christianity is under attack on all fronts. We need to watch and pray lest we enter into temptation. The truth can be found in Jesus Christ *alone*. Jesus has revealed God to us. 1 Cor. 1:30 states, "It is because of him (God) that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption." The Apostle

Paul realized this and was totally focused on Jesus. These are his words in 1 Cor. 2:2: *“For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.”* Jesus is truly the source of all godly wisdom. This is His promise to us in 1 John 2:27: *“As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, **remain in him.**”* May we all seek TRUTH in Jesus alone!

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