

The Rich Man and Lazarus

Some people feel that when Jesus told the story found in Luke 16:19-31, He was sharing a glimpse of what takes place in the afterlife. Others, citing many passages of Scripture that seem to contradict the picture of heaven and hell brought to view in this message, feel that Jesus was teaching an altogether different kind of lesson.

Before we begin, it should be stated that **this is the only passage in scripture** that teaches consciousness between death and the resurrection. Also, there is not the least reference made to the soul or spirit of man. The question is, is it a parable or a literal story?

In Mark 4:33, 34, we read that Jesus gave His lessons as parables. To begin with, this story says nothing about immortal souls leaving the body at death. Instead, the rich man, after he died, has "eyes" and a "tongue," that is, very real body parts. He asked that Lazarus "dip the tip of his finger in water."

If the story is to be taken literally, then at death, the good and the bad do not soar away as shadowy spirits (Job 34:14, Ecclesiastes 3:21; 12:7), instead, they go to their rewards as physical beings with body parts. How could this be when their bodies return to dust? (Genesis 3:19, Ecclesiastes 3:20; 12:7, Psalm 22:29; 104:29; 146:4, Job 7:21; 17:16; 34:15, Isaiah 26:19, Daniel 12:2). We know that the body does not go to hell at death, because it is very obvious that the body remains in the grave, as the Bible says (Job 17:13; John 5:28,29).

Now, suppose we add the word "soul," so as to make it harmonize with modern theology. Then it should read;

And it came to pass, that the beggar's body died, **and his soul**; the rich man's body also died, **and his soul**, and in hell he lifted up **the eyes of his soul**, being in torments, and seeth Abraham's **soul** afar off, and he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus' **soul**, that he may dip the tip of the **finger of his soul** in water, and cool the **tongue of my soul**; for my **soul** it is tormented in this flame.

Remember the nature of the soul of man, that it is without body or parts; that it has neither interior nor exterior. Could such a being have a "tongue," "finger," and "eyes?" Absurd! Whenever there is a tongue, finger and eyes, there is a physical, material organism.

Five Questions to Ponder

If you are convinced that "The Rich Man And Lazarus" is **not** a parable, I have some questions for you.

1. Is it possible that heaven and hell are so close to each other that a conversation can be held between the inhabitants of heaven and hell?
2. Can those in heaven look down and see people burning in hell?
3. Can they hear the screams?
4. Would a finger dipped in water lessen the torment in a burning hell?
5. How large is Abraham's large bosom if it contains all the elect who go there?

Obviously, the language here is highly symbolic. How could anyone go to Abraham's physical bosom? Nowhere in the Bible is "Abraham's Bosom" defined as "heaven". At the time this parable was spoken, Abraham's body parts were not heaven, but in the grave (Genesis 25:8-9).

What's the Point?

This story is a parable, used by Christ, to emphasize a point. This passage is the fifth in a series of parables:

1. The lost sheep - Luke 15:3-7;
2. The lost coin - Luke 15:8-10;
3. The lost boy - Luke 15:11-32;
4. The unjust rich man - Luke 16:1-15;
5. The rich man and Lazarus - Luke 16:19-31.

Concerning "The rich man and Lazarus," a manuscript of the seventh century reads: "And he spake also another **parable**." Another of the tenth century reads: "the Lord spake this **parable**." I wonder why this disappeared from the Bible?

The point Christ was making is found in the very last verse of this parable:

Luke 16:31, "And he said unto him, If they hear not **Moses** and the **prophets**, neither will they be persuaded, **though one rose from the dead**."

Nowhere does this story speak of sending back 'spirits', not even in the matter of returning to warn men, but of rising "from the dead." The lesson Jesus was trying to teach in this parable is apparent from the remarks with which He prefaced the story. The Pharisees were covetous (verse 14). They also regarded wealth as an evidence of God's favor and poverty of His displeasure.

The Meaning of this Parable to the Jews living in the first century

The Jewish nation, (especially the Scribes and Pharisees) were about to die as a power, as a church, as a controlling influence in the world; while the common people among them, and the Gentiles, were to be exalted in the new order of things. The details of the parable shows: "There was a certain **rich man clothed in purple and fine linen.**" In these first words, by describing their very costume, the Savior fixed attention on the Jewish priesthood. They were, emphatically, the rich men of that nation. His description of the beggar was equally graphic. He lay at the gate of the rich, only asking to be fed with the crumbs that fell from the table. Thus dependent were the common people, and the Gentiles, on the scribes and Pharisees.

We remember how Christ once rebuked them for shutting up the kingdom of heaven against those entering. They lay at the gates of the Jewish hierarchy, for the Gentiles were literally restricted to the outer court of the temple. Hence in Revelation 11:2, we read; "But the court, which is without the temple, leave out, and measure it not, for **it is given unto the Gentiles.**" They could only stand at the outer court, or lie at the gate. The brief, graphic descriptions given by our Savior, at once showed his hearers that he was describing those two classes, the Jewish priesthood and nation, on the one hand, and the common people, Jews and Gentiles, on the other.

The rich man died and was buried. This class died officially, nationally, and its power departed. The kingdom of God was taken from them & conferred on others (Matthew 21:43). The beggar died. The Gentiles, publicans and sinners were translated into the kingdom of God's dear Son, where is neither Jew nor Greek, but where all are one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28).

This is the meaning of "**Abraham's bosom.**" They accepted the true faith and so became one with faithful Abraham. Abraham is called the father of the faithful, and the beggar is represented to have gone to Abraham's bosom, to denote the fact, which is now history, that the common people and Gentiles accepted Christ, enjoying the blessings of the faith.

What is meant by the torment of the rich man? The misery of those proud men, when, soon after, their land was captured, and their city and temple possessed by barbarians, and they scattered like chaff before the wind--a condition in which they have continued from that day (70 A.D.) to this. All efforts to bless them with the teachings of Christ have proved unavailing. At this very moment there is a great gulf fixed so that there is no passing to and fro. And observe, the Jews do not desire the gospel. Nor did the rich man ask to enter Abraham's bosom with Lazarus. He only wished Lazarus to alleviate his sufferings by dipping his finger in water and cooling his tongue. It is so with the Jews today. They do not desire the gospel; they only ask those among whom they sojourn to tolerate them and soften the hardships that accompany their wanderings.

The Jewish church and nation are now dead. Once they were exalted to heaven, but now they are thrust down to Hades, the kingdom of death. Jesus knew the Pharisees believed this and used it in a parable. Of the Pharisees, Josephus says: "They also believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them, and that, under the earth, there will be rewards and punishments, according as they lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have power to revive and live again." (Antiquities, B. 18, Ch. 1, §3. Whiston's Tr.).

The Lessons for us that Jesus was seeking to teach in this Parable

1. In this life is the time when decisions for salvation are irrevocably made. There will be no future opportunity to change.
2. A contrast is being drawn between those who, in this life, make wealth their dependence and the poor who have depended upon Christ. A man's value is not in his possessions; for all that he has belongs to him only as lent by the Lord. A misuse of these gifts will place him below the poorest and most afflicted man who loves God and trusts in Him.
3. The law and the prophets are God's appointed agencies for the salvation of men. Christ was telling His hearers to give heed to these evidences. If they do not listen to the voice of God in His Word, the testimony of a witness raised from the dead would not be heeded. This literally happened in the resurrection of Lazarus, just shortly before Christ's death. (See John 11.) Those who had rejected previous evidence as to His messiahship were so hardened, however, by their rejection of the evidence already available to them, that this crowning miracle of Jesus' ministry did not change their course toward Him.

Conclusion

Clearly, this story is a parable, and doctrines cannot be built upon parables or allegories. A parable, like other illustrations, is generally used to make clear one particular point. To try to build doctrines on every part of the story would generally result in a completely unreasonable conclusion, if not utter contradiction. Certainly, we would not expect to find in the illustration a proof for a belief the very opposite of that held by the speaker or writer of the scriptures.