

Parables of Jesus//The Parables of the Kingdom
Part Five - Lazarus, the Rich Man and the Great Reversal

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Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. ²⁰ At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores ²¹ and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

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

²⁵ “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. ²⁶ 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.’

²⁷ “He answered, ‘Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, ²⁸ for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.’

²⁹ “Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.’

³⁰ “‘No, father Abraham,’ he said, ‘but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’

³¹ “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.’”

This is both a beautiful and alarming parable. It is unique in a number of ways, but most notably in that Jesus actually gives one of the characters a proper name.

Lazarus means “God is my help.”

While at the beginning of the parable of this does not seem to be the case, in the end Lazarus is delivered from his wretched circumstances.

The rich man stands in great contrast to Lazarus. He is very wealthy, dressing finely and living the life of luxury on a daily basis. Lazarus, as we are told in verse 20, is laid at his gate. In a society with no formal social service network, this would be how someone in Lazarus’s circumstances would be expected to survive. The rich man, however, ignores him and leaves him to the dogs of the street.

In verse 22 the ‘great reversal’ takes place with the death of both men. Lazarus is carried in angel arms to the bosom of Abraham, we are to understand he is at last forever in a place of comfort.

The rich man suffers the opposite fate, he moves from great comfort in life to an uncomfortable, tormenting afterlife. Somehow, he can see Lazarus in the better place with Abraham and he seems as dismayed about this as his own turn of circumstances.

The rich man begins making requests of Abraham to improve his comfort. He wants Lazarus to come and cool his tongue with water. Abraham explains there is a great chasm between them which cannot be crossed. The finality of his fate is beginning to sink in.

A second request follows that Lazarus, who is looking all too comfortable with Abraham anyway, be sent to warn his five brothers of this place of torment. Abraham replies that they have the prophets to warn them. The rich man insists that this is not enough and if someone was raised from the dead to warn them they would repent.

Abraham's response is telling: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead"(Luke 16:31).

Jesus knows that soon he will carry the cross to Calvary, be crucified for our sins, and descend to Hades only to rise again. Many, including the Pharisees who are listening to this parable, will still not believe (see Luke 16:13-14 for insight). Jesus is the true and perfect rich man who comes from heaven to address our spiritual poverty so that we may become rich (2 Cor 8:9).

Jesus is telling us that the way we respond to the Lazarus in our life reflects our heart towards him. The rich man seems to only see Lazarus as a pitiful object who littered his gate, a "lesser than" who might disturb his tidy world. His opinion of him does not seem to be changed after the great reversal.

Reflection Questions

1. Why do you think each man ended up where he did in the great reversal?
2. Read Luke 16:31. Why do you think Jesus ended the parable on this note?
3. Do you have a Lazarus in your life presently? If so, how have you responded?