

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16.19-31)
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Keywords

Christianity, beliefs, actions and their consequences, poverty and wealth, heaven and hell

Notes for teachers

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is distinctive among Jesus' parables as it is the only one in which a character is given a name: the poor man who sits at the rich man's gate is identified as Lazarus. This is a popular, informal form of the name Eleazer/Eliezer, who is identified as Abraham's servant in Genesis 15.2. Significantly, the Hebrew name means "God helps", although it is very probable that Luke's Greek-speaking readers would not have known this. Another Lazarus is mentioned in the New Testament, in John 11, as the man Jesus raises from the dead, but it's unlikely that there is any connection between that character and the parable.

It is also the only one of Jesus' stories which focuses on life after death, rather than life here and now. It works as a warning to its readers/hearers about the consequences of their behaviour, and might be compared to the Hebrew Bible story the prophet Nathan tells King David in 2 Samuel 12.1-13:

The Lord sent the prophet Nathan to David. Nathan went to him and said, "There were two men who lived in the same town; one was rich and the other poor. The rich man had many cattle and sheep, while the poor man had only one lamb, which he had bought. He took care of it, and it grew up in his home with his children. He would feed it some of his own food, let it drink from his cup, and hold it in his lap. The lamb was like a daughter to him. One day a visitor arrived at the rich man's home. The rich man didn't want to kill one of his own animals to fix a meal for him; instead, he took the poor man's lamb and prepared a meal for his guest." David became very angry at the rich man and said, "I swear by the living Lord that the man who did this ought to die! For having done such a cruel thing, he must pay back four times as much as he took."
"You are that man," Nathan said to David.

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David had taken Bathsheba as his wife, and had arranged to have her husband Uriah killed. Through Nathan, David is confronted in the form of a story with the harsh reality of the effect his actions have had on others. David is then given an opportunity to recognize and make amends for what he has done. However, the warning comes too late for the rich man in the parable, and it does not look good for his brothers, who have had the teaching of the prophets but have chosen to ignore it. The reader is left to heed the warning or to follow the way of the rich man and his brothers.

Of course, it is clear in the story from 2 Samuel what David had done wrong. What the rich man had done to merit such punishment is much less clear in Jesus' parable. He does nothing actively to harm the poor man. His wrongdoing is left to the reader to infer: perhaps it was his simple disregard for the man who sat at his gate every day in desperate poverty which merits such eternal punishment. His concern for his brothers suggests that he recognized there was something he might have done differently, and he is keen to alert them to that possibility.

Several biblical texts suggest there was a view in Jesus's time that success in life was an indication of God's blessing, and poverty signaled that you were cursed by God. The comments of the disciples in John 9.1-2 on seeing a blind man ("Who sinned, the man or his parents, that he was born blind?"), imply that this was a common understanding. The Book of Job in the Hebrew Bible suggests the same.

However, Jesus' response to his disciples in John 9.3 ("His blindness has nothing to do with his sins or his parents' sins") suggests that this was not an understanding he promoted. Instead, he seemed to focus on what might be done to change the situation of individuals and marginalized groups. The notion of the reversal of fortunes is a common one particularly in Luke's Gospel, established clearly in the song Mary sings in praise of God at the conception of Jesus:

He has brought down mighty kings from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away with empty hands.
(Luke 1.52-53)

We can also see parallels with Jesus' teaching about salvation in Luke 13.28-30:

How you will cry and gnash your teeth when you see Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and all the prophets in the Kingdom of God, while you are thrown out! People will

come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down at the feast in the Kingdom of God. Then those who are now last will be first, and those who are now first will be last.

Here there is a gulf between those who are allowed into the company of Abraham and the prophets at a heavenly feast, and those who are barred from entering. Some of the first will be last and the last first in this heavenly world, asserts Luke's Jesus.

Understanding of the afterlife

In the parable, the Greek word "Hades" is used to describe the place where the rich man is taken after death, while Lazarus is described as being in a place of honour, with Abraham the great patriarch himself. Neither Hades, nor "Sheol", its Hebrew equivalent, is a common word in the Hebrew Bible or in the New Testament. Both words refer to the place where the dead go, although often this is little more than the grave itself. In some texts, both the righteous and the unrighteous go to Hades, which is a place of both reward and torment. However, the two places are kept firmly apart here, with the gap between them necessary for the interaction within the story. A contemporary, alternative word for a place of judgement after death is "Gehenna", a valley outside Jerusalem where children had been sacrificed (2 Kings 23.10) and which later became the place where rubbish was burned. There seems to have been a variety of ways in which Jews at the time of Jesus understood what would happen to people after they died, with different groups believing different things about whether or not souls continued to exist postmortem.

Whether this parable is referring to the final judgement of the souls of the rich man and Lazarus, or to an intermediate state, with final judgement still to come, is not clear. In terms of the story, what is important about the places the characters end up in is that there is no escape, even for reasons which sound merciful. Of course this is a story describing life after death, which by definition is beyond human experience on earth. In this it works as a folk-tale or myth, although it could also be read as indicating the divine insight of Jesus as storyteller.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Describe the way Lazarus lives. What happens to him when he dies?

Describe the way the rich man lives. What happens to him when he dies?

From whose perspective is the story told? And who is the main character in the

story? Are they the same?

Some have called this the story of the six brothers- can you suggest reasons for this?

Application to other contexts

What did the rich man do wrong? What did Lazarus do right?

Is the story fair to both characters?

What does the story suggest about actions and their consequences?

The story talks about warning people about the consequences of their actions. Do people respond well to warnings about the right and wrong things to do? How do you respond to warnings like these? What makes you more or less likely to listen to these warnings?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues

Do you think this story describes Christian beliefs about the after life, or is it just trying to communicate a message? Why?

What other stories from Christianity deal with afterlife?

Sources / Further Reading

Harold G. Coward, *Life After Death in World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997)

John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell and Purgatory* (Oxford: OUP, 2009)

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

There was once a rich man who dressed in the most expensive clothes and lived in great luxury every day. There was also a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who used to be brought to the rich man's door, hoping to eat the bits of food that fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs would come and lick his sores.

The poor man died and was carried by the angels to sit beside Abraham at the feast in heaven. The rich man died and was buried, and in Hades, where he was in great pain, he looked up and saw Abraham, far away, with Lazarus at his side. So he called out, 'Father Abraham! Take pity on me, and send Lazarus to dip his finger in some water and cool off my tongue, because I am in great pain in this fire!'

But Abraham said, 'Remember, my son, that in your lifetime you were given all the good things, while Lazarus got all the bad things. But now he is enjoying himself here, while you are in pain. Besides all that, there is a deep pit lying between us, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot do so, nor can anyone cross over to us from where you are.'

The rich man said, 'Then I beg you, father Abraham, send Lazarus to my father's house, where I have five brothers. Let him go and warn them so that they, at least, will not come to this place of pain.' Abraham said, 'Your brothers have Moses and the prophets to warn them; your brothers should listen to what they say.'

The rich man answered, 'That is not enough, father Abraham! But if someone were to rise from death and go to them, then they would turn from their sins.' But Abraham said, 'If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone were to rise from death.'