

A Parable that Jesus Told, Recorded in the Gospel of Luke

Luke records in his Gospel several of Jesus' most gripping parables. I refer to the parable of the Good Samaritan, the parable of the Prodigal Son and, in my view, the most compelling of all, that of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Let's think carefully about this last one because it has dramatic and powerful significance to us in America today. It's one that absolutely must change us.

First, let's look at the text. It's in Luke 16:19-31. Many of you are familiar with it. There are two scenes, the first (2 verses) is in this life, and the second (2 verses) takes place in the existence after death. Then there's the all-important dialogue between the rich man and Father Abraham (7 verses). After we review the parable itself, we'll try to draw some lessons from it for modern American Christianity. Before beginning, I need to clarify that this parable's point is how we live in this life; it is not meant to teach anything about what happens to us after we die. So let's not try to build theology on the basis of this text. By the way, this may not be a parable; it may be a true story. I'll call it a story from here on.

Luke has carefully organized his material. Chapter 16 mostly deals with the proper use of money. So this story was written with our use of money in mind. We also need to realize that Luke was writing for *us*. His Gospel is for the Church, to teach something necessary for the Christian life.

Scene I contrasts a rich man who lived in luxury, a man who has no name and is silent, with a very poor man. The poor man is disabled, sick, and hungry, and he is named Lazarus. Lazarus suffers terribly in this life. Lazarus also says nothing; he's too pathetic to have to say anything. The miserable state he's in shouts at us all we need to know. From just what we know about these two, it's evident that the rich man is totally oblivious to Lazarus. He is indifferent to Lazarus and his destitute life. He's self-absorbed, enjoying all that life has to offer. No sense of responsibility to any (except his family). Notice, Lazarus "was laid" at the rich man's gate. So there must be someone who places Lazarus there.

Scene II also contrasts the two, except that now their states are reversed. The rich man is in hell in agonizing torment, but Lazarus is forever in heaven, in comfort, along with Abraham. Lazarus is not merely being compensated for the torment he endured during his life. We should presume that Lazarus, like Abraham, believed God. More than just belief, Lazarus had to depend on God to get him thru life. And the rich man . . . an eternity of torment is his destiny. By the way, why Abraham? Because he believed and obeyed God, so he's in heaven; the atonement Christ effected at Calvary retroactively applies to Abraham and to all the Old Testament people who obediently trusted God.

Now comes the dialogue. Let's paraphrase the next 7 verses. The rich man now speaks, and he wants Lazarus to serve him! "Send Lazarus," he says. So the rich man knew Lazarus was there at his gate, he even knew his name. The rich man is asking for mercy, but he won't get it. Abraham now says something startling: both persons "received" the circumstances of their life. God deliberately places people into whatever circumstances they're in, evidently to test them. Verse 25 implies that the two are being dealt with – that is, God is dealing with them – in justice. Furthermore, there's a chasm between heaven and hell that's permanent. In other words, there are two *and only two* options for eternal life, and how we live determines where we spend it. So the rich man's request is rejected.

The rich man continues pleading for mercy, but this time it's for his family members. (He's so thoughtful of others!) Again, he wants Lazarus to be his servant. His brothers, evidently living the same way as did the rich man and deserving also of hell, need to be warned what destiny is waiting for them. Abraham's reply is stark: "They have the Scriptures, let them obey God's Word. If they did, they'd avoid hell." Evidently the rich man never cared about God's Word. He didn't care about God's will. Let's go one step further: He didn't care about God.

The rich man persists. "If someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent." What? Is he referring to the narrative of Jonah and the Ninevites? No. This is prolepsis. Jesus is anticipating His resurrection and the continued rejection of Him even after the Jews *knew* that He had been raised. The hardness of heart of most people is irrational, but real. So Abraham's reply is stark and compelling: "If they don't listen to [that is, obey] Scripture, they won't repent even in the face of a miraculous resurrection." The issue is *not* a reasonable response to something miraculous, it's our willing obedience to God's Word, which is our response to God Himself, that fixes our destiny. The rich man thought, "We don't have to love God or obey God, nor even know His Word; all we need is for someone to come from heaven to warn us [that's what Jesus did] or even to be aware of a miracle like a resurrection (and thus that God and heaven or hell exist), and that'll be enough so that we won't be in hell." Aren't many of us thinking the same? Reflect on this!

Now, let's discuss this trenchant story's meaning. Almost all commentaries recognize that in this Gospel, Luke sustains a polemic against the misuse of wealth. So this story, along with the others, teach us that we need to use the greatest of

care – *exquisite* care – in how we use whatever wealth God has entrusted to us. The Pharisees and Sadducees loved wealth. So the rich man in this story could represent those elite leaders of Judah who rejected Jesus as their Messiah. Their love of money sadly kept them from entrusting themselves to Him. The love of money is an exceedingly powerful block to biblical faith. The Pharisees and Sadducees possessed God’s Word, knew God’s Word, and they believed in God. But the Scriptures – and their belief in God – were useless to them because they loved money, which is really self-love. So they couldn’t or wouldn’t obey the Scriptures that they treasured. They didn’t really love God.

Wealth is exceedingly deceitful. We falsely suppose that it’s God’s blessing for us. Wrong! It’s entrusted to us as a test of our stewardship, of our faithfulness, of our love for God, His values and His will. How we use wealth indicates our heart; it’s like a litmus test of who we truly love, if it’s ourself or if it’s God. And there’s nothing glorious about poverty. This story isn’t here to teach soteriology, so we cannot – indeed, must not – conclude from this text that all poor people are saved to compensate them because of a harsh life. Poverty is mostly due to sin and especially sinful systems in societies. People who are poor are here so that we who are rich can show love and help them with their needs.

The first commandment is to love God with all our being. The second is to love our neighbor. But we can’t fulfill the second unless we fulfill the first. Self-love, self-indulgence, self-gratification – all these block us from loving God, and therefore from loving our neighbor. The rich man in our story perfectly exemplifies this spiritual law. Lazarus was right there at the gate to his home (there was no closer neighbor), and surely the rich man knew that Lazarus was there. Yet the rich man cared nothing for him, whether he had anything to eat or if he were dead. The rich man, although Jewish, was certainly not a child of Abraham; he was a phony. Lazarus was there to show him for what he was. Justice is two things: (i) seeing to it that people get what they deserve; and (ii) righting wrongs. This story satisfies both of those demands. God rules His creation in perfect justice. God is not mocked. If we’ve been entrusted with wealth, let’s use it according to how God has revealed in His Word we’re to use it, viz, to benefit others who are in need. If this story teaches *anything*, it’s that God holds us, Christians, accountable.

But I suspect that there’s more to this story for us today than just being very careful how we use our wealth. It’s this: *Beware of indifference!* The rich man represents wealth, yes indeed. But deeper, between the lines, is what I see as the key issue in this story, he was totally indifferent to Lazarus. All he cared about was himself. He didn’t care if Lazarus was hungry or sick or even there. He just didn’t care. He wasn’t just hard-hearted, he was evil. The opposite of love is not hate, it’s indifference. Apathy. God has commanded us to love, to express the love of Christ. This rich man represents the very opposite of love. He’s one with Satan, he reflects or expresses Satanic self-love. That’s why he’s in hell (along with Satan) for an eternity. He not only fails to reflect the image of God, he is the very opposite of God.

This rich man was indifferent not only to Lazarus, but to the Word of God. He was indifferent to God Himself. He surely had a copy of the Bible in his house, but it was irrelevant to him. He surely knew God existed, but that too was irrelevant. He surely knew at least some of the theological teachings of the scribes, but they had no bearing on his life. Beware of indifference! Beware also of *sins of omission*. They are just as heinous as the wrong things we do.

Almost all atheism in America today is not open hatred or rebellion against God. It’s indifference to Him. “He may exist, but so what?” The only ones who love God [and I’m aware you’ll dispute this] are those who are committed to serving Him regardless the sacrifice or loss, and those who remain faithful to Him in spite of great risk or danger (e.g., due to persecution). Professions of faith will be judged by Christ, not by me. But if a profession isn’t SHOWN to be real by a changed life, by a life seeking to know God and pursuing His revealed will, it’s probably not real. Most American “Christians,” even evangelicals, except for Sunday mornings, live their lives as if they’re atheists, indifferent to God. Indifference could be due to distractions, of which American culture is surfeited, or to sin or to ignorance. But most likely indifference is due to hardness of heart. Just like the rich man in Luke 16. The tragedy of a hard heart is that it prevents repentance, so it’s irreversible and permanent. Only a miraculous act of God akin to raising the dead is able to change a hardened heart.

How does indifference express itself in modern Christianity? We don’t study theology. We don’t reflect long and hard on the Word of God so as to conform our lives to it. Most of us don’t even read it much. We obey it *in theory*, in the abstract, but not really. But mainly, we don’t do Gospel outreach. We’re as indifferent to the lost-ness of the people around us and in the world as the rich man was to Lazarus. We’re indifferent to their lack of salvation because we’re indifferent to God’s will. We’re indifferent to God Himself. No love for God works itself out as no love for others.

How real is our belief in Jesus? How do we live our life? Is it based on and in careful, deliberate obedience to Christ’s Word? If not, we need to change. We *must* change. As the rich man found out too late, God holds us accountable.