

The Rich Man and Lazarus

The story of the rich man and Lazarus makes a comparison between the lives of two men—one rich, the other poor. As we'll see, the comparison extends beyond this life and into the next. Let's take a look at how Jesus described the rich man.

There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. (Luke 16:19)

Not a lot is said in this brief introductory description, but the original listeners would have drawn some definite impressions from it. This man was not only rich but he made a point of showing off his riches by the clothes he wore. He dressed daily in purple cloth, which was something only the very wealthy could afford. The process of extracting purple dye from a shellfish called murex was labor intensive, thus making purple cloth very expensive. Royalty and those of high rank wore purple robes.



The rich man also wore fine linen. The Greek word translated as “fine linen” means a delicate, soft, white, and very costly linen. Wearing white linen garments under purple robes was indicative of great affluence. On top of that, he feasted sumptuously



every day, which might mean that he entertained guests on a daily or regular basis, which would be very costly. The point being made, both here and later in the story, is that the man was very rich and self-indulgent.

And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores. (Luke 16:20-21)

Lazarus is so poor he must beg for food. He is also ill, covered with oozing sores, and cannot walk. Either his legs are paralyzed or he is so weak and ill that he isn't able to walk. Lazarus depended on others to daily carry him to the rich man's gate, where he could beg, and where he hoped that he would receive food which fell from the rich man's table.

When guests ate at feasts, they would break off a piece of bread and use it to scoop food from the common dish. Throughout the meal, when they wanted to wipe their hands they would break off a bit of bread, use it to clean their hands, and then throw it under the table. It was this food that Lazarus would have been hoping to receive.

Every day Lazarus would sit at the gate of the rich man, knowing that daily feasts were being eaten there, knowing that his hunger could be satiated if he were just given some of the food being tossed on the floor. He desired that food, but did without, as it wasn't given to him; or if it



was from time to time, it wasn't enough to assuage his hunger. The dogs would come and lick Lazarus' leaking sores. Having such sores and being licked by dogs made Lazarus ritually unclean.

Lazarus was in a miserable state—unable to walk, covered with sores, always hungry, completely dependent on others for help to move from one place to another, and sitting day after day begging outside the gate of the rich man, who apparently ignored him. He was a ritually unclean social outcast.

The parable continues:

*The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham's side.
(Luke 16:22)*

Being by Abraham's side, or at Abraham's bosom, as it's sometimes translated, expressed the blessed state after death, and was compared to dining with the patriarchs, as seen in Matthew 8:11:

I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven.

Lazarus, who was never invited to the rich man's feast, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table, is now reclining at a feast in the place of honor next to Abraham, the father of faith.



The rich man, meanwhile, experiences a very different fate.

The rich man also died and was buried, and in Hades, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. And he called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame." (Luke 16:22-24)

The unnamed rich man has died and been buried, undoubtedly with an expensive funeral. However, his existence is now very different from what it was in his time on earth. He who feasted daily with copious food and wine is now the one in need and dependent on others for help.

He called out to Abraham, making sure to call him "father," perhaps hoping that reminding Abraham of his Jewish descent would in some way obligate Abraham to help him.

At this point in the parable, the surprising discovery is made that the rich man knew Lazarus' name. He was apparently well aware of Lazarus, who sat daily in front of his house in desperate need. However, he shows no remorse about his neglect of Lazarus; instead, he's instructing Abraham to send Lazarus to perform a service for him.



Kenneth Bailey expressed the situation well when he wrote:



The rich man's first demand is unbelievable. When Lazarus was in pain, he was ignored by the rich man. Now the rich man is in pain and something must be done about it—immediately! After all, he is unaccustomed to such things. Instead of [giving] an apology he demands services, and from the very man he refused to help in spite of his great wealth! He wouldn't even give Lazarus some of his "dog food." He might as well have said, "Now that Lazarus is feeling better and is on his feet, I would like a few services. Given who I am, and he, being of the servant class, such service is expected. Send him down, Abraham—and hurry up about it. Unlike Lazarus, I am not accustomed to discomfort!"

There's no sign of remorse, no asking for forgiveness, only continued self-concern and self-importance.

But Abraham said, "Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish." (Luke 16:25)

Abraham doesn't answer harshly; rather he calls him "child." He then instructs the rich man to think back on the life he led and all of the good things he received, as opposed to the bad things Lazarus

experienced. Abraham reminds him that what he possessed wasn't truly his; it was on loan from God, and he was meant to use it wisely. Now his earthly life is finished, and due to his actions in that life he is in anguish.

Abraham then said:

"And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us." (Luke 16:26)

The rich man then comes up with a new task for Lazarus.

And he said, "Then I beg you, father, to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—so that he may warn them, lest they also come into this place of torment." (Luke 16:27-28)

Realizing that his predicament isn't going to change, the rich man asks that Lazarus be sent on a mission to warn his brothers. He sees that the same fate awaits them, most likely because they live in the same manner as he did, pursuing their own selfish pleasure with no concern for those in need.

But Abraham said, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." (Luke 16:29)



Abraham states that they have the five books of Moses, known as the Torah, as well as the books of the prophets, called in Hebrew the Nevi'im, available to them. Abraham is saying that the Scriptures, God's written Word, are sufficient to instruct his



brothers in righteous living and faith. If they will hear those words, meaning to obey and follow them, they won't end up as their dead brother has.

This answer doesn't sit well with the rich man. He's used to people doing what he says. His response is argumentative.

And he said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." (Luke 16:30)

This is ironic given that the rich man himself is at that moment seeing someone "from the dead," Lazarus, who is reclining at the table with Abraham, and he hasn't shown any sign of repentance. Yet he's convinced that if Lazarus will appear to his brothers, they will repent. Abraham lets him know that's not the case.

He said to him, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." (Luke 16:31)



Although it isn't specified, as parables don't give a lot of details or historical facts, it's possible that the rich man and his brothers were Sadducees. The Sadducees were the aristocracy of Israel and many were very wealthy.

The Sadducees did not believe that life continued on after death. There was no expectation that there was any life beyond this one; as such, if a man lived prosperously and happily, died in peace, and was honorably buried, he had all that a man could ever expect. However, Jesus' parable shows that this is not the case. The rich man, contrary to the belief of the Sadducees, finds out that there *is* life beyond the grave and that our actions in our earthly life do in fact have something to do with life after death.

Whether the brothers were Sadducees or not, what is clear is that the rich man knew they weren't living in obedience to what God's Word taught, and that they were going to end up in the same state he was in if they didn't receive a sign. But Abraham says that no sign would be given to them, as they had God's Word available to them and that was sufficient. They knew enough from the Torah, the Scriptures, to know what God says about how to live righteously and how to treat the poor.

So what was Jesus teaching with this parable?

How we live our lives affects our eternal future. Our actions, or our lack of action, make a difference not only in our life today, but in our life forever. We should be mindful of the choices we make, how we live, how we use our money and possessions, and how we treat those in need. The sum of our decisions, choices, and actions not only make us who we are today, but affect our future in the life after this one.



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