

Luke 16:19-31

¹⁹ “There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. ²⁰ And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, ²¹ who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. ²² When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, ²³ and from the netherworld, where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. ²⁴ And he cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.’ ²⁵ Abraham replied, ‘My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented. ²⁶ Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.’ ²⁷ He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father’s house, ²⁸ for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.’ ²⁹ But Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.’ ³⁰ He said, ‘Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ ³¹ Then Abraham said, ‘If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.’”

Context

Recall that in successive weeks we have heard the parable of the Prodigal Son (15:11-32) followed by the story of the Dishonest Steward (16:1-13) – both stories featuring rich men and concern the handling of money (among other key topics). This week our reading against features a rich man but this time in contrast to the poor Lazarus (16:19-31). The in-between verses, vv.14-18, begin with the phrase, “*The Pharisees, who loved money.*” This directly speaks to the Pharisees as ones who are ignoring the warning of v.13 “*You cannot serve God and mammon.*” Since they love money, they are not serving God. Allan Culpepper (*Luke*, 312) notes that vv.14-15 introduce the first part of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, while vv.16-18 in turn foreshadow the reference to the law and the prophets in the second part of the parable.

Perhaps our parable is better titled “Rich Men and Lovers of Money” in order to convey its thematic unity and serve as an apocalyptic warning to those who pursue the treasures of earth; they are “*an abomination in the sight of God*” (v.15). Certainly that is the fate of the rich man in our parable and the fate that awaits his five brothers. Tempting as the title is, the title then also runs the risk of losing sight of Lazarus, the parable’s protagonist who never speaks a word. While such an emphasis points to the rich man’s torment as a fulfillment of the earlier warning: “*His winnowing fan is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire*” (3:17) one may lose sight of the fulfillment that the kingdom of God belongs to the poor and the hungry (6:20-26).

Commentary

Culpepper well describes this parable as a drama in three acts (*Luke*, 316):

- Act 1 – a tableau during which the characters are introduced and their way of life is described, but nothing happens
- Act 2 – the rich become poor and the poor become rich as each character has died and

received their eternal reward

- Act 3 – narration give way to dialogue, but between the rich man and Abraham, in three exchanges:
 - about the finality of judgment
 - about the witness of Moses and the prophets
 - about the blindness that prevents even the Resurrection from leading to conversion

Act 1 – The Tableau

The first three verses contain a sharp contrast in description between Lazarus and the unnamed “lover of money.”

- The rich man is clothed in purple and fine linen where Lazarus is covered with sores or ulcers
- The rich man “*dined sumptuously each day*” while Lazarus longed to eat what fell from the table, but can’t.
- The rich man lives a privileged life while Lazarus *ebeblêto pros ton pulôna*, literally, “had been thrown before the gate” of the rich man’s house.

It is perhaps noteworthy that the first word in a Greek phrase is a position of stress, as is the last word in a phrase. Even the Lucan grammar seems to stress the contrast between the two men:

- The first word in v. 19 is *anthropos* = “a person” and the last word in the phrase is *plousios* = “rich”
- where the first word in v. 20 is *ptochos* = “poor,” the last word in the phrase is “Lazarus,” a name meaning “God helps”

Perhaps Luke is making the point that “the poor” were not considered “people;” as well the rich depend upon themselves whereas the poor depend on God.

The rich man is splendidly robed and feasts on the finest foods (see Note below re: v.19) – a clear echo of the parable of the Rich Fool who is well satisfied: “*Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!*” (12:19). As the parable makes clear the flash and pomp of the rich man’s life in no way reflects the eternal glory that awaits the faithful.

Lazarus is the only character ever named in a parable. As mentioned above, the name means “God helps” and thus foreshadows Lazarus’ liberation even as its ironically contrasts his life – no one in this life helps Lazarus. He has been cast away at the rich man’s gate. He is a cripple beggar covered with sores and in the end dies.

In our tableau the two characters live with a “stone’s throw” of each other and yet they never meet, never speak, nor are in any way neighbors. One is reminded of Jesus’ question to scribe (scholar of the law) in the parable of the Good Samaritan: “*Which of these three [priest, Levite, Samaritan], in your opinion, was neighbor to the robbers’ victim?*” He answered, “*The one who treated him with mercy.*” Jesus said to him, “*Go and do likewise.*” Our two main characters lived entirely separate lives, divided at table and divided by a gate.

Act 2 – The Rich Become Poor and the Poor Become Rich

The Act is briefly told and simply describes the fate of our two characters. “*When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was*

buried,²³ and from the netherworld, where he was in torment...” (vv.22-23a). We are not told how Lazarus died. Was it starvation? Again we are reminded of Jesus’ admonition to the Pharisees. “*Then he said to the host who invited him, “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”* (14:12-14). Was it exposure and hypothermia while the rich man slept nearby? Infected sores while the rich enjoyed baths and healing ointments? Perhaps weakened and unable to defend himself, the dogs took his life.

However his life ended, Lazarus is taken by the angels to the bosom of Abraham. Nothing is said of a burial which brings to mind the bodily translations of Enoch (Gen 5:24), Elijah (2 Kings 2:11) and Moses (Jewish legends) to their eternal rewards. Neglected by others, Lazarus is prized in the sight of God.

The rich man *also died* – again we are left to speculate by what cause – but notably, he is buried, perhaps “thrown” into his grave as was Lazarus at the gate.

Act 3 – The Dialogues

To a first century hearer of the parable, the fates of the two would have been surprising for it went against the grain of the common wisdom: blessings in this life were a sign of God’s favor while illness, poverty, and hardship were a sign of God’s curses. Yet the one well “blessed” in his lifetime is now tormented in the *netherworld* (see the Note on 16:23 below) where he can see Lazarus and Abraham across the great chasm that divides them (v.26).

The First Exchange

Some things never change. The rich man, who surprisingly knows Lazarus’ name, making his lack of charity perhaps worse, still thinks of Lazarus as someone below his station in life, someone to serve his personal needs: “*Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames*” (v.24). The rich man stills thinks of himself as a “son of Abraham” since he addresses Abraham as “Father” (*cf.* 13:16; 19:9)

And he is. Abraham addresses him as “child” in v.25; however, such a relationship is no guarantee that one will dwell with Abraham in paradise. The theme of the Lucan “great reversals” (*cf.* Luke 6:20-26, the Beatitudes and other vv.) is now complete. Where table and gate once divided them in life, now a great chasm (v.26) separates them and confirms the finality of judgment – “*prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.*” In life indifference and apathy shut the rich man off from Lazarus and now no one can reach him.

The Second Exchange

Here the rich man asks that Lazarus (again as servant) be sent back to warn the rich man’s surviving brothers. Seemingly accepting his fate, he at least gives evidence of thinking of another person. “*But Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them’*” (v.29). Indeed, let us listen to them:

“If one of your kinsmen in any community is in need in the land which the LORD, your God, is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor close your hand to him in his need. Instead, you shall open your hand to him and freely lend him enough to

meet his need” (Dt 15:7-8)

“This, rather, is the fasting that I wish: releasing those bound unjustly, untying the thongs of the yoke; Setting free the oppressed, breaking every yoke; Sharing your bread with the hungry, sheltering the oppressed and the homeless; Clothing the naked when you see them, and not turning your back on your own” (Isaiah 58:6-7)

The Third Exchange

Apparently the rich man realizes that his brothers have little hope of repenting and turning from the very life that lead to the rich man’s fate. The call to repentance has been consistent within Luke’s gospel. John the Baptist preach repentance (3:3, 8). Jesus calls people to repentance (5:32), even declaring woes upon Chorazin and Bethsaida for their failure to repent (10:13) when even Nineveh repented (11:32) Jesus warned the crowds that unless they repented they would perish like the Galileans at Pilate’s hand or people in Jerusalem upon whom a tower fell (13:3,5). Even close at hand, the parable of the Prodigal Son is a call to repentance as is the parable of the Dishonest Steward.

The Pharisees who heard this parable (16:14-18) are the ones to whom this third exchange is directed, but the message extends to all who love money (mammon) more than God. The ones who will not hear the Word of God (via Moses and the prophets) or the Word of God enfleshed, they even rising from the dead will be convincing.

The question that lingers for Luke’s church and our own – how could it be that one would rise from the dead and still some refuse to believe, repent and reform their lives?

Notes

Luke 16:19 rich man: The oldest Greek manuscript of Luke dating from ca. A.D. 175–225 records the name of the rich man as an abbreviated form of “Nineveh,” but there is very little textual support in other manuscripts for this reading. The rich man is popularly known as “Dives” which is the Latin Vulgate’s translation for “rich man.”

purple garments and fine linen: Cloth dyed purple was costly and made from the extract of shellfish murex. So prized was murex purple dye for its commercial value that the Hebrew term *argāmān* acquired the sense of “tribute” in both Ugaritic and Hittite. Hittite sources reveal that such payment was made in the form of purple garments for the king, queen, crown prince, and ministers of the court. Purple cloth would be used for the outer garment. The use of *fine linen* for the other garments indicates that the rich man enjoyed the ultimate in luxury. The phrase is reminiscent of Prov. 31:22, suggesting that he lived like a king

dined sumptuously each day: “Dining sumptuously” is not necessarily bad. The same word, *euphraino*, is used four times of the “celebration” the waiting father hosted for his prodigal son (15:23, 24, 29, 32). The emphasis in the phrase is its combination with “each day” and echoes Amos 6:4-7.

Luke 16:20 lying at his door: The Greek is *ebeblêto pros ton pulôna*, literally, “had been thrown before the gate.” The verb is passive, thus others (unnamed) dumped Lazarus at the rich man’s gate – perhaps other rich people who did want Lazarus at their gate? friends of Lazarus?

poor man: the use of word *ptōchós* (poor, destitute) in such close conjunction with *plousios* (wealthy, rich) gives us the suggestion that this parable is a narrative rendering of the first

Beatitude and woe of Luke 6:20-24.

Lazarus: The name of Lazarus, an abbreviated transcription of *El-azar* (“God helps”), appears in the NT only in the gospel of John and this parable. It is the only proper name to appear in a NT parable attributed to Jesus.

Luke 16:21 would gladly have eaten his fill: *epithymōn chortasthēnai* (literally, desired/lusted to be filled). Luke poignantly describes the poor man’s condition with graphic, illustrative terms. The root verb *chortazō* is derived from *chortos*, a Greek word for “grass, green crops, hay.” Normally *chortazō* is used to describe animals eating. It is used of people in case instances: (a) to describe Jesus’ miraculous feeding (Matt 14:20; 15:37; Mark 6:42; similarly 8:8; Luke 9:17; John 6:26) and (b) figuratively of those who hunger and thirst for righteousness (Matt 5:6; cf. also Ps 17:15). Elsewhere the word *brōsis* (to eat, eat a meal) is used.

Dogs evenused...lick his sores: This reference echoes OT passages in which dogs consume the dead (cf. 1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:24; Ps. 22:15–16; Jer. 15:3)

Luke 16:22 he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham: The traditional translation takes *kólpos* (bosom, lap) to mean “bosom” although elsewhere (6:34) the term is translated as “lap.” The expression “bosom of Abraham” is found only in Luke and may derive from the ancient Biblical idea of being gathered to one’s people at death (cf. Gen 49:3; Num 27:13; Judges 2:10) – especially pointing to Abraham the Father of the faithful.

In Jewish legends regarding the martyrdom of the mother and her seven sons (2 Maccabees 7), the martyrs were brought to the bosom of Abraham, a place the legends regard as the place of highest bliss.

Luke 16:23 the netherworld: *hádēs* is normally a colourless term, signifying the abode of all the departed whether good or bad – most often used to translate the Hebrew *Sheol*, the realm of the dead. In the OT this term came to denote the place of temporary sojourn prior to resurrection (cf. Is. 26:19). In later Judaism, *hádēs* is the place the good were separated from the bad (Eth. En. 22) and where the good were finally thought to be comforted and content.

In the New Testament era the associations of *hádēs* with dead the continues but begins to be understood differently in the light of the Resurrection – the term is never used of the saved. Here it seems to be equivalent to Gehenna, the place of punishment, for the rich man was *in torment*. Nonetheless, one goes down into Hades (Mt. 11:23; 12:40), but stay is limited (Rev. 20:13). Sometimes all the dead seem to be in Hades (Acts 2:27), but elsewhere believers are in paradise, or with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), or under the altar (Rev. 7:9); *hádēs* is sometimes just the abode of the wicked (Rev. 20:13-14). Scripture is clear that Jesus is the Lord of Hades (Mt. 16:18; Acts 2:31). Distinctive here is that Christ preaches in Hades (1 Pet. 3: 19ff.) and that he has the keys of death and Hades (Rev. 1:18).

Luke 16:24 water...cool my tongue: This reference to thirst echoes several OT passages in which thirst is an image of divine judgment (cf. Isa. 5:13; 50:2; 65:13; Hos. 2:3; 2 Esd. 8:59; 1 En. 22:9)

Luke 16:26 chasm: *chásma* – In this only NT occurrence a figurative meaning of χάσμα ‘yawning,’ taken to be a deep, unbridgeable valley or trough between two points. The reference is to the impassable space between two parts of the supernatural abode of the dead.

Luke 16:30 if someone from the dead: The notion that the dead can contact the living,

especially through dreams, echoes 1 Sam. 28:6–19; 2 Kings 21:6; Isa. 8:19.

Luke 16: 31 *If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets:* “Moses” means ‘the writings of Moses’, and in combination with “the prophets” points to the whole of Scripture. There is no shortage of OT citations for the biblical warrant of righteous treatment towards the poor – to list but a few: cf. Deut. 14:28–29; 15:1–3, 7–12; 22:1–2; 23:19; 24:7–15, 19–21; 25:13–14; Isa. 3:14–15; 5:7–8; 10:1–3; 32:6–7; 58:3, 6–10; Jer. 5:26–28; 7:5–6; Ezek. 18:12–18; 33:15; Amos 2:6–8; 5:11–12; 8:4–6; Mic. 2:1–2; 3:1–3; 6:10–11; Zech. 7:9–10; Mal. 3:5.

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