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Lazarus and the Rich Man

It seems that our culture is obsessed with the afterlife. Movies are made about it, songs are sung about it, books are written about it. In this regard, consider two ironies; first a Gallup Poll Survey from 2007 revealed that virtually all who believe in heaven think that they will go there when they die.¹ Yet this is in direct contrast to biblical teaching.

Matthew 7:13b-14, Christ said, "...the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is

narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.”

On the Day of Judgment, there will be a massive majority of men and women who think that they are saved but will be shocked to discover that “Christ never knew them” (Matthew 7:23)! Of this group, few if any have paused to think if they would enjoy it if they got there. J. C. Ryle wrote:

Now perhaps you love the company of the light and the careless, the worldly-minded and the covetous, the reveler and the pleasure-seeker, the ungodly and the profane. There will be none such in heaven.

Now perhaps you think the saints of God too strict and particular and serious. You rather avoid them. You have no delight in their society. There will be no other company in heaven... I know not what others may think, but to me it does seem clear that heaven would be a miserable place to an unholy man. It cannot be otherwise. People may say, in a vague way, they ‘hope to go to heaven’, but they do not consider what they say. (Ryle, 2013, p. 43)

Today, we are privileged to study together a passage that was inspired by these people and more. The text before us is one of the forty-six parables Christ told when He walked the earth. Recall that a parable is a story which is designed to communicate truth. The word “parable” literally means “to place alongside of” and so is understood to be a truth carried in a vehicle. It has two parts... the Story and then the Point or the truth being conveyed. Now, unlike the practice of many throughout church history who sought instruction from the elements of the story, sound interpretation demands that we endeavor to apply NOT the elements of the story BUT the truth that is being conveyed!²

A parable is analogous to a peanut. There is the hard-outer shell when once addressed is discarded, leaving the nut for our consumption. And so it is with the parable. The rule of thumb when studying parables is that we owe no more to the story than what is necessary to discover the truth it illustrates.

Luke 16 is seen to be a parable in the language which Luke used to introduce a parable.

Luke 16:19a: “Now there was a certain rich man...”

Compare this with the other parables in Luke:

- Luke 10:30a: The Good Samaritan, “Jesus replied and said, “A certain man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho...”
- Luke 14:16a: The Unwilling Dinner Guests, “But He said to him, ‘A certain man was giving a big dinner...’”
- Luke 15:11: The Prodigal Son, “And He said, ‘A certain man had two sons.’”
- Luke 19:12: The Minas, “He said therefore, ‘A certain nobleman went to a distant country’...”

So, there is no question that our passage is a parable.³ And that is significant especially here for among other things this parable speaks of:

- “A great chasm” separating heaven and hell (v. 26) as well as...
- The ability for those in hell to gaze upon those in heaven and vice versa (v. 23).

Because this is a parable, we do NOT derive theology from the elements of the story and so cannot say that either of these is true. There is a main truth Christ is getting at here, that is what we are after!

That having been said, that is NOT to say that we DO NOT recognize truth reflected in a parable. For example, when Christ told the Parable of the Prodigal Son — a parable clearly teaching about the love of God for His people — there is no question that the elements of the son’s repentance are right on, “I have sinned against heaven, and in your sight” (v. 18b)! But we derive this NOT from this parable, but from other passages of Scripture which teach as much- as in David’s confession concerning Bathsheba, he prayed thus:

Psalm 51:4a, “Against Thee, Thee only, I have sinned, and done what is evil in Thy sight...”

Because the Parable of the Prodigal Son reflects this truth, the student of Scripture is able to take this element *of the story* and apply it to himself! With that, let’s consider The Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, beginning with the context.

Luke 16:19, “Now there was a certain rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, gaily living in splendor every day.”

We’ve entered here into Christ’s third year of ministry in which our Lord became much more pointed in His attacks on Apostate Judaism and the Religious Hypocrite. Immediately preceding passage, Christ told the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward (Luke 16:1-13) which pictured a wicked man using money to advance himself. Now we note that the scribes and Pharisees scoffed at this.

Luke 16:14, “Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, were listening to all these things, and they were scoffing at Him.”

Why would the Pharisees scoff at Christ’s teaching here? The Jews of Christ’s day held the belief that God helps those who help themselves. Accordingly, if you were rich, powerful, good looking, without physical blemish, it meant that you were a man of God whom the Lord obviously loved. The disciples even fell prey to such thinking:

John 9:1-2, “And as He passed by, He saw a man blind from birth. And His disciples asked Him, saying, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he should be born

blind?”

In fact, you will recall that it was this teaching that God addressed in the oldest book of the Bible- the book of Job! Yet the Jews of Christ’s day missed it! They continued to relate to God based on their conduct and so “trusted in themselves that they were righteous” (Luke 18:9)!

In Luke 16, the “righteousness” of the particular Jews standing before Christ was evidenced by their wealth! They knew God loved them because they were rich! The “blessing” of their wealth was proof of their acceptance before God! So, prompted by this misunderstanding, Christ told this parable about “a certain rich man.” In other words, we are NOT talking about *any* rich man, BUT “a certain” rich man, a rich man distinguished above all others on account of his wealth and so God’s love for him!

Furthermore, notice that “he habitually dressed.” This means that the rich man here was NOT dressed up here on account of *an occasion*, like a wedding. Rather, this is how this man dressed all the time, he was that wealthy/godly!

“He habitually dressed in purple.” This is the language of opulence and nobility! The purple referenced here was a Tyrian dye which was extracted from sea snails. Because it was incredibly labor intensive to produce, the purple dye was quite costly such that only the richest individuals could afford fabrics or garments dyed with it.⁴

“He habitually dressed in purple and fine linen.” The “linen” referenced here was Egyptian cotton which was incredibly soft and white. As such, it was extremely expensive! In Christ day once again, only the wealthy could afford an inner garment made of such material. Of this purple outer garment and fine linen which would have been white, J. B. Green wrote:

The process by which wool was ‘fulled’ in a basin with special clay in order to render the cloth brilliantly white was time-consuming and costly. Clothing colored with Tyrian purple dye was likewise a striking luxury. Though white garments indicated membership among the elite, they were regarded as modest when compared with clothing dyed purple. White garments underneath a purple robe- this was the sign of the highest opulence. (Green, 1997, p. 605)

He was “gaily living in splendor every day.” Again this is a description NOT of a rich man hosting a wedding feast, BUT of the lifestyle, the daily living, of this man! He just wasn’t rich; he was filthy rich! J. B. Green added,

In the story of the lost son (15:11–32), a feast is used to signal a special occasion, with a calf killed in order to feed as many as a hundred guests. Jesus has it that this was daily fare for this wealthy man, and that in an economy where even the rich could afford to kill a calf only occasionally. (Green, 1997, pp. 605-606)

So the picture was one of extreme wealth and self-indulgence! This man was so wealthy he no

longer needed to work! Instead he spent his days catering to himself and whatever impulse he might have at the moment.

Now if you and I could go back in time and consider a man like this, we might feel a little sick to our stomach at his appearance and lifestyle! Yet you must understand, in Christ's day this man would have been understood to be one of the godlier individuals to have walked the earth! He had to have been for God to have blessed him as he was! That means, if there was ever a man we could say had a lock on heaven, it was this man! In contrast, notice the other main character.

Luke 16:20-21, "And a certain poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate⁵, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man's table [in Christ's day wealthy people used bread to wipe their hands as napkins]; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores."

The irony of this passage must not be lost on us... it is incredibly important! This is the only parable in which Christ names one of the characters of His story! As such, we conclude that his name here must have significance to Christ's story... which it clearly does. The name "Lazarus" (Λάζαρος [*Lazaros*]) is the Greek translation of Old Testament, Eleazar, which means "whom God has helped." Talk about foreshadowing! In a world which believed that *God helped those who helped themselves*, what an incredible statement Christ introduced here, a statement He will develop by parable's end! With that, notice the description of this man, it is shocking in its extreme.

He was "a certain poor man." Like the rich man, this was no ordinary poor individual. This is "a certain" poor man and so one who was known in his town as the poorest of the poor. Understand, the ancient world typically did NOT have a town drunk (drinking wasn't a game like it is in our culture)! They DID however have a town loser, like the prostitute who washed Jesus' feet (cf. Luke 7:38)! Lazarus clearly was that town loser!

Furthermore notice, "a certain poor man"> The word commonly used in Christ's day for poverty was *πενιχρός* (*penichros*), used of the widow Jesus saw giving an offering in the Temple; she had "two small copper coins" (Luke 21:2). And so while she was poor, she was NOT a beggar!

The word in the ancient world for that condition; ones who were begging-poor, who stood in the alley ways and covered their faces as they begged- was *πτωχός* (*ptōchos*). The word means "to shrink, cower, or cringe" and so denotes NOT just poverty, BUT humiliation! The *πτωχός* (*ptōchos*) were the losers of Jewish society! NOT only were they filthy and needy, BUT they also were understood to be the object of God's wrath and displeasure! Clearly, these individuals had not *helped themselves* to merit God's blessing, and so they were cursed with a brutally hard life!

Can you guess the word used here? It is *πτωχός* (*ptōchos*)! Accordingly, and rightly so, this poor

man would have been “longing to be fed [In other words he wasn’t fed; he just longed to be fed] with the *crumbs* which were falling from the rich man’s table.”⁶ Yet it gets even worse.

He was “laid at his gate.” Not only was he poor, but from this we conclude he was infirmed/crippled. This no doubt is why the text doesn’t read that “he was laid at his gate,” but “cast” or “thrown” at the gate!⁷ In other words, Lazarus was thrown away like garbage! *So, who sinned? This man or his parents?*- that is the question many would be asking at this point!

We read further, “he was covered in sores.” Christ is piling on the adjectives here! That this man had open sores (which meant that he was ceremonially unclean) tells us that he had any of a variety of illnesses common in that day which resulted in a stinky, gross, puss-filled sores which oozed from the wounds (that is what the dogs were licking). One in such a condition in ancient Judaism could expect to be spat upon and to have rocks thrown at them as a sign of derision on account of their sin (cf. Galatians 4:14)! Dr. John MacArthur noted:

In ancient times, without benefit of good medicines, sterile bandages, and other such modern care, diseases were often disfiguring and their stench nauseating. To most ancients, including Jews, physical affliction was considered a form of divine judgment. (MacArthur, 1987, p. 116)

Yet there was one more degree of humiliation referenced here, “the dogs were coming and licking his sores” (v. 21). Dogs in Biblical times were NOT loyal pets or the companions they are today. RATHER, they were semi-wild scavengers⁸ consistently viewed in Scripture in a negative light!⁹ That they were “licking his sores” indicates that to them Lazarus was a source of food!

Now with the two characters in mind, in the opinion of those listening who do you suppose they would have said was pleasing to God: the rich man or the poor man? Clearly the rich man! His life reflected the showering of God’s love upon him! Lazarus would have been viewed as one whom God hated!

No doubt at this point, the story had drawn in the Pharisees. Now Christ was talking their language! And so, like almost every one of His parables, Christ introduced here a shocking twist.

Luke 16:22-23, “Now it came about that the poor man died and *he was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom* [in Judaism at the time of Christ this was one of the privileges reserved for the faithful whom God loved dearly¹⁰] and the rich man also died and was buried.¹¹ *And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom.*”

I don’t think I need to give you a commentary on how the Jews would have received this! Talk about shock, scoffing, and anger. It would have been loud and demonstrative! Yet Christ was speaking to a large crowd (cf. Luke 15:1-2) which means the disapproving voices would have been relatively few in comparison to the masses who no doubt sat in shock with their mouths

open! The wretched man died and “was carried away by the angels to Abraham’s bosom”?^{12,13} While the wealthy/godly man, upon his death, was sent to hell?¹⁴

The point here is one of shock as well as the implicit statement that the one who enters heaven is NOT the one who helps themselves, BUT the one “whom God helps” (Lazarus)! That brings us to the recompense.

Luke 16:24-25, “And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me [There is a pun not obvious in English translations, but clear in the Greek. The word for ‘mercy’¹⁵ is related to the word for ‘almsgiving.’¹⁶ This man who never gave alms to Lazarus is the one now asking for alms!], and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame’ [there is a note of arrogance here as this wealthy man continued to view Lazarus as a lowly individual whose purpose it was to carry out the desires of a noble man like himself]. But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your life you received your good things [The word ‘your’ indicates that the rich man here made his own bed. He did NOT enjoy *divine* ‘good things,’ but *your* good things’ indicating volition and choice!! IOW, he was exactly where he chose to be!!! In life he merited that which he gained and so it would be in death!¹⁷], and likewise Lazarus had bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony.’”

From this we do NOT derive the teaching that hell is a place of agony, again, this is a parable. It is from other passages that we deduce this (like Matthew 13:49-50)! Rather we may deduce the fate of all who approach God on the basis of their own merit verses those who approach God on the basis of God’s help/merit!

- The rich man does NOT cry foul; he only cried for relief.
- He did NOT cry for justice, but “mercy” which is an admission of guilt!

The implication is that both received what they in their lives merited! The rich man trusting in his riches received death. Lazarus — who was helped by God’s merit — received life!

There is no question that upon our death and/or at the Last Day, all mankind will stand before God and receive that which they in their lives have merited! In Romans Paul establishes the basis why for not only the Gentile who has never read the Bible to be condemned, but also for the religious who profess a love for the word of God:

Romans 2:11-13, “For there is no partiality with God. For all who have sinned without the Law [that is, Gentiles] will also perish without the Law [the word here references hell, but is not as strong a word as could have been used]; and all who have sinned under the Law [this is the religious who grew up learning the Bible and memorizing its doctrines] will be judged by the Law [this is stronger than the word for ‘perish.’ To be ‘judged by the Law’ is to be assigned a greater form of judgment and suffering. And how is this the case?]; for not the hearers of the Law are just before God, but THE

DOERS of the Law will be justified.”

Brothers and sisters, you must see from this passage that for a person to stand with Christ in glory, they must perfectly obey the law of God! One fault, one slight missing of the mark, and that person will suffer eternity in hell! Yes, that sounds like Paul is teaching that we are saved by works! And that is correct! Now before we go on, live with this a moment!

- In glory we will continue to relate to God on the basis of works! God established the world on this basis (cf. Genesis 2:15-17), and heaven will NOT change it!
- Truly today and forevermore we stand before God on a legal basis!

So, who then can be saved, for all have sinned? The answer is only those who stand before God with a perfect record! And who is in this group? The answer is twofold; first Jesus. Paul wrote this of Christ:

Galatians 4:4-5a, “But when the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law [this is the Covenant of Works], in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law...”

How did He do this? He upheld the Covenant of Works.

Hebrews 4:15, “For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin.”

And so having been born “under the law,” what did Christ do? Unlike Adam and Eve, Christ did NOT disobey God on one point. Accordingly, He earned salvation!

Hebrews 7:26, “For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens.” (cf. also 1 Pet. 2:22)

Again, Jesus is the only one who earned salvation! Of those who stand before God with a perfect record is only Jesus! Anyone else in this group? Only those to whose account God has imputed Christ’s right-standing; that is Lazarus (only those whom God has helped). Speaking of Adam’s sin, Paul writes:

Romans 5:15, “...if by the transgression of the one the many died, much more did the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abound to the many.”

What is this gift? Nothing less than Christ’s right-standing...

Romans 5:19, “For as through the one man’s disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the One the many will be made righteous.”

This is justification! *Justification* is a legal term in which a guilty individual stands before a judge and is declared not guilty as it relates to a specific violation of the law! Now how did Christ grant us this glorious gift?

Romans 5:8-9, “But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. Much more then, having now been justified by His blood we shall be saved from the wrath of God through Him.”

How is it that we are ‘justified’? It is ‘by His blood’- that is, His death on the cross- a death He died for us! Based upon this, do you understand how it is that you are saved? You are saved by works, BUT not that of your own works. You are saved by the merits of another! Speaking of Christ, Paul wrote this:

2Corinthians 5:21, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”

How do we apply this?

- Understand that mankind- including you- stand before God on a legal basis. If you uphold the law, you will be saved. If you violate it, you will perish.
- Understand that on account of Christ’s cross-work on your behalf, you now stand before God not guilty of violating God’s law. This is what Justification is all about!
- Understand that if you have been justified on account of Christ’s work, then to look to yourself in any way as the basis upon which to approach God in the present is to “rebuild again what has once been destroyed” (Galatians 2:18)!
- Understand that it is time that we stop relating to God on the basis of our merit or our deeds! Our salvation has nothing to do with what we have or continue to do. It has everything to do with Christ and what He has done!

Spurgeon commenting on Romans 8:33, “who shall bring a charge against God’s elect?” wrote:

Every sin of the elect was laid upon the great Champion of our salvation, and by the atonement carried away. There is no sin in God’s book against His people: He sees no sin in Jacob, neither iniquity in Israel; they are justified in Christ forever. When the guilt of sin was taken away, the punishment of sin was removed. For the Christian there is no stroke from God’s angry hand- no, not so much as a single frown of punitive justice. (Spurgeon, 1991, pp. July 27, evening)

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End Notes

¹ Gallup poll survey, 10-13 May 2007.

² Unless of course Christ Himself states in the passage that there is more than one application to the parable.

³ Calvin stated concerning this passage: "Some look upon it as a simple parable; but, as the name Lazarus occurs in it, I rather consider it to be the narrative of an actual fact. But that is of little consequence, provided that the reader comprehends the doctrine which it contains. (Calvin, 2010, p. 193)

⁴ In fact, you may recall that this is what Lydia traded in (Acts 16:14 & 40).

⁵ That the rich man had a "gate" indicates his living would have been palatial!

⁶ The crumbs were pieces of stale bread used by the dinner guests to clean their hands, and then tossed under the table for dogs to eat (cf. Matthew 15:26-27).

⁷ The Greek is βάλλω (*ballō*) which means to cast or to throw.

⁸ cf. Exodus 22:31; 1 Kings 14:11; 16:4; 21:23-24.

⁹ e.g., 1 Samuel 17:43; 24:14; Psalm 22:16; Proverbs 26:11; Philippians 3:2; 2 Peter 2:22; Revelation 22:15.

¹⁰ On account of Genesis 18, in Christ's day there was a long-standing tradition regarding Abraham as a model of hospitality to strangers.

¹¹ The language of being "buried" is absent from the account of Lazarus' death which means he most likely wasn't buried- which is significant! In Jewish tradition, to be refused burial, and so left to be the food of wild animals and birds, was tantamount to bearing the curse of God!! That the rich man was buried further adds to the shock as to where he ended up!

¹² Leon Morris wrote, "The bliss of the saved is pictured as a great feast in which the favoured one reclines with his head on the bosom of the great patriarch (in the manner of John 13:23; cf. Matthew 8:11)." (Morris, 2008, p. 270)

¹³ In the Judaism of Christ's day, it was believed that the privileged Jew upon his death would be carried by angels to Abraham's lap!

¹⁴ Once again as this is a parable we do not derive theology from the particulars of the story. In fact, Scripture is quite clear that when a believer dies, he is not carried to "Abraham's bosom." Rather, he immediately enters into the presence of Christ (2Corinthians 5:8) to fellowship with Him for eternity (Luke 23:43; cf. also John 17:3)!

¹⁵ ἐλεέω (*eleeō*)

¹⁶ ἐλεημοσύνη (*eleēmosunē*)

¹⁷ Leon Morris further wrote, "The adjective you is significant. He had had what he chose. He could have spent time with the things of God and delighted in the word of God. He could have engaged in almsgiving (Lazarus had been close enough!). For him good things had been purple and fine linen, daily merriment and feasting. He had chosen what he wanted and now he must abide by his choice." (Morris, 2008, pp. 270-271)