

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus



What Luke 16:19–31 Teaches About Wealth, Mercy, Scripture, and the Afterlife

Setting the Scene

Jesus tells of two men who live a few steps apart yet inhabit different worlds. One is unnamed, clothed in purple and fine linen, feasting every day. At his gate lies a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores, hungry for scraps that fall from the table. Only dogs attend him. Both men die. Angels carry Lazarus to Abraham's side. The rich man is buried and finds himself in Hades, in torment. Across a great chasm he sees Abraham and Lazarus. He asks first for a drop of water, then for Lazarus to be sent as a messenger to his five brothers. Abraham refuses both requests. The brothers already have Moses and the Prophets. If they will not hear them, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.

The scene is stark rather than subtle. Luxury and misery share a threshold. After death, the threshold becomes an unbridgeable gulf. The story does not linger on either man's inner life. It shows what each received, what each failed to do, and what cannot be undone.

Context

The parable appears at the end of Luke 16, after Jesus teaches on wealth, faithfulness, and the law. The Pharisees have just been described as lovers of money who sneer at Jesus (16:14). Jesus has already said that one cannot serve God and mammon (16:13), and that the law and the

prophets remain in force until all is fulfilled (16:16–17). The story that follows is not a detached meditation on the afterlife. It is a pointed reply to people who justify themselves before others while neglecting the poor at the door.

Luke's Gospel as a whole prepares for this scene. Mary's Magnificat announces that God has filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty (1:53). The Beatitudes and woes declare blessing on the poor and hunger now, and woe on those who are rich and full now (6:20–25). Jesus tells hearers to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to their feasts (14:13–14). The rich man of chapter 16 does the opposite: he feasts daily and leaves Lazarus outside.

The story also belongs to a world of patronage. In first-century Mediterranean society, a wealthy householder was expected to act as patron to those at his gate. The rich man fails that social and moral duty. The “great chasm” after death is the afterimage of a chasm he already maintained in life.

Two further contextual notes matter. First, Lazarus is the only named character in Jesus' parables. The name, from Eleazar, means “**God helps**.” The rich man is given no name. Second, Luke does not label the story a parable, and it uses traditional Jewish language for the realm of the dead—Hades and Abraham's bosom. Interpreters have long debated how far the details describe the intermediate state and how far they serve the story's moral and prophetic force. **Either way**, the narrative's pressure falls on this life: what one does with Scripture, wealth, and the neighbor one cannot avoid.

Observations

In life, the rich man is defined by clothing, daily luxury, and a gate. Lazarus is defined by placement (“at his gate”), sores, hunger, and the dogs. The rich man is buried; Lazarus is carried by angels. After death, the rich man still speaks as if Lazarus were available to serve him: dip a finger in water; go warn my brothers. He never addresses Lazarus. He still sees the poor man as an instrument. Abraham answers him as “child,” acknowledging kinship, but refuses the request. The good things and the bad things have already been received. A chasm has been fixed.

Abraham's second refusal is as important as the first. The brothers do not need a ghost. They have Moses and the Prophets—texts that already command justice for the poor, care for the stranger, and love of neighbor. The closing line looks beyond the story: even resurrection will not compel those who refuse the word they already possess. In Luke–Acts that line acquires a further resonance after Easter. Signs do not create faith where Scripture has been ignored.

The parable does not say that poverty itself saves or that wealth itself damns. Lazarus is not praised for virtue; he is simply poor, sick, and unnamed by the household that could have helped him. **The rich man is not condemned for riches as such, but for a life in which the poor man at the gate never became a neighbor.** The reversal after death echoes Luke's larger theme: God lifts the lowly and brings down the proud. Yet the story also refuses cheap consolation. It does not tell the poor only to wait for heaven. It tells those who have enough that the gate is still open—and that it will not stay open forever.

Questions

The parable leaves several questions that theology cannot close too quickly.

Does Lazarus rest with Abraham only because he suffered, or because God helps those whom the world discards? The name suggests the second; the plot emphasizes the first. The text gives Lazarus no speech and no recorded piety. Grace here looks like vindication of the crushed rather than reward for achievement.

Is the rich man's sin primarily omission—the failure to see—or a deeper hardening that treats another human being as furniture? His requests after death suggest the latter. He wants relief and a warning for his own family. He does not ask to repent toward Lazarus. The neighbor remains a means.

How should the afterlife imagery be read? Some take Hades and Abraham's side as a literal sketch of the intermediate state. Others treat them as parabolic furniture for a teaching about irreversible consequence. The story itself does not pause to theorize cosmology. It uses the language of finality: a chasm no one can cross.

What does it mean that even a resurrection would not convince those who will not hear Moses and the Prophets? The question presses both ancient hearers and later readers. Miracle is not a substitute for obedience already commanded. Scripture already said enough about the poor at the gate.

Finally, does the parable describe only two individuals, or a social order in which patrons refuse to be patrons and so create a gulf that later cannot be crossed? The gate in the story is both a household feature and an image of a society that organizes itself so that suffering remains just outside view.

Conclusion

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is not mainly a map of the next world. It is a judgment on this one. Two lives share a threshold. One man receives good things and gives nothing. The other receives evil things and is carried to comfort. After death the distance that was maintained in life is declared unbridgeable.

Abraham's word still stands: they have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them. The church that reads this story already claims a further word—the risen Christ. That does not soften the parable. It intensifies it. If Scripture and resurrection together do not teach us to see the person at the gate, we have not yet heard either.

The theological center is therefore double. God is the helper of Lazarus, the one who reverses the fortunes the world treats as final. And God is the one who will not forever honor a life that feasts while a neighbor starves in sight. The gate is the place of decision. **The chasm is what remains when the decision is refused.**

Abraham's final word is severe because it is hopeful in the only way that matters: the brothers still have the Scriptures. So do we. The Law and the Prophets, and the One who rose from the dead, already tell us what to do with the person at the gate. The time for crossing the threshold is now. After death, the chasm is fixed. Before death, it is still only a gate.

