

Parables Session 13

Introductory Comments

1. One refrain amongst scholars is that this parable is “not a story about the afterlife.” It’s not about final judgment, eternal damnation, or heavenly reward. The motifs of Lazarus resting comfortably in paradise and the rich man frying in hell are merely folklore or metaphor, they say. Some of us similarly resist taking the parable in literal fashion, because we are uncomfortable with the idea of a real heaven and a real hell, of harps and halos, devils and pitchforks.
2. Other scholars say that this is “not a story about economics.” Surely Jesus is not saying that wealth in and of itself is bad or that poverty is good. Jesus does not tell everyone to “sell all you have and give the money to the poor.” Moreover, according to 1 Timothy 6:10, it is the *love of money* that is “the root of all kinds of evil,” not money itself. Granted, Jesus says, “How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:24), but hard is not impossible, especially with God’s help. The parable cannot be about changing the economic system, they say. The idea is too earthly, to communistic.
3. Since we refuse to take the fates of the rich man and Lazarus literally, and since we resist reading the parable as about economics – that is, since we ignore what the parable does say – we are forced to interpret it in light of what it doesn’t say. Thus, we conclude that the rich man was condemned not simply because he ignored the man at his gate, but because he earned his wealth by exploiting the poor. Or we conclude that Lazarus was not only poor but pious.
4. For our purposes, we will consider this: what if the parable does say something about the afterlife, which is what the early church fathers thought and probably what the original hearers of the parable thought, too? What if we took seriously Jesus’ own concern for how people related to each other, or how they might live if they already had one foot in the kingdom of heaven? What if the parable does say something about economic status, a major concern of both the scriptures of Israel and Jesus of Nazareth? That’s how people in Jesus’ audience would have heard it; we do well to hear it as they would have.

Questions

Read Luke 16:19-31, “The Rich Man and Lazarus”

1. **What does the rich man’s introduction tell us about him?** As soon as the parable begins, “There was a rich man who...,” we know that the rich man is a poor role model. The scriptures of Israel, Jewish literature of the Second Temple period, rabbinic sources, and numerous quotes attributed to Jesus of Nazareth all agree that wealth is a snare, that the rich should but usually do not care for the poor, and that God has special concern for the disadvantaged. The rich man’s lack of a name shows his conventional character. He represents any rich man.

For Jesus’ original audience, the reference not simply to a “rich man,” but to one who lives a hedonistic life would convey a negative impression. While specific evil deeds are not mentioned, the rich man has sinned by omission – he has failed to extend his hand to the poor. Also, for that initial audience, the rich man is not “one of us.” He doesn’t merely have extraordinary wealth – he displays it ostentatiously. His “purple cloth” was among the most expensive of textiles, representing the height of fashion.

2. **How are we supposed to feel about Lazarus when he is introduced?** He has our sympathies. As one who “lays at the gate,” he is in desperate shape. He neither sits nor begs, so he is worse off

than a beggar. And thus he too is not “one of us.” Like the rich man at the other extreme, he is a figure so poor that we cannot identify with him. We are neither the rich man nor Lazarus. But we are supposed to feel for him. Scriptures of Israel repeatedly express God’s concern for the poor, widow, orphan, and stranger – it’s not about whether they deserved their fate. Nothing is really said about what Lazarus did or didn’t do in his life. We have no indication of whether he deserved what he got or not – he simply deserves our pity, and, like Job, he receives it.

3. **The parable hints at why the rich man ends up in torment, but why does Lazarus end up in Abraham’s bosom?** Most often when people reflect on Lazarus’ heavenly reward, the focus is on the evils of wealth more than the virtues of poverty. We could claim, “Lazarus is judged innocent and so finds lasting comfort, not so much because of his assumed faith as because of his poverty, which excluded him from the damning life of the rich man.” Or maybe we could say that poverty itself is unjust and therefore those who suffer from it must receive recompense. Ultimately, the parable never answers that question, and the parable functions quite well without explaining it.
4. **What does the rich man’s response in 16:24 tell us?** He continues to think of Lazarus as nothing more than a servant or a dog, who is to fetch something for the master. He fails to recognize the irony of his request. Lazarus would have been happy with a crumb; the rich man wants even less – a drop of water. He will receive exactly what he gave to Lazarus. But now the circumstances are different.
5. **What do we make of the rich man’s second request in 16:27-28?** The rich man still can’t divest himself of his status or change his ways: Lazarus is still the slave whose job it is to serve the master, still the laborer who will do whatever is necessary to survive. Although the NRSV sees the rich man as “begging” Abraham, that translation overstates his self-perception. A person who “begs” realizes his subordinate position. The rich man does not beg; he merely “asks.”
6. **How do you react to the judgment of this parable?** For many readers, the judgment of the parable is emotionally satisfying. The salvation of the sick, suffering, and destitute and the damnation of the obscenely wealthy would likely have appealed to Jesus’ audience, as it continues to have appeal today. Yet, once we judge the rich man as deserving of his fate – eternal torment – we condemn ourselves as barbaric. Once we envy Lazarus for his eternal reward and forget, or worse, romanticize his poverty, we again condemn ourselves. **To whom is it directed?** Given what transpires just prior to this parable, as well as the pattern that Luke uses, many scholars have interpreted this parable to be directed against the Jewish religious leadership. The historian Josephus goes so far as to specifically reference Caiaphas, the high priest at the time of Jesus who had five brothers and was well-versed in Moses and the Prophets. Others, however, view it as a more general polemic against hypocrisy, greed, and self-centeredness.
7. **What is this parable asking of us? Warning us?** The parable ends with a cautionary note. Heed the commands to aid the poor and the sick and hungry, or you will eventually suffer worse poverty, greater pains, deeper hunger. Do not just contribute to the food drive, but invite the hungry into your home. Do not just put money in the collection plate, but use your resources to provide jobs and support for those in need. Do not treat the sick as burdens, but as beloved family members who deserve love and care. Know the names of the destitute; each has a story to tell. Recognize, as Jesus puts it, that you cannot serve both God and mammon (Luke 16:13).

The parable suggests that the gift of eternal life in paradise is possible. “Heaven,” however understood, is ours, but it is also ours to lose. The point is not that we have to “earn” it. The point is that we uphold our part of the covenant by behaving as human beings should behave: we care for the poor; we are our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers. If we expend everything on ourselves, then there is nothing left in the heavenly treasury. Our choices have consequences.

****Thank you all for being a part of this virtual Bible study. Our next study begins in August, exact date and book TBA.*