

## **A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 16:19-31**

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The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is told in the frame of the two ages: this age and the age to come. "This age" is the age of the rich man feasting sumptuously every day and dressing in linen and fine clothes. At his gate is Lazarus, covered with sores who wants to eat just the crumbs that fall off the rich man's table. The dogs come and lick his sores. That's this age. "The age to come" is the reversal of this age. In the age to come, the rich man is in hell and Lazarus is comforted and consoled in the bosom of Abraham.

This is one of the parables that has been the source of the idea of heaven and hell as separate places. In that system, heaven and hell are not understood in relation to the old age and the new age, but rather as where people will go after they die. It's based on the geography of a three level universe where heaven is up above and hell is down below the earth. You go up to heaven or down to hell. However, in Jesus' parables, heaven and hell are metaphors for the two ages, not a geography lesson. The logic of the new age is the primary subject of his parable.

The dynamic of this parable is created by identification with the rich man. He is the one who is crying out from hell where he's being tormented. It's important to tell the story in that style rather than to simply read it in a normal voice. The rich man is really in agony. He was being tormented and he looked up and saw Abraham far off and he called out, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus to at least dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. I am in agony in these flames."

Communicate agony in telling this, as I'm sure Jesus did when he told this parable. You might try to remember times when you have been in great pain and how you talked. Or explore how you would talk if you were in the rich man's position. Somehow convey his reality, rather than simply reading it in a dispassionate manner.

Abraham's speech comes from the place of the angels. His words are consoling in a profoundly ironic way. To paraphrase: "Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus, in like manner, evil things. So now he is comforted here and you are in agony. It's only just. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed so that those who might want to pass from here to you can not do so and no one can cross from there to us. So Lazarus can't come and cool your tongue because of this great chasm. Sorry but there's nothing I can do about it." One can imagine the rich man thinking, "Thanks a lot, Abraham."

The parable is essentially a short conversation between the rich man and Abraham. The next part of the parable is: "'Father, I beg you to send him to my father's house. I have five brothers and he can warn them so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.'

He said, 'But if someone goes to them from the dead, then they'll repent.' He says, 'No, if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'"

Now, what is being said is not to be taken literally. This is a visual way of experiencing the reality of the future, of the reversal of values in the future Kingdom of God. This is the judgment that will be made about people. You cannot cross from one age to another. Once it's done, it's done. So whatever is done in this age will be the basis of what happens in the next age.

The warning is essentially a celebration of the Torah. This reflects that the parable was addressed to Jews (and perhaps Gentiles who identify themselves as Jews) who regard Moses and the prophets as authoritative. The rich man and Abraham do not refer to the Gospels. This story and the other stories in the Gospels were not authoritative or canonical in the first century. Rather, Jesus refers to the Torah, the sacred scripture of the people to whom Jesus spoke.

The resurrection is the someone speaking from the other side, from the new age. The implication is that Abraham has been resurrected, that he is there in heaven in the resurrection from the dead.

One of the questions that is often raised about this parable grows out of the fact that it's so clearly connected with the resurrection from the dead. The implication is that this is a parable that was written after Jesus' resurrection and that it was composed as a way of referring to Jesus as the one to whom they might listen if he was raised from the dead. The parable certainly carries that implication for Luke's listeners. Luke is probably telling this story (this parable only occurs in Luke's gospel) during the 80's, some fifty or so years after Jesus' ministry. Luke's listeners would certainly have heard this story in relation to Jesus' resurrection. The implication is that even after Jesus has been raised from the dead and his stories are being told, the possibility is that people will not believe them and will not repent. However, this reference by Jesus to the resurrection also gives his parable credibility when it is heard after his resurrection.

It is also fully possible that this would have made sense for Jesus' listeners. Resurrection was a widely held belief in Jesus' time, as is reflected in the responses of the Sadducees who did not believe in the resurrection while the Pharisees did. For an audience including Pharisees, or people influenced by Pharisees, Jesus' parable would make complete sense. His reference to someone not being convinced even if someone were raised from the dead would apply to many people who were skeptical about the resurrection in Jesus' day. Thus, it is not a necessary conclusion that this parable was composed after Jesus' life.

What this parable does as graphically as any parable in the whole corpus of Jesus' teaching is to make very specific and concrete the experience of the possible consequences of not using your money in the interests of the poor. Jesus' teaching is in continuity with one of the primary teachings of the Pharisees: give alms to the poor.

Supporting those who are poor was a widely held value in Judaism. It was seen as a way to insure that you will receive the blessings of the righteous.

The parable's invitation is to think back from the future of the rich man in hell with no way to get out and no way to communicate to his brothers in the present. Change your way of living now in light of the reversal that is coming when the power of money will collapse.

There have been some relatively minor experiences of this dynamic in recent times with the great recession of these past years when we all have experienced the way in which capital and the capital markets are extremely vulnerable and can simply collapse. There are people who have had to reassess their values in light of the loss of their money. This parable is about the realities of life, and the reality that in the kingdom of God how much money you've accumulated really doesn't count for anything. What matters is how you used the money that you had—whether or not you used it for the benefit of others, and especially for others who are poorer than yourself.

Jesus is very tough in regard to this issue and his teachings are consistent. This is a parable that deals with the same theme as his sayings about the rich man who came to him and wondered about eternal life. He said it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. Jesus is clear: the thing to do with money is to use it in the interest of others, especially the poor like Lazarus.