

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

16:19 “There was a rich man who dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 But at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus whose body was covered with sores, 21 who longed to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. In addition, the dogs came and licked his sores. 22 “Now the poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 And in Hades, as he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far off with Lazarus at his side. 24 So he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue because I am in anguish in this fire. ’25 But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things and Lazarus likewise bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in anguish. 26 Besides all this, a great chasm has been fixed between us, so that those who want to cross over from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us. ’27 So the rich man said, ‘Then I beg you, father—send Lazarus to my father’s house 28 (for I have five brothers) to warn them so that they don’t come into this place of torment. ’29 But Abraham said, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they must respond to them. ’30 Then the rich man said, ‘No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent. ’31 He replied to him, ‘If they do not respond to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Some argue this isn’t a parable at all but a historical account. Nothing in the text says it’s a parable, and it’s different from other parables in that Jesus names one of the characters—Lazarus. If it is a parable, it is the only parable in the entire Bible where that happens.

The nameless rich man has immense wealth that enables him to give splendid banquets each day. He also wears expensive clothes that highlight his social position and wealth. In a certain sense, the rich man represents anonymously all wealthy persons and societies. The Pharisees thought wealth was a sign of spirituality and blessing from God.

The poor man in the parable is a specific person for Jesus, who calls him very appropriately “Lazarus,” the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Eleazar,” which means “God has helped.” Lazarus represents every person who is needy or who suffers unjustly. The Pharisees also thought that poverty was a result of sinfulness and cursing from God. They were sure that poor people were not going to go to heaven.

As the parable begins, Lazarus is begging just outside the rich man’s gate. The rich man could have gone out and helped Lazarus any time that he felt like it. The rich man did not listen to the law and the prophets, which taught about how to love one’s neighbor. We know from the parable of the Good Samaritan that loving one’s neighbor involved helping one who was down and out like Lazarus was.

In this parable and in eternal life, there is a great chasm separating heaven and hell. Jesus uses space to emphasize that this gap is uncrossable and permanent. Those in hell will not receive mercy from those in heaven.

The rich man asks that Lazarus be sent to warn his brothers to change their ways. We ought not need an angel, ghost or some extraordinary sign. The Scriptures and the teachings of the Church should be sufficient. Their message is clear enough: daily prayer, daily Scripture, weekly Eucharist, frequent confession and repentance all lead to a change of heart wherein we begin to love the kingdom of God and its values more fully. We become more merciful, kind, generous and loving toward the poor and the needy. We also become patient, chaste, devout and self-controlled ourselves.

Jesus uses human experiences of life and human experiences of death to teach that one's life affects one's fate, and that one's fate is sealed at death. Social status and material possessions are no guarantee of one's standing with God. The only thing that matters is a right response to the Word of God.