

The Rich Man & Lazarus

Interpreting Scripture—Part 1

This lesson is designed for the purpose of how to correctly interpret scripture. What is written here will be proven by the bible, not extracted from men's commentaries. We will "let the bible interpret the bible."

It's not enough to deduce *facts* from the bible. The *intent* of scripture is to impart spiritual *truth* to the reader. Academic understanding must lead to spiritual discernment. Without the latter, the former is a waste of time. Proper spiritual discernment is based on a correct understanding of the facts. If the *facts* are misunderstood, the *truth* will be misapplied. The greater the distortion, the greater the error.

There are many lessons in the story of the Rich Man & Lazarus (RM&L). However, two simple objectives are presented:

1. What is Jesus telling us? The first rule when trying to understand the bible is to extract the truths presented, without adding to or taking away from the word of God. There is some "wiggle room" in some areas, such as culture and history.
2. What is He *not* telling us? Exegesis is "pulling out" truth from scripture, while eisegesis is "putting in" our beliefs and opinions. This is dangerous territory, and is where many have stumbled.

To read Jesus' story on the RM&L, [click here](#).

Parable or Actual Story?

Many think that the Rich Man and Lazarus were real people. Others insist that the context makes it a parable since it comes after several other parables regarding wealth and money. All parables are based on truth, so it matters not if these were actual people or not. The Rich Man's reference to "five brothers" is perhaps a clue that this person really existed; one cannot allegorize¹ the fact. Debating such issues has no spiritual value—they are "foolish arguments."

Learning God's word is to learn His will. That word is not made up of useless information designed to satisfy quarrelsome individuals. It bespeaks definitive truths designed to lead us along the path of righteousness. It is, in essence, Jesus Christ Himself (John 1:1; Heb 1:3)

¹ An allegory is a picture, symbol, or representation of a deeper truth. Jesus' depiction of Himself as a Vine, His Father the Vinedresser, and believers as branches, are metaphors. There is no way to spiritualize the Rich Man's five brothers as being symbolic of a deeper truth. This leaves us to conclude that they were most likely a real family. If so, the story is not a parable.

The Story's Purpose

First of all, this story is a study in *contrast*. Note:

The Rich Man	Lazarus
Wealthy	Poor
Lived in luxury	Lived in misery
Covered in fine clothes	Covered in sores
Ate fine food every day	Longed for just some crumbs
Received good things in life	Received bad things in life
Went straight into Hades	Was carried by angels to Paradise
In agony	In comfort

The only things these two men had in common were that (1) they both lived; (2) they both died. How they lived and their rewards after death were vastly opposite, however. One lived luxuriously and went into Hell; the other lived miserably and went into Paradise.

Which of the following do you think Jesus is trying to teach us?

- That being rich is a sin that will send one to hell
 - FALSE. Being rich is not a sin. However, wealth makes it very difficult to be saved. (Matt 19:24) God made Solomon one of the wealthiest men in history. It is the *love* of money and the *desire* for wealth that is a sin. (1 Tim 6:10)²
- That only poor people go to heaven
 - FALSE. Jesus came to preach the gospel to the poor. (Luke 4:18) The poor are mentioned numerous times in scripture as being of special concern to God. Compared to being rich, it is easier to receive salvation as a poor person. However, poverty doesn't exempt a person from having to receive Christ as Savior. Some of the meanest, nastiest people I've ever met were poverty-stricken.
- He's describing conditions in heaven and hell
 - TRUE & FALSE: Although *some* aspects of the afterlife are depicted, the story is not designed to encompass *all* of its parameters. Certain characters are portrayed for the sake of the audience. The Rich Man, for instance, was a Jew; Abraham is the Jewish nation's father. We're not to interpret Abraham as being in charge in heaven. For clarity, the Rich Man saw Lazarus and Abraham and no one else.

Jesus has three points. Two points are *specified*, the third is *implied*:

- Don't rely on earthly wealth—they are deceitful (specific)
- The word of God is the only thing that will lead one to salvation (specific)
- Once a person is dead, there is no more chance at salvation (implied)

² See the article, [Idolatry Today](#) for a full explanation.

The third point is implied in the text but can be *confirmed* by other passages. NEVER FORM A TEACHING FROM ONLY ONE VERSE.

The Rich Man

We take our observations on this person straight from Jesus' lips:

- He was rich
- He was finely clothed
- He lived in luxury every day

Jesus did *not* say

- He was a great sinner
- He became rich from illegal gain
- He was uncharitable, hard-hearted, or unfeeling

The listener is left with no exact details of the man's character, what sins he may have committed, etc. Jesus only alludes that *because the man was wealthy, he went to Hell*. He was rich, well-dressed, and lived in daily indulgence. He could have been an upright, even righteous citizen. Jesus does not refer to any evil (or good) in his life at all, only that he *seemed* apathetic and unconcerned about others. He 'seemed' uncaring because there is no hint of him and Lazarus having any relationship whatsoever. The closest tie between them was the "crumbs that fell from his table." Even then, Lazarus only "*longed* to be fed from the crumbs." It doesn't say that he ever ate them.

Jesus seems to take pains in avoiding all references to the man's *personal* character, even to the point of omitting the man's name. Most Pharisees were wealthy, so singling one of them out by name would have caused the rest to detach themselves from the story.

Lazarus

We notice three things about Lazarus, again taking only what the Savior said about him:

- He was poor
- He was covered with sores that the dogs licked
- He longed to be fed from whatever scraps happen to fall on the ground

We can speculate that a name is given to this man because the saved will be remembered throughout eternity in heaven. (Rev 2:17; 3:12) Based on Revelation, this may be a legitimate speculation. However, it also points to the actual existence of Lazarus.

Jesus paints a vivid contrast here to how the Rich Man lived. While one lived daily in the lap of luxury, Lazarus spent his days in abject misery.

Include the Historical

Commentators have agreed that the dogs' licking Lazarus' wounds were his only comfort. This underscores a common mistake today, namely, that of *interpreting the bible from a modern perspective instead of an historical one*. In our culture, dogs are pets. In the 1st Century, they were dangerous, ravenous scavengers. Historians of that time write that dogs ate feces, dead animals and garbage. These animals viciously fought over the smallest scraps. To have such creatures licking one's open and running sores could not have been a source of much comfort. Although we are not told the details of Lazarus' death, infection from disease or by opportunistic, starving animals is not unlikely.

The Rewards After Death

Only two sentences sum up the end of both men's lives: (1) Lazarus died and was carried by angels to Paradise; (2) The Rich Man died and was buried.

Again, 21st Century perspective assumes that Lazarus was given a proper burial. Scripture does not say so. History tells us that those like Lazarus were simply tossed into pits, where the animals and birds took care of the bodies. The fact that he was covered in sores (Lev 17) and laws prohibiting contact with a dead body (Lev 21:11; Num 19:11) probably expedited his trip to the local dump.

The verse also implies that Lazarus died first. Yet unlike Joseph from Arimethea, a rich man who underwrote Jesus' burial, the Rich Man is not said to have paid for Lazarus' grave. He did not feed him; why would he bury him? Again, these are subtle speculations, and have no real bearing on the point of the story.

Throughout history, funerals have always been big events in most cultures. During the Rich Man's funeral, there was no doubt much pomp and ceremony, flowery speeches made, and food and drink aplenty.

There is no indication that any time passed between each man's death and their respective destinations. Lazarus died and was carried off to heaven by angels. (Heb 1:13, 14) The Rich Man died. Jesus concedes that the latter was given a burial. The verse says, "In Hades, he lifted up his eyes—looked up—and the first thing he *experienced* was torment. The first thing he *saw* was Abraham.

Notice there is no mention of the Judgment Day here. Jesus' point in the story is not to teach us about events before, on, or after the Day of Judgment. His focus is on how misplaced priorities will send a person to Hell.

Notice also that the Rich Man doesn't beg Abraham to be freed from his situation, only that some relief be applied to it: *Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue.* There is an unspoken implication that the Rich Man is aware of the permanence of his condition.

Like we read earlier, there are three main points to the story. The first one deals with wealth.

Point #1: The Deceitfulness of Riches

In order to get the correct perspective, let's look at the RM&L in its context:

- The audience: Rich Jewish religious leaders
 - Long-term audience would be any reading the story—*you and me!*
- Verses 1-9: The Unrighteous Steward and managing worldly goods
- Verses 10-12: Being trusted with worldly wealth versus eternal wealth
- Verse 13: Serving God versus serving worldly wealth
- Verses 16, 17: How God's word will never be set aside

Most of the context deals with wealth, and is only broken by verses 14 and 15:

The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus. He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight." (Luke 16:14, 15)

What were the Pharisees sneering at? The parables He just told them concerning wealth. Worldly wealth was "highly valued" among men. (vs 15) Yet Jesus tells them that this kind of wealth is "detestable in God's sight." This parallels James: "Don't you realize that friendship with the world is enmity with God?" James was speaking in reference to worldly luxury and money.

For some reason, the whole context of this passage is broken by Luke's insertion of verse 18:

Anyone who divorces his wife and marries another woman commits adultery, and the man who marries a divorced woman commits adultery.

So between the parables concerning wealth and the story of the RM&L is this single, seemingly out-in-the-middle-of-left-field passage regarding divorce and adultery. Are they connected?

The intent of adding the divorce and adultery seems to be to criticize the Pharisees for not observing the law of Moses. They had great pretensions of being externally righteous, but Jesus tells them that they had really departed from the law, not abided in it.

Point #2: God's Word is the Only Thing that Will Lead One to Salvation

Having failed to get his first (and most urgent) request past Abraham, the Rich Man moves to his second biggest concern: *his brothers' salvation*. The request for water was for personal pity: “*Father Abraham, have pity on ME...*” Failing to get help for himself, he solicits Abraham to save his family. It is more strident: “*Father Abraham, I beg you...my BROTHERS...*”

Abraham's response to this request is, “They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.” In other words, “Your family has a bible—let them read it.” Abraham's answer is enlightening: *salvation from Hell is found in God's word*.

The Rich Man knows that his brothers are not keen on bible study, so his response is revealing:

- An understanding that they wouldn't read or believe the scriptures
- An understanding that they needed to repent

“If someone comes back from the dead, they'll repent.” The implication can apply even today: poring over the bible is too dull to rouse my family to change—they need a miracle to wake them up.

Abraham's reply: “If listening to God's Word won't get them to change, raising the dead won't convince them.” This fact was later proven true:

A large crowd of Jews found out that Jesus was there and came, not only because of him but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. So the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well, for on account of him many of the Jews were going over to Jesus and putting their faith in him. (John 12:9-11)

Point #3: There is No More Chance at Salvation after Death

The story of the RM&L *by itself* does not expressly teach this. There are several cults today who believe that the brass ring will come around once more at death.³ It was this doctrine that caused me to leave the Jehovah's Witnesses. They get the teaching from Peter's first letter: (1 Pet 3:19)

Peter was referring to the *spirit* of Christ preaching *through Noah*, namely, those who lived in Noah's time. Where were those spirits of whom Peter speaks? They were “now in prison.” In other words, they failed to heed Noah's preaching and ended up where the Rich Man was. Christ didn't “go into Hell” and preach salvation to the spirits. The Good News includes the hope of the resurrection. Christ could not preach any resurrection hope while He Himself had yet to be raised from the dead!

³ Universalism teaches that everyone, regardless of how heinous their sins, will eventually go to Heaven.

Like many other false teachings, this one has its origin in recent times. Universalism developed fairly recently and was not known in Christ's or the apostles' times. Like smoking cigarettes, the bible never addresses it. What it *does* teach is "it is appointed to each person to die once, and after that, the judgment." (Heb 9:27) In Revelation, it speaks of certain ones being thrown into the Lake of Fire, where they will be tormented "day and night, forever and ever." (Rev 14:11; 20:10)

Conclusion

Like most of Jesus' teachings, a child can understand *The Rich Man & Lazarus*. If we take it at face value and not read too much in between the lines, the message is clear:

- Don't trust in money to put you right with God
- Have pity on those in need and quit thinking of only yourself
- Don't wait until its too late to get yourself right with God
- Its God's word that leads you to Christ—nothing else, not even miracles

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