

Simon Campbell: 17 April pm

The rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

(Sermon Summary)

Context

This is one of many parables where an unclean sinner, rather than a religious Jew, obtains mercy. Jesus is telling this parable to the Pharisees after rebuking them. Like the rich man, they despised the poor and saw their riches as a sign of God's favour. Their hope of Heaven was based on their physical descent from Abraham and their outward religious observance. The parable emphasises that Jesus has come to save humble sinners, not the (self) righteous.

In Jewish culture a name gave you significance. The rich man is not given a name, but Lazarus' name means "the one God has helped". Lazarus was possibly a leper and unable to walk, he was in constant pain and need, and was treated like one of the scavenging dogs.

What happened after each man died

Both men died. The rich man had a proper burial, unlike Lazarus who had no family or friends.

Lazarus was then 'carried to Abraham's bosom': this was a figure of speech in the Talmud for entering Paradise. We are reminded of the Great Supper where the blind and the lame are brought in. The rich man, however, woke up in Hades (Sheol), the place where dead souls await judgement.

The rich man cried out to Abraham, not God. Like the Pharisees, he prided himself on his descent from Abraham, but did not know God. He expressed no remorse, only self-pity. He had had a whole lifetime to repent but had not done so. Abraham speaks kindly to him but is powerless to help.

The idea of an impassable gulf that separates the righteous from the unrighteous dead comes from a Rabbinical belief. The Pharisees would have been familiar with this, but would have been offended by the idea of an unclean beggar entering Paradise.

Jesus was not teaching that the poor go to heaven and the rich go to hell. Abraham was wealthy but was saved by faith. Instead, the rich man represents people like the Pharisees who were proud, self-righteous and lovers of money. Psalm 73 fits in well with this parable: it describes how the rich prosper in this life but will be judged and perish.

Prior to telling this parable, Jesus had warned the Pharisees that God would judge them for their self-righteousness. The Pharisees rejected Jesus, showing they were not true children of Abraham (John 8:37-45).

The unbelief of the rich man and his brothers

Now, the rich man wants Lazarus to be sent on an errand to his brothers. He seems still to view Lazarus as a lesser person who should do his bidding. The rich man realises that his brothers need to repent, but does not believe that God's word (Moses and the Prophets) is enough to convince them. The sad truth is that people want to go on sinning and refuse to repent, despite having a clear message.

The brothers will not repent even if someone rises from the dead. Christ would soon rise from the dead, but these Pharisees would still refuse to believe in Him. Even the soldiers who saw the stone rolled away by the angels refused to believe, but instead took money from the priests. You cannot serve both God and Mammon (Matthew 6:24). God's Word is now closed, and we will have no further signs.

Three truths from the parable

1. A true son of Abraham is one who believes in the God of Abraham.
2. Scripture is sufficient for our salvation. There will be no more opportunities for repentance after death. The time for repentance is now.
3. Christ has risen and sits at the right hand of God, so we may receive His perfect life and righteousness as a free gift.