

## The Parables of Jesus

### - The Rich Man and Lazarus

(Luke 16:19-31)

This parable is found only in the Gospel of Luke. Jesus was leaving Capernaum and was on a road that was leading to Jerusalem. It would be during this final trip to Jerusalem that He would be arrested, tried and crucified. This parable follows immediately after the parables of the "Lost Sheep," the "Lost Coin," the "Lost (Prodigal) Son" and the "Unjust Steward" in which Jesus chastised the Pharisees, scribes and religious leaders for their "unjust" ways of selfishness, greed and covetousness.

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The Parable of the "Rich man and Lazarus" - Luke 16:19-31 - *"There was a certain rich man, which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day: And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, And desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame. But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed: so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence. Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house: For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment. Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent. And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead."*

As we continue with our discussion, I would like to make us aware that there has been an ongoing "debate" concerning if this passage of scripture is indeed a parable or if Jesus is referring to an actual account with actual people. The use of a person's actual name, the beggar named Lazarus, gives rise to the thinking that this was an account involving real people. Jesus never used proper names in any of His parables. This would be the only one in which an actual name was used.

To be honest, there are good thoughts on both sides of the debate. However, whether it was an account of real life people or if it was an actual "parable" is not the main point of what Jesus was teaching. I will leave that "debate" to those who are more qualified. We will review the story that Jesus told, whether factual or parable, in the context of what Jesus was teaching His disciples and the religious leaders who were listening.

In the story we see a rich man who had everything in life that he needed for his comfort and well being. He actually had more than he needed. It is no coincidence that Jesus used an example of a person that was "rich." We must remember that in the religious leaders' way of thinking at that time, anyone who was rich and wealthy (which, by the way, included the religious leaders) would be considered blessed by God and thereby approved by God and have their spot "reserved" in Abraham's bosom. Anyone who was poor and in dire straits, such as Lazarus, would be thought of as being cursed by God and sinful, therefore that person (Lazarus) would have no place in Abraham's bosom.

We see a beggar named Lazarus, who was "*laid at the gate.*" This would be by one of the gates leading to the Temple mount. This was the customary place for beggars to receive "alms for the poor." He was a man of ill health for most of his life. We are told by Jesus that Lazarus was looking for "crumbs," the discarded food from the table of the rich man. However, the rich man was such an "elitist" that he would not even do that. To bring home the point concerning how wicked this rich man was, Jesus tells us that "*...moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.*" We may think that Jesus was relaying to us how bad the state of Lazarus was. However, He was making a point of how truly evil, self-centered and selfish this rich man was.

This is what I mean. In that time there was a common thought among the people that there was medicinal value in the saliva of dogs and other animals, as well as humans. The common practice would be to apply the saliva upon the open sore of the individual as a healing salve, thinking that it would bring comfort and aide in the healing process of the wound. Regardless of we may think or know today, this was a common practice by the physicians in many cultures at that time. The point that Jesus was actually making was that even the dogs had more compassion upon Lazarus, by licking his wounds, than the rich man had.

Jesus tells us that both men died at the same time. Lazarus went to a place called "Abraham's bosom" and the rich man went to "hell" (Greek - Hades; Hebrew - Sheol)

- **Abraham's Bosom** - To understand this term, "Abraham's bosom," as used by Jesus, we must approach it from a Jewish perspective, not a Christian perspective. Jesus used this term as He was speaking to Jewish people so he would be using it in a way that they would grasp and understand.

Around the second century BC, certain "idioms" began to be used by the Jewish people. One of those "idioms" was that of "Abraham's Bosom." The term, "Abraham's Bosom" is not found in Torah. By the first century AD, the Jews had adopted the Roman custom of dining while reclining on "couches" or pillows. Guests at a feast would lean themselves on one elbow and at the same time they would lay and rest the back of their head against the chest of the guest behind them. The guest who would dine and rest their head against the host's chest or "bosom" would be sitting in what would be considered a place of honor. The Jews called this dining position "resting in the Bosom of Abraham."

The phrase reminded them of their Jewish belief that someday at the resurrection, as their final reward, all the Jewish people would feast in that place of honor with their father Abraham. This came from the Jewish belief that all Jews will experience eternal paradise in the resurrection, simply because they are of the "seed of Abraham."

It was the Jewish belief that Abraham had gone directly to heaven at the moment of his death and sat down on the right hand of God. In order for any soul to go into heaven, that soul must seek the approval of Abraham. Only upon Abraham's recommendation could one enter. Therefore, when the Jew died, believing that they would experience paradise simply because they were of the "seed of Abraham," they expected to be greeted by Abraham. There, Abraham would then welcome and embrace them by holding them near to his chest/bosom.

Ultimately, the term "Abraham's Bosom," in the Jewish Talmud, became synonymous with "heaven," or "paradise," the place of final reward, the place of the eternal feast. We must take note that this belief was not held by the Sadducees. They did not believe in an afterlife or resurrection. They believed that life ended at the time of physical death.

Later, after Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection, we get a clearer understanding of what "Abraham's bosom" actually was. Abraham's bosom was a place set aside in Hell (Hades) where all those who held to God's commandments because of their belief in, and looking forward to, the "promise" of the coming of Messiah. It was not heaven but yet those that were there were not in torment.

When Jesus, finished His work of defeating and triumphing over satan and his forces of darkness (Colossians 2:15) He then set these faithful "captives" who were waiting for the "Promise of Messiah" in "Abraham's bosom," free (1Peter 3:18,19; Ephesians 4:8-10; Hebrews 11:39).

- **Hell/ Hades/Sheol** - In his account, Luke uses the Greek term, "Hades," which is translated from the Hebrew word, "Sheol" which is then translated into the English to mean "Hell." To understand this term, "Hell/Hades/Sheol," as used by Jesus in this story, we must approach it from a Jewish perspective, not a Christian perspective. Jesus used this term (Sheol) as He was speaking to Jewish people so he would be using it in a way that they would grasp and understand at that time. Luke translated the word "Sheol" into the Greek word "Hades" for his Gentile, Hellenistic readers.

There is a difference between Sheol (Heb)/Hades (Gr) and Gehenna (Gr) in Jewish thought. In Christian thinking we have many times tried to understand or define these terms with Christian concepts based after the fact of Jesus crucifixion and resurrection. We have tried to "squeeze" the meanings to "fit into" Christian thought. We have done this with many things. However, the opposite needs to be done.

We need to take the Jewish understanding of what these terms mean and allow the Holy Spirit to reveal to us how Christianity now confirms and reveals the deeper truth and understanding of these terms and why we believe what we believe. Let's discuss Sheol/ Hades

Very important - the Greek word, "Hades" and the Hebrew word, "Sheol" are different translations of the same "place" which in English is translated to "Hell." In Jewish thought, Sheol, which refers to the grave or the bowels of the earth, is portrayed as the "place of the dead." It is sometimes used as a metaphor for "oblivion." It is described as a region "dark and deep," "the Pit" (Psalm 88:4), an abyss, and "the Land of Forgetfulness" (Psalm 88:12), where the wicked descend after death. It is also referred to as "the grave" (Psalm 88:11; Psalm 49:15).

The King James Version uses the word "Hell" in the Old Testament rather than Sheol. Most other Bible translations use the term "Sheol." It occurs 65 times in the Old Testament. It refers to both the grave and the home of the wicked. (Deuteronomy 32:22; Psalm 9:11; Proverbs 5:5)

Revelation 9:11 refers to the Jewish thought of Sheol and the names of those who "ruled" over it - *"And they had a king over them, which is the angel of the bottomless pit (Sheol), whose name in the Hebrew tongue is Abaddon, but in the Greek tongue hath his name Apollyon."* Therefore, to the Jewish mindset, Sheol/Hades was the place of oblivion and eternal damnation. This was the destination designated for all the Gentiles (for they all were considered "unrighteous") as well as any Jew found to be unrighteous.

According to the rabbis not all sins merited eternal damnation. Those "sins" that a Jew would be found "unrighteous" in committing and "worthy" of Sheol would include: heresy; publicly shaming someone else; committing adultery and rejecting the words of Torah. It is interesting to note that the Pharisees charged Jesus with at least three of the four mentioned above which they thought gave them the right to condemn Him to not just physical death, but "eternal damnation."

We must remember that these four sins, in the scriptures, are never placed into a category of sin that would merit eternal damnation in Sheol/Hades in and of themselves. As we know all sin brings separation from God. These "four sins" that led to eternal damnation were from rabbinical teachings and thought, not the Torah or Tenach but became a part of the Jewish "tradition." What is most important to the story that Jesus is telling, is that leaving Sheol was impossible. (2Samuel 12:23; Job 12:9) To the Jewish mindset this is what makes Sheol "different" from Gehenna.

- A brief discussion concerning Gehenna which **is not** mentioned in this story by Jesus - **Gehenna** (Greek)/ **Gehinnom** (Hebrew) - In rabbinical Judaism, Gehenna/Gehinnom is an afterlife place where unrighteous souls are punished. Although the term "Gehinnom" is not mentioned in Torah as a "destination" in the afterlife, the concept comes from verses found in the Book of Maccabees. (2 Maccabees 12:41-46) Catholicism uses these verses in reference to "purgatory." Over time, this concept as well as the term "Gehenna" has become a term used in "Jewish tradition" as it is only found in rabbinical texts and not the Torah concerning the afterlife.

The name is taken from a valley (Gei Hinnom) just south and on the outskirts of Jerusalem, once used for child sacrifice by the pagan nations of Canaan (2 Kings 23:10). During the time of Jesus, this valley was used literally as the garbage dump of Jerusalem where continuous fires burned as the garbage would be incinerated.

According to Jewish tradition found in rabbinical texts, Gehenna is located beneath the earth, often described as a place of fire and brimstone and also exists in the depths of darkness. In rabbinical texts Gehenna has an important role as a place where "unrighteous Jewish souls" who did not commit the offenses worthy of Sheol, would be punished for a time in Gehenna. The rabbis taught that anyone who did not live in accordance with the ways of God and Torah, in other words anyone who sinned and did not repent of them before death, would spend "some time" in Gehenna.

In order to avoid Gehenna, the rabbis recommended that you do "good deeds" (mitzvahs) within your lifetime. Therefore, the concept of Gehenna was used to encourage people to live good, ethical lives and to study Torah.

For the most part the rabbis did not believe that those souls who went to Gehenna would be condemned to eternal punishment. "The punishment of the wicked in Gehenna is twelve months," states one of the rabbinical texts (Shabbat 33b), while other texts say the time frame could be anywhere from three to twelve months. They taught that the family members of the souls in Gehenna could perform "mitzvahs" (good deeds) on behalf of the deceased that would expedite the deceased's exit from Gehenna and entrance into Abraham's bosom.

Remember, this is from Jewish "tradition," not Torah. We must take note here - Gehenna/Gehinnom has no Biblical foundation for it is not found in Torah or any of the Hebrew Scriptures. It is only found in rabbinical texts, writings and thought in which Jesus referred to as the "traditions of men."

The important thing to note about Gehenna was that, in Jewish thought it was a place of "temporary" punishment meant to "purge" one from their sin's and prepare them for paradise. Where as in Sheol, there was no way out. In modern terms we would refer to Gehenna as a type of what Catholicism calls "purgatory."

Returning to the story that Jesus was telling, we see that the beggar, Lazarus, was taken by the angels to "Abraham's bosom" and the rich man went to "hell" (Greek - Hades; Hebrew - Sheol). In Abraham's Bosom, Lazarus, even though he had nothing in life and suffered through pain and illness was now found welcomed by father Abraham into what the Jews referred to as "Paradise," forever.

The rich man who lived in luxury throughout his life on earth was now in hell - Sheol/Hades experiencing torment that would never end and with no way out. Remember, Jesus used the word "Sheol/Hades" not "Gehenna." This meant and would be understood by every Jew listening, that there would be absolutely no hope of this man escaping or being released from this torment. It would be **forever**.

The rich man knew this. That is why he begged Abraham to send Lazarus to his family. Abraham answered that it would be useless to do that even if it were possible. The rich man's family had the Law and the Prophets just as much as this rich man did. They all had the same opportunity to learn how and choose to live a lifestyle with the correct attitude of heart that God's Word points His people to live.

However, just as the rich man's heart was hardened through selfishness, greed and covetousness, unfortunately, so would be the hearts of his relatives. Their hearts were also filled with selfishness, greed and covetousness. They would be considered, "*children of the world*" as Jesus taught in one of the parables preceding this story He was telling. This was the lifestyle and attitude of heart they chose to live. Because of that attitude of heart, the result would be the same for them as the "*children of the world*" - Sheol/Hades - Hell.

What was Jesus teaching His disciples, the Pharisees, scribes and everyone else who was listening, as well as us today, through this Parable/Account? We see that the parable just prior to this story concerned an "unjust servant" who made friends with the "*children of this world*" so that he would be taken care of in his time of need came. We know that making friends with the "*children of the world*" would lead to one living in the children of the world's "*everlasting habitations*." These "*everlasting habitations*" of the unrighteous is representative of an eternity in Hell/Sheol/ Hades.

We also see that the scripture immediately prior to Jesus giving this story about Lazarus and the rich man expressly said, "*Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from her husband committeth adultery.*" - Luke 16:18 Why do Jesus make such a statement? It seems so out of context with what He was speaking about. Why, as it seems out of nowhere, does Jesus bring up adultery? Why is this important? Remember, as previously discussed, one of the "four sins" that the religious leader's thought merited an individual's eternal damnation to Sheol was "adultery."

Could it be that Jesus was referring to an **actual** "rich man" who everyone knew had committed adultery and did not repent of it before his death? If so, then according to their own Jewish traditions this "rich man" would be in "Sheol," the place of eternal damnation according to the Jewish leaders' own "tradition" of adultery being a sin that merited eternal damnation.

Could it be that the Pharisees and leaders of that city knew of, allowed, and then justified, the rich man's adulterous behavior? Was it because of their unspoken "permission" that led this "rich man" to stay in his adultery? By not encouraging this rich man to repent it would really be placing the blame for the rich man's situation in Sheol, not only on him, but on the Pharisees and leaders in whom God had entrusted to be the stewards over His people to prevent this from happening.

This story by Jesus, whether an account of actual people or a parable, was given to teach the disciples, as future leaders, of the great responsibility they will have in leading and shepherding those that they would be entrusted with by Him. People's eternal destinies were at stake. He was teaching them to speak only God's truth and not get caught up in the way of the "children of the world." The "blood would be on their hands" just as much as it was on the hands of the religious leaders of that day because of the incorrect attitude of their hearts which were filled with selfishness, greed, covetousness, self-righteousness and wickedness.

Jesus, through the use of this story, was addressing and exhorting the Pharisees as the leaders who were entrusted by God to watch over the Jewish people. They were to exhort the people to repent from their wicked ways. Secondly, Jesus was letting them know that they were responsible for others ending up in the same situation as this rich man. The "blood was upon their hands" for allowing people to be lost in Sheol for eternity.

Jesus is using this story and these parables to speak to Christian leaders for these past two thousand years, as well as those entrusted in leadership roles today. He is exhorting them to take this responsibility very seriously and repent if necessary from leading people into compromise and other paths that may lead to their eternal destruction. The letter of Jude picks up on this thought as he writes, *"For there are certain men crept in unawares, who were before of old ordained to this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying the only Lord God, and our Lord Jesus Christ."*

An interesting side note. Let's look at verse 31 as Abraham responds to the rich man's request to send Lazarus to his family - *"And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, **though one rose from the dead.**"* Didn't Jesus rise from the dead... but they still did not believe that He did nor did they believe the testimony of His disciples. This was ultimately because they really did not believe *"Moses and the prophets"* – the Word of God - concerning Messiah in the first place. Isn't this true even today? People still will not believe even though *"one rose from the dead."* Hmmmm.....