

## **Food for Thought: Lessons from Lazarus and the Rich Man**

Let's take a look at the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. A good place to start is to note that the parable is...well...a story. Sometimes we may get the vague idea that Jesus mostly gave theological lectures, but he didn't. He made frequent use of story; he also used poetic language and great eloquence (the Sermon on the Mount is full of this eloquence). So, the first thing we should perhaps note is that storytelling is a beautiful and powerful thing.

Like the Sermon on the Mount, the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man demonstrates that the Kingdom of God is very different from the way of the this world. In the beatitudes, Jesus lists those who are meek, those who mourn, the peacemakers, the pure in heart, and those who suffer as among the groups of people who are, or will, be most blessed in the Kingdom of God. These are not usually the people whom the world honors. Few college graduation speeches exhort the students to go out into the world and be meek or longsuffering. What is valuable in God's eyes is not what the world tends to value. Along those same lines, of the two main characters in this parable, Lazarus is the honored one. This point is made clear not only by what happens to the two main characters in the afterlife, but also in a very interesting thing—the fact that only one of them is given a name, and that one is Lazarus. He gets to have a name; the rich man doesn't. Normally, during this time period, if only one character were to be given a name, it would be the rich man. The most important and honored character is the one who would get that distinction—a king, a famous hero, or at least the top man in the town. But in this parable, it is the other way around. It is the poor, destitute, ill man who gets to have a name and is honored in that way.

It is likewise important to notice how the people in the story respond to Lazarus. We are told that Lazarus longs for any crumbs that might fall off the rich man's dinner table, but we are not told that anyone ever even brings him some of those crumbs, much less something more substantial. The rich man doesn't, nor do his servants, as far as we can tell. And since Lazarus has been laid at the rich man's gate, the rich man would've had to step by Lazarus every day, usually multiple times a day, whenever he left his house or returned to it. Many of the servants would have passed him numerous times a day as well. It is also interesting that, as the second half of the story makes clear, the rich man knew Lazarus's name (he asks for him by name in the afterlife); thus he must've also known of his need (or even his whole story), yet he doesn't do anything for him. I suppose it is good that he at least let Lazarus lie there (perhaps he thought that was magnanimous enough), but he completely and repeatedly ignores Lazarus's need.

It is also interesting to note that there is another person (or persons) whose action predates the beginning of the story. Lazarus had at some point before the action of the story begins—been laid down at the rich man's gate. Someone, therefore laid him there. It is interesting to wonder why that person didn't instead take Lazarus home and feed Lazarus at least a little of his own food. It is possible this was the best that the person could do, but it is also possible that this person hoped that by depositing Lazarus there, he was absolved of feeling that he needed to do anything further to help Lazarus.

Then there are the dogs. Not many parables mention animals, but this one does, and they are in a way key players. Jesus must've had a reason for including the detail that the dogs lick Lazarus's wounds. Some Biblical scholars see the dogs in a negative way—as pariah dogs from whom Lazarus is too weak to defend himself, further showing how great his misery is. Others point out that to some degree their licking could've helped Lazarus, as recent science has shown that dog saliva contains a chemical compound which can be effective against certain kinds of infections and that the dogs were likely helping Lazarus. Others experts say the licking wouldn't have helped, and they point out that dog saliva also includes several very bad microbes and that even when dogs lick their own wounds, they are doing themselves more harm than good. Whatever the ultimate truth is about whether the licking helps, it is very probable that the dogs meant well. Dogs lick themselves when they are wounded or in pain, they lick their puppies, and they lick the humans they love. So they probably at least meant well. At any rate, they appear to give Lazarus more attention than any of the human characters do. That is saying something.

After the two main characters die, they are again contrasted, the one suffering and the other being comforted and refreshed. That is no doubt one of the most important parts of the story. In addition to that, however, it is in this second half of the story that we see additional important lessons. The rich man, now that he has experienced some suffering, begins to develop some unselfishness. When he finds out that Lazarus is unable to help him, he asks that Lazarus be sent back to the land of the living to warn his brothers and help them avoid his fate. This is significant. It is only after suffering that the Rich Man begins to think about and care about someone besides himself. The suffering in this sense has been good for him. This is something we see in our own lives as well. We are often complacent about the problems of other people (and sometimes condemn the people for having these problems) unless or until we go through similar problems ourselves. Once we've experienced similar misery, we understand and have much more compassion.

The parable closes with a glimpse as to the motivation behind Jesus's choice of name. Why did he call the poor man "Lazarus" instead of "Philip" or "Joshua"

or "Eli"? Abraham explains to the rich man that, sadly, even if Lazarus were to be brought back from the dead and were to go to the rich man's brothers and speak to them, the brothers would not listen to him. Later in Jesus's ministry he will bring back to life a man with the same name, Lazarus (of Bethany). Some of the people who saw the miracle or were told of it still didn't decide to change the direction of their lives and now believe on Jesus and follow him. They didn't deny the miracle, which is wild; but they still denied Jesus. Ironically, they didn't say "An amazing miracle! Maybe we should believe on Jesus after all!" Instead, they said, "An amazing miracle—let's kill Jesus!" They even thought it would be a good idea to kill Lazarus also while they were at it. Soon afterward, they responded in the very same way when Jesus himself rose from the dead (with evidence—the Roman guards told the religious leaders about what had happened at the tomb, after all). Instead of believing, they paid hush money and told lies. The name given the poor yet ultimately blessed man in this parable foreshadows the resurrection of Lazarus of Bethany and of Jesus Himself. It also reminds us of the fact that a hard heart can be unmoved even by a clear and total miracle, one important reason why we need to not develop hard hearts.

There were a number of people present for that miracle (the raising of Lazarus) who, thankfully, did believe on Jesus. That is probably because their hearts were already open to good things in general and open to Him in particular once they encountered Him.

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