

Richie & Lazarus

Luke 16:19-31

A beggar saw a sign over the door of an upscale London pub that read *Eddie & the Dragon*. He knocked on the back door and asked the woman who appeared to be in charge, "I've not eaten in days. Could you spare some food?"

"Get out of here," yelled the woman. "We don't feed beggars" The man left, but returned a few minutes later. "What now?" the irritated woman asked.

"The beggar, looking up at the sign over the door, *Eddie and the Dragon*, said, "I wonder if I might have a word with Eddie this time?"

Our modern attempts to address the needs of the poor often leave people polarized. The truly needy become targets of bitterness right alongside those who simply will not help themselves. Still, we must battle cynicism, always keeping our hearts open and compassionate toward the less fortunate.

Jesus named the beggar in His story Lazarus. Tradition gave the rich man a name, *Dives*, which is Latin for "rich." Were Hollywood to tell the story in a modern setting, they might dub him "Richie."

Do you remember that cartoon character touted as the richest kid in the world? All his creators could think to call him was *Richie Rich*. He was depicted as charming, likable and harmless. Of course, realistically, he was surrounded by trappings so extravagant that they were just silly. Jesus listeners could not relate to Richie's robotic maid or jet-powered toys. However, the extravagance enjoyed by Jesus' rich man was every bit as much silly overkill according to the standards of his day.

Jesus told this parable with one eye firmly fixed on the Pharisees, who boasted of their righteousness and made great displays of their religion. Typically wealthy, they equated their worldly riches with God's expression of favor upon their righteous lives. But, the parable teaches that on judgment day, God will give no weight to our possessions, but He will give great weight to the virtues proven in our lives.

I. Richie & Lazarus in Life

A. How Rich Was this Rich Man? Richie Was So Rich ...

This week a New York City restaurant unveiled a \$25,000 chocolate sundae created with a blend of 28 exotic cocoas. It is also made with some kind of edible gold and is served with a goblet adorned with a diamond and gold bracelet. Richie was the kind of fellow who might say, "I'll take two."

Jesus described "a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day." This describes not simple comfort, but obscene extravagance. "Purple" was a richly-dyed garment affordable only to the very wealthy. Fine linen was also very upscale. In a culture where the average laborer made about twenty cents per day, purple garments cost about fifty dollars each.

Richie was also depicted as a glutton. He "lived in luxury" which means that he "fared sumptuously". What is actually pictured here are heavy, gourmet-style, exotic and expensive foods - day in and day out. Jesus did not say as much, but since a parable is intended to tease the imagination, my imagination tells me that Richie was in all likelihood, rather soft and quite large.

This rich man enjoyed his excesses "every day". This would not be a minor detail to Jesus' original listeners. The staple of life for most people in that day was bread. They deemed themselves fortunate if they ate meat once per week. This man "fared sumptuously" every day. What is more, the fourth commandment of Moses, which we overly-condense down to "Remember the Sabbath", actually established an ethic for work as well as rest. One day of rest presupposed six days of work.

"... Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God." – Exodus 20:9

Many today fantasize that such a lifestyle as this rich man enjoyed might be something to crave, but to the Hebrews, this kind of an out-of-balance life was an aberration in the eyes of God and of man.

B. How Pathetic Was this Beggar? Lazarus Was So Pathetic ...

Jesus' description of Lazarus' misery was every bit as deliberate as His portrait of the rich man's excesses. Every detail portrays Lazarus as a pitiful fellow. He "was laid" every day at the rich man's gate. Apparently, he could not walk. Whether "laid" means "gently placed" by some compassionate persons or "thrown down" by authorities who wanted him off the streets is not clear.

Lazarus was covered with "sores," a common and painful malady of the day. To fortify the pathos of the scene, Jesus depicted Lazarus as either lacking the physical strength to ward off the dogs that licked his sores, or as welcoming them because of the relief it gave him. Either way, don't picture the family poodle when you think of a dog in Jerusalem. These dogs were vile street scavengers. The only thing that separated them from circling buzzards was a few hundred feet of altitude. In terms of laws governing cleanness and uncleanness, Moses ranked dogs right alongside pigs.

Even Lazarus' aspirations were pathetic. He craved anything that might fall from the rich man's table. Perhaps, this meant crumbs or table scraps, but William Barclay writes that the rich in those days wiped their hands with chunks of bread which they discarded. Regardless, Lazarus' plight is not pretty, and Jesus does not waste a single word as He paints a graphic picture of the economic polarization between the beggar and the rich man. Of course, regardless of economic and social differences among people, there is one who levels the playing field. Death calls upon both of these men, and the scene changes.

II. Richie & Lazarus in the Afterlife

A. Jesus Uses the Popular Imagery of His Day to Depict Heaven and Hell

We cannot build a theology of Heaven and Hell from any of Jesus' parables. That was never His point. Christ spoke the people's language so as to communicate kingdom truths. He used familiar pictures to make simple points. When we study a parable, we wrestle with cultural gaps that span centuries. All that barred the communication of truth to those who heard Jesus speak was spiritual indifference, which is why He often said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Luke 8:8).

"Hell" in verse 23 is the Greek *hades* which represents the Hebrew idea of *Sheol*. The Old Testament does not define afterlife in any detail. *Sheol* was simply an abode for the dead who did not secure the reward of the righteous. The rabbis began to speak of the righteous as reclining at Abraham's side and of *Sheol* as a place of torment. Jesus used these common rabbinic images.

According to rabbinic lore, part of the reward of the righteous was watching the unrighteous suffer. The Pharisees would have especially enjoyed the words of one rabbi who said of sinners: "... they shall be a spectacle for the righteous and the elect, they shall rejoice over them ..." That's not God's heart as it He has revealed it to us. Watching sinners sizzle would not be fun. Jesus depicts Abraham addressing the suffering rich man tenderly as "Son", demonstrating that God finds no joy in the peril of the wicked. Still, such sadism was a part of the pharisaic notion of a good time in heaven.

B. Three Sure Truths about the Afterlife Do Remain Intact

First, the idea of conscious identity in the afterlife is consistent throughout the Bible. The ancient stoics believed that at death, a man's immortal soul was absorbed back into whatever was ultimately God, but that individual consciousness ceased. Most eastern religions believe this as well. The problem is that the thought of dying only to get absorbed backed into the cosmos doesn't render many people too "misty-eyed" as they yearn for what lies ahead. There is certainly no practical value now to such a notion of the afterlife. The result of believing we will cease to exist is either fear in dying, selfish pleasure-seeking in living or an utterly dispirited state of hopelessness in facing both life and death.

Secondly, the notion that this present life serves to shape the life in eternity is also consistent throughout the Bible. Paul taught that all of us will appear before Christ the judge "... that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (II Corinthians 5:10). Elsewhere, we are taught to invest toward heaven by laying up a treasure in heaven "that will not be exhausted" (Luke 12:33). Jesus identifies this specifically with caring for the poor.

Finally, the finality of judgment alluded to in verse 26 is also reliable: "a great chasm has been fixed" or, is permanently set in place. Once death arrives, every man's destiny becomes unalterable. But, how did the lives of these two men bring them to their respective destinations? Did poverty secure Lazarus a place at Abraham's side? Did Richie's wealth doom him to eternal torment? Is it more righteous to be poor than rich? The answer is "No" on all counts. Let's try to picture ...

III. Richie & Lazarus before the Judge

A. Might Poor Lazarus Also Represent the Poor in Spirit?

The gospels of Matthew and Luke treat poverty differently. In Matthew's account of the beatitudes, Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). The idea is that humility and spiritual brokenness presuppose any relationship with God. However, Luke records Jesus in another sermon saying simply, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of heaven" and He juxtaposes that blessing against a specific warning that says, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have already received your comfort" (Luke 6:20, 24).

Is Jesus suggesting in Luke that poverty alone is adequate to secure heaven, contrary to what He says in Matthew? There is no conflict between Matthew and Luke. The two story-tellers had different literary emphases. Matthew emphasized the spiritual realities of coming to God as opposed to the works and rituals that the Pharisees taught were essential. In Matthew, Jesus taught that righteousness must be a matter of a repentant spirit and not of mere outward conformity to rules, rituals and regulations.

Luke is operating from a different framework. Those who responded to Jesus were typically the poor, who wielded little baggage to blind them to the greatest need of their souls. That was the pattern, but Luke records a number of exceptions. Levi, an unnamed Roman Centurion, Zacchaeus, Jairus – each of these men of wealth is also depicted as men of faith. In Luke, Jesus presented Himself as the One spoken of by the prophets Who would come "to preach good news to the poor" (Luke 4:18). The mistreatment of the poor by rich oppressors was a major theme of prophetic preaching.

The poor, generally, but not absolutely, responded to Jesus. And, as their champion, Jesus rebuked the rich, who were generally, but not absolutely, oppressors of the poor. Because some rich people viewed their wealth as the evidence that God's favor already rested upon them and because other rich people put their trust in what they had, the rich, generally, but not absolutely, dismissed Jesus.

Our greatest insight into Lazarus is his name, a Greek form of the Hebrew *Eleazer* which means "God is my help." Lazarus simply represents any that have no one on whom they can depend save a merciful God. Lazarus did not go to Abraham's side because of poverty *per se* any more than Richie went to *Hades* over the mere fact that he possessed wealth. We are all helpless to save ourselves, but only when we recognize and confess that helplessness do we take the first step toward God.

B. Might Rich Richie Also Represent the Arrogant in Spirit?

I have casually been calling this fellow "Richie", following the lead of the early tradition that dubbed him *Dives*. These names reflect the nonsensical degree of the excessive luxury he enjoyed. But, having made that point, there is probably a reason why Jesus gave this extravagantly rich man no name even while giving the beggar a very meaningful name. In this world, a rich man like this would have been very conspicuous. Everyone would have known his name. A beggar would hardly have been noticed. It is doubtful that many people would have thought of him as having a name. In the kingdom, things are different." There, the first will be last, and the last will be first.

This theme is woven into the story. When Lazarus died, God's angels, those ministering spirits to the heirs of salvation, carry a beggar named Lazarus to Abraham's side. Some rich dude (Jesus did not acknowledge that he even had a name) died and he just got "buried." That detail, which seems minor in our eyes, would have greatly annoyed the arrogant, self-righteous – and rich - Pharisees.

What was the rich man's sin? Jesus does not tell us that he mistreated Lazarus. We don't know that he ever spit on the beggar, mocked him or preached self-reliance to him. He didn't play mean tricks on him. The rich man's friends may have even thought him humane for tolerating this beggar's daily presence "at his gate". The rich man may simply have been indifferent to Lazarus which may well have been his greatest sin. As William Barclay puts it, Lazarus was "part of the landscape."

The Pharisees who equated wealth with virtue considered themselves experts on Moses and the Prophets, but in reality they were only selectively aware of God's mind. Moses spoke to issues of mercy and justice for the poor. The prophets constantly warned the nation on these same matters. Speaking to a people who fasted and otherwise tried to posture themselves as religious, God said, "I don't get it!"

⁵Is this the kind of fast I have chosen,
only a day for a man to humble himself?
Is it only for bowing one's head like a reed
and for lying on sackcloth and ashes?
Is that what you call a fast,
a day acceptable to the LORD?

⁷Is it not to share your food with the hungry
and to provide the poor wanderer with shelter -
when you see the naked, to clothe him,
and not to turn away from your own flesh and blood? - Isaiah 58:5, 7

A local charity noted that one of the town's most successful businessmen had never given them a donation. A representative of the charity contacted him to try to solicit a gift. "Our research shows that you make over \$750,000 per year, but don't give anything to charity. Would you consider a significant gift to help the community?" asked the fund-raiser.

The businessman answered, "Does your research also show that my elderly mother is quite ill and has medical bills far exceeding her assets and income? Does it show that my brother was recently in a debilitating accident and is now unemployed? Or that my sister's husband recently died after 10 years in the hospital leaving her penniless with three kids?"

The humiliated fundraiser meekly said, "I'm sorry. I had no idea."

"So," said the businessman, "if I'm not giving money to them, why would I give you any?"

We cannot be certain what drove the rich man to ignore Lazarus – meanness, indifference, stinginess, greed – all of the above? We can clearly see that he was a rebel against God's Word. He lived a life of exaggerated luxury while Lazarus existed in misery right under his nose. My politics tells me that government is probably a horrible solution to the problem of exorbitant wealth and extreme poverty existing side by side, but my theology tells me that God's anger seethes about the inequity nevertheless. Enjoy everything in life, my friend, as a blessing from a generous Provider. At the same time, realize that there is a degree of physical comfort which can become obscene and heinous sin in God's eyes, especially, when we casually step over the needs of others that are in our power to address.

Even in death, the rich man was too self-absorbed to see matters clearly. He hoped that Lazarus might bring him water. In what appears to be a more noble and selfless gesture, he asked Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers of the horrible fate that awaited them. Abraham answered:

... "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."

This may be a veiled prophecy of Jesus' own return from the dead. In any event, Moses had emphasized mercy, and the Prophets had harped on it, but arrogant hearts miss God's call. The rich man felt that a sensational experience would compel his five brothers to embrace God's word, but, when people are comfortable in the flesh and complacent in the spirit, little can move them. The listeners would assume that these brothers were a part of the daily festivities. They knew right from wrong, but their apathy toward God's will regarding Lazarus and others like him was what it was. A sensational experience would have no impact upon them over the long haul.

So, what will it take for you to respond to Christ when you have the choice to meet a need or to step over one? There may be times when the call of God will not present itself as anything more dramatic than your understanding of His will in a given matter coupled with your ability and your willingness to obey. Open your ears, and especially, your eyes to these simple calls from God. On the most basic level, it is those responses that confirm or deny the place of God's Word in our lives.

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