

The Richman and Lazarus

by Charles Finney

The sermon explores the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to illustrate the eternal consequences of one's choices in life and the stark realities of the afterlife.

Scripture: Luke 16:19

Topics: "Eternal Consequences", "Wealth and Poverty"

Description

Charles Finney delivers a powerful sermon on the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, emphasizing the stark contrast between the eternal fates of the wealthy and the poor. He illustrates that the rich man, who lived in luxury, faced torment after death, while Lazarus, who suffered in life, was comforted in heaven. Finney highlights the permanence of one's state after death, the consciousness of both the righteous and the wicked, and the importance of heeding the teachings of Scripture. He warns against the dangers of wealth and self-indulgence, urging listeners to recognize the eternal consequences of their earthly choices.

Transcript

"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 lifted 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 besides 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." --Luke 16:19-31.

A parable is a little anecdote or a case of supposed history, designed to illustrate some truth. A simple and striking mode of illustration--it makes no attempt at reasoning; indeed it takes the place of all reasoning by at once revealing truth to the mind. In general, parables assume certain truths--a thing which they have an ample right to do, for some truths need no proof, and in other cases, a teacher may speak from his perfect knowledge, and in such a case, there can be no reason for demanding that he stop to prove all he asserts.

In the case of parables it is often interesting to notice what truths they do assume. This is especially true of the parables of Christ for none were ever more rich by virtue both of the truths directly taught and also by virtue of the truths they assume. I may also remark here that truths are taught in Christ's parables both directly and incidentally. Some one great truth is the leading object of the illustration, yet other truths of the highest importance may be taught incidentally, not being embraced in his direct design.

The passage which I have read to you this morning, is probably a parable though not distinctly affirmed to be so. The nature of the case seems to show this; although these very circumstances might have all actually occurred in fact and in the same order as here related.

In discussing the passage, I propose,

I. To notice some truths that are assumed in it;

II. To present some that are intentionally taught.

I. 1. Christ assumes in this passage the direct opposite of annihilation. He assumes that men are not annihilated at death, nor indeed ever. For he speaks of things that take place immediately after death. The men who lived on earth live beyond death and receive according to the things they have done here in the body. It was no part of his direct object to affirm this doctrine; yet his statements imply it. Being himself the Great Teacher, it is not without reason that He should assume the fundamental truths that pertain to man's future existence under God's moral government.

2. He assumes that the state into which both good and bad men pass at death is one of real and intense consciousness. This of course denies the assumption that this state is an unconscious one. You are aware that some do not hold to annihilation, yet hold to unconsciousness in the intermediate state between death and the resurrection. This doctrine, whether applied to saints or sinners, is entirely set aside by our Saviour's teachings in this narrative.

3. He assumes that the righteous and the wicked recognize each other after death. The rich man knew both Abraham and Lazarus. Abraham knew him. They all respectively knew each other. The statements represent the colloquy to have been held between the rich man and Abraham. Abraham, though long since in heaven, knew both this rich man and Lazarus. It was not our Lord's design directly to affirm this, yet he obviously implies it.

4. It is also assumed that they are acquainted with each other's state and history. All these matters were entirely familiar to their minds.

5. It is fully assumed that at death the righteous go immediately to a state of bliss and the wicked to a place of torment. This lies out undeniably on the face of the passage.

II. I am next to notice some of the truths distinctly and directly taught in this passage.

1. That at death angels conduct the righteous to their place of blessedness. It is expressly said of Lazarus that he was carried by angels into Abraham's bosom. Dogs were his companions here up to his death; angels immediately thereafter. When the dogs could minister to his wants no longer, angels stepped in and took his case in charge. They bore him away to the home of the blessed.

We may infer that this is the common employment of angels. Paul in Hebrews 1:12 strengthens this position, in his question, "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?"

2. Saints after death are sensible of no want. They have nothing left to desire. They are sensible of wanting nothing that can be needful to their highest happiness. In this life they may have had their cup filled with bitterest grief; but at death, this cup is removed forever away, and quite another cup is placed to their lips--forever. Lazarus had his evil things in this world; poverty, pain, sores, and want, were his portion here; but after death, he knew these things no more at all. They passed away forever.

3. On the other hand sinners after death are full of want, and have no good at all. The rich man asked for only the very smallest favour. He had fared sumptuously every day; but now he is reduced so low, he can only beg for one drop of water to cool his tongue. He asks for only so much as might adhere to the tip of one's finger when taken from the water. You have seen persons lie under a burning fever--prostrate, parched, can't say a word, can only beckon for water--water--one drop to cool their burning tongue. See the man dying;--he tries to move a little, towards the water;--ah he fails; he sinks back in his bed for the last time, and the burning fever has used up all his strength. You who have suffered from fever know what this means--to have a consuming fire shut up within you. Here mark. The Great Teacher makes the rich man cry out, "Send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am tormented in this flame." --Why did he not ask for an ocean of water, or a pail-full at least, or a pitcher-full; why restrict himself to the least drop? Plainly he knew himself to be placed beyond all good. He knew this was the utmost he could ask, and even this is denied him! What could our Lord have designed but to teach this? How irresistibly is this taught and with what overpowering force! What remarkable facts are these! How obviously and how forcibly is the truth taught here that saints at death pass into a state all joyful, but the wicked into one of unutterable torment!

4. We learn the state of mind in which the wicked are. This man asks for only the very slightest mitigation. He says not one word about pardon; this he knows to be impossible. How small the boon he dares to ask! How very small if he could have had it, would have been the boon of one small drop of water on a tongue tormented in flame! Yet he does not dare to ask for anything beyond this;--nor even this of God! He knew and he most deeply felt that he had cast off God and God in turn had cast off him. He could not think of speaking to God. He could venture to speak only to Abraham, and this solitary Bible case of prayer to saints in heaven surely affords no very plausible foundation for the Romish practice. This rich man had not the least hope of release from his woe. He did not ask so great a boon as this. Deep in his soul he felt that such a request was for ever precluded.

It is remarkable too that though the boon he did ask was so trifling and his need so great, yet even this pittance was denied him. Abraham gave him plainly to understand that this was impossible. Son, said he, remember that thou in thy lifetime hast received thy good things; thou hast had thine all; there are no more for thee to enjoy!

5. Besides this, there is a great gulf fixed--parting forever the saved from the damned: we cannot go to you if we would; you cannot come to us, however much you may desire it. Most plainly does Christ teach in this representation that the state of both the righteous and the wicked is fixed, fixed forever, and forever changeless. There can be no passage open therefore as some would fain have it, from one world to the other. They who are in heaven can never get to hell to help the suffering ones there if they would; and on the other hand, the miserable in hell can never get to heaven. What less than this could the Saviour have intended to teach--that each class enter at death upon another state which is to each alike unchangeable? The righteous cannot pass the great gulf to hell; the wicked cannot pass it to heaven. Once heaven's gate was open to even the sinner on his repentance; now it is open to him no more. He has passed away from the world where his moral state can be changed. He has entered on one where no change can reach him any more at all forever.

6. The wicked dread to have their friends come to them in this place of torment. You see this feeling most distinctly manifested in this parable. The reason of the feeling is obvious. They are still human beings and therefore it can be no joy to them to have their earthly friends come into their place of woe. They have human feelings. They know they can look for no alleviation of their own woe from the presence of their friends. They know that if those friends come there as they did they can never escape; therefore they beg that those friends may never come. Therefore this rich man prays that Abraham would send Lazarus to his five brethren, to testify to them, lest they also come into that place of torment.

7. The state of mind that rejects the Bible would reject any testimony that could be given. This is plainly taught here, and can be proved. It can be proved that the testimony of one who should rise from the dead is no better or stronger than that of the Bible. Paul said he had been caught up to the third heaven, but men would not believe him. Or take the case of Lazarus, raised beyond all question from the dead. We are not told what he taught, nor is it said that his instructions made any special impressions on the living unbelievers of that generation. Those of you who have read the history of William Tennant--a co-labourer with Whitfield and Edwards, know how he apparently died; how after death he went to heaven; how he too like Paul, saw there unspeakable things which no man could utter; how he returned again and lived several years as one who had seen the glories of heaven; but was this stronger evidence than the Bible itself? Did it surpass in strength of demonstration the teachings of Moses and of the prophets? Yet more, did it surpass the force and evidence with which Jesus spake and also his apostles? No verily. When unbelief has taken possession of the mind, you may pile miracle on miracle; men will not believe it. Suppose ever so many should rise from the dead. Men who reject the Bible would not believe their testimony. They would insist either that they had not been really dead, or that if they had been, they did not bring back a reliable report from that other country. They would make a thousand objections, as they do now, against the Bible, and with much more plausibility than now. Now, they only know their objections are really unfounded; then they would have more plausible objections to make, and would be sure to give them credit enough to refuse to repent under their teachings. They would not be persuaded even then.

8. The estimation in which God holds men may not be learned from their outward circumstances. His favor cannot be inferred from the trappings of wealth; nor is it precluded by any amount of poverty. These external things neither prove nor disprove God's approbation of the hearts and the life of men.

9. The righteous need not envy rich sinners. Lazarus did not envy the rich man. He saw that he was petted for his great wealth, but pitied rather than envied him. He doubtless understood that this man was having his good things in this world. So good men, if they have faith, understand that those rich and wicked men

are receiving all their good things in this world therefore are far from being objects of envy.

10. The former poverty of the righteous poor will give a keener relish to the joys of heaven. Think of the abject poverty of this man--wandering about with no home, no place even to lay his head. So multitudes in Eastern countries may be seen lying around the city walls like the swine of the streets. I saw them in Malta when I was there, and in Sicily also. They had no home to go to, no resources against a sick or stormy day. So Lazarus lived and it was from such a life and such scenes that he was transferred to the royal palace of Jehovah. Take the case of some poor beggar lying helpless outside the palace-walls of Queen Victoria. Suppose him suddenly taken up and exalted to the highest honors of the palace itself. How would his joy intoxicate his brain--too much for flesh and blood to bear! So poor saints passing from the dunghill on earth to the golden palaces of heaven. It is well they lose their nerves in the change, for surely nerves of flesh could not bear so great a change. See Lazarus, sick and sore, perhaps putrid--licked by dogs; but he reached at length the crisis of his sorrows, and all suddenly the mortal coil drops, and his spirit takes wings--angels receive him; he soars away and heaven opens wide its gates of pearl to make him welcome! Sometimes when I have stood and seen the Christian die--have seen him struggle and pant and gasp and pass away, I have said, What a wonderful change is this! See how that eye grows glassy and dark; then it closes; it sees no more of earth, but all suddenly it opens on the glories of the upper world to be closed no more forever!

But to have the luxuries of this life superseded by the poverty and woe of hell--how awful! This rich man had royal wealth. We are told that he fared sumptuously every day--not only on special occasions, but every day! Every day too he was clad in purple and fine linen; but now how wonderful the contrast! Nothing is said of the burial of Lazarus; perhaps he had none worth noticing; but this man had a funeral. It was a noticeable fact. Perhaps thousands gathered round his remains to do him honor--but where is he? Lifting up his eyes in hell, being in torments! What a change! From his table and his palace, to hell! Lazarus passed from his sores and beggary to heaven; the rich man, from his pomp and pride and feasting, to hell. As the great poverty of Lazarus, so set off in contrast with heaven, must have given great edge and keenness to the joys of that world, so on the reverse scale, how dreadful the contrast which this rich man experiences! If we always get clearer and stronger views by contrast, surely we have a picture drawn here that is adapted to teach us awful truth and force it home on the soul with telling power.

If it be true that angels convey saints to heaven, as we are taught both here and elsewhere in God's word, then it is not irrational to suppose that what many saints say in their dying hours of the things they see is strictly true. Gathering darkness clouds the senses, and the mind becomes greatly spiritual as their looks plainly show; those looks--the eye, the countenance, the melting whisper, these tell the story better than any words can do it; indeed no words can describe those looks--no language can paint what you can stand by and see and hear--a peace so deep and so divine; this shows that the soul is almost in heaven. In all ages it has been common for some dying saints to hear music which they supposed to be of heaven and to see angels near and around them. With eyes that see what others cannot see, they recognize their attending angels as already come, "Don't you hear that music?" say they. "Don't you see those shining ones? they come, they come!" But attending friends are yet too carnal to see such objects and to hear such sounds; for it is the mind and not the body that has eyes. It is the mind that sees, and not the body. No doubt in such cases, they do really see angelic forms and hear angelic voices. The Bible says--"Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." How gloriously do these closing scenes illustrate this truth.

If this be true of saints, then doubtless wicked spirits are allowed to drag the wicked down from their dying beds to hell. Nor is it unreasonable to suppose that they too really see awful shapes and hear dreadful sounds. "Who is that weeping and wailing? Did I not hear a groan? Is there not some one weeping as if in awful agony? O, that awful thing; take him away, take him away! He will seize me and drag me down; take him away, away?"

So the wicked are sometimes affected in their dying moments. There is no good reason to doubt that these objects seen and sounds heard, by saints and sinners in their last earthly moments, are realities. You who have read Dr. Nelson's book on infidelity, cannot but have noticed especially what he says of the experience of persons near death. These things passed under his observation chiefly while he was a physician, and while yet an infidel himself. Dying sinners would cry out, "O, that awful creature! take him away, away; why don't you take him away?" Ye who know Dr. Nelson, must have known that he did not say these things at random. He did not admit them without evidence or state them without due consideration.

We are left to infer the character of this rich man from his worldly-mindedness. Christ did not seem to deem it necessary to state that he was a wicked man, but left this to be inferred from his self-indulgent life. He needed only to say of him that he lived for self-gratification; that he used his wealth for himself only, and not for the good of man, or for the glory of God. This explained his character sufficiently.

People act very much in this world, as if they supposed poverty would disqualify them for heaven. They would seem to hold the exact opposite of the truth. Christ said, "How hardly shall a rich man enter into the kingdom of heaven"; and yet, who seems to have the least fear of losing heaven by means of the snare of wealth! How wonderful is the course that men pursue, and indeed a great many Christian men are pursuing! A Christian mother, writing to me from New York, said, "All, even Christians, are giving themselves up to making money, MONEY, MONEY! They are wholly given up to stocks, and banks, and getting rich." There is a great deal of this spirit all over the country, and even here. But look at it in the light of this parable and of our Saviour's assumption in regard to the character of this rich man, and what a fearful state is this to live and to die in?

What can Universalists say or believe when they read such passages as this? What miserable shifts they must make to interpret these words! I recollect when I tried and wanted to be Universalist, and for this purpose went to their meetings and heard their arguments; I said to myself, "For very shame, I could never use such arguments; no, not for the shame of admitting and avowing such absurdities!" What can be more absurd than to resort to such sophistry and special pleading to set aside statements so clear and direct to the point as these in this chapter.

God is giving to all sinners--to you sinners in this place--a great many rich gifts. What use are you making of them? What are you doing with these gifts? What are you doing with these things which God comes down each day to bring to you? Are you cavilling, to prevent Christ from saving you if you can? Many act as if they meant to avoid being saved if by any means they can. You act just like reprobates. --But I must explain myself. I often meet with persons whose spirit makes me believe they are reprobates. You know that all things are eternally present to the mind of God. He saw how these sinners would treat the gospel. He saw they would repel and hate Christ--would not love his service nor accept the offers of his great salvation. He saw all this in his past eternity; therefore he reprobated them; therefore he gave them over to their own hearts' lusts. Those things which God saw in the depths of his eternity, we only see as they boil up upon the surface of actual present life. You see them resist the Spirit; you see them cavil and fight

against God's truth; you know they are fighting against God. So strongly does the conviction fasten on the minds of Christians in some cases, that they cannot pray for those who they are assured are reprobates. Said a very pious woman, "For ten years, I have not prayed for that son." Why? She saw that he was set against God, and she could not pray for him. It is indeed an awful thing to find such cases in Christian families. Nobody can tell the agony of a parent's heart to see a son setting at naught all the claims and all the mercies of God, and working his dismal way obstinately down to the depths of an eternal hell. Some of you before me to-day, know that you have children who give awful evidence of being reprobate!

Hear that man across the street sighing as he moves along. What is the matter? He is in agony for a hardened, reprobate son.

You call at a neighbor's door; you ring the bell; the mother comes. You see the tear in her eye; she can scarcely speak. What is the matter? She has a son, and she fears he is a reprobate. All his conduct heightens the awful fear that he is given over of God.

But let those who have not gone so far, take warning. Some of those whom you have mocked and reviled, you may by and by see in glory. They may be in Abraham's bosom, and you afar off! You may cry to them for help, but all in vain. Will they rush to your help? No. You see your father, your mother, afar off in that spirit land,--you think they will fly to succor you, and bring you at least one drop of water,--they used to do so many a time when you were in pain. Ah! many a time has that mother watched over your suffering frame, and rushed to your relief; but will she do so now? "My son, hear this: there is no passing from this place to that. You once lived in my house and lay in my bosom, but I cannot bring you one drop of water now!" And has it come to this? Must it come to this? Ah, yes, it must come to this!

Christian parents, one word to you. Suppose you conceive of this as your case. You see one of your children crying, "O give me one drop of water to cool my burning tongue!" I know what Universalists would say to this. They say, "Can a parent be happy, and see this? And do you think a parent is more compassionate than God?"

But in that hour of retribution, those Christian parents will say even of the sons and daughters they have borne, "Let them perish, they are the enemies of God and of his kingdom! Let them perish, since they would not have salvation! They must perish, for God's throne must stand and ought to stand, though all the race go down to hell!["]

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