

• *An unusual parable*

• *Lazarus – represents the poor*

• *The rich man – all rich people who are careless and self centred*

• *Abraham – himself*

• *The parable deals with the time immediately after death*

1. Wealth cannot be taken beyond the grave

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus is unusual. The characters do not symbolise people different from themselves (as, for example, in another parable the sower represents Jesus). They represent people in **similar** situations: Lazarus represents the poor; the rich man represents all rich people who are careless and self-centred; Abraham does not stand for anyone other than himself. So this is not the kind of parable in which the characters and situations symbolise something totally **different** from those in the story (as elsewhere the soils might symbolise disciples, and treasure might symbolise God's kingdom, and an estate-manager's day of accounting might represent God's judgement day). This makes me think that the description of Hades is to be taken fairly seriously. It must not be pressed too much. For example, I do not think the parable teaches that people in Hades talk to Abraham, or that people in heaven might want to visit Hades, or that people in Hades are concerned about their brothers. These details are surely only part of the picture language. But there are other aspects which probably are to be taken more seriously. The parable deals with the time immediately after death. It is mainly a parable about the use of riches, and teaches three main lessons about wealth.

1. **Wealth cannot be taken beyond the grave.** At the moment of death wealth has to be left behind. The story reminds us that people's lifestyles can vary so much. The rich man was dressed in expensive clothes (purple material was expensive), and in comfortable garments (fine linen). He ate well and was enjoying his affluent life¹. Not far away, however, was a person living a very different lifestyle. Lazarus was homeless, sick, hungry and without any protection from troublesome dogs². It seems to be taken for granted that Lazarus is a godly man, and that the rich man is not. The assumption is a reasonable one. God has chosen the poor³; the wealthy find their riches block their way to experiencing the kingdom of God. Only because *'with God all things are possible'*⁴ can a wealthy person experience God's kingdom.

• *There is nothing good about poverty*

• *There is nothing bad about wealth*

There is nothing good about poverty, nothing bad about wealth. Abraham was rich! It all depends what you do with your wealth or your poverty. The rich man had Lazarus at his gate – but did nothing for him. But wealth only lasts for this life and death is a time of great reversal. The godly but poor man was taken by the angels to heaven ('Abraham's bosom' is a way of speaking of heaven). But the careless, heartless, rich man went to Hades¹ – the place of the dead. There his punishment for his sins began immediately, and his riches could not help him.

2. Wealth brings God's wrath upon us if it is not used compassionately

2. **Wealth brings God's wrath upon us if it is not used compassionately.** The rich man went to an early stage of punishment, experiencing the anger of God in 'Hades'. This word can be used (i) of the realm of the dead without defining whether bliss or punishment is involved¹, and (ii), as here, of a place of punishment. The rich man is being punished immediately after death. He does not have to wait for the day of resurrection. The Greek word Gehenna (the more common word for 'hell' but not used in Luke 16) is used of punishment after the resurrection. Judgement is determined by this

¹ 16:19

² 16:20-21

³ James 2:5

⁴ Mark 10:27

¹ 16:22-23

¹ as in Acts 2:2

life, decided at death, experienced from death onwards, publicised and confirmed in the final resurrection.

• *Punished because he was heartless and lacking in compassion*

The rich man is not being punished because he is rich. He is experiencing God's fiery anger because he was heartless and lacking in compassion.

Judgement takes place immediately after death. Both the saved and the lost are conscious after death. The saved are happy; the lost are in agonising pain. Failure to use one's wealth for God will bring judgement in the life to come.

• *Hell is the absence of mercy*

Hell is the absence of mercy. The rich man who had given no mercy to Lazarus now begged for mercy, but found none. 'Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy,' says Jesus [1](#). The rich man showed no mercy and received no mercy [2](#).

• *Hell is a place of jealousy*

Hell is a place of jealousy. The rich man could see and envy Lazarus. There is no repentance in Hades. The rich man, who as a Jew regarded himself as a child of Abraham, still presumed his requests to Abraham would be bound to be answered. He thought the class-system of earth still applied beyond the grave and wanted to use Lazarus as a servant! Sheer pain does not in itself makes anyone repent. Hell does not bring spiritual insight. The rich man knew Lazarus by name but had done nothing to help him.

• *Hell is a place of pain*

Hell is a place of pain. The rich man was in agony. Hell is a place of compensation and repayment. Both of the men who have died are being repaid. Lazarus is receiving the rewards of his patience. The rich man is receiving the retribution for his heartlessness [1](#).

• *Hell is the end of opportunity*

Hell is the end of opportunity. The poor man cannot come to the rescue of the rich man in Hades. The rich man cannot escape [1](#).

3. Paying attention to the written Word of God

3. The lesson about how we use our wealth must be taken from the Word of God; nothing saves us from Hades except paying attention to what the written Word of God says about Jesus [1](#). The rich man thought a miraculous visit from someone from hell to his brothers would lead them to salvation. Not so. The only way of salvation is to put faith in what God's written Word says. If the brothers will not listen to the written Word of God – Moses and the prophets – nothing else will lead them to true faith in Jesus.

[1](#) Matthew 5:7
[2](#) 16:24

[1](#) 16:25

[1](#) 16:26

[1](#) 16:27-30

	<p>Dr Michael Eaton is highly respected internationally as a theologian, author, preacher and teacher. He lives in Kenya where he is one of the leaders of the Chrisco Fellowship. His <i>Preaching Through The Bible (PTTB)</i> books are highly popular worldwide. Michael Eaton puts the theological and practical meaning of the Bible in a clear and down-to-earth way so that what is written can be easily understood by the reader.</p>	
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