

LAZARUS AND THE RICH MAN

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As with all Christ's parables, Lazarus and the Rich Man must be understood in context. If the context is missed, one cannot understand the lesson behind it. Here is the all-important context.

In the Jewish world, blessings were the gift of God to those who had God's favor. Likewise, poverty, sickness, and disease were the marks of God's disfavor. From this, one can gather that the man of wealth was important in God's eyes, whereas the pauper was not. It was in this light that the disciples of Christ asked who had sinned, the man born blind or his parents?

The question of personal importance continues to be at the center of the parable, even after death. The rich man in hell asked Father Abraham to send Lazarus with a little water for his tongue, as he had been suffering in the flames. The rich man sees himself as important and Lazarus as naturally subservient.

Abraham, then, as father of the faithful, teaches the rich man a lesson by saying, "Son, remember that in life you enjoyed all the good things, but things are different in the afterlife, where you would receive your ultimate reward. That remark compels us to go back to the beginning of the parable and ask some fundamental questions.

There was a rich man that dressed in purple, who ate sumptuously every day. By looking at what happened in the afterlife, one begins to see that the "good things" enjoyed by the rich man were also a test for him. God wanted to see what he would do with the wealth that had come his way. Even the presence of a poor, sick man at his doorstep was a part of that test. Would he think of his fellow man, or would he bask in his own importance?

The good things of this life are attractive. Some increase our comfort, promote our health, generate security, spread good cheer, and so on. When we share with those around us, we become like God. Directly or indirectly, God is glorified to see us behave like him. Christ gave a parable about another rich man who wondered where he could hoard more goods for himself, so that his soul might eat, drink, and be merry for many years. In his planning, he thought only of his own well-being.

When we count our blessings, it is a good idea to identify the tests that are attached to them. The question is: Does God have favorites, or does he also dish out responsibilities? Had the rich man shown an interest in the beggar at his doorstep, he would have been like God, and God would have been glorified .

At the end of the parable, the rich man remembers that he has relatives. Even that thought came to him because relatives are an extension of the self. He did not think of others in the neighborhood that might profit from the information. Abraham corrects him on that idea, too. He says, "Son, they already have Moses and the prophets." The implication is that the rich man's relatives were expected to know what Moses and the prophets had said. The rich man lived without such consideration, and chances are that his relatives lived the same life as he.

Few indeed look into what Moses and the prophets have said and written. We may also justify this ignorance. Our age is not one of reading or studying the word of God; yet God expects his people to know what his prophets have said and to live accordingly. Otherwise we will live like the rich man, imagining that we have God's favor and need nothing else for the next life.