

# Charles Dickens, Lazarus & the Rich Man

Sermon by the Rev. DWHinkle

Pentecost 16 Proper 21 Year C September 29, 2019

**Scripture:** Luke 16:19-31

*“19 ‘There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24He called out, “Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.” 25But Abraham said, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.” 27He said, “Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— 28for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.” 29Abraham replied, “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” 30He said, “No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.” 31He said to him, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” ’”*

**Sermon:** The Pharisees were lovers of money and they often ridiculed Jesus, so, in response he tells the Parable of “Lazarus & the Rich Man.” Lazarus is a poor beggar who sits by the gate of the rich man’s estate. The rich man walks by Lazarus day after day, ignoring his plight.

Lazarus dies and is carried away by angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also dies and is in torment in Hades. He looks up, and sees Abraham and Lazarus far off, on the other side of a chasm that cannot be crossed. He calls out to Abraham to send Lazarus to bring him something to quench his thirst.

Abraham refuses, saying that the rich man received his comfort during his life, and that Lazarus is now receiving his comfort. The rich man also pleads for Lazarus to be sent to his father’s house to warn his family about this place of torment, but Abraham says that they have Moses and the prophets and should

listen to them. Besides, they wouldn't believe even if someone were raised from the dead.

This parable is often understood to be about heaven and hell, and the uncrossable chasm between the two. But, I don't think it's about that at all. First, the rich man is in Hades. Hades isn't hell. Hades is Greek for the Hebrew word Sheol, the place of the dead prior to the general resurrection of the dead when Jesus returns.

Also, Lazarus is said to be with Abraham, not God. How many gospel songs have you heard about going to heaven to be with Abraham? Not many. Or, how many near death experiences feature heavenly bliss with Abraham? Also, if this parable is about how to get into heaven and avoid hell, the only criterion seems to be caring for the poor. No faith required.

I think the Victorian author Charles Dickens, one of my favorite story tellers, can help us understand our Gospel for today. Dickens was a master at creating memorable, fictional characters. Jesus, too, was a master at creating memorable, fictional characters. The parables of Jesus are works of fiction. The Prodigal Son, or the Good Samaritan, or Lazarus weren't real people you could meet in person, but they are a few of the most memorable and influential characters of Jesus.

One of Dickens' most beloved works of fiction, and again one of my favorites, is "A Christmas Carol." This is the story of Ebenezer Scrooge and his transformation from a crotchety old penny pincher into a generous benefactor.

In several otherworldly, ghostly scenes, Scrooge is shown the past, the present, and the future. During these scenes, Scrooge begins to see the error of his ways and cries out across the chasm that cannot be crossed, trying in vain to change his past in order to affect his future. He awakes from his last vision a changed man. He runs out on Christmas morning, buys the biggest Christmas goose he can find and hurries to the home of Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim. The otherworldly scenes and ghostly visions in the story help Scrooge see the error of his ways and change the way he lives... in this life.

When reading "A Christmas Carol," we don't try to extract any doctrine about heaven, hell or the afterlife from it. We understand that the visions and apparitions function in the story as a way of giving Scrooge the opportunity to repent and change the way he lives... before he dies.

I think this is exactly what Jesus is doing in the Parable of "Lazarus & the Rich Man."

1st - In "A Christmas Carol," Dickens composes a story which leads Scrooge to discover his prejudices and blind spots.

In “Lazarus & the Rich Man,” Jesus does the same. He composes a story intended to help the Pharisees discover their prejudices and blind spots, and even the prejudices and blind spots in their own scriptures!

2nd - In “A Christmas Carol,” Scrooge cries out across a chasm when he discovers the error of his ways, but the chasm can’t be crossed.

In “Lazarus & the Rich Man,” the rich man cries out across a chasm when he discovers the error of his ways, but the chasm can’t be crossed.

3rd - In “A Christmas Carol,” the otherworldly visitations offer Scrooge the opportunity to see his own actions more clearly, and give him the opportunity to repent. Remember: to repent means more than just feeling sorry about things we’ve done or neglected to do. To truly repent means to change one’s mind, to change one’s thinking and actions.

In “Lazarus & the Rich Man,” the otherworldly scene that Jesus constructs is meant to help the Pharisees see the error of their ways, and give them an opportunity to repent.

4th - In “A Christmas Carol,” Scrooge does change. He becomes gracious and generous with his resources... IN THIS LIFE.

In “Lazarus & the Rich Man,” Jesus leaves the ending of the story unwritten. It’ll be up to the Pharisees to decide how they’ll respond... IN THIS LIFE, as it is up to each one of us in this life.

When we read Dickens’ moving tale of “A Christmas Carol,” we don’t take it literally. We don’t now believe in ghosts or that they forge chains in life by neglecting the poor. In the same way, we shouldn’t take the parables of Jesus literally. We should, however, take them seriously. But many people somehow come to believe that he is giving us a true, literal picture of the afterlife. But that’s not the point. Just as for Dickens, Jesus tells us a parable of the future afterlife to move us to different choices... in the present life.

For any wealthy folks that heard Jesus tell the Parable of “Lazarus and the Rich Man,” they might ask what Scrooge asks the Ghost of Christmas future when it points a bony finger at the gravestone with the name ‘Ebenezer Scrooge’ engraved upon it, *“Are these the shadows of the things that Will be, or are they shadows of things that May be, only? Men’s courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead,” said Scrooge. “But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me.”*

The Good News is that Scrooge is moved to change in the end, as a model for the wealthy among Dicken’s audience. I believe that Jesus’ Parable of “Lazarus and the Rich Man” is meant to have a similar effect upon each of us. It’s not a tale told to reveal secrets about the afterlife. It shows us that, *“Men’s (and women’s) courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead. But if the courses be departed from, the ends will change.”*

And that's very Good News indeed. Amen?!

**Sources:**

NRSV.

Sept. 25, 2016 Blog of same title by Russ Hewett.