

CHAPTER IV

A PRACTICAL STUDY OF LUKE 16:19-31

Luke 16:19-31 is unpleasant and terrible.

It is a drama,

The drama of a man who was rich and thought
he had everything--for awhile.

The drama of a man concerned about eternity
and repentance--when it was too late.

The tragedy of a man who nicely enjoyed life
and then died--but never prepared.

How searching these words which lift up the veil
And solemnly show that, past death's door,
There's more.

Luke 16:19-31 is the contemporary and fascinating account of a materialistic man who played the game of life, ignored God's rules, and lost. Lazarus is a figure who stays in the background and never actually does or says anything. He was laid, was carried, was comforted, and was discussed. The climax of the drama comes with the separation of these two persons, and with those awesome words, "there is a great gulf fixed" (verse 26). God's sovereign justice reigns. Men have adequate warning (verse 29) and their choice determines their eternity. Although the rich man ignored the warnings and did not repent, both believers and unbelievers today can profit from the clear warnings of God's Word.

The following discussion, centering around the great reversals

in time and eternity and how men can be warned, is an attempt to portray some of the poignant lessons from this portion of Scripture.

The Great Reversal

"The abyss between the children of this world and the children of God is not filled up by death, but only reversed and fixed."¹ Perhaps the most obvious "reversal," at least to the casual reader, is that of wealth. Riches are temporal, passing "good things" which will vanish as nothing when man confronts eternity. Many passages in the Bible warn against riches. A rich man shall hardly enter the kingdom of God (Mt. 19:24); riches are uncertain (1 Tim. 6:17); the rich man shall pass away (Jas. 1:10).

The materialistic church of the Laodiceans is warned "thou sayest, I am rich, and am increased with goods, and have need of nothing; and knowest not that thou are wretched, and miserable, and poor and blind, and naked" (Rev. 3:17). In like manner, the rich man was lavishly clothed and "fared sumptuously every day of his earthly life." Lazarus was impoverished, abandoned, suffering with sores, and desirous of even some crumbs from the rich man's table. The rich man could get to Lazarus to help him, but he would not.

After death the rich man was afar off and tormented, begging for a drop of water which probably meant more to him than the riches he enjoyed in life: "He lacked the drop who denied the crumb"

¹Colin Campbell, Critical Studies in St. Luke's Gospel: Its Demonology and Ebionitism (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1891), p. 278, quoting Fuchs.

(Augustine).¹ Lazarus, however, was in Abraham's bosom and comforted. Lazarus could not (μη δύναται, verse 26) get to the rich man to help him, though apparently he wished to do so (θέλοντες, verse 26). Furthermore, a physical gulf--a yawning chasm--has come between them.

Before death it had not occurred to the rich man that he had any relationship to Lazarus: Lazarus was someone outside the sphere of his existence. Only after death did the rich man recognize a need to relate to Lazarus.²

However, the wealth of the rich man (and of the Pharisees) is of no avail when the "great reversal" occurs. The Pharisees could not miss the bitter lesson: invested in temporal and passing ways, their riches could only soothe them on to irreversible and eternal distress.

How Men Can Be Warned

Why the Rich Man Was in Hades

Many have objected to the account of the rich man and Lazarus on the supposed basis on which the rich man was condemned. For example, one interpreter holds that a literal interpretation of the passage involves such "absurdities" as "that the rich man went to 'hell' because he had enjoyed many earthly blessings and gave nothing but crumbs to Lazarus. Not a word is said about his wickedness."³

¹Trench, Notes on the Parables of Our Lord, p. 167.

²J.F. McFadyen, The Message of the Parables (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, n.d.), p. 174.

³The Bible on Hell (Brooklyn, N.Y.: International Bible Students Association, 1921), p. 37.

However, the closing verses of the chapter clearly indicate that the rich man had never repented. The rich man is anxious that someone testify to his brothers lest they join him in the place of torment (verse 28). The objective of this desired testimony is the repentance of his brothers (verse 30). Obviously the rich man realized he was there because he himself had failed to repent. The real issue is obviously repentance--not works, degree of wickedness, or behaviour.

The All-sufficiency of the Word

When the rich man asks that Abraham send Lazarus to warn his brothers, Abraham replies that "they have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them" (verse 29). The problem of the rich man's five brothers was not that they needed more revelation. Rather, they needed to hear (i.e. understand, perceive) the revelation already available to them.

But the rich man is not satisfied. He wants Lazarus sent back; he wants evangelism done his way, not God's way. Surely a messenger from the dead will be convincing proof. He announces confidently that "if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent" (verse 30).

Abraham's reply is the solemn verdict which closes the case--the verdict both upon the rich man in this account and also upon the Pharisees in their disregard for God's Word: "If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead" (verse 31).

The problem with the rich man's brothers and with the

Pharisees is not a lack of evidence, but is unbelief. The Pharisees have before them the Lord Jesus Christ, even the fulfillment of the writings of Moses and the prophets. Both Christ and the other Lazarus (John 11) were to rise from the dead, but the unbelief remained!

This conclusion is remarkably contemporary in its application. No spectacular evidences--the discovery of all the "missing links" of evolution or of Noah's Ark, e.g.--can pierce the darkness of the heart of the unbeliever. Only God's Word can penetrate such blindness (Heb. 4:12). Men need to be warned, and real love will testify thoroughly (διδραμαρτύρηται, verse 28) to them of their lost and perilous situation. Yet God's Word, not some astounding phenomenon, must be the basis for that solemn warning.

Believers, as well, are very often guilty of disregarding the clear teachings of God's Word:

Many people try to by-pass the fundamentals of the spiritual life. . . . They ask themselves . . . "Why does God seem so remote to me? Why are my prayers so dry and formal? Why does my Communion mean so little to me and apparently so much to other people?" And the answer is: Because you have not set yourself to the discipline of beginning where you ought to begin, with the Scriptures, the revelation of the nature and will of God in "the Law and the Prophets," and in the Gospel of Christ.¹

Summary

Many practical lessons can be drawn from a study of Luke 16: 19-31. The "great reversal" of earthly circumstances--reflecting the fantastic difference between the natural man's perspective and God's

¹John R.H. Moorman, The Path to Glory: Studies in the Gospel According to Saint Luke (London: SPCK, 1960), pp. 198-199.

perspective on life and death--is at once evident. Because of his disbelief, the rich man's temporary life of luxury was replaced by an eternity of torment. Lazarus, however, left a life of suffering to be carried to the bliss and comfort of Abraham's bosom.

The second aspect of this practical study dealt with the question of how men are warned. The words of verse 31 are crystal clear: if men do not heed existing revelation, no amount of spectacular discoveries or evidences will persuade them.

Both of these areas of practical study were particularly appropriate for the pharisaic audience. Their selfish love of money and disregard for God's Word and for Christ as He spoke to them (verses 14-18) are fully answered by the account of the rich man and his fate.

Both of these areas of practical emphasis are also of particular contemporary importance. No words could be more relevant to today, when men live in the enjoyment of their present possessions--unwilling to prepare for eternity by heeding God's clear Word of revelation.