PARABLE OR TRUE STORY?

Is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus a true-to-life story? The answer is no. We know it’s a parable because, according to the gospel of Luke, Jesus used the same opening formula (“There was a certain . . .”) for all His parables (see Luke 7:41; 14:16; 15:11; 16:1; 19:12; 20:9).

Jesus occasionally used parables of situations that existed in His day. The Pharisees told a story similar to this one, and Jesus used it and gave it a surprising twist to teach a deep spiritual truth. Ellen White wrote, “In this parable Christ was meeting the people on their own ground. The doctrine of a conscious state of existence between death and the resurrection was held by many of those who were listening to Christ’s words. The Savior knew of their ideas, and He framed His parable so as to inculcate important truths through these preconceived opinions.” (Ellen G. White, Christ’s Object Lessons (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald, 1900), 263.)

Certain Bible expositors claim that this story cannot be a parable because Jesus used the proper name Lazarus, and He never used proper names in any of His other parables. The parables of Jesus have multi-dimensional applications. They can apply to individuals and also to groups. For example, Ellen White applies the parable of the unjust steward to the publicans, the disciples, the Pharisees, Israel, and us. (White, Christ’s Object Lessons, 366–375.) The parable of the rich man and Lazarus has a central lesson: The way people or groups use or abuse God’s blessings in this life will determine their eternal destiny.
A very important nuance appears in this imaginary story. The parable tells us that the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus from the dead to warn his five brothers not to come to this place of torment: “And he said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent’” (Luke 16:30, emphasis supplied). Abraham’s reply shows that he (as well as Jesus, who quoted him) believed that Lazarus could only go to his brothers if he rose from the dead: “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead” (v. 31, emphasis supplied). The expression “rise from the dead” refers to the resurrection (Luke 24:46; Mark 9:9, 10; 12:25). The rich man wanted Lazarus to go to his brothers from the dead, but Abraham told him that Lazarus could go only if he were resurrected from the dead.

In the parable, Abraham told the rich man that his brothers had Moses and the prophets to warn them not to go to the place of torment. The rich man objected, however, saying that if Lazarus went to his brothers from the dead, they would repent and believe. Abraham replied that if they did not believe Moses and the prophets (cf. John 5:39, 40, 45–47) they would not repent even if a man called Lazarus were resurrected from the dead!

Sometime after He told the parable, Jesus resurrected a man called Lazarus, who had been dead four days. The body was tightly wrapped in linen and in the grave. There was no room for foul play or sleight of hand! Did the Pharisees then repent and believe that Jesus was the Messiah? A resounding no! The Sanhedrin met and laid plans to kill Him: “Then the chief priests and the Pharisees gathered a council and said, ‘What shall we do? For this Man works many signs. If we let Him alone like this, everyone will believe in Him, and the Romans will come and take away both our place and nation.’ And one of them, Caiaphas, being high priest that year, said to them, ‘You know nothing at all, nor do you consider that it is expedient for us that one man should die for the people, and not that the whole nation should perish’” (John 11:47–50, emphasis supplied). Not only did they lay plans to kill Jesus but Lazarus as well (John 12:9–11)!
TWO GROUPS

Two groups of people are represented in the parable, one that lived for themselves in riches (particularly the Pharisees; Luke 16:14) and another that followed God in their poverty. The leaders of the Jewish nation lived sumptuously and hoarded the blessings that God conferred on them. They enjoyed the privileges of election but failed to fulfill its responsibilities. They claimed an intimate closeness with Abraham as their father as represented by the bosom (cf. John 1:18; 13:23; Deut. 13:6) but did not share his generous hospitality toward others (cf. Gen. 18:1–5). In the parable, the rich man addressed Abraham as “father,” and Abraham addressed the rich man as “son” (Luke 16:24, 25, 27, 30; see John 8:39). All the hopes of the Pharisees were centered on Abraham, not on God (cf. John 8:31–59).

Lazarus represents the suffering poor who believe in Christ. The story tells us that Lazarus ate the crumbs that fell from the rich man’s table and the dogs licked his sores (Luke 16:19–21), pointing to his poverty and suffering. This story is not real to life for many reasons. The Bible teaches that the dead are in the grave, not in hell (John 5:28, 29). The unrighteous will be thrown into the lake of fire at the end of the age, not at their own death (Matt. 13:40–43; 25:31–34, 41, 46; Rev. 21:8; 20:11–15). Scripture teaches that the righteous will be taken to heaven by the angels at the second coming, not to the bosom of Abraham at death (Matt. 24:31). The Bible forbids attempted communication of the living with the dead (Lev. 20:27; Isa. 8:19, 20), and yet the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus from the dead to admonish his brothers not to come there. Furthermore, the rich man and Lazarus had body parts in the bosom of Abraham and Hades—fingers, tongue, and eyes. Why would they have body parts in the bosom of Abraham and Hades if their bodies went to the grave?

The late Robert Morey, a close associate of writer Walter Martin and a staunch believer and defender of the immortality of the soul, made this remarkable admission: “Everyone understood that these parables and dialogues did not literally take place. It was understood that the rabbis used imaginative stories and dialogues as a teaching method. It was understood by all that these dialogues never took place. . . . He [Jesus] was merely using the dialogue method to get across the concept that there is no escape from torment, no second chance, and we must believe the Scripture in this life unto salvation.” (Robert A. Morey, Death and the Afterlife [Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 1984], 85.)
What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

Acts 23:8
Matthew 25:31–34, 41, 46
Matthew 15:21–28
John 11:43–50
John 1:18
John 8:39

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Luke 16:19–31?

“I DESIRE MERCY”

The central point of this parable is that we need to repent, trust in Jesus, and use the resources He has lent us to bless those who are hungering and thirsting for food from the table and from the Word. What individuals, nations, and churches do with God’s blessings in this life will determine their future reward.

The rich man received God’s abundant resources during his lifetime but hoarded them selfishly for himself. He did not mistreat Lazarus or kick him under the table. He even allowed Lazarus to eat the crumbs that fell from his table. His sin was to ignore Lazarus, what we call the sin of omission.

The parable of the sheep and the goats in Matthew 25:31–46 teaches the same lesson. In both stories the final recompense of fire or living in the kingdom is based on what believers did with the blessings that God conferred upon them. The goats did not mistreat people; they simply ignored them. Ellen White wisely wrote, “The condemning power of the law of God extends, not only to the things we do, but to the things we do not do. We are not to justify ourselves in omitting to do the things that God requires. We must not only cease to do evil, but we must learn to do well. God has given us powers to be exercised in good works; and if these powers are not put to use, we shall certainly be set down as wicked and slothful servants” (Selected Messages, vol. 1 [Washington, DC: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1958], 220).

The story of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) teaches the same lesson. The Samaritan helped the wounded man not for any personal gain but out of pure mercy. There was nothing in it for him. He took the man to the hospital and paid his medical bill. He served without mercenary motives. The good Samaritan represents Jesus, who came to heal wounded humanity, and what Jesus did He commands us to do likewise.

Perfection is more than ceasing to do evil; it means doing good. That is why Matthew 5:48 commands us to be perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect but the parallel passage in Luke 6:36 calls us to be merciful as our heavenly Father is merciful. James 1:27 describes the perfect balance between ceasing evil acts and performing good deeds: “Pure and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their trouble, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world.”
inSight

Review the memory verse.
How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week’s study of the chapter, what changes must take place in your personal life?

What changes can be implemented in your social and public life?

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THIS LIFE NOW

In this parable Christ was meeting the people on their own ground. The doctrine of a conscious state of existence between death and the resurrection was held by many of those who were listening to Christ's words. The Saviour knew of their ideas, and He framed His parable so as to inculcate important truths through these preconceived opinions. He held up before His hearers a mirror wherein they might see themselves in their true relation to God. He used the prevailing opinion to convey the idea He wished to make prominent to all—that no man is valued for his possessions; for all he has belongs to him only as lent by the Lord. . .

Christ desires His hearers to understand that it is impossible for men to secure the salvation of the soul after death. . . This life is the only time given to man in which to prepare for eternity. . .

When Christ gave the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, there were many in the Jewish nation in the pitiable condition of the rich man, using the Lord's goods for selfish gratification, preparing themselves to hear the sentence, “Thou art weighed in the balances, and art found wanting.” Daniel 5:27. The rich man was favored with every temporal and spiritual blessing, but he refused to cooperate with God in the use of these blessings. Thus it was with the Jewish nation. The Lord had made the Jews the depositaries of sacred truth. He had appointed them stewards of His grace. He had given them every spiritual and temporal advantage, and He called upon them to impart these blessings. Special instruction had been given them in regard to their treatment of their brethren who had fallen into decay, of the stranger within their gates, and of the poor among them. They were not to seek to gain everything for their own advantage, but were to remember those in need and share with them. And God promised to bless them in accordance with their deeds of love and mercy. But like the rich man, they put forth no helping hand to relieve the temporal or spiritual necessities of suffering humanity. Filled with pride, they regarded themselves as the chosen and favored people of God; yet they did not serve or worship God. They put their dependence in the fact that they were children of Abraham. “We be Abraham's seed,” they said proudly. (John 8:33.) When the crisis came, it was revealed that they had divorced themselves from God, and had placed their trust in Abraham, as if he were God. (Ellen G. White, Christ's Object Lessons [Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1900], 263, 267, 268.)
To whom did Jesus address the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:14)? Why?

What biblical evidence do we have that the parable is fictitious and not real to life?

What central lesson does the parable teach individuals, institutions, and churches?

What other stories and parables of Jesus teach the same central lesson of the parable?

How can we avoid being identified as the rich man?

If we are saved by grace through faith, why does our eternal destiny depend on how we treated others?

How do people associate socio-economic status and amount of wealth with righteousness and salvation? Why?

How does this lesson reveal the multi-dimensional depth of Christ’s teachings?