

36 PARABLES

AMBER BIBLE STUDY

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Film: *Afterlife*

Parable: *The Rich Man and Lazarus*

Scripture: *Luke 16:19-31*

Interpreting *Afterlife*

In the film *Afterlife*, Mary has had an automobile accident that leads to a near-death experience. In her experience, hell is perceived as a vivid reality. As she awakens in the hospital, the professional “helper” tries to convince her that hell isn’t real and that her experience is easily explained away. This “explaining away” has always been a temptation, since many feel that a “loving God” could never punish people.

In this parable Jesus tells the story of an affluent man who cannot imagine a reversal of fortune in the afterlife. He lived in luxury on earth but finds himself on the other side in hell. Even after death, the Rich Man tries to pull aristocratic strings—barking out requests to Abraham that poor Lazarus function as his servant.

Discussion Questions

1. Who do you suppose Jesus was addressing with this parable?
2. Why do we find hell to be an objectionable concept? How do we try to explain it away?
3. In what ways do we rely on our heritage or our earthly accomplishments to keep us from eternal trouble?

Background

Here in Luke 16 Jesus tells several parables about rich people. In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the Rich Man remains nameless. All we know is that he has five brothers and wears the purple clothing of an aristocrat. In the parable he appeals to Abraham as a fellow Israelite, assuming it will somehow buy him special privilege. Abraham tells the Rich Man of the harsh realities of eternity: Judgment is irrevocable. In fact, there is a “chasm” between heaven and hell, and after death it cannot be crossed. We naturally may minimize the irrevocable nature of hell, but in this parable Jesus underlines its permanence. There is no chance of appeal.

The Rich Man was hoping to get a free pass based on his resume—as far as he was concerned, hell wasn’t on the radar screen. The point of contrast in the parable is between this man’s riches and the abject poverty of Lazarus. The Scripture tells us that Lazarus was hoping for some bread scraps from this bourgeois’ table, which refers to the use of bread as napkins in wealthy middle-eastern households. The rich would wipe their hands on the bread and toss it to the floor as unfit for their consumption—and Lazarus wasn’t too proud to fight the dogs for the scraps.

Note: The Rich Man didn’t end up in hell because of sins of commission (wicked acts) but because of sins of omission (failure to see the neediness of Lazarus and respond). Not that sins of commission don’t matter; rather Jesus points out how sinful it is to ignore suffering and pain around us.

1 John 3:17 puts it this way: “If any one of you has material possessions and sees his brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in you?”

Discussion Questions

1. What resume items do I believe will get me a free pass to heaven?
2. What sins of omission will God bring to our attention in eternity?
3. If we truly perceived hell as an actuality, how would it change our daily behavior? Our dealings with others? Our spiritual lives?

As you reflect on the parable and the video, consider that Jesus told these parables so that we could learn truth in the midst of our everyday lives. Because reveals himself through common experiences, and we should be able to find Jesus in the most unlikely places. Christ can “show up” while we’re sitting in front of our computers at work, cooking dinner, or driving in traffic. It’s great to learn during the big moments of our lives, but Christ clearly notes that learning about his love, his grace, and his mercy can be experienced in the most ordinary circumstances of our lives as well.