

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus: A Narrative-Exegetical Study of Its Relationship to the Afterlife, Wealth, and Poverty—Part 2: Wealth and Poverty

Thomas R. Shepherd
Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary
Andrews University

Wealth and poverty reside next to each other throughout the world. In the United States incredible disparities stand side by side with the homeless stretching out their hands to Wall Street bankers and with disabled veterans pleading for help at busy street intersections. In other countries the same stark disparities exist with squatter settlements in India in comparison to the riches of Mumbai and *favelas* in the midst of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The United Nations estimates that one billion or more people worldwide reside in slums, typified by poor housing, lack of clean water, and no electricity.¹ What should the Christian response be personally and corporately to such conditions?

In the first part of this study we considered the scholarly debate regarding the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in relation to the afterlife. We found that the story contains strong indications of being an imaginative parable instead of a report of real events. We found that a long history of commentary on the parable sees it teaching a conscious intermediate state after death before the Final Judgment. However, our assessment of the data indicated that such a view would not stand against

¹ See Carrie Kellenberger, “Slums around the World,” available at <https://www.myseveralworlds.com/2009/04/05/slums-around-the-world/>.

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the overwhelming biblical witness of wholistic anthropology and eschatology focused on the resurrection and Parousia.

Turning to Luke-Acts we found evidence of the same biblical anthropology and eschatology. Counter to those who suggest that Luke had either a confused or composite eschatological schema, we considered the contexts and genre of the Luke-Acts material used to support such a claim (particularly the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the story of the Thief on the Cross, and the story of the Stoning of Stephen). We found that these stories were either in a parabolic context (the parable) or that the supposed implication of immediate transfer to heaven (the thief and Stephen) was explainable on other grounds consistent with broader biblical anthropology and eschatology.

In this part of the study we turn to the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to test the validity of the assertion that its teaching does not focus on the afterlife but rather on the use of resources in the service of others in the present life. First, we will note the context of the parable within a chapter focused on the use of resources. Then we will review the scholarly debate concerning the teaching of the parable regarding the use of resources. Following this we will present a narrative analysis of the passage and argue its primary focus from the data.²

The Context of the Parable

The parable appears in a context focused on money and its use. Luke 16 contains a collocation of parables and instruction on the use of wealth, beginning with the intriguing parable of the dishonest manager (Luke 16:1–9), followed by Jesus’ teaching about faithfulness and serving God rather than money (16:10–13).³ These teachings are followed by a reference to the Pharisees’ derision of Jesus since, Luke tells us, they were lovers of money (16:14). Jesus responds that God knows their hearts and “what is exalted among men is an abomination in the sight of God” (16:15). These words are followed by miscellaneous teachings on

² This study utilizes Quantitative Narrative Analysis (QNA) in which a story’s narrative characteristics are analyzed in six categories (settings, character, plot, actions, time, author/reader) and catalogued in spreadsheets. The details of the QNA for Luke 16:19–31 are available from the author at trs@andrews.edu.

³ It seems that Luke places Jesus’ teaching about faithfulness next to the parable of the dishonest manager so that we do not get the wrong idea from the parable of the dishonest manager. Jesus is not affirming dishonesty or shrewd dealing.

the Law and Prophets and divorce (16:16–18).⁴ The last part of the chapter (16:19–31) returns to the subject of wealth and its use—the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, the subject of this two-part study. As will be unfolded in this article, the point of the story is not about what happens when you *die*, but rather about how you should *live* in the present world, in particular, how resources should be used, or not used.

The Scholarly Debate on the Parable’s Teaching Regarding Resources

Many scholars, though not all, see the focus of the parable on the right use of resources.⁵ The rich man should have had pity on poor Lazarus and helped him with food and other resources. We saw in the first part of this study that John Chrysostom, Gregory the Great, Luther, and Calvin all spoke of the importance of the rich helping the poor.

This perspective carries into the modern discussion of the parable. François Bovon sees the parable as an imaginary example story that teaches the importance of doing good, to repent and follow Jesus’ example.⁶ John Nolland argues that this is a cautionary tale about the need to take seriously the ethical demands to care for the poor as found in the Law and the Prophets. The fate of the rich man is rooted in his disregard of those demands. “Entrusted with the riches of this world, the rich man had generously rewarded himself during his lifetime. He has in fact been paid in full (see [Luke] 6:24) and can expect no more. Lazarus has been dreadfully short-changed in his lifetime, but now there is a redressing of the balance.”⁷

⁴ Note that “Moses and the Prophets” (another name for the Law and the Prophets) reappear in the parable in 16:29, 31.

⁵ Ronald F. Hock, “Lazarus and Micallus: Greco-Roman Backgrounds to Luke 16:19–31,” *JBL* 106/3 (1987): 453n23 lists the following scholars who *do not* see the parable critiquing wealth—A. Plummer, *Luke*, ICC (New York: Scribner, 1914) 390, 396–97; K. H. Rengstorff, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (NTD; 9th ed.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1962) 193, 195; Joachim Jeremías, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1963), 185; John D. Crossan, *In Parables: The Challenge of the Historical Jesus* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1973), 66; J. Ernst, *Das Evangelium nach Lukas* (RNT 3; Regensburg: Pustet, 1977), 472–3; and J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel according to Luke XXXIV*, AB 28A (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1985), 1132. As we will see below, other scholars do see the teaching of the parable focused on how resources are used.

⁶ François Bovon, *Luke 2, Hermeneia* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013), 473.

⁷ John Nolland, *Luke 9:21–18:34*, WBC 35c (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1993), 832.

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Craig Blomberg notes that the rich man was not condemned for being rich, but rather for doing nothing to help the poor man.⁸ He sees a frightening parallel to Western world Christians who spend inordinate amounts on shopping, entertainment, eating out, recreation, etc., but give little or nothing to help the poor. Darrell Bock echoes Blomberg, “material possessions are not the point; the use of them is.”⁹

It is Richard Bauckham who stands out among modern interpreters for arguing that the reason for the reversal after death in the parable is that the rich man has enjoyed amazing wealth and the poor man has experienced deep poverty.¹⁰ He counters others who argue for some basis in the actions of the individuals for the reversal (such as: the rich man misused his wealth, or obtained it unjustly, or his neglect of the poor man; and that the poor man must be pious).¹¹

However, Bauckham does accept that there is an implicit standard of judgment found in Luke 19:25—the justice of God.¹² He argues that the wrong in the story is the “stark inequality” between the living conditions of the two men.¹³ That is, it is not something residing in the *people*, their character or actions, but rather the fact of gross *disparity between resources available* to the two men that Bauckham feels the parable is pointing toward. Given these disparate viewpoints in scholarship, we turn to the narrative analysis of the passage to obtain a clearer grasp on the point the story is driving at.

A Narrative-Exegetical Study of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

A narrative analysis of a passage can be presented in one of two formats. One method is to discuss the passage verse by verse presenting

⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 262.

⁹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, BECNT (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1372–73n26.

¹⁰ Richard Bauckham, “The Rich Man and Lazarus: The Parable and the Parallels,” *New Testament Studies* 37 (1991): 231–3.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 231. “It is sometimes said that the parable does not explain why the fortunes of the two are reversed after death, and so some implicit criterion of judgment must be supplied. It must be assumed that the rich man is condemned because he was not only rich but misused his wealth, or because he acquired it unjustly, or because he neglected to give charity to the poor man at his gate. Similarly, it must be assumed that Lazarus was not only destitute but pious.”

¹² *Ibid.*, 232.

¹³ *Ibid.*

the narrative data for each verse in order. The other is to present the data under each of the narrative analysis categories. In the current study we follow the latter procedure so that the reader can see the way in which each category of data points toward the focus of the parable.

The parable's linkage to other stories current in the cultural milieu of Jesus' time as illustrated by Bauckham and others is instructive and helpful in making sense of the narrative data.¹⁴ Below we catalogue the narrative data and summarize its foci.

Settings and Props

The story takes place in two spatio-temporal locations—this life and what happens after death. The setting in life is mundane in that the common experience of the poor and the rich are cataloged though starkly contrasted with one another as they stand next to each other. The rich man and Lazarus are never narrated as meeting in this part of the story, they are inside or outside the house and their circumstances are completely opposite to one another—one with grandiose wealth, the other with grinding poverty. The reader/listener sees the hyperbole of the vast difference juxtaposed.

Props in this part of the story abound and display the contrast between the characters. The rich man is finely clothed in shining purple apparel and eats sumptuously. The poor man is lying at the rich man's gate and seems to have nothing to eat (cf. Luke 15:16 re the prodigal son). His body is covered with sores (parallel to Job), and dogs come and lick his wounds. The difference between the characters could not be more stark with the locations and props highlighting the differences—again, striking hyperbole.

After death everything reverses. The poor man, mentioned last in the first part of the story is now mentioned first (thus a chiasm—"the first shall be last and the last shall be first"). Lazarus is taken to "the bosom of Abraham," a banquet type picture of people around a table on couches enjoying a meal (cf. John 13).¹⁵ The rich man, in sharp contrast, is in

¹⁴ Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," 225–46; Hock, "Lazarus and Micyllus," 447–63; Bovon, *Luke 2*, 476–7.

¹⁵ Contra Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53 BECNT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 1368, who notes that "there is no explicit reference to banquet imagery anywhere in the parable." While this is technically true, there is a vast food theme in the Gospel of Luke, once described as in almost every chapter, Jesus going to a meal, coming from a meal, or at a meal. While food is not mentioned in this section of the parable, it is implied in the location where Lazarus resides, in parallel to the rich man's great table in the first

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torment in Hades. Shortly into this section of the story props will again abound as the rich man pleads for a drop of water from Lazarus' finger to cool his burning tongue.¹⁶ But alas, a great chasm prevents any travel between the two places.

The last setting to be mentioned in the story is the house of the rich man's father, a location back in the realm of the living. But that location is only mentioned, it will not be visited. However, it is important nonetheless because it is tied with the revelation that will make the point of the parable, as we will see below.

The settings and props are hyperbolic in nature so that the point being made by them cannot be missed. They speak of vast inequalities. As we will see below, these inequalities are accompanied by lack of action, not only in this life, but surprisingly in the afterlife as well.

Characters

Three main characters inhabit this story—the rich man, Lazarus and Abraham. As is typical of Jesus' parables, the story includes an authority figure who stands as arbiter of the dispute or problem between the different characters.¹⁷ Father Abraham stands in favor of the poor man, not the rich man.¹⁸ Abraham is characterized by telling with both his name and the title "father," but also by showing as he dialogues with the rich man.¹⁹ He comes across as both judicial in always refusing the rich man's requests, but with a touch of gentleness as he calls the rich man "child." Abraham states that he is powerless to do anything for the rich man because of the great chasm God has set between where he is

part of the story. The phrase "the bosom of Abraham" is unknown in other early Jewish writing but does appear in later Midrashim. See Kim Papaioannou, *The Geography of Hell in the Teaching of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), 124–5. Bock does provide useful parallels describing reception into heaven being at Abraham's side. Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1368.

¹⁶ The reference to Lazarus' finger and the rich man's tongue continues the sense of bodily existence found in biblical anthropology as highlighted in the first part of this study.

¹⁷ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 197–8.

¹⁸ The grand reversal in the story is typical of this type of afterlife story in the Greco-Roman world. It also fits with a reversal theme in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 1:46–55, the Magnificat; 6:20–26, beatitudes followed by woes; 12:33–34 and 14:33, the problem of riches and the call for believers to give them up; 12:16–21 the parable of the Rich Fool; and 16:1–9, the parable of the Crafty Manager). See Bovon, *Luke 2*, 474.

¹⁹ Telling is when the narrator indicates some trait about a character or their name (for instance *Father Abraham*). Showing is when some trait about the character can be deduced from his/her speech or actions.

(presumably heaven) and Hades where the rich man is.²⁰ Thus, behind this authority figure, Abraham, stands God in the shadows, the true moral arbiter of the universe.

The rich man is the most filled out character in the story, presented by both showing and telling. The settings and props noted above set forth his extreme wealth and at the same time, by the absence of action, his insensitivity and neglect of the poor man. Here is where Bauckham, it seems to me, has failed to reckon well with not only what is said in the story, but what is not said.²¹ The rich man's great wealth in the very presence of the poor man's plight, should call forth mercy, but instead there is silence.²²

When the rich man gets to Hades he suddenly takes notice of Lazarus and hopes that Abraham will send him with a drop of water to cool his burning tongue. No such mercy is shown. The rich man seems to treat Lazarus like a servant sent to bring something he needs. He never speaks to the poor man, always addressing Father Abraham instead.²³ As

²⁰ There is dispute in scholarship as to just where "the bosom of Abraham" is to be found. Some suggest actually for a place in Hades (A. Plummer, *Luke*, ICC [Edinburgh: Scribner, 1896], 394; W. F. Arndt, *The Gospel according to St. Luke* [St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1956], 365; Bock *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1369–70). Papiouannou notes that Bock associates Abraham's bosom with paradise (Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1368). Papiouannou says that therefore paradise "must also be part of Hades!" (Papiouannou, *Geography of Hell*, 125n49). In fairness, Bock notes that the imagery of Hades "is graphic and pictorial and reflects a reality, rather than describing it literally" (Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1369). Needless to say, Bock still states that it reflects a reality. We can also note that this confusion about the location of Abraham's bosom in Hades is reflective of the confusion about the state of the dead referenced in the first article of this study. Hades is the place of the dead, the grave. If one believes that a person goes to heaven when they die, it is challenging to consider Hades being linked with heaven. However, if all the dead sleep in the grave at death the problem is resolved, and hence the great New Testament emphasis on the resurrection.

²¹ Bauckham argues that it is the disparity of resources between the rich man and Lazarus that is the problem (Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," 232). John Chrysostom in his first sermon on the parable actually answers Bauckham quite well in describing the rich man seeing the poor man at his gate day after day ("laid at his gate") and not relieving his need. See *St John Chrysostom on Wealth and Poverty*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 21–2.

²² The very Law and Prophets that Abraham references later in the story are full of calls for mercy for the needy. See e.g. Deut 14:28–29; 15:1–2, 7–11; 22:1–4; 23:19; 24:10–15, 19–22; Isa 3:13–15; 5:7–8; 58:1–12; Jer 5:26–29; 7:5–7; Ezek 18:10–18; Amos 2:6–8; Mic 2:1–2; Zech 7:8–10; Mal 3:5.

²³ John Chrysostom has an interesting take on this detail of the rich man not talking to Lazarus. Chrysostom states, "Why did he not address his words to Lazarus? It seems to me that he blushed and was ashamed, and because of what had happened he thought

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the story develops the rich man shows persistence, arguing with Abraham about what could and should be done. He takes interest in his brothers, “his people,” so that they do not end up with his fate. He does not have the last word, however, Abraham does in pointing to Moses and the Prophets as sufficient revelation for the brothers.

Lazarus is characterized both by showing and telling. He has the name that makes him stand out in contrast to the nameless rich man.²⁴ He is characterized by telling, but much more extensively by showing, particularly in the description in verses 20–21—helpless, sick, hungry, needy—it is a striking picture. Suddenly after death he is honored and well cared for, in the place of honor at the side of Father Abraham. But he still says nothing. The rich man recognizes him and treats him like a servant (showing that he had noticed him sometime at his gate during this life), but Abraham will not disturb his repose in the land of comfort.

Plot

The plot of this story is straightforward although subtle in its opening lines. The story starts (Luke 16:19) by describing an especially wealthy man. He has no problems, it seems, with all his needs met. However, the second verse (16:20) presents a very poor and sick man named Lazarus lying at the rich man’s gate. This juxtaposition of two diametrically opposite pictures, amazing wealth and grinding poverty, puts on display the implicit twofold problem of the story. Problem 1—a man is in great need, sick, and hungry. And next to this picture, Problem 2—a man with great wealth, all the means necessary to help the poor man, but he does nothing to relieve his agony.²⁵ Hyperbole is used both to describe the rich

Lazarus would certainly bear a grudge,” “Second Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man,” *On Wealth and Poverty*, 53–4. Chrysostom goes on to indicate that Lazarus did not have such a view, but the rich man feared he did.

²⁴ A number of manuscripts have names for the rich man. The oldest is strikingly, P⁷⁵ from the third century, giving the rich man the name “Neues.” But no other major manuscript gives a name. Part of the Sahidic manuscript tradition has “Ninevah” for the man’s name and in Latin the word for “rich” *dives* is taken as a name, *Dives*.

²⁵ This is good storytelling because the problem is not explicitly stated at the beginning and the reader must ponder what the juxtaposition of the two opposite characters implies. Hiding behind this juxtaposition is the call of the Law and Prophets to care for the poor. Abraham’s double reference at the end of the parable to Moses and the Prophets brings this out in the open. A recognition of the profound ethic of care for the weak found therein is expected of the reader and is consistent with the same ethic found in Luke-Acts. See Darrell L. Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, Andreas J. Köstenberger, gen. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 352–7.

man and the poor man. It makes the twofold problem stand out in sharp relief.

After death all shifts. The poor man is exalted to “the bosom of Abraham,” by his side presumably at a banquet table, and the rich man is burning in Hades. It is a Rags to Riches (Riches to Rags) plot with the downtrodden Lazarus receiving comfort and the rich man anguish (16:23).

One might expect the story to end there, but the majority of the story (vv. 24–31) is yet to come as a complication enters the story. The rich man sees Abraham and Lazarus far off and makes a request of the father of the Jews. The request is for a small mercy—indeed, the smallest favor—a drop of water on the tip of Lazarus’ finger. This is soundly refused by Abraham in two steps. First, Abraham notes that the rich man received good things in his life and Lazarus bad and that, in justice, this is reversed in the afterlife. Second, the father of the Jews indicates that a great chasm is fixed between them that prevents crossing over from either direction.

The rich man does not give up, adding yet another complication to the story. He asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them to change so that they not end up in the place of torment (vv. 27–28). It is another request for mercy. But Abraham counters that the brothers have Moses and the Prophets and can hear them (v. 29). However, the persistent rich man replies that they would repent if someone came from the dead to them (v. 30). Abraham refuses yet one more time saying that if they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they would not be convinced if someone rose from the dead (v. 31).²⁶

It is a striking and unusual ending to the plot of the story. First, the lack of mercy shown to the rich man stands in marked contrast to the story of Abraham in life where he pleaded with the Lord for mercy for Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 18) and step by step the Lord agreed not to destroy the cities if he found but ten righteous people there.²⁷ None of

²⁶ As illustrated in part one of this study, some interpreters believe that the rich man is suggesting that Lazarus appear as a ghost or in a dream to the brothers (Bauckham, “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” 243). But Abraham’s words in v. 31 parallel to this request of the rich man demonstrate that what is in mind here is an actual resurrection from the dead.

²⁷ God, in fact, shows mercy beyond Abraham’s request as the one righteous man of the city, Lot, is saved by God’s great mercy (Gen 19).

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that appears in Luke 16 as Abraham refuses the rich man's pleas for mercy, and conveys that God has set it so with the great chasm.²⁸

The second striking feature of the plot is that the resolution at the end of the story is open-ended. Did the five brothers listen to Moses and the Prophets and repent? The story does not tell us. It is this open ending of the plot that helps explain some of the oddities of the story. Something similar happens in the parable of the Prodigal Son in Luke 15 which also has an open ending. We are not told if the older brother in the story goes in to the feast with his father. The point of that parable is an appeal to the Pharisees to stop criticizing Jesus' ministry to the outcasts and to "join the party," welcoming sinners who are attracted by Jesus' gospel message and fellowship.²⁹

In a similar way, the plot of the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is an appeal particularly to those with riches to "hear Moses and the Prophets" (v. 31) and to eschew the rich man's lack of action in the present life. Bauckham is correct when he states, "The point is no more than the law and the prophets say—and that no more than the law and the prophets say is required."³⁰ One does not need extraordinary revelation to know what is required of man. "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Mic 6:8 ESV).³¹ It was this that the rich man failed to do in life and so he did not receive it in death.³²

²⁸ This lack of mercy on Abraham's part is one of those aspects of the story that stands counter to expectation for a biblical story, particularly one about Abraham, and suggests that Jesus is creating an imaginative story for effect.

²⁹ See Thomas R. Shepherd, "Welcoming Sinners: Redeeming the Past and Future in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32)," in *Biblical Parables: Essays in Honor of Robert M. Johnston*, eds. Thomas R. Shepherd and Ranko Stefanovic (Berrien Springs, MI: New Testament Department, Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University, 2016), 168–84.

³⁰ Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," 245.

³¹ In Micah 6:8 "justice" is מִשְׁפָּט "judgment, fair decision" referring to what is due someone in a case. "Kindness" is רַחֲמִים "loving kindness, faithfulness, graciousness."

³² David Peter Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor in Luke-Acts*, SNTU B6 (Linz, Austria: Studien zum Neuen Testament und seiner Umwelt, 1982), 177, "The parable deals with a flagrant outrage of 'the Law and the Prophets'. Moreover, it is an offence against that part of the law and the prophets which we have already had reason to suspect lay close in Luke's mind to what was required by way of repentance of those seeking the Kingdom."

Actions

Actions are the “baby steps” of plot. They are the individual verbs used throughout a story to carry the plot forward. Each verb has three characteristics in story analysis—*duration* (how much space is used in the narrative to tell the action), *frequency* (how many times the action is reported in the narrative), and *order* (in what order the actions are told in the narrative). The details related to these three characteristics of each action are extensive, so only a summary can be provided here.³³

The first scene of the story (vv. 19–21) relates in summary format the lives of the rich man and Lazarus. No words are spoken. However, the use of present participles (εὐφραινόμενος “feasting,” ἐπιθυμῶν “desiring,” πιπτόντων “falling,” ἐρχόμενοι “coming”) and imperfect verbs (ἐνεδιδύσκετο “he was wearing,” ἐπέλειχον “they were licking”) give the iterative sense that these actions were the common, continuing activities of the two men. This perspective is confirmed by the use of the pluperfect “laid” at the rich man’s gate and the perfect participle “covered with sores.” The poor man was placed at that gate presumably every day to get the attention of the rich man and he had been covered with sores for some time. Thus, the opening scene summarizes the ongoing character and life of these two men, one in opulence every day, the other in deep distress at the same time.

As noted in the expression of the plot, things change after death, and the same happens with the actions. The overall arc of the story at this point revolves around a tableau conversation between the rich man and Abraham. The rich man makes a summary request for mercy in verse 24. This request is then broken down into three pleas—for a drop of water (v. 24), to send Lazarus to warn his brothers (v. 27–28), and again requesting that Lazarus be sent to his brothers (v. 30).

Abraham responds each time in denial of the requests. The first request receives a long, two-step response illustrating the injustice and impossibility of granting even a drop of water. The rich man and Lazarus have, so to speak, traded places from life to afterlife and Abraham grants that this is fair given what each experienced in life (v. 25).³⁴ But further, the patriarch, refers to a great chasm that divides them (v. 26). The verb

³³ Order is the most complex of the three. Due to its complexity, it is described under *Time* in this analysis, the following section.

³⁴ A theodicy issue arises here since burning in Hades (forever?) seems unequal justice for a life of perhaps 70 years spent in disregard of the needs of others. This detail is one of the challenges for those who take the parable as a depiction of what actually happens after death and for those who argue for an eternally burning hell.

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“has been fixed” is a perfect passive (ἐστήρικται “support, make firm, strengthen”). This format is typical of action by God—a “divine passive.” It is rather striking that Abraham intimates that someone from his side might want to come relieve the rich man’s suffering, but, because of the chasm set by God, it is impossible.³⁵

The rich man shifts his plea to send Lazarus to his brothers. But Abraham twice denies the request, citing in each case that the brothers should listen to Moses and the Prophets. Abraham does not say to listen to their writings, but to Moses and the Prophets themselves, as though these ancient writers were still speaking (cf. Heb 11:4). And, of course, the writings of Moses and the Prophets were read each week in the synagogue. Thus, their voices were still being heard. But, from what the rich man says, it appears the brothers are not listening, hence, his request for Lazarus to return from the dead to warn them. Abraham argues that ears closed to Moses and the Prophets would not be open to a risen witness. The truth of these words finds fulfillment in another Lazarus who did rise from the dead, but whom the religious leaders plotted to kill along with Jesus to silence his witness (John 12:9–11).

Four gaps appear in the story—Why is Lazarus given the place of honor (v. 22)? Why does the rich man ask for the smallest of mercies (v. 24)? Why does Abraham refuse to send Lazarus (v. 29)? Do the five brothers repent (v. 30)? The first and third are filled in the narrative. Lazarus receives the place of honor in the afterlife because he had suffering in life (v. 25).³⁶ Abraham does not send Lazarus because the brothers already have the witness of Moses and the Prophets (vv. 29, 31).

³⁵ Again, the rather troubling theodicy issue that this circumstance raises for those who hold that the parable depicts what actually happens after death is that the saved would seem to have more mercy and compassion in their hearts than God does. And this, again, would stand in contrast to Abraham’s plea for mercy and God’s granting of mercy to Lot as depicted in the story of Genesis 18–19.

³⁶ That is the simple expression in the text, but commentators quite commonly seek to explain more deeply (cf. Bauckham, “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” 232). Was Lazarus godly? And why would suffering merit comfort in the afterlife? This aspect of the gap is more elusive. However, the reference to Moses and the Prophets helps fill this aspect of the gap. The Old Testament is filled with calls for mercy for the widow, the orphan, the foreigner. Why? Because these are the people in society without a voice, without resources, without protection. If humans do not help them, God will. This truth explains the exaltation of Lazarus to comfort at Abraham’s side—God’s mercy bestowed in the face of human indifference. There is no virtue in suffering or poverty, per se. However, those who pass through these can, by the grace of God, grow and develop through the experience.

The other two gaps are not filled, though some hints appear in Luke. The gap concerning the drop of water parallels the request of the prodigal son in 15:17–19. In the prodigal’s situation asking again for sonship would suggest arrogance and not repentance. The smallest request, to be a servant, if granted would still be a demonstration of mercy, but in a relationship of reciprocity and a culture of honor/shame it would seem more appropriate for a dishonored suppliant to request.

The same is true for the rich man, but with one major difference. The prodigal was alive, the rich man is dead. The rich man’s small request would suggest some remorse on his part, just as the prodigal’s humble request seconded his expression of repentance (“I have sinned against heaven and in your sight” 15:18–19). But the fact that the request for mercy by the rich man is consistently denied would play into the focus of the story—that the time for repentance and change is during life, not after death. The rich man cannot make up for his sins in the world of men by remorse in the hereafter. Therefore, his request is consistently denied.

The last gap, whether or not the brothers listened to Moses and the Prophets and repented, as we noted above, is part of the appeal of the parable—that now in this life is the time to repent and show mercy and concern for the poor. We notice that both unfilled gaps point in the same direction—repent now, help others, or face judgment.

Time

The order in which a story is told is a fascinating but complex storytelling device to analyze. Telling events out of order is known as anachrony. It comes in two forms—prolepsis (telling something from the story world’s future in the story’s present) and analepsis (telling something from the story world’s past in the story’s present). Often these disorders in story show up in speeches, because people quite regularly talk about the past or future in their conversations.³⁷ The same occurs in this parable, particularly in the conversation between the rich man and Abraham.

The anachronies are mainly prolepses related to the showing of mercy. The rich man requests it, Abraham refuses it each time. First the

³⁷ Some analysts call an analepsis that appears briefly in a conversation a “back flash” instead of a “flashback.” This procedure is used to describe a brief analepsis and not an entire scene. See James Scott Bell, *Plot & Structure* (New York, NY: Writer’s Digest Books, 2004), 197. It is still an analepsis so we utilize here the more technical terminology.

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rich man asks for a minor mercy for himself, a drop of water to cool his tongue (v. 24).³⁸ Abraham responds with an analepsis looking back on the rich man's life (v. 25). He has already had his good things and Lazarus his bad things. Abraham also looks back with a reference to a chasm that God has fixed between them (v. 26).

Next the rich man asks for his brothers, another prolepsis looking for mercy to be shown to them by Lazarus warning them, because the rich man does not want his brothers to come to the place of torment where he is (vv. 27–28). It is again a trajectory requesting mercy be shown, this time to his family. Interestingly, Abraham's response switches to prolepsis, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." (v. 29). Abraham refers to the ancient revelation that is presently in hand and argues that the five brothers should listen to it.³⁹ The patriarch thus ties together revelation from the past with current duty to show mercy, evidently, something the brothers are not doing.

The rich man protests that "No, Father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (v. 30). The rich man continues his persistent use of prolepsis to paint a picture of showing mercy, thus saving his brothers from his fate. The "punch line" comes in verse 31 as Abraham again refuses with the final prolepsis, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

The rich man consistently projects a trajectory of mercy which is always answered with denial in a trajectory of justice. The rich man does not receive mercy because he did not show it.

The only analepses (vv. 25–26) relate to God's actions of entrusting the rich man with riches on earth, and also setting the chasm between heaven and Hades. The rich man did not sense the responsibility laid on him by the first (receiving riches), so he consequently experiences the second—the fire of Hades.

Narrator/Reader/Stylistic Features

The narrator of the story is omniscient, typical of biblical stories. The narrator does not intrude into the story with any asides. The distance

³⁸ It is a prolepsis because it has not happened at the point the rich man asks for it. He is projecting an arc of Abraham and Lazarus showing/giving mercy.

³⁹ Notice the past (ancient revelation), present ("they have") and future ("let them listen") all linked in one sentence. This procedure provides a cosmic scope to the patriarch's response—past, present, and future combine to counter the rich man's request.

from the story in the first scene is at a sufficient distance to see both the rich man in his house and Lazarus outside. However, in the second scene the view draws back to be able to take in both the rich man in Hades and Abraham and Lazarus in the realm of heavenly bliss with a wide chasm between. However, the location of the narrator is not so far back that the reader cannot hear the conversation that ensues between the rich man and Abraham. This perspective creates some tension since one wonders how it is possible to take in heaven and Hades in one view, a wide chasm between, and yet the ability for the rich man and Abraham to carry on a conversation that the reader can hear. This detail points toward the imaginary character of the narrative. The ideology of the narrative is clear—God is the arbiter of all humans, both the rich and poor, the good and evil. He sets the ground rules on display in the writings of Moses and the Prophets.

The reader is likely expected to be acquainted with the folktales of visits to Hades as documented by both Bovon and Bauckham in the first article of this study.⁴⁰ The narrator does not refer to these other stories, but the parallels are clear so that it is likely that Jesus made use of the motifs from these stories in presenting his teaching. The storytelling method is even-handed, the reader learns the plot and progress of the story in conjunction particularly with the rich man who carries forward the conversation with Abraham. But Abraham has the last word in the denouement of the story.

Three stylistic features appear in the story. First, a chiasmic structure of reference to the rich man and Lazarus (vv. 19–22, 25) in the typical fashion of A B B' A' (rich man, Lazarus, Lazarus, rich man). This feature plays a part in the reversal motif that runs through the parable. Settings and dialogue illustrate this motif of reversal with life followed by afterlife, Hades in contrast to heaven, suffering in contrast to comfort, justice in contrast to mercy. The third stylistic feature is the broad use of hyperbole throughout the parable—extreme wealth, grinding poverty, Hades versus heaven, torment versus comfort, the smallest mercy versus severe justice, good things versus bad things. These details help to illustrate the parabolic nature of the story and make its sharp point that this life is the location to do good to others because there is no opportunity to change after death.

⁴⁰ Bovon, *Luke 2*, 476–7; Bauckham, “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” 225–31, 234–42. Cf. also the analysis of Papaioannou, *Geography of Hell*, 115–22.

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Conclusion of Narrative Analysis

Typically narrative features point together toward the major teaching encapsulated in the story. What is clear from the above review of narrative data is that a variety of narrative characteristics work together to press home the central teaching of the parable that in accordance with the testimony of the Scriptures (Moses and the Prophets) the present life is the time to show mercy to those in need. Let us summarize these data.

The hyperbole visible throughout the parable raises distinct contours of difference between the two men, the rich man and Lazarus—mutely exemplifying the injustice of great need not receiving help from great resources. The settings illustrate the grand reversal when God intervenes—great want receives mercy, great indifference receives just punishment.

The characterization in the parable also displays the sharp contrasts between the characters and their reversal. Even the character of Abraham displays a contrast from his behavior in pleading for Sodom and Gomorrah. In the parable he is the exponent of strict justice. The plot of the story is Rags to Riches (Riches to Rags) resolving the twofold problem of great need and lack of help from great wealth. The complication of the rich man's requests to Abraham and Abraham's responses to him place on display the underlying values of the importance of listening to the ethical appeal of the Law and the Prophets. The contrast between Abraham in the afterlife from Abraham in life (Gen 18) helps remind the reader of the imaginary character of the story. The open ending of the story drives home the principle of virtue—reminding the reader of the weighty responsibility that resources given by God place upon the receiver to help a suffering neighbor.

The iterative actions of the story in the opening scene illustrate the everyday, mundane but ongoing character of the lives of the two men, showing that the rich man's neglect was not momentary. The tableau nature of the conversation of the rich man in Hades with Abraham at table with Lazarus arrests the listener's attention. The unfilled gaps of why the rich man asked for the smallest mercy and the question if the five brothers repented both point toward the importance of showing mercy in life. There is no opportunity for change afterward.

The vast number of prolepses in the story revolve around the request for mercy. The rich man pleads for it, Abraham refuses it. Those who refuse to show mercy in the present life will receive justice in the afterlife. The chiasmic structures in vv. 19–22, 25 point toward the grand

reversal that God's justice brings and the hyperbole throughout the parable heightens the awareness of the call for ethical behavior.

All these details point to the central teaching of the parable: Showing mercy in this life to those in need is practicing justice. A failure to do so leads to justice with no mercy in the afterlife. If you show mercy in this world, you receive it in the next. If you do not show mercy, what you receive is justice (what you deserve). This plays in to the Lukan theology of forgiving and helping others, because if you do not, you will not receive forgiveness and mercy from God (Luke 6:20–45; 10:25–37; 11:1–4; 12:33; 14:12–14; 18:22).⁴¹

Application of the Parable to Life Today

The parable is a clear, forthright reminder that helping those in need is the privilege and responsibility of the Christian. The parable is not a description of what happens when you die, but rather is an imperative on how to live.⁴² Each of us comes in contact with those in need. It can be tempting to judge or prejudge how they came into their lot. Such assessment can lead to fatal inaction and complacency not unlike the rich man in the parable. Better to help “too much” than to wait for “the worthy poor” to come along.

But the question of what “need” is arises as well. Many people feel they do not have enough themselves and that if they had “a little more,” then they would have sufficient to help others. It is a mirage that recedes into the distance. Money is seductive and its use for personal “needs” can be intoxicating as happened to the rich man in the story. In contrast, it is better to set aside some set amount or percentage on a regular basis for helping others than to wait for some great rise in resources to enable generosity.

In the ancient world the means of helping the poor was through personal charity particularly in patron client relationships, or in Judaism through community agencies.⁴³ In modern societies governmental social safety nets have taken over most of these functions that help ease the

⁴¹ See Bock, *A Theology of Luke and Acts*, 352–7.

⁴² Seccombe, *Possessions and the Poor*, 177, “The rich man’s fate is sealed; there is no reprieve for him. But his story is meant as a warning to the living. His brothers are in danger of sharing his fate.”

⁴³ See Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 67–8, 575–6.

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weight of grinding poverty. This procedure of easing suffering is in keeping with the parable's implied ethic of helping the poor.⁴⁴

However, these governmental structures do not absolve us from personal benevolence for those in need. The parable clearly teaches the importance of personal charity. The difference between government involvement in social support and personal action in generosity is the difference between what is required (taxes) and what is freely given. The one is used to create a broad social network greater than any individual can provide, the other keeps the heart sensitive to fellow humans in need and ties us to them in bonds of friendship that government agencies can never provide. The two in combination can help to lift up the Lazarus at our door to a place at the table where he himself can become a provider for others.

Thomas R. Shepherd, PhD, DrPH, is Senior Research Professor of New Testament at the Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University. He is also the pastor of the Eau Claire and Dowagiac Seventh-day Adventist Churches.

⁴⁴ Several of the authors cited in this study give voice to arguments in favor of the rich helping the poor or for resource equality among the people of God. Bauckham states, "[The first part of the parable, Luke 16:19–22] uses the popular motif of eschatological reversal to express the stark contradiction between that situation of flagrant injustice and the justice of God to which the poor look for remedy. If it is close to the religious folklore of the poor, it is also close to 'Moses and the prophets' (i.e. the Hebrew Bible), which hold out the ideal of relative material equality among the people of God, denounce the rich who live in luxury while the poor are destitute, and maintain the expectation of God's justice as the hope of the poor in the face of the arrogant complacency of the rich and powerful." Bauckham, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," 245–6. Where Bauckham is mistaken is in positing that the rich man was basically wrong simply because he was rich (pp. 232–3). Bock is right in arguing that it is not the possession of riches that is the problem, but what one does with them (Bock, *Luke 9:51–24:53*, 1372–73n26, "material possessions are not the point, the use of them is"). Bauckham's position borders on a dualism in which material is evil and spirit (lack of material) is good. Scripture, instead, affirms material as good and places in human hands the responsibility of their proper usage in blessing others. John Chrysostom, again, is helpful in this regard, "not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth but theirs. If we have this attitude, we will certainly offer our money; and by nourishing Christ in poverty here and laying up great profit hereafter, we will be able to attain the good things which are to come, by the grace and kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ." "Second Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man," *On Wealth and Poverty*, 55.