

# Lazarus and Dives: Lk 16:19-31

*(Leader's notes in 9-pt italics)*

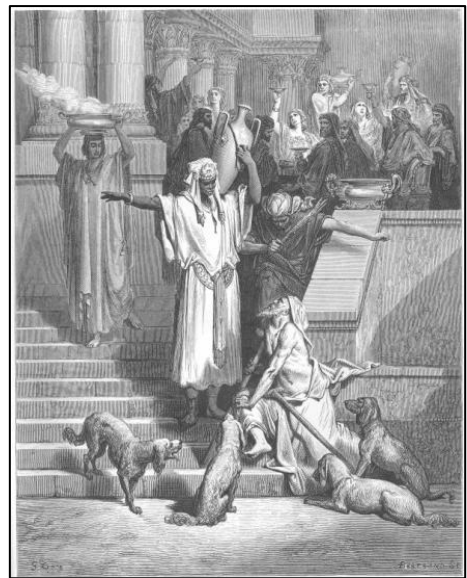
## BACKGROUND

- This parable is unique in that (a) it names two characters; (b) it carries over into the next life; (c) the characters aren't equivalents of something else, so much as types or examples. *(So, it's like the Good Samaritan, rather than the Wedding Banquet or Wicked Tenants.)*
- Lazarus was a common name, the Greek form of the Hebrew *Eleazar*, meaning 'whom God has helped.'
- *The Law and the Prophets were consistent in emphasizing the needs of the poor; e.g. Ps 103:6, "The Lord works vindication and justice for all who are oppressed," Ps 41:41, "Blessed is the one who considers the poor," Dt 15:11, "There will always be poor people in the land. Therefore I command you to be openhanded toward your brothers and toward the poor and needy in your land.", etc.*

## QUESTIONS

1. This parable is very similar to a folktale of the time:

An ancient Egyptian folktale, modified and popularized in Jewish circles, strikingly resembles the parable but lacks its emphasis on repentance through obedience to Moses and the prophets. The more well-known Jewish form of this folk-tale narrates the story of the rich tax collector Bar Ma'jan, who died and was given a well-attended, ostentatious funeral. About the same time, a poor scholar found himself in Paradise, by flowing streams, while Bar Ma'Jan found himself near the bank of a stream unable to reach the water.<sup>1</sup>



What is new in Jesus' version?

2. Why shouldn't this parable be taken as a picture of the afterlife? What *does* it say about the next life? *My Answer: Dives is in the fire, yet his brothers are still alive? In Rev 20:14 the throwing of death and Hades into the Lake of Fire occurs at the end of time (Expositor's, p. 991). As Blomberg puts it in Interpreting the Parables, "The restrictions against unlimited allegorizing and the fact that the source for much of the imagery of the parable probably was popular folklore should warn against viewing the details of this narrative as a realistic description of the afterlife." [206]. It does, though, say that our actions in this life have implications for the next, and there is a "too late"; as Blomberg again says, "More important still, the theme of 'too late' winds through the portions of the passage, weaving it into a tightly-knit unit."*
3. To whom is this parable addressed? How is this parable self-referential—and perhaps even self-contradictory?
4. Karl Barth said,

<sup>1</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (IVP, 1990), p. 204. The centrality and novelty of the second part of the parable is such that Jeremias suggested the title "Lazarus and Dives" be instead "The Parable of the Six Brothers."

God always takes his stand unconditionally and passionately on this side and this side alone: against the lofty and on behalf of the lowly; against those who already enjoy right and privilege and on behalf of those who are denied it and deprived of it.

It is not uncommon to see this parable as an expression of Luke's beatitudes (6:20-26; see also 1:53). However, Michael Wilcock<sup>2</sup> asserts that this isn't primarily about money:

Only incidentally, we realize, does this parable deal with wealth... the story could equally well have featured a politician with his power, or an academic with his brains, or even a preacher with his eloquence—indeed anyone with any kind of resources or skills. Every man possesses something of the sort, be it no more than a heart and a hand and a span of life; and to every man is given some 'Lazarus at the door', a test case as to whether we will use those possessions rightly or wrongly, with love or with self-indulgence, bringing God's will into the matter or leaving it out...

Augustine has a similar take:

I think that we have proved that Christ did not object to the riches of the rich man but to his impiety, infidelity, pride and cruelty... The rich must not start saying that I have agreed to be their advocate. They felt afraid, after all, when reminded of the gospel. When they heard about the rich man hurled into the pains of hell, they felt afraid. I have reassured them. They do not need to fear riches but vices. They should not be afraid of goods but of greed. Let them possess wealth like Abraham, and let them possess it with faith. Let them have it, possess it and not be possessed by it. [ACCS]

Do you agree? What, *including your first-world wealth*, are your "riches"? Who, then, is your "Lazarus"? Following Augustine, what vices need you fear?

5. Regarding the conclusion of the parable (v. 31), Blomberg writes, "One is tempted to generalize the... parable even further and agree with Cadoux that the passage illustrates how often 'conscience is not convinced nor the spiritual world vindicated by signs.'"

How have signs played a role in your faith?<sup>3</sup> Could the vast revival in Africa occur *without* signs?

*Fun fact:* "The vagueness of 'a certain man,' was intolerable for early readers, and some early 'improvements' were made, such as the insertion of the name Neues in P<sup>75</sup>." [*Expositor's*, p. 993.] Note also: "Dives" is Latin for "rich." Augustine read an earlier text in which Dives isn't named; he believed this is because Dives' name isn't found in the book of life.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Message of Luke* (IVP, 1979), p. 161

<sup>3</sup> John records a range of responses to Jesus' miracles: Jn 2:23: "Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast, many people saw the miraculous signs he was doing and believed in his name"; Jn 4:48: "Unless you people see miraculous signs and wonders... you will never believe"; and Jn 12:37: "Even after Jesus had done all these miraculous signs in their presence, they still would not believe in him."

## The Parable of the Unforgiving Servant: Mt 18:21-35

“The parable emphasizes that no one can offend our human moral sensibilities as much as everyone offends the moral sensitivities of a perfect God.”

—Keener

### BACKGROUND<sup>4</sup>

- “Judaism also stressed forgiveness, but some teachers saw the need to limit forgiveness to three instance of *premeditated* sin, whose repentance was not genuine.”
- A myriad, or 10,000, was the largest number named in Greek; everything larger was expressed in multiples of myriads (as in 1 Clement 34:6).
- A talent the largest unit of currency. “The combined annual tribute of Galilee and Perea just after the death of the repressive Herod the Great came to only 200 talents...; the tribute of Judea, Samaria, and Idumea came to 600 talents...” So “the poor man owes the king more money than existed in circulation in the whole country at the time!”
- This parable is similar in message to a passage from the inter-testamental *Ecclesiasticus* (also called *Sirach*), a Jewish wisdom book written in the 2<sup>nd</sup> cent. B.C.:

Anger and wrath, these also are abominations, yet a sinner holds on to them.

The vengeful will face the Lord’s vengeance, for he keeps a strict account of their sins.

Forgive your neighbors the wrong he has done, and then your sins will be pardoned when you pray.

Does anyone harbor anger against another, and expect healing from the Lord?

If one has no mercy toward another like himself, can he then seek pardon for his own sins?

If a mere mortal harbors wrath, who will make an atoning sacrifice for his sins?

Remember the end of your life, and set enmity aside; remember corruption and death, and be true to the commandments.

Remember the commandments, and do not be angry with your neighbor; remember the covenant of the Most High, and overlook faults. [27:30-28:7]

- Note Mt 6:14-15, where Jesus says, “For if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins.” (See also Mt 5:7, blessed are the merciful; and 6:12, the Lord’s prayer.)
- “For the most part ‘forgiveness’ in the NT and the apostolic fathers is a translation of the Greek word *aphesis*, the basic idea of which is ‘release’” [*Dict. Later NT & Dev.*].

### QUESTIONS

1. In Bonhoeffer’s sermon *On Forgiveness*<sup>5</sup>, he observes that forgiveness is not the same as indifference, or “live and let live.” How do you see this distinction in this parable, or in the greater context of Mt 18?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Craig S. Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1999), p. 458-459.

<sup>5</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *A Testament to Freedom* (Harper San Francisco, 1995), p. 260.

<sup>6</sup> Note that the only synoptic parallel to this passage is Lk 17:3-4: “If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him. If he sins against you seven times a day, and seven times comes back to you and says, ‘I repent,’ forgive him.”

2. In telling this parable, Jesus clearly implies that forgiveness is a choice within our power to make. What advice does Bonhoeffer give for making this choice—i.e., how does he answer the question he poses in his final paragraph, “What path brings us to heartfelt forgiveness of one another for every sin?” (Compare Lk 7:36-50, about the anointing of Jesus’ feet at the house of Simon the Pharisee; and 1 Jn 4:19; Col 3:13; Eph 4:32—we love because He first loved us.)

Have you found it effective to dwell on the grace you have received?

3. Extensive controlled psychological research has shown that forgiveness is linked to psychological well-being, physical health and improved interpersonal relationships. Propensity to forgive is correlated with reduces risk for nicotine addiction and substance abuse, depression and anxiety. It is even associated with high satisfaction with life.

One major researcher in the field has developed a process for forgiveness, employing journaling or talk therapy.<sup>7</sup> This process includes four main phases, which he describes as: Uncovering your anger; Deciding to forgive; Working on forgiveness; Discovery and release from emotional prison. While he emphasizes that the process is particular to an individual and his or her context, and is not necessarily linear, it has been shown to increase measures of forgiveness.

How deliberate are you in seeking forgiveness? What techniques have you found successful?

4. Jesus is adamant that our forgiveness of others must accompany God’s forgiveness of us. Based on these passages, forgiveness—showing grace to others—is a necessary trait of discipleship.

In Oct 2007, the Amish community in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania astounded the nation with their public forgiveness of a man who murdered ten girls from their community. Even given their admission in the following weeks that they struggled to offer complete forgiveness, their actions dramatically set them apart from the culture at large and even the American Christian community.

Is ours a community of forgiveness? If not, what would it take to become one?

*Fun quotation:* “...[Christ] desires that, by our compassion, we shall raise up those who have fallen. This doctrine is very necessary, because naturally almost all of us are peevish beyond measure...” (Calvin, *Comm. on Matthew, Mark, Luke, Vol. 2*).

*Fun fact:* Heb 10:26-31 on the surface implies that God only forgives those who stop sinning after conversion. Because of the enigmatic passage, “the practice of putting off baptism until one’s deathbed became widespread” in the early church. “In reaction to this practice,” the writer of the second-century “Shepherd of Hermas modified the idea to admit a second repentance after baptism”—which must be followed by a blameless life (*Dict. Later NT & Dev, on forgiveness*).

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<sup>7</sup> Robert D. Enright, *Forgiveness is a Choice* (Amer. Psych. Assoc., Wash., D.C., 2001).