

Christmas 2018

“Crazy Rich Pharisees”

Ask someone what is their favorite Christmas movie, and most will answer with one of the classics:

- *Its a Wonderful Life*
- *Miracle on 34th Street*
- *A Christmas Story*
- *Home Alone*
- *White Christmas*
- *Elf*
- *The Santa Clause*

Inevitably someone will say, *Die Hard*. After all, it was Christmas when John McClain saved Nakitomi Plaza.

A lot of folks, however, object because they just don't think of *Die Hard* as having the proper Christmas spirit.

Ask someone what is their favorite Christmas Bible verse, and most will answer with one of the classics:

- Isaiah 9:6 For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
- Matthew 1:23 "BEHOLD, THE VIRGIN SHALL BE WITH CHILD, AND BEAR A SON, AND THEY SHALL CALL HIS NAME IMMANUEL," which is translated, "God with us."
- Luke 1:30 & 31 Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS.
- John 1:14 And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.

What if I suggested the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus?

If you're not immediately familiar with it, let me read a portion to give you the gist of it:

Luke 16:19 "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day.

Luke 16:20 But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate,

Luke 16:21 desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

Luke 16:22 So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried.

Luke 16:23 And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

I'll bet none of your Christmas cards featured that parable. More than a few folks would object to that as a suitable text for Christmas. It seems to lack the proper Christmas spirit.

It might surprise you who *did* think of the Rich Man and Lazarus as an inspiring Christmas tale. None other than the man who wrote perhaps the most endearing Christmas fiction of all, Charles Dickens.

First published in 1843, it has never been out of print. There are umpteen dramatized or animated adaptations of it; there are new ones every year. I'm talking about, *A Christmas Carol*.

There is good reason to believe that the Dicken's classic has its roots in the Rich Man and Lazarus:

1. First, there is a rich man - Ebenezer Scrooge - who sees his death, and there is a poor 'man' - Tiny Tim - who is going to die.
2. Second, it is made clear that Scrooge is headed to torment in the afterlife.
3. Third, around the time *A Christmas Carol* was published, Dickens wrote a short biography of Jesus for his children, titled *The Life of our Lord*. The "Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man" was one of only eight stories that Dickens chose to include in that volume.
4. Fourth, the Sunday after Dickens was buried in Westminster Abbey, Dean Arthur Penrhyn Stanley, preaching on exactly this parable, spoke of Dickens as the "parabler" of his age. Stanley said that "By [Dickens] that veil was rent asunder

which parts the various classes of society. Through his genius the rich man... was made to see and feel the presence of Lazarus at his gate.”

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is, if you'll pardon the pun, the *Die Hard* of the parables, in more ways than one.

From this day forward, every time you see, or read, a version of *A Christmas Carol*, it is my hope that you will think of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus that inspired it.

By the way: Many scholars argue this is not so much a parable as it is a true account. They point out that it is the only time Jesus used real names - Lazarus, Abraham, and Moses.

The first thing I want to say is that the parable isn't about being rich; it's about being **right** - specifically, being right with God.

Jesus was talking with men from a sect of the Jewish religion known as the Pharisees. They considered themselves right with God because of their meticulous adherence to the written Laws of God.

For example, in one place we're told that these guys were so meticulous about giving God 10% of their wealth that *they gave 10% of their spices*. Here is what Jesus said:

Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.

You see where Jesus was coming from. Their problem wasn't that they were rich; it was that they were not right with God.

Behind all this is a fundamental biblical principal. It was stated most clearly by the apostle Paul when he said, “We know very well that we are not set right with God by rule-keeping but only through personal faith in Jesus Christ. How do we know? We tried it - and we had the best system of rules the world has ever seen! Convinced that no human being can please God by self-improvement, we believed in Jesus as the Messiah so that we might be set right before God by trusting in the Messiah, not by trying to be good” (Galatians 2:16 MSG).

Are you trying to be good? Do you think that if you do more good than bad that you will be accepted into Heaven when you die?

Then you are the rich man in this Christmas tale. You need to be rich in faith. If you're not, you are the *poor* rich man.

Let's meet the rich poor man. Lazarus was beyond poverty. He had to be carried to the rich man's gate to beg. He was covered in foul sores from head to toe. The household dogs had it better than him. They, at least, *did* get table scraps.

It was unthinkable to a Pharisee that such a person could be accepted into Heaven. His condition was, to them, a sign of God's displeasure. He was getting what he deserved in their minds.

It wasn't simply that the rich man lacked compassion. His works-based understanding of God's Law encouraged him to despise Lazarus.

This story is not about being poor, either. It is about being **poor in spirit**. Jesus promised, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, For theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mathew 5:3). Lazarus' afterlife destination proves he was indeed among the poor in spirit - he was one who was rich in faith in God to save him.

We read elsewhere in the Bible, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; *it is* the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

The poor rich man and the rich poor man died and both arrived in a place called Hades.

It is a temporary abode for your spirit when it leaves your physical body at death.

Luke 16:24 "Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'

Luke 16:25 But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.

Luke 16:26 And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

I find it interesting that the rich man knew Lazarus' name. I doubt he knew it in life; but he knew it in the afterlife.

The Bible is very informative regarding the afterlife. The moment you die, your spirit leaves your body.

From the creation of the world until Jesus Christ, the spirits of all the deceased went to Hades - described for us here. It is divided by a chasm into two areas:

- One is a place of bliss and comfort, called Abraham's Bosom in honor of the father of the Israelites. It was called Paradise by Jesus.
- The other area is a place of unrelenting torment.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ three days after His death on the Cross changed the population of Hades. He descended there, and took those in Paradise with Him to Heaven. Now when a believer dies, he or she is said to be immediately absent from their body, and present with the Lord in Heaven.

Jesus left behind in Hades all those who were not right with God by faith. If you're not a believer - When you die, you will go to Hades to await your final destination, which is Hell.

Death abruptly ends your opportunities to have faith in Jesus and be saved. There is no second chance after death.

The poor rich man realized it, and begged for his family on the earth:

Luke 16:27 "Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house,

Luke 16:28 for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'

Is there really a place of torment? Is it forever?
Speaking about Hell, John Walvoord wrote:

According to the Bible... Hell is just as real as Heaven. The Bible clearly and explicitly teaches that Hell is a real place to which the wicked/unbelieving are sent after death. We have all sinned against God. The just punishment for that sin is death. Since all of our sin is ultimately against God, and since God is an infinite and eternal Being, the punishment for sin, death, must also be infinite and eternal. Hell is this infinite and eternal death which we have earned because of our sin.

You don't have to go there. In fact, God has gone to great lengths to keep you from going there. He has revealed Himself to mankind, and shown the way to Heaven.

Luke 16:29 Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

Abraham's testimony was that God has revealed Himself sufficiently for a man to have faith in Him, thereby entering Heaven after death and avoiding Hell. To an Israelite like the poor rich man, He had supremely revealed Himself in their Scriptures - what we call the Old Testament.

Today we have even more. We have the New Testament as well as the Old.

What about those around the world that have no Bible? They have the witness of God's creation to their conscience. In fact, in one place God said He was the one Who scattered men everywhere in the hope they would seek after Him, and find Him.

God is not willing that anyone should arrive in Hades, or afterward be consigned to Hell.

Luke 16:30 And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

Luke 16:31 But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' "

The poor rich man reasoned that if Lazarus rose from the dead, his brothers would believe.

In what classic Christmas tale does a man return from the grave to warn his partner? Jacob Marley does in *A Christmas Carol*. It's abundantly clear that Dickens had this parable in mind as he wrote.

A lot of people demand a sign from God. It seems like it would be effective. It's not.

Just a short time later Jesus did raise a man from the dead, *another man named Lazarus*.

The result was that the Pharisees and the other religious leaders of Israel began to plot more earnestly to kill both Jesus and Lazarus.

Scrooge sees Tiny Tim's death, and his own death and destiny, and it stuns him to action.

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is meant to stun you to spiritual action.

The action isn't to do more good works - like buying a turkey for the Cratchit's. It is to realize that no amount of good works can save you, but that faith in the risen Lord, Jesus Christ, does.

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved.

- Call upon the Name of the Lord.
- Then talk to someone you know who has identified themselves as a Christian.