



"Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Disbelief"

Most popular non-Biblical Christmas story of all time?

I didn't say your favorite. Most popular. And it's not *Die Hard*. BTW: You die hard *Die Hard* fans - Do NOT Google Die Hard + Ambulance while you're here. Do it later.

A Christmas Carol, by Charles Dickens, was an instant classic. It's full title is, *A Christmas Carol. In Prose. Being a Ghost Story of Christmas.*

Published on December 19, 1843, the first edition sold out by Christmas Eve. By the end of the year thirteen editions had been released.

In 1849 Dickens began public readings of the story, which proved so successful he undertook 127 further performances until 1870, the year of his death.

A Christmas Carol has never been out of print and has been translated into several languages. The story has been adapted umpteen times for film, stage, opera, and just about every other media:

- There have been at least 23 motion picture adaptations.
- 62 theater adaptations.
- 4 operas.
- 29 television adaptations (with new ones every year).
- 5 graphic novels.



Then there are the radio performances, recordings, and straight-to-DVD's. It's almost impossible to count what are classified as 'derivative works,' where the storyline, or a character, are utilized.

For all its popularity, you almost never hear anything about what inspired Dickens.

There are good reasons to believe that Dickens had a Bible story in mind.

But not one that most people would in any way think of as representative, or even appropriate, for Christmas.

It's the story of the Rich Man & Lazarus. It is found in the sixteenth chapter of the Gospel of Luke. Let me read it to you in its entirety:

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.

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.'

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.'

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

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.' "

Try reading *that* before opening gifts on Christmas. It will certainly set a mood. It's reminiscent of *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. Yet this WAS Dickens' inspiration:

1. First, there is the 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 like the Rich Man, Scrooge, beyond death 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, a passage in a book titled, *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens*, mentions the Rich Man & Lazarus in a sentence together with Scrooge.
5. Fifth, and most significantly, 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 story of the Rich Man & Lazarus is often called a parable. It isn't. It doesn't follow the rules of a parable:

1. For one, in a parable there are people or things that represent other things. In the Parable of the Sower, for example, the seed represents the Word of God; and the soil, the various conditions of the human heart. In the story of the Rich Man & Lazarus, everything is itself - not a representation.
2. For another thing, parables do not name their characters. If this was a parable, it was the only one Jesus told that used a proper name. Lazarus was a real person, and the description of him was his true daily life.
3. You may also have heard the Rich Man referred to as Dives, as if that was his name. Dives means *wealthy*. The 'name' was given to him by translators and commentators to further emphasize to readers that this is not a parable.

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. Their wealth was, to them, evidence that God was pleased with their devotion.

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 to God*. 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. For all their claim to scrupulously keep the Old Testament Law of God, they were not right with God.

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. With a little seasoning, I might add.

It was unthinkable to a Law-keeping Pharisee that such a person could be right with God. His destitute condition was, to them, a sign of God's displeasure. He was getting what he deserved.

Lazarus wasn't taken to a place of rest and refreshment because he deserved it. He was taken there because, in spite of his miserable condition in life, he believed God.

How can I say that? I can say that because he was greeted by Abraham, and the place was referred to as Abraham's Bosom. We are told in the Old Testament that Abraham "believed God," and it was accounted to him as righteousness. Not by works of righteousness that he had done, but by faith, was Abraham justified by God to be taken to his rest. All those taken to Hades, to wait with with Abraham, **must have like-faith**. They are there by faith, not works.

Hades. It is described as a temporary abode for a person's spirit when it leaves the physical body at death. But not everyone is in the same part of Hades after death.

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The Bible is very informative regarding the afterlife. The moment you die, your spirit leaves your body. From the creation of the world until the coming of Jesus Christ, the spirits of all the deceased went to Hades:

- One part is a place of bliss and comfort, called Abraham's Bosom. It was called Paradise by Jesus, when He promised one of the thieves crucified next to Him that "Today, you will be in Paradise."
- The other part is a waiting room of unrelenting conscious torment.

The resurrection of Jesus Christ three days after His death on the Cross changed the population of Hades.

Jesus is described in the Book of Ephesians as having descended there, and evacuated those in Paradise, taking them with Him to Heaven.

Subsequently, when a believer dies, he or she is said to be immediately absent from their body, and present with the Lord, not in Hades, but in Heaven.

Jesus left behind in Hades all those who were not right with God by faith. They wait there until the final judgment.

If you're not a believer - Death abruptly ends your opportunities to have faith in Jesus and be saved. There is no second chance after death. When you die, you will go to Hades to await your final destination, which is Hell. The Rich Man, Dives, is still there.

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



Among the many things we can glean from this is that the Rich Man understood that religion could not save anyone. It could not make a person right with God. He wanted his brothers to know that it's "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5).

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

Reading the Old Testament, it is abundantly clear that works cannot save you. Think again of Abraham, father of the Jews. He believed. It was by faith.

The Rich Man wanted Lazarus to preach; **but he had already been a sermon.** He had been a *living* sermon, in his suffering.

Here's how: The Law that these Pharisees claimed to obey talks plenty about helping the poor and needy. Earlier we quoted Jesus saying that they, "neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone."

The Rich Man had left "mercy" undone. While he weighed out his spices, to tithe, a fellow Israelite lay begging just yards away.

The very presence of Lazarus, and his treatment at their hands, condemned them as law-breakers. It revealed them as self-righteous, void of God's righteousness.

Lazarus was thus called to a very hard ministry. That's right; ministry. Do you ever think of him that way?



The Rich Man had guests all the time. Think of all the other Pharisees and scribes and visitors who would come to dine sumptuously with the Rich Man, and be confronted with Lazarus as a silent sermon.

What was his text? It could have been any number of passages, e.g., "If your brother becomes poor and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall support him as though he were a stranger and a sojourner, and he shall live with you" (Leviticus 25:35).

In life, Lazarus was carried. In death, he was again carried - but by angels. Are all believers carried? Probably not. I think Lazarus was carried after his death to remind us that after a believer dies, every pain and suffering, every sorrow and trouble, is immediately left behind. His being carried in life was overshadowed by his being carried to Hades.

Lazarus would no longer need to be carried, but he was carried one last time as a kind of representation of a life well-lived.

It's not unlike what Bob Cratchit says quoting his invalid son, Tiny Tim: "He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see."

Think of it as street theater. In the Old Testament, God frequently instructed His prophets to act out a scenario in public. Lazarus probably didn't realize that he was a street theater Gospel preacher to lost Pharisees.

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 Rich Man reasoned that if Lazarus returned 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*.

A lot of people demand a sign from God. It seems like it would be effective. It's not. Just a short time after telling this story, 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.

Ebenezer Scrooge sees Tiny Tim's death, and his own death and destiny, and it stuns him to action. His reformation reminds you of the Grinch's heart growing three sizes larger.

Here, sadly, is where Dickens falls terrifically short. Let me read to you from the end of his Christmas Ghost Story:

... to Tiny Tim, who did not die, [Scrooge] was a second father. He became as **good** a friend, as **good** a master, and as **good** a man, as the **good** old city knew, or any other **good** old city, town, or borough, in the **good** old world. He had no further intercourse with Spirits, but lived upon the Total Abstinence Principle, ever afterwards; and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge.

BTW: The Total Abstinence Principle has nothing to do with alcohol or the avoidance of other vices. It is abstinence from being bitter, mean-spirited, angry, dour, greedy, grasping, self-centered, and unforgiving. It is moral self-improvement.



As he ended, Dickens kept using the word "good." Be good; do good works. Improve yourself. In the sermon preached eulogizing Dickens, the minister concluded that his greatest achievement was that, "the Rich Man... was made to see and feel the presence of Lazarus at his gate."

That was the extent of Scrooge's reformation. Be good. It is what every religion, or philosophy, or psychology, tells you.

There's a rhyme that puts this into perspective:

*"Do this and live!" the law demands,
But gives me neither feet nor hands.
A better way the spirit brings,
He bids me fly, and gives me wings!*

Without the indwelling spirit of God, we lack the power to be good, or keep a program like the Total Abstinence Principle.

Sadly, if Scrooge were a real person, he'd die to find himself alongside the Rich Man, in Hades. No amount of good works, or self-improvement, can save you.

Was Dickens a Christian? Historians disagree. He certainly had Christian influences that come through his writings.

If he was a believer, he didn't feel the need to stress repentance and the Cross. *A Christmas Carol* doesn't point you to Jesus. Scrooge wasn't saved from sin, but from cynicism.

Scrooge needed Jesus. He needed a conversion; to be transformed by God, not merely to reform himself. He needed to be born again by repenting of his sin and believing Jesus saved him by dying on the Cross.



Why is being a good person not enough to get you into Heaven? Because no one is a "good" person; there is only One who is perfectly good, and that is God Himself. The Bible says that all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). The Bible also says that the wages of our sin is death (Romans 6:23a).

God took action to save us. While we were in our sinful state, Christ died for the unrighteous (Romans 5:8). By His death on the Cross, He exerts an influence that draws all men to Himself. He is the Savior of all men; but not all receive His salvation. Only those who believe. Salvation is not based on our goodness but on Jesus' goodness.

If we confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord, and believe in our hearts that God raised him from the dead, we will be saved (Romans 10:9).

This salvation in Christ is a precious gift, and, like all true gifts, it is unearned (Romans 6:23; Ephesians 2:8-9). The message of the Bible is that we can never be good enough to get to Heaven. We must recognize that we are sinners who fall short of God's glory, and we must obey the command to repent of our sins and place our faith and trust in Jesus Christ.

Christ alone was a "good" - good enough to earn Heaven - and He gives His righteousness to those who believe in His name (Romans 1:17).

Most of you have had your wills freed by God's prevenient grace in order to receive God's indescribable gift of salvation in Jesus.

Rejoice. Your conversion and transformation are the better ending to the story. No matter your condition or situation, you are doing street theater out in the world. Your life is a sermon.

If you have not received the Lord... It is our prayer that this year's celebration of His birth will mark **your** new birth.

