

# The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Does it Teach a Conscious Existence After Death?

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The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, as found in Luke 16:19-31, is often appealed to as proof that Jesus and the New Testament teach a conscious existence immediately after death. But is this true? I quote from several of the leading commentaries on the Gospel of Luke:

[E. Earl Ellis, *The New Century Bible Commentary, the Gospel of Luke*, pp. 201-202, 206]

The general theme of the parable is familiar to the Lord's audience ... but it is not necessarily a "true after-life story". Some have thought that Jesus tells the parable to reveal what happens after death. However, the general currency of this story-theme in Judaism does not support this view. And Jesus himself expresses contrary views elsewhere about the future life (see on Luke 20:27-40). These facts indicate rather strongly that he does not intend here to give a preview of life after death. On this almost all commentators agree ... It is probable, rather, that Jesus makes use of a well known story to illuminate certain truths about the kingdom of God ... The

picture of judgment and reward immediately at death is contrary to the usual New Testament understanding. Cf. Mt. 10:15; Acts 17:31; Jn. 5:28f.; I Thess. 4:13ff.; 2 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 20:13.

[Norval Geldenhuys, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament, The Gospel of Luke* p. 428. Geldenhuys here quotes A. Plummer from *The International Critical Commentary*]

We must remember that we have here to do with a parable and not with a real occurrence and that "it is no purpose of the parable to give information about the unseen world ... the details of the picture are taken from [popular] Jewish beliefs as to the condition of souls in Sheol, and must not be understood as confirming those beliefs ... "

[I.H. Marshall, *The New International Greek Testament Commentary*, pp. 632-633, 637]

The editorial comment in 17:1 reminds us that the audience for this parable is still the Pharisees; there has in fact been no break in the teaching of Jesus since v. 15 ... the background to the teaching is more probably found in non-biblical sources ... The general motif of this story found its way into Jewish lore, and it is attested in some seven versions ... It is clear that Jesus' parable bears some relation to this folk tale ... Jewish representations of the after-life were fluid and developing, so that consistent pictures are hardly to be expected ... It is manifest too that the details are not to be taken literally.

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