

The Rich Man and Lazarus: Hell and Heaven?

Luke 3:1-2; Luke 16:19-31

"Any text taken out of its context is a pretext." The temptation to make the Bible say things that it doesn't really say is something that we must avoid. It is amazing how often people get their understanding of heaven and hell from the story of the rich man and Lazarus. I'd like to do a little work in this lesson to show how the parable of the rich man and Lazarus is a lesson on belief in God's Word.

"Now in the fifteenth year of the reign of **Tiberius Caesar**, when **Pontius Pilate** was governor of Judea, and **Herod** was tetrarch of Galilee, and his brother **Philip** was tetrarch of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and **Lysanias** was tetrarch of Abilene, in the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John, the son of Zacharias, in the wilderness." (**Luke 3:1-2**).

The People Most Opposed Christ and His Ministry

In this Luke 3:1-2 passage, Luke is making known seven people who opposed everything about Jesus. He introduces to us seven political and religious leaders who ruled the people during Jesus' day. These seven people--two Roman rulers, three Hebrew political leaders, and two Jewish religious leaders--eventually became the chief antagonists of Jesus Christ throughout His earthly ministry. If it were not important for us to know them, Luke would have not named them. Let's take a look at them.

(A). Two Roman Rulers

Tiberius was the adopted son and sole heir of Augustus Caesar. He was the emperor of Rome (Caesar) throughout Jesus' ministry. He became co-regent of the Roman Empire in AD 12 when his ailing adoptive father (Augustus) became bedridden and could no longer function as emperor. Luke gives the date for the beginning of John the Baptist's ministry as 'the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar' (AD 26/27). Jesus once answered a question about paying taxes to Rome by saying, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's." The Caesar to whom He referred was this Tiberius in Luke 3. Augustus Caesar was emperor over the Roman Empire when Christ was born at Bethlehem. Augustus' son, Tiberius Caesar, was emperor over the Roman Empire when Christ was crucified. The second Roman official named in this text is the infamous **Pontius Pilate**, governor of Judea. He is the Roman official who presides over the trial and execution of Jesus Christ. The American modern equivalent to Tiberius Caesar would be the President of the United States, and Pontius Pilate would be a state governor.

(B). Three Hebrew Political Leaders

Luke then names three Hebrew political officials who ruled during Jesus' ministry in Judea - **Herod**, **Philip the Tetrarch** (Herod's brother), and **Lysanias**. Who are these three men? *They are the 'leaders' of the ethnic Jews in Jesus' day.* They were also the sons and political heirs of Herod the Great, the former 'king of the Jews' who died in 4 BC. Herod the Great went ballistic when the wise men asked him "Where is He who is born king of the Jews?" because he (Herod the Great) was already king of the Jews. Herod died shortly after the birth of Jesus Christ. His political kingdom was then divided into regional fourths (Greek: tetrarchys) and distributed among his surviving sons to rule (tetrarchs). Leaders of the Judean tetrarchy mentioned in Luke 3 included Herod (nicknamed Antipas), Philip (often called Philip the

Tetrarch), and Lysanias. These men were powerful among the Jews, but they couldn't do anything without Rome's permission

At the birth of Jesus, we read in Matthew 2 that Herod the Great was 'king of the Jews.' Thirty-three years later when Jesus is crucified, we read in Luke 23 that Herod orders soldiers to beat Christ and take him to Pilate. This 'Herod' at Christ's crucifixion is the Herod mentioned in Luke 3. He is the son of Herod the Great and is sometimes called Herod Antipas. The quarter of the region Herod was given to 'rule' as tetrarch included Galilee, the land where both John and Jesus based their ministries. Herod Antipas is the one who had John the Baptist beheaded (picture).

In the ethnic melting pot we call the United States, it is difficult to find a modern equivalent to the tetrarchy positions held by Herod, Philip, and Lysanias. The closest equivalent might be those men who rule over individual political parties, major corporations, unions, and other powerful economic, political, and cultural entities within America. These positions aren't the highest authority, for they must answer to 'Caesar,' but they have a great deal of influence over a specific category of people.

(C). Two Jewish Religious Leaders.

The final two men named by Luke in Luke 3:1-3 are religious leaders, two powerful priests, who both served as high priests of Israel. Their names are **Annas** and **Caiaphas**.

Modern Christians know very little about these two men. Annas was high priest over Israel for ten years (AD 6-15), until at the age of 36, he was removed by the Roman governor Gaius, the predecessor to Pontius Pilate. The other man, Caiaphas, served as high priest over Israel from AD 18 to AD 36, a time period that encompassed all of Jesus' adult life and public ministry. Annas had five sons and one daughter. His daughter married Caiaphas. Interestingly, every one of Annas' five sons--as well as his son-in-law Caiaphas--served as the high priest of Israel during Annas' lifetime. Though Caiaphas was high priest during the time of Jesus, Luke names both Annas and Caiaphas because Annas was the power behind the high priest of Israel. It was said that "Annas ruled the religious world," even though his own children were the chief priests of Israel and each had their turn as 'high priest.' It was to Annas that the people first brought Jesus after our Lord's arrest. Only after being questioned by Annas was Jesus sent to Caiaphas for official trial by the Sanhedrin. Modern religious leaders, like Annas, have a tendency to want to control and run things 'behind the scenes.'

Annas and Caiaphas hated everything to do with Christ. Caiaphas particularly was the chief antagonist of our Lord. Caiaphas lived in a palatial mansion inside the walls of Jerusalem. He served as President of the Sanhedrin. If you saw Caiaphas walking around the streets of Jerusalem, he would always have his servants and attendants around him, and he would be dressed in the finest purple and fine linen. He ate the most sumptuous meals, drank the finest wines, always traveled first class, and lived better than the 'common Jew.' The modern equivalent of Caiaphas would be the wealthy religious leaders in America who take a spiritual position of authority and power over the common people of the land.

The Group of Leaders Jesus Condemns

It is striking to discover that Jesus says very little about the corrupt Roman and Judean political leaders of His day. These leaders--men like Tiberius Caesar, Herod Antipas, and Pontius Pilate--were all evil men. Yet, Jesus says very little publicly about any of them. In fact, when questioned about the supreme political leader (Caesar), Jesus simply says "Give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar." Jesus is also

completely silent before Herod during His trial. Instead of railing against Herod's abuse of political power, Jesus says nothing. It seems Jesus had little to say about politics.

Yet, Jesus boldly and soundly condemned Annas and Caiaphas, the '**rich**' religious leaders of His day. Ironic, is it not, that modern evangelical preachers rail against and condemn President Obama, state governmental leaders, the immoral behavior of business and cultural icons, but there is an appalling silence when it comes to religious leaders who become rich off the tithes and offerings of God's people? Notice the anger and greed of the religiously rich in Jesus' day. **The Bible tells us in John 12 that after Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead.** Caiaphas and Annas sought to kill Lazarus 'because many people were going away and believed in Jesus.' These people 'going away' from the religious institutions, those governed by Annas and Caiaphas, because they had seen Lazarus, a former dead man, walking around regenerated and enlivened by the power of Christ. These people had seen the power of real religion. John the Apostle puts it like this:

"The large crowd of the Jews then learned that He was there; and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might also see Lazarus, whom He raised from the dead. But the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death also; because on account of him many of the Jews were going away and were believing in Jesus." (John 12:9-11)

There are many places that Jesus condemns the religiously rich (i.e. 'the chief priests') throughout the New Testament, but the most striking example of his imprecatory words against Caiaphas and Annas is found in a parable that is more than a parable.

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus - (Luke 16:19-31)

"(19) Now there was a rich man, and he habitually dressed in purple and fine linen, joyously living in splendor every day. (20) And a poor man named Lazarus was laid at his gate, covered with sores, (21) and longing to be fed with the crumbs which were falling from the rich man's table; besides, even the dogs were coming and licking his sores. (22) Now the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's bosom; and the rich man also died and was buried. (23) and in hell he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away and Lazarus in his bosom. (24) And he cried out and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus so that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue, for I am in agony in this flame.' (25) But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your life you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus bad things; but now he is being comforted here, and you are in agony. (26) And besides all this, between us and you there is a great chasm fixed, so that those who wish to come over from here to you will not be able, and that none may cross over from there to us.' (27) And he said, 'Then I beg you, father, that you send him to my father's house— (28) for I have five brothers—in order that he may warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' (29) But Abraham said, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them.' (30) But he said, 'No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent!' (31) But he said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead.'"

One can only fully understand this parable when you know the context (the religious leaders wanting Jesus dead, Jesus raising Lazarus from the dead, etc... Caiaphas is the rich man in Jesus parable of "The Rich Man and Lazarus." Caiaphas is the man "who lifted up his eyes in hell." Caiaphas, the equivalent to a modern religious leader who becomes rich through his religious service, is condemned by Jesus Christ.

How do we know Caiaphas is the “rich man” in the parable?

- The rich man wears the robes the color of the high priest (purple and fine linen).
- The rich man mistreats the poor man named Lazarus (just as Caiaphas sought to kill Lazarus).
- The rich man asks a messenger to go to his 'father's house' (Annas' house).
- The rich man had five brothers (Annas had five sons, Caiaphas was his son-in-law and considered his brothers-in-law to be his brothers).
- The rich man desires a warning to be given to his five brothers about their behavior (all five of Caiaphas' brothers--the sons of Annas--followed him as 'chief priest' of Israel).
- The rich man is told that they will not believe "even if someone rises from the dead" (just as Caiaphas, his father Annas, and his five brothers refused to believe in Jesus after Lazarus had been raised from the dead).

If you are a topical preacher you might pick the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus and wax eloquent on the subject of 'hell.' You might say something like (1). Hell is real, (2). Hell is rough. (3). Hell is ready. Then you might give the following application: "If you don't let go of your riches and willingly give your tithes and offerings to the church, you may find yourself waking up one day in hell, wanting to warn others to 'repent' and let go of their riches. Don't wait until it is too late! Give to the Kingdom of God today by giving your tithes and offerings!"

That, my friend, is the sorry state of evangelical preaching today. It's taking a text (the Rich Man and Lazarus) out of its context (the resurrection of Lazarus and the chief priests desire to kill Lazarus instead of believing on Christ) and turning it into a pretext (the false conclusion that the parable is about a person letting go of his money and giving it to the church).

The lessons of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus are only obtained when you systematically and intentionally learn the Scriptures, take texts in their contexts, and focus on the life transforming truth from God's word. The lessons of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus are:

- (1).** Any of us who are working in ministry to become rich through our religious service may wake up one day in hell, facing the holy judgment of God.
- (2).** Instead of railing against the world and our American culture, be it politics, business, Hollywood or some other segment of society, we preachers ought to reserve our harshest words *for the religiously rich among us*, that is those who become rich through their religious service, and focus more on policing ourselves than we do the world.
- (3).** We do our the Kingdom of Christ a service when we teach the Scriptures verse by verse because we prevent them any application from false conclusions and will give the hearer a better appreciation for the words and ministry of Jesus Christ.

The entire chapter of Luke 16 is dealing with greed, or the love of money in five separate sections:

The Parable of the Greedy and Unfaithful Steward (verses 1-8)

The Application of the Parable by Jesus to His Greedy Audience (verses 9-13)

The Greedy Pharisees' Reaction to Jesus' Words and Jesus' reply (verses 14-15)

An Example of a Faithful Steward—John the Baptist (verses 16-18)

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus - (verses 19-31).