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Luke 16:19–31—Rich Man and Lazarus

Saint Ephrem the Syrian (ca. 306–373) lived in different parts of modern-day Turkey and wrote theological works as well as poems, sermons, and hymns. Facing persecution from Persians, he spent the last ten years of his life in a cave, devoted to poverty and asceticism. He is venerated as a saint in Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Anglican communities.

When reflecting on the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31), he was particularly struck by the refusal of “Father Abraham” to grant any clemency to the condemned rich man—particularly since Abraham is known to have sought clemency for the residents of Sodom on one occasion (see Gen. 18:16–33). Was the problem simply that the rich man waited until it was too late (he was already in Hades), or was there something so insidious in his apathy toward poor Lazarus as to render his sin less pardonable than those of the Sodomites?

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being

tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'" (Luke 16:19–31)

Saint Ephrem the Syrian comments:

See then! The more the rich man lived sumptuously, the more Lazarus was humbled. The more Lazarus was made low, the greater was his crown. Why was it, therefore, that he should have seen Abraham above all the just, and Lazarus in his bosom? It was because Abraham loved the poor that he saw him, so that we might learn that we cannot hope for pardon at the end, unless the fruits of pardon can be seen in us. If then

Abraham, who was friendly to strangers, and had mercy on Sodom, was not able to have mercy on the one who did not show pity to Lazarus, how can we hope that there will be pardon for us?¹ (Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works* [Catholic University Press of America, 1994], p. 235–36).

In addition to his commentary on this parable, Ephrem also penned a hymn.²

1. Ephrem, *Selected Prose Works* (Washington, DC: Catholic University Press of America, 1994), 235–36.

2. For more information on this hymn and other works by Ephrem, see *Hymns on Paradise* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1990), 129; and David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 47–50.