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Luke 16:19–31—Frederick Douglass on the Rich Man and Lazarus

Frederick Douglass (ca. 1818–95) was an escaped slave who became a prominent abolitionist during the period of the Civil War. Later he became an ardent supporter of women’s suffrage.

He used the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus to promote both causes, focusing especially on the end of the parable in which the condemned rich man realizes his fate and appeals to “Father Abraham” to get the word to others before it is too late.

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 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)

Douglass the Abolitionist

In 1865, the year Lincoln would be shot, Douglass identified black slaves with Lazarus in the parable and he identified slave owners with the rich man:

We all know who the rich man is in this country, and who the poor man is, or has been, in this country. The slaves in the South have been the Lazaruses of the South, lying at this rich slaveholder’s gates; but, it has come to pass that the poor man and the rich man are dead, for both have been in dying condition for some time, and the poor man is said to be some where very near in Abraham’s bosom.¹

The last line would bring peals of laughter, for Douglass was using a play on words—his audience quickly associated the name

“Abraham” with Abraham Lincoln, who had recently signed the Emancipation Proclamation:

That rich man is lifting up his eyes in torments down there and seeing Lazarus up in Abraham’s bosom, calling on Father Abraham to send Lazarus back. But Father Abraham says, “If they hear not Grant nor Sherman, neither will they be persuaded though I send Lazarus unto them.”²

Douglass is also playing spatial imagery: in the parable, *down* refers to Hades, but now it can mean “the South”; in the parable, *up* refers to Paradise, but now it can mean the North.

Douglass is mixing his metaphors a bit. On the one hand, the condemned rich man is a symbol for the soon-to-be defeated southerners and the comforted Lazarus is a symbol for escaped slaves who made it to freedom in the north, from which they will not be returned. On the other hand, since Lazarus and the rich man are both dead, they can symbolize the demise of an institution: neither slaves (Lazarus) nor slaveholders (the rich man) will continue to exist in the new union.

Douglass the Suffragette

Years later (1888), Douglass took to calling himself, “a Radical Woman Suffrage Man” and insisted, “When this battle for woman suffrage shall have been fought and the victory won, men will marvel

at the injustice and stupidity which so long deprived American women of the ballot.”³

He revisited the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus in this light:

Woman’s claim to the right of equal participation in government with man, has its foundation in the nature and personality of woman and in the admitted doctrine of American liberty and in the authority and structure of our Republican government. When the rich man wanted someone sent from the dead to warn his brothers against coming where he was, he was told that if they heard not Moses and the prophets, neither would they be persuaded though one rose from the dead. Now our Moses and our prophets, so far as the rights and privileges of American citizens are concerned, are the framers of the Declaration of American Independence. If the American people will not hear these, they will not be persuaded though one rose from the dead.⁴

1. Frederick Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series 1: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame et al., 5 vols. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979–92), 4:55. For more specific references (and further commentary), see David B. Gowler, *The Parables after Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2016), 173–78.

2. Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 4:73–74)..

3. Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 5:387.

4. Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, 5:384.