Questions About Understanding the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazurus

By Pastor Ed Anderson

Please help me to hermeneutically [I think that's a real word] understand your explanation of the Rich Man and Lazurus.

Concerning the terms "certain rich man" and "Father Abraham" and "Lazurus"...how could they be metaphorical or allegorical when the plain reading of the Scripture indicates that they are literally experiencing or have experienced what the Lord was teaching? He calls Abraham and Lazurus by their names? Doesn't this indicate literal humans? Doesn't "certain" rich man indicate a literal human? Do you teach a study on Bible hermeneutics?

Answer:

Yes, "hermeneutically" **is** a real word—and you're using it exactly right!

Let's walk together through your **hermeneutical** (interpretive) questions about **Luke 16:19–31**, the story of **the Rich Man and Lazarus**—a passage that has sparked much debate about **life after death**, **hell**, and **parable vs. literal event**. Here's how we'll break it down:

Hermeneutical Framework: How to Interpret Luke 16:19–31

a

To study this passage carefully, we'll apply **classic hermeneutical principles**:

- 1. Literary Context
- 2. Historical/Cultural Context
- 3. Linguistic Structure
- 4. Theological Consistency
- 5. Biblical Comparison (Scripture interprets Scripture)

1. Literary Context: Is This a Parable or a Literal Event?

Evidence It's a Parable:

• Luke 16 follows a series of **parables** (see Luke 15–16:1–13): Lost Sheep, Lost Coin, Prodigal Son, Unjust Steward.

- Jesus often begins parables with "There was a certain man..." (e.g., Luke 15:11; 16:1).
- Parables often feature **named characters or personified ideas** (e.g., "Wisdom" is personified in Proverbs).
- The story teaches a **moral or spiritual lesson** rather than describing a historical event.

The only unusual detail:

Lazarus is the **only named character in all of Jesus' parables**—but this does **not prove literalness**, only that the story is especially vivid and memorable.

Hermeneutical Note:

Names in parables can symbolize **real categories of people** (e.g., poor, sick, faithful), not necessarily **historical individuals**.

2. Historical/Cultural Context: Second Temple Jewish Thought

- At the time of Jesus, Jewish teachings (influenced by Pharisaic oral tradition and Greek ideas) included popular **folklore about Hades**, **Abraham's bosom**, and **post-mortem reward/punishment**.
- Jesus often **used familiar imagery** from culture to make a **deeper point** (e.g., mustard seed, fishing nets, fig trees).
- The mention of "Abraham's bosom" reflects common Jewish idiom for paradise or being "with the fathers."

Hermeneutical Insight:

Jesus is not teaching **cosmology** (the nature of the afterlife), but **contrasting the arrogant religious elite (Pharisees)** with the **poor and faithful** who depend on God.

3. Linguistic Structure: How Does the Language Function?

- "A certain rich man" (Greek: *anthrōpos tis*): This is a typical parable formula, not a legal introduction.
- "Father Abraham" functions as a theological archetype—he's called "father" because he is the patriarch of Israel and represents covenantal inclusion.
- "Lazarus" means "God has helped"—a symbolic name that may represent the faithful poor.

Hermeneutical Key:

The use of **names and dialog** in parables doesn't require literal historical existence—it serves a **literary and moral function**.

4. Theological Consistency: Is the Story Compatible with Other Scripture?

Here's the biggest hermeneutical clue:

Jesus **never contradicts Himself** or the Scriptures.

Let's compare:

Luke 16 (If literal)	Clear Bible Teaching
Dead are conscious in torment or bliss	Ecclesiastes 9:5 — "The dead know
	not anything"
People can talk between heaven and	Job 14:12 — "He shall not rise till the
hell	heavens be no more"
People go to heaven/hell at death	John 5:28–29 — "Resurrection at the
	last day"
The saved watch the lost suffer	Isaiah 65:17 — "Former things will
	not be remembered"

If taken **literally**, this parable contradicts the **doctrine of the resurrection**, the **sleep of the dead**, and the **Second Coming**—which is inconsistent with the rest of Scripture.

Therefore, the story is a parable using popular imagery to deliver a spiritual warning—not a theology of the afterlife.

5. Main Point of the Parable (Hermeneutical Purpose)

Jesus is confronting the **Pharisees' love of wealth** (see Luke 16:14) and their **rejection of Scripture and the prophets**.

The key line is:

"If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead." — Luke 16:31

This is **foreshadowing His own resurrection**—and the fact that the Pharisees still won't believe, even after that miracle!

Why Use Abraham and Lazarus?

- **Abraham** represents the covenant and heritage the Pharisees boasted in.
- Lazarus represents the poor, sick, and outcast—whom they rejected.
- Jesus flips the expectation: **It's not the "privileged" but the "faithful" who** inherit the kingdom.

Final Hermeneutical Conclusion

Lazarus and the Rich Man is a parable, not a literal description of life after death.

It is a **judgment against hard-hearted religion**, not a theological map of heaven and hell.

It teaches:

- Wealth doesn't guarantee God's favor
- Neglecting the poor and rejecting Scripture brings judgment
- · There's no second chance after death
- · Faith must be genuine before it's too late

Do I Teach Hermeneutics?

Yes! I teach and have written on biblical hermeneutics—how to **rightly divide the Word of God** (2 Timothy 2:15).