

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

Yves I-Bing Cheng, M.D., M.A.

Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

www.meetingwithchrist.com

THE PARABLE OF THE RICH FOOL AND LAZARUS (1)

Luke 16:19-31

Among all the parables that Jesus had taught, there is only one which does not limit its action to events in this world but carries over into the next. It is the parable of the rich fool and Lazarus. Let's read this interesting story.

Luke 16:19. "There was a certain rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day.

20 "But there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, full of sores, who was laid at his gate,

21 "desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table. Moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

22 "So it was that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels to Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died and was buried.

23 "And being in torments in Hades, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.

24 "Then he cried and said, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame.'

25 "But Abraham said, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented.

26 'And besides all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed, so that those who want to pass from here to you cannot, nor can those from there pass to us.'

27 "Then he said, 'I beg you therefore, father, that you would send him to my father's house,

28 'for I have five brothers, that he may testify to them, lest they also come to this place of torment.'

29 "Abraham said to him, 'They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.'

30 "And he said, 'No, father Abraham; but if one goes to them from the dead, they will repent.'

31 "But he said to him, 'If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.' "

In the context of all the parables

What exactly does Jesus want to say to us in giving this parable? The rich man is the major figure of the story. The emphasis is on him. Should we say then that it is a message for the rich? Is this parable simply teaching the rich about the moral necessity of showing generosity to the poor? Charity is important indeed, but is it the main point that Jesus is making here?

In order to understand this parable, I think it would be helpful to put it in the broader context of Jesus' teaching. This is what we aim to do in our lesson today. Then in the next lesson we will go into the detail of the account. So first, let us ask this question. What essentially is Jesus trying to say in

all His teaching in parables? How do they fit together? If the parables are compared to a pearl necklace, what is the string that holds them all together?

Jesus' parables are not just a collection of loose pearls. They all revolve around one central theme: the kingdom of God. In fact, all His preaching can be summed up in this one word: kingdom.

We have mentioned before that several parables explicitly begin with the formula, 'The kingdom of God is like this...' (Mark 4:26; Matthew 13:44, 45, 47; Luke 13:18, 20). This kind of introduction tells us right away that Jesus likens the kingdom to a situation that He is about to describe in parable. When we look at the passages which do not specifically refer to the kingdom, we observe that the concept is still present. There is always a link that we can find at some point or another in the story that deals with the topic of the kingdom.

I would like to give you some statistics which, I hope, will help us appreciate the importance of this theme in the Lord's teaching. Let's just consider the word 'kingdom' and its occurrence in the gospels.

Matthew: 56x
Mark: 21x
Luke: 46x

For a total of 123 times. The word 'kingdom' is used 123 times in these three gospels, mostly in connection with the kingdom of God. We will talk about John's gospel in a moment.

Do you remember how the Lord opened His ministry? The first thing that He said when He started to preach the gospel in Galilee was, *Repent, for the **kingdom** of heaven is at hand* (Matthew 4:17)! This sentence is fundamental in Jesus' ministry because it constitutes the grounds for all His messages afterwards. The kingdom of God is at hand. Why should we repent? Because God's kingdom is coming. That is the reason.

The kingdom, the King and His subjects

Now, how do the parables help us understand better what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of this kingdom? Well, at the very least, we can say that God's kingdom has a king (God) and it has loyal subjects (the people of God).

In that kingdom, God is the King. He is sovereign. He commands his servant as He chooses (Luke 17:7-10 – the parable of the unprofitable servants) and sows His word in the heart of men (Mark 4:3-9 – the parable of the sower). He is patient. He delays the punishment of evildoers in the hope that they might turn back to Him (Mark 12:1-9 – the parable of the vine-growers) and that He will find faith on earth at the end of the age (Luke 18:1-8 – the parable of the unjust judge). He is very careful not to destroy evil where good might be destroyed as well (Matthew 13:24-30 – the parable of the tares among the wheat). He gives generously to those who ask Him (Luke 11:5-8 – the parable of the friend at midnight). He is gracious and merciful beyond all expectations, going to great lengths to seek and to save the lost (Luke 15 – the parables of the lost sheep-coin-son). He entrusts all people with the task of stewardship (Luke 16:1-9 – the parable of the unfaithful steward), and will judge them in accordance with their faithfulness or faithlessness to His charge (Luke 13:6-9 – the parable of the barren fig tree). That's what we learn from the parables about God, the divine King.

Also, in that kingdom, we find people who are prepared to abandon whatever might stand in the way of whole-hearted discipleship (Matthew 13:45-46 – the parable of the pearl). In doing so, they acknowledge their unworthiness to earn God's favor (Luke 17:7-10 – the parable of the unprofitable servants). They bring their needs to God in prayer, boldly and without shame (Luke 11:5-8 – the parable of the friend at midnight). They look forward to seeing the kingdom grow into a powerful

force despite its slow beginning (Matthew 13:31-32 – the parable of the mustard seed). They commit themselves to a life of obedience to the King, and to a life of stewardship in which they make concern for the poor a priority (Luke 16:19-31 – the parable of the rich fool and Lazarus). They know that their disobedience and faithlessness can lead to the forfeiting of spiritual privileges (Matthew 22:2-14 – the parable of the marriage feast). Those who persevere until the end will ultimately be rewarded with eternal fellowship with God and the company of all believers (Matthew 25:31-46 – the parable of the sheep and the goats). Again, this is what we discover in the parables. They depict the people of that kingdom.

What then does the kingdom of God mean? Put simply, the word ‘kingdom’ means kingship. The kingship of God. It is God’s government, God’s rules, God as King. In other words, the whole emphasis of the Lord’s teaching is that God is King. Interestingly, even when Jesus talked about Jerusalem, He sometimes spoke of it as ‘the city of the great King’, namely God (Matthew 5:35). So the kingship of God is the central theme of Jesus’ teaching.

The kingdom of God in the NT

When we come to the gospel of John and to the letters of Paul, we notice to our surprise that the word ‘kingdom’ becomes very infrequent. In all of Paul’s writings for example, the word ‘kingdom’ occurs only 14 times. This is quite amazing, isn’t it? Fourteen times compared to 123 times in Matthew-Mark-Luke. Some might be tempted to ask, ‘How come the theme of the kingdom is so important in the Lord’s teaching but not that important in Paul’s teaching?’ A question like that is based on a wrong assumption. The truth of the matter is that the kingship of God is just as important to Paul as it is to Jesus. Paul has simply used a different word for kingship. What is the word that he uses in his letters? Paul uses the word ‘Lord’. Jesus is Lord. He seldom uses the word kingdom – only 14 times. But he uses the word ‘Lord’ 289 times.

You see, there is the contrast. In the gospels, over 100 times, the emphasis is on the kingdom. When it comes to Paul, the emphasis is still there, but a different word is used. He does not use the word ‘king’ or ‘kingship’, but he uses the word ‘Lord’. Perhaps Paul found that the word ‘king’ did not carry enough the meaning that he wanted in the mind of his readers. They may be thinking of Caesar or something of that sort. Therefore he uses the word ‘Lord’. And notice: By using the word ‘Lord’, he achieves a double objective. Because ‘Lord’ in the OT is a title of God. So he wants to say that Jesus is both God and king. For Paul, Jesus is everything. He expresses beautifully this conviction in Colossians 3:11 where he says, *Christ is all and in all*.

The same thing happens in John’s gospel. John doesn’t use the word ‘kingdom’ very much – only 5 times. But he uses the word ‘Lord’ 53 times. You see, like the apostle Paul, John found another word to talk about the kingdom of God. He speaks of the lordship of Christ. Jesus is Lord because the kingdom has come in the person of Jesus. If God is really your King, then by implication you must have Jesus as Lord.

We make the same observation in Acts. In the book of Acts, the word ‘kingdom’ occurs only 8 times, but the word ‘Lord’ is found 113 times.

When we look at those statistics, it seems that wherever the word ‘kingdom’ is used infrequently, the word ‘Lord’ is used a lot. This indicates that not only is the kingship of God the central theme of the Lord’s teaching, it is also the central theme of the whole NT. The lordship of Christ. Jesus is Lord. Any discussion about faith must lead to the notion of a faith in Jesus as Lord. Your faith is genuine only if Jesus becomes the Lord of your life. That is the emphasis of the gospels and of the NT.

Lord, then Savior

Now, some Christians tend to emphasize more the fact that Jesus is the Savior. They talk more about Jesus as Savior than as Lord. I don't think that we do justice to the word of God when the gospel is presented in that way. Because you see, Jesus can never be our Savior unless He is first of all our Lord. That is the view, it seems to me, of Peter. The apostle Peter speaks of Jesus as the 'Lord and Savior', in that order (2Peter 1:11; 2:20; 3:2; 3:18). As far as Peter is concerned, Jesus only becomes our Savior when He is our Lord.

If you take the time to open a concordance and see how many times the word 'Savior' is used in the NT, you might be surprised. Here is the count.

Matthew:	0x
Mark:	0x
Luke:	2x
John:	1x
Acts:	2x
Paul:	12x

Paul speaks of Jesus as Savior only 12 times in all his epistles, but as Lord, 289 times. You don't have to do too much thinking to get the point. We don't have Jesus as Savior until we first have Him as Lord.

You notice that the word 'Savior' basically does not appear in the gospels – only 3 times. The emphasis is on the kingship of God. Either God is king in your life or He is nothing in your life. It is as straightforward as that.

Some might argue that we only looked at the word 'Savior'. 'That's not enough. You have to take into account other words'. That is a valid point. Let's take another word then. How about the word 'salvation'? All right, here are the statistics.

Matthew:	0x
Mark:	0x
Luke:	4x
John:	1x
Acts:	6x
Paul:	19x

Does that surprise you? Paul has only 19 times. That is astonishing because the whole letter of Romans is really a letter about salvation and yet, the word 'salvation' appears only 19 times in all his epistles. And remember again, Paul refers to Jesus as Lord 289 times.

Maybe we should start reviewing the way some of us present the Good News. Salvation is a wonderful gift offered by God to mankind. But we must say at the same time that without the kingship of God in a person's life, salvation is unavailable.

Those who are not in the kingdom

As we mentioned earlier, the central theme uniting all the lessons of the parables is the kingdom of God. These stories also tell us something about those who do not have that salvation, those who are not part of the kingdom.

We learn for example that profession of allegiance to Christ is inadequate in and of itself. A life yielding the ‘fruits that befit repentance’ must follow (Matthew 21:28-32 – the parable of the two sons). Positions of status in the church are no substitute for true repentance and deeds of mercy (Luke 18:9-14 – the parable of the Pharisee and tax-collector). No sin is so vile that God will refuse to forgive the repentant heart (Luke 15:11-32 – the parable of the lost son). Now is the time to make a full commitment, while judgment is delayed for just a little while longer (Luke 13:6-9 – the parable of the barren fig tree). One day, it will be too late to repent. Salvation will no longer be offered (Matthew 13:47-50 – the parable of the dragnet). That’s what we discover in the parables.

One of the most shocking aspect of Jesus’ teaching concerning those who are and those who are not in the kingdom is His consistent reversal of people’s expectations. Over and over again, He made it clear that the Jewish leaders, the religious elite, have missed the mark, while He received with open arms those that His society rejected – women of bad reputation, tax-collectors, Samaritans and Gentiles, the poor, lepers and all kinds of ceremonially unclean people.

It is precisely that kind of reversal that we see in the parable of the rich fool and Lazarus. There was this rich man who had all he asked in life and lived a life of enjoyable ease. In contrast, there was Lazarus, a poor diseased man who had one basic desire: to eat. He would have been content with scraps from the rich man’s table but he got nothing. For the people who were listening to the story, wealth was viewed as a sign of God’s blessing, poverty a sign of God’s disfavor. Then, at the moment of death, everything was reversed. The rich man ended up in hell and in torment. Lazarus was given a place of highest honor next to Abraham, the father of believers. All the benefits that the rich man possessed in this life were lost in the next, while all that the poor man lacked on earth was provided for him in the afterlife.

In our next lesson, we will look at the details of this parable and seek to understand this reversal. Why did the rich man end up in hell? What allowed Lazarus to be admitted to heaven? How is Jesus’ lordship demonstrated in this account? Those are crucial questions. We will try to answer them next time.