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The Herald of His Grace

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Volume XVII
Issue 418

The Rich Man and Lazarus as an "Admission"

by — B. Davies

It is customary to treat Luke 16:19-31 as an unrelated passage, without any connection to what precedes or even to what follows.

If we seriously examine Luke's record, it will become obvious that we have a sustained discourse commencing with Luke 15:1 and going forward to 17:10.

Moreover, it will be evident that what stands within these limits is not entirely divorced from what is recorded in the prior chapters.

That the passage is not a literal pronouncement regarding the state of the dead ought to be readily recognized by those really acquainted with the undoubted teaching of the Scriptures on that particular question.

Of prevalent ideas regarding the dead, it is very manifest that they have not been drawn from God's Word, but rather from the philosophies. It is not therefore remarkable that anything in the Scriptures which, in a superficial way, tends to afford support thereto, is made to do service in that direction, and at the same time prevents the possibility of the matter being studied in a proper way.

No apology is necessary when it is suggested that we should examine the passage to discover what it meant as it fell from the lips of our Lord. Was He actually teaching this as information concerning the dead? If not, what import has this particular passage as a part of the larger section from 15:1 to 17:10?

At the juncture to which our section is related, the ministry of the Lord had been in progress for some time. His teachings and activities had gradually led to a position where the people were divided into two classes: (1) those who wished to hear more, (2) those who resented and objected to His teaching.

Of the former were the publicans and sinners (15:1), while of the latter were the Pharisees, scribes and law teachers. The one "heard Him gladly," but the other sought to entangle Him and discredit His message. Nor was it only to His teaching that they objected. They were also against the class of persons who

were attracted, and whom He received (15:2) – They were sinners and He ate with them!

Undeniably the teaching of our Lord had a definite appeal and blessing for such as the publicans and sinners. This was too much for the Pharisees. The clash which had been gathering must be dealt with. In fact, a crisis had arisen. What, then, is the difference between the teaching of our Lord, which reached out to the publicans and sinners, and that of the Pharisees, which had nothing for those of such low standing?

The Lord now deals with the situation which is crystallized in Luke 15:1-2, and in replying to those who decry Him, He formulates matter calculated to drive home His own teaching, and at the same time to exhibit the advantage gained by the class who seek to hear Him; nor does the Lord omit to show the disadvantages of the attitude adopted by the Pharisee.

The reply contains five illustrations, and each refers to the vain assumptions of the Pharisee. His proud superiority is thrown into relief. The irony used is often most severe. If we briefly translate them into direct terms, then, in the first stage of the address, heaven does not rejoice over the Pharisee, and at the close, father Abraham does not entertain any consolation for him, but straightly condemns, and gives no hope except in the hearing of Moses and the prophets.

The special place of the Pharisees as God's stewards also comes to the front. The whole of this discourse occurs at a time when the rejection of the Messiah's proclamation of the kingdom is plain, and in the course of the Lord's answer He deals with the question of stewardship. It is shown that the fact of Messiah's rejection does not at that time necessitate the rejection of Israel, but rather a change of stewards; hence we have the significant words of 16:1, "Now He said to His disciples also."

These are followed by the details concerning the unjust steward. The disciples were to be the new stewards, and the section regarding the unjust steward serves as an exhortation to them, but it is also directed at those who have held God's stewardship, the Pharisees, scribes and law teachers. Later, and to

(see LAZARUS, page 3743) ↗

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- the affirmation of God's purpose to save all mankind through the death, burial, and resurrection of Christ (I Timothy 2:3, 4; 4:10; Titus 2:11);
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LAZARUS (continued from front page)

conclude the discourse, the Lord speaks again to the disciples (17:1-10) warning of the coming of snares, and intimating that they were not to be controlled by a mere conventional sense of duty, but rather that they must go to unlimited lengths in their divine service. Thus should they avoid being merely “useless slaves.”

Herein it is being maintained that the verses regarding the Rich Man and Lazarus are part of a discourse – the details around which commence in Luke 15:1 and do not end until 17:10, after which the Lord goes to Jerusalem.

Our main object is (a) to obtain a correct appreciation of the teaching of this story (16:19-31), (b) to see the real intention of these verses, and (c) to ascertain why the Lord used the particular matter there given. We will look at the other sections of the address sufficiently to discover the main features and so utilize the light they afford.

In answering the fault-finding Pharisee, our Lord speaks the parable of the Lost Sheep and shows the shepherd’s solicitude for the one as against the ninety-nine. Not only so, but the shepherd calls his friends and neighbors to rejoice with him. The intention behind the figures is obvious; the Lord is looking for the lost; these He has found in the publicans and sinners. The Pharisees, like the shepherd’s friends and neighbors, ought to rejoice. The Speaker makes the direct conclusion that heaven rejoices more over the one repenting than over ninety-nine just, who have no need for repentance. This is definitely ironical and is directed against His “just” listeners.

Further matter, and with the same objective, is given in that commonly known as the Lost Coin. The woman spares no trouble to find it, and finding it, she also calls friends and neighbors to join her rejoicing. Thus do God’s messengers rejoice over one sinner repenting. The attitude of the Lord’s traducers was contrary to the spirit of heaven.

The Lord continues, framing His remarks into the portion familiar to us as the Prodigal Son. Here we have the same objective as in the preceding illustrations, but the matter is considered within the family circle, where intimate relationship ought to make for definite acclamation at the recovery of prestige by relatives.

We perceive the two classes, tribute-collectors and sinners, also Pharisees, in the two sons. The one has always been circumpect, but the other the very reverse. Circumstances lead to the prodigal’s repentance, and as in the prior cases, there is rejoicing.

We get an added feature, that of one who does not and will not rejoice, and not only so, but this one raises his protest against the joy over the one who has repented and returned. The elder son is made to speak to his father of “*this son of yours*” (15:30), but is rebuked by the pointed words “*this your brother*” (15:32) over whom the family ought to rejoice that, though he was lost, yet he is now found. This is a severe censure upon the aloofness to which the Pharisee was committed.

Thus far we observe the very great stress which has been laid

on the fact of repentance; each of the three sections has indicated its value and its necessity to those who are aware that they are sinners being called by the Lord. The just person has also been shown his place; he ought to rejoice and help. Can such resist the force of the picture?

The connection with the original circumstances which gave rise to our Lord’s remarks is obvious. He has vindicated His own doings, and at the same time defended the tribute-collectors and sinners to the detriment of those who have opposed and grumbled.

Yet the Master has not finished His case; to His disciples He also speaks. The disciples are to become the new stewards and their Lord gives them a picture of the old stewards. He is not requiring them to do as the one He instances; that is certainly not His teaching! It is shown distinctly how unjustly the Pharisees acted, and how with continued injustice they seek to cover up their follies. The direct application of the matter is made by the Lord: no one can slave for two lords.

The Pharisees recognize the intention, but, still unconvicted, they sneer at Him (16:14). Matters now come out into the open:

You are those who are justifying yourselves before men, yet God is knowing your hearts, seeing that what is high among men is an abomination before God (16:15).

They may be seeking to force and snatch the kingdom of God violently (16:16), yet that is of no avail. The law will not fall (16:17). They may pretend to observe it; yet it will be maintained to the utmost detail, and to their detriment.

No amount of Pharisaic subterfuge or tradition can alter God’s precepts. They may teach their own notions as to the dismissal of a wife, but that will not succeed in removing the guilt of adultery. Thus does our Lord maintain the law in the face of the accusations against Him for His dealings with the lower class of persons.

In the next section the reply to the Pharisee becomes even more forceful. It is demonstrated to them that they stand in need of repentance. This cardinal matter of the Messiah’s message is for them as well as for others. In the illustration of the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Prodigal, their assumed superiority has not been directly questioned.

Though it has been allowed, yet it has been made clear that as the superior ones they should have been taking delight in the heed which tribute-collectors and sinners were giving to the Master. The utterances regarding the unjust steward turn directly to accuse them and reveal the truth that the Pharisees did not deceive our Lord in regard to their pretended service to God. “The Rich Man and Lazarus” deals with them personally. They also stand in need of repentance.

The real difficulty which has to be resolved lies in the manner by which that conclusion is reached. How shall we regard it? As a literal possibility? Or is it only a parable as so often thought?

The suggestion that it is a dispensational parable requires a knowledge of the details given in Romans 9 to 11, and this ►

requirement would make it difficult to understand at the time. Even if it is admitted as such, we still leave unsolved the reason why our Lord chose to throw His remarks into such language, unless we grant that the utterances do actually bear some relation to realities around the dead.

We cannot for a moment consider that our Lord states facts concerning the departed. That the dead are conscious entities is absolutely alien to the Scriptures, directly opposed to their unequivocal statements – and our Lord has been emphatic that the Scriptures fully stand. Unless we are prepared to aver that He creates a dilemma, we cannot take the passage as a record of actual happenings in the realms of the unseen.

The dead know not anything (Ecclesiastes 9:5).

Though we speak thus as regards the passage being a dispensational parable, yet it is not proposed to exclude the idea that we have a parable, but rather is it suggested that our Lord's observations were most relevant to the leading questions of the moment, and must be so interpreted.

The composition of the passage certainly has not the usual simple character associated with a parable; and, in order to clearly exhibit the case, as well as dispel all strangeness, it will be necessary to digress somewhat. We will enquire what can further be said to show that we may have other rhetorical features as the basis of a parable.

FIGURES OF SPEECH

We hold to the literal understanding of any part of Scripture, if it is at all possible, but this does not preclude the recognition of figures of speech. That the Scriptures have been given by God to reveal His ways and ultimate will, and that in so doing He has used human language is fully upheld; yet the

devices of rhetoric abound in the Scriptures. God has used figures with great precision and aptness. We have frequent cases in which God teaches most forcibly in this way, and He uses the rarer figures as well as the more generally known. There are three figures, much akin, and a brief consideration of them will assist us before coming closer to the section which is especially before us. These are Irony, Concession and Admission, to use their simple names. We find each of these used in the Word of God.

Irony

The figure Irony throws a statement into a form which we may define as a contrariety. We say what we do not actually mean. In fact, we say the opposite. The following are examples.

Go and cry unto the gods which ye have chosen; let them deliver you in the time of your tribulation (Judges 10:14).

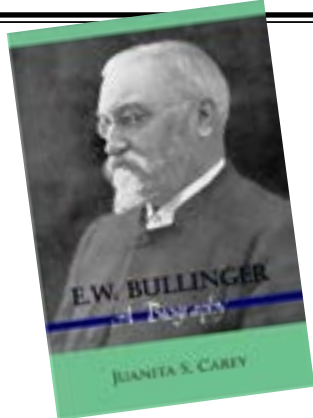
Israel was in trouble, and this is part of Jehovah's reply to them. It was not, however, Jehovah's intention for the words to be taken as literal instructions, and it had the intended salutary effect, for they turned to serve the Lord.

First Kings 18:27 contains the mocking of Elijah:

Cry aloud; for he is a god; either he is talking, or he is pursuing, or he is in a journey, or peradventure he sleepeth and must be awaked.

It is scarcely necessary to say that Elijah did not intend this to be taken as a true description of Deity, yet so far gone were Baal's prophets that the irony was wasted on them.

Job, in replying to his friend (12:2), was far from signifying what he actually thought when he said,



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No doubt but ye are the people, and wisdom shall die with you.

Job intended the opposite, for he continues:

But I have understanding as well as you; I am not inferior to you.

It is evident that Job, by this introduction, wished to show how commonplace were the notions of his friends, for he further observes,

Yea, who knoweth not such things as these?

Concession

Concession is a form of argument wherein we admit a position for the sake of advancing the discussion because we wish to consider matters from another angle and so penetrate deeper. Jeremiah 12:1 reads,

Righteous art Thou, O Lord, when I plead with Thee.

These words serve as an introduction to what is to follow. Something very different is now to be said. In fact, without such an observation it could be inferred that the Lord's righteousness was seriously questioned. Hence the speaker first makes clear that he concedes such a point, and then he goes on with his topic:

Yet let me talk with Thee of Thy judgments. Wherefore doth the way of the wicked prosper: Wherefore are they all happy that deal treacherously?

It needs but little reflection to realize the disparity between the prosperity of the wicked and the righteousness of the Lord. The prophet does not bring these matters forward simply for that purpose, but rather with a view to understanding why such conditions exist and to seek their adjustment.

Habakkuk 1:13 contains the same figure:

Thou art of purer eyes than to behold evil, and canst not look on iniquity.

Yet what follows would seem to be directly opposite:

Wherefore lookest Thou upon them that deal treacherously, and holdest Thy tongue when the wicked devoureth the man that is more righteous than he?

The prophet is advancing to comprehend the transitory nature of the activity of the wicked, and in doing so he first puts the character of Deity beyond question. In this figure it is as though we said, "Yes, I am not querying so and so; but what of so and so, the latter being matter which appears to require some explanation in the light of the former?"

Admission

In the figure Admission we temporarily concede that which is wrong in order by it to show and establish what is correct.

Unless we recognize that the prophet Micaiah was making use of this figure, when replying to Ahab's question, we shall have difficulty in understanding why he said:

Go and prosper and the Lord will deliver it into the hand of the king (I Kings 22:15).

Surely this was a good message! Why, then, did Ahab adjure Micaiah and cast him into prison? Had not Ahab's own prophets said the same?

Ahab perceived the intention of the message. Though it literally agreed with the project in Ahab's heart, yet he had serious misgivings as to the success of his intended expedition against Ramoth-Gilead. God's prophet was urging Ahab to his own destruction, whereas Ahab wished to be dissuaded from his scheme. Because of this message, couched in such terms, he should have abandoned it. The king's rebellion against Jehovah was so intense that neither the plain counsel of his ally, Jehoshaphat, nor the force of the rhetoric, availed. Ahab, recognizing the real truth behind Micaiah's words, sought to preserve himself by disguise, but to no purpose.

The same rhetorical means are employed in Ecclesiastes 11:9.

Rejoice, O young man, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth, and walk in the ways of thine heart, and in the sight of thine eyes.

The verse, however, also gives the antithesis:

But know thou that for all these, God will bring thee into judgment.

Amos 4:4-5 may also be recalled in regard to this figure:

Come to Bethel and transgress; at Gilgal multiply transgression.

God framed His message in the most powerful way, making the strongest appeal to the people, for elsewhere the literal is used (3:14; 5:5).

Matthew 23:32.

And you! Fill ye the measure of your fathers.

Though using the figure Admission, it could not be misunderstood, and it ought to have been the surest warning against the ensuing event of crucifying the Lord Jesus.

In Romans 2:17-20 the apostle acknowledges the claims of the Jew, and the statements should have been actually true of the Jew. This admission gives great emphasis to the apostle's later denial that they measured up to the standard of the law, and hence, in the judgment, will stand abashed.

From the foregoing cases it is evident that we must not treat God's Word in a superficial manner. If we study the circumstances around these Scriptures we shall realize that there was need for more than ordinary words, and the particulars of the occasions contributed to their being apprehended, and ►

with more appeal than could arise from the use of plain language. So it is in regard to the special passage which is before us as recorded in Luke 16:19-31.

In “The Rich Man and Lazarus” the Lord is dealing with formidable opposition, and it is necessary to make His remarks as pointed as possible. If we see the passage as part of a larger discourse, then we have the first essential for an understanding. Our attention is focused by the aim of the whole. This brings to the fore that the leading parties amongst the Jews did entertain teaching which was seriously different from the Law and the Prophets as well as from the doctrine of the Lord. This fact lies beneath the opposition to the ministry of Messiah, and it has to be shown that His ministry has a definite answer for all who are against Him.

We are now able to state the position which resolves our difficulty as to the material in this section of the address. The figure Admission allows its employment. For the purpose in hand our Lord admits the false as though it was true, and this then becomes the basis of a parable giving a vivid picture from which the desired conclusion can be drawn.

The traditional Hebrew ideas as to the dead were the reverse of the scriptural statements. We find them in the apocryphal writings. The historian Josephus accepted them. He sought to correct and instruct the Greeks on the topic. In his dissertation he gives expression to the notions then current; in fact, he uses the same expressions as those in Luke 16. Abraham’s bosom, the fixed gulf, and the impossibility of passing from the one side to the other. The introduction of the thought of one rising from the dead is an idea distinctly foreign to a spectacle wherein the dead are living.

The fact of the existence of these notions in the minds and teachings of the Pharisees furnished the required surroundings for the Master to use the figure Admission. He draws on those ideas, and putting them in a suitable situation, He gives a full and effective rebuke to His accusers. Their own teachings are used to demonstrate that they have real need for the primary item in the Lord’s proclamation, and that is repentance. At the same time the despised tribute-collectors and sinners are set forth as obtaining the blessing which the Pharisees arrogated to themselves. The Pharisees are put into the very position which they judged proper for tribute-collectors and sinners.

The story is not a mere flat rehearsal, but is embellished to suit the case. The two characters introduced into the traditional teaching are portrayed so that those who hear will be in no uncertainty as to the meaning. It is not merely a rich man, nor yet only a poor man, but features are added thereto with a definite intention. The rich do not necessarily adorn themselves in purple and cambric.

So also the describing of a poor man does not compel the plight of being afflicted with ulcers. Undoubtedly the description of the rich man included the purple and cambric because it refers to those who consider themselves to be the royal righteous, and probably also they are rich in view of their being provided for by God, even as enjoying the riches of His kindness. They made merry, but not over the finding of the lost.

The condition of the poor man is also most significant, and evidently it is calculated to figure the obvious sinner afflicted by God with the threatened ulcers because of disobedience to His law. Such an affliction is administered with the object of producing repentance and this poor ulcerated one has profited thereby, and yearns for that which the royal rich can supply to him out of God-given blessings. But he receives nothing from the hands of those who are able to assist. It is only the curs which give him any attention. He is beneath the regard of these rich. They leave him to find such help as can come from those as degraded as himself, mere dogs in their estimation.

The Messiah has brought details together which exactly picture the two classes into which His hearers were divided at the beginning of the discourse. One class is so excellent and scrupulous that God could not fail to bless them! Nay, they have the tokens of His blessings, the purple and cambric. They have no need for such a message as that by Messiah! They are not called to repentance! The other class is so sunken and repulsive that they merit only the attention of those equally base.

Into this scene, depicting a favorite tradition, the Messiah brings a representative from each class of His hearers, but the result He achieves is far different from that which would be expected by those who hold to such notions. The Pharisees would have made Abraham to commend them, but from the mouth of Abraham is made to issue commendation for those who sought to hear the Messiah, while unmistakable condemnation is given to the self-satisfied and unrepentant Pharisee.

The inviolability of the Law and Prophets is upheld in no uncertain way, thus confirming the plain strictures made earlier by the Messiah. The words of Abraham are most notable. That he should so closely agree with the Messiah in maintaining Moses and the Prophets, as well as the importance of repentance, is a severe denunciation of the sneering opposition, and furnishes added emphasis to what the Messiah has said in the course of His reply.

The five brethren of the rich man may also add to the impressiveness of the rebuke. Six is the number of humanity, and he and his brethren total to this. In such a traditional background as that chosen for the story, it is fitting to despoil those who choose human conjectures rather than the sure declarations of God by His prophets.

In using the figure Admission, our Lord employs a most forceful method against the opposition directed at Him. He admits for the moment their notions, not because they are true, but only to establish the truth of His own teaching. It is utterly impossible for Him to have regarded the contents of this narrative as the truth concerning the dead. Our Lord knew the truth of that subject. He was fully aware what the Law and the Prophets say of the dead, and He maintained their accuracy to the utmost degree. Were it otherwise, we should be in doubt as to whether we would not have to reject the Lord’s teaching as to the dead. Such a course is not necessary. We will reject the Jewish traditions as being contrary to God’s revelation, yet we will accord to the matter in hand a significance justified by the circumstances accompanying the words uttered by our Lord. ■



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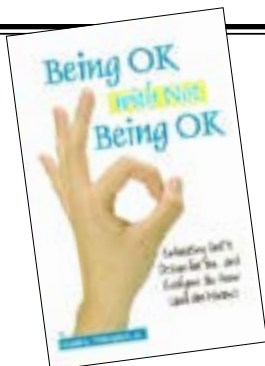
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