

Overall Goal: The overall goal for all the lessons by Fig Tree Ministries is to help people deepen their understanding of the biblical text.

Class Learning Objectives: Understanding Jesus' warning to the Priests/Levites through the Rich Man and Lazarus parable.

Cultural Background: The first century in Israel was a tumultuous time. With Rome's help, the Priests/Levites held political power and wealth at the expense of the "people of the land." Jesus is extremely critical of the priesthood and the corruptions that had permeated the Temple's worship operations. So much of Jesus' ire is directed at the priests who were supposed to reflect God to the people of Israel (see our video of Mark 12:1-12 – The Parable of the Wicked Tenants).

1. Parable or not?

- A debate exists about whether this story is a parable or a literal telling of something in the afterlife.
- There is no introductory phrase such as, "Jesus told this parable."
- Parables generally do not include names (Lazarus and Abraham)
- The story is often reduced to merely a description of the afterlife.
- A parable does not discount the afterlife or God's justice in the next life – but a description of the afterlife is not the main focus of what Jesus is attempting to convey.

2. Common themes of other folklore in the ancient world:

- Egyptian, Greco-Roman, and Jewish culture all contain stories with these two motifs:
 - **Role reversal:** the rich vs. the poor.
 - Job is commonly referenced. Job was rich, then made poor, only to be restored in the end.
 - **Message from beyond the grave:** a message of changing your ways (repent) or pay the consequences.
 - Like *A Christmas Carol* – Jacob Marley visits Scrooge from beyond the grave to warn of how he should use his wealth.
- Jesus uses a familiar story theme – but then changes it to fit his cultural and theological context.

Notes:

3. Review of the Characteristics of a Parable:

1. Story – stories captivate, inspire, and can transform us.
2. Fiction – not intended to relate a set of historical events
3. Carry Truth – the story itself carries the truth inside of it – even though it is fictional
4. Jesus adds twist/shock – Jesus often shocks his listeners by adding a twist for emphasis

Parables are an effective way to communicate a “Truth” that your opponent would rather not hear.
- the story provides a means for **self-discovery** of the truth principle.

5. Old Testament – Jesus relies heavily upon them. We must look for details from OT
6. Cultural Beliefs – Jesus speaks in cultural terms that may not be familiar to us.

4. Main emphasis of this parable:

- Directed at the **Priests** (and **Levites**)
- An element of God’s Justice
- Responsibility of those with wealth and power.

- Rich v. Poor and how people use their wealth is a common theme throughout Luke.

5. Luke 16:19-31 –

- We must pay attention to Jesus' use of details. When you see him including a detail, ask, “why did Jesus include that?”

Notes:

6. Priests and Levites

- “Rich Man” – “Purple” and “Fine Linen”
 - Read Exodus 28:5 (Priestly garments)
- The Priests/Levites had become wealthy and held political power with the help of Rome

A second way to view the “purple” and “fine linen”

- Purple = royal or garments of a King (the king of Israel should be from tribe of Judah, but that didn’t happen)
- Linen = priestly garments.

- For many years -the Hasmonean dynasty (142 BCE – 36 BCE) – the rulers were combining King with High Priest even though they were not connected to David or the tribe of Judah.

7. Priests and Levites were considered **Sadducees**

- Did not believe in God’s justice in the afterlife – nor the resurrection.
- Sadducees said, “all of God’s justice is meted out in this world.”
 - Luke 16:25
- Sadducees said, “Only the Torah (books of Moses) are considered scripture” no the Prophets
 - Luke 16:29 – why does Jesus include this detail about the Prophets?

8. Priests and Levites –

1. Jacob had 12 sons -one of which was Levi
2. Levi (the Tribe) received <u>no land inheritance</u> but was directed to maintain the tabernacle/temple
3. Aaron the Levite: descendants of Aaron are considered Priests

Notes:

9. The details of the parable are all directed toward the Priests/Levites:

- Wealth and power
- Lack of compassion for the people of the land (*am ha aretz* – “people of the land”)
- God’s justice in the afterlife
- Resurrection
- Relying on the Torah and not the prophets

10. Common sentiment in the first century regarding the Sadducees:

“those who do not believe in the resurrection have no share in the world to come”
Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1

11. next week...the name **Lazarus** is a first-century Greek variant of the name **Eliezer**.¹

- Eliezer = Abraham’s servant (a gentile) who would have inherited Abraham’s blessings

Faith Principle: God’s justice extends beyond this physical world. Therefore, your actions today have eternal consequences.

Faith Principle: The kingdom of God is manifested here on earth when those who have power or wealth *choose* to use it to alleviate the suffering of those who are not in power. Part of God’s standard of judgment towards us is how we used the resources (power or monetary wealth) that were given to us (Luke 16: 10-15).

Blessed are those who exercise strength under control, for they will inherit the land; (Psalm 37:11, Matt. 5:5)

Got questions? Email us at info@figtreeteaching.com.

¹ Tal Ilan, *Lexicon of Jewish Names in Late Antiquity: Palestine 330 BCE - 200 CE*