

Gospels – Luke - Rich Man and Lazarus 1

I'd like to look at the account of the rich man and Lazarus as a number of important issues are raised. Before doing that, I want to lay some foundations which will help us to see where the Gospel writer is coming from. That will help us to understand why he wrote what he did.

I was thinking about how many letters I had written during my 35 years or so in patents. I came to a figure of somewhere between 20 to 25 thousand. They were all business letters written with a specific purpose in mind, often giving legal advice. Hence, I never seem to have difficulty in writing business letters at all.

I've written very few chatty, newsy type letters or letters expressing emotion. I wouldn't be so good at writing a love letter. It might go like,

Dear Jean, with reference to our meeting the other night when I said that I loved you, I now wish to confirm that in writing and to make a number of additional observations as set out below. 1.....

Not very emotional.

My letters went, for example, to individual inventors who invented in home workshops, to directors of large companies who were involved in important product developments, to lawyers in this country and overseas and to patent offices and every letter had to be carefully worded bearing in mind:-

the person for whom it was intended,

**the topic that needed to be addressed,
the depth to which it was necessary to go,
the point in time that it was being written,
what had happened so far and
what was likely to happen in the future.**

Because of that, the letters were quite individual and advice in one letter in one set of circumstances couldn't necessary be taken to apply to a different set of circumstances. Above all, the letters had to be accurate and easy to understand by the person who received them. There's nothing worse than receiving advice that you can't understand. I also had to train others to write such letters.

Now the Bible contains many letters. Particularly in the New Testament. Each of those was written bearing in mind some of the things I had to bear in mind when writing mine. There are more than just letters though. The gospels are not letters as such but they weren't just written because the writers thought it would be a good idea to record the life of the Lord Jesus. Writing materials were not cheap, everything had to be written by hand and you only wrote down what was essential. As well as the letters, the Gospels too were written with specific circumstances in mind. We'll look at that shortly.

Myles Coversdale was a Bible translator who continued the work of William Tyndale after Tyndale was sentenced to death. Myles Coverdale completed the work in the 16th century and dedicated it to Henry the Eight who allowed it to be published in England. Following that, Bibles were placed in every church in the land and often had to be chained to the

reading desk to stop them being taken away. People who couldn't read it for themselves got those who could to read the Bible to them.

This is a statement made by Myles Coverdale. Some of you will have heard me quote it before:-

It shall greatly helpe ye to understand Scripture, if thou mark

**Not only what is spoken or wrythen,
but of whom
and to whom,
with what words,
at what time,
where,
to what intent
with what circumstances
considering what goeth before
and what followeth.**

Myles Coverdale is applying to scripture, some of the things I was bearing in mind when writing letters. If we follow Myles Coverdale's advice, we shall be able to understand the Bible more easily.

The Bible was not written in verses. Splitting into verses helps us to find our way around but it also leads to a problem too. Do you remember promise boxes? A promise box was a small box with what looked like a honeycomb inside which formed dozens of tubes. In each tube was a rolled up a piece of paper on which was printed a promise from the Bible. You would take a pair of tweezers and draw the rolled up promise from a tube

of your choice, then read it and put it back. It was like Christian lucky dip and after a while you got to know where all the good ones were! What the promise box failed to do was recite the conditions laid down in scripture which would enable the Lord to fulfil the promises in your life – the promise was just a verse and failed to take into account what went before and what followed. In other words, it didn't follow the Myles Coverdale's approach.

Here's one. "He is able to keep you from falling" There's a requirement on our part and it's this:-

"Keep yourselves God's love Jude 21"

Here's another

Phil 4:13

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

What does that mean? It looks like Christians can take on all kinds of jobs and do them relying on God's strength.

However, Using the Myles Coverdale approach about what goes before, it is all about facing trials. In fact more accurately it's about being well fed or hungry, having plenty or having nothing and being able to go on regardless because Paul found that Christ strengthened him at such times.

When we take any verse from the Bible and quote it, we need to make sure that we use it in circumstances similar to those which applied when the

verse was written or there is a risk that we end up making it mean something that the writer never intended.

Now we all know the four gospels written by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But why did God prompt four writers to record the life of the Lord Jesus? Why not just have one “Gospel” which is absolutely complete and which records everything that happened in all four?

If you wanted a conservatory built and you showed the builder the front of your house, the builder might say “fine, the house has a nice front but it’s the back I need to see”. If you were having someone in to decorate your kitchen and you showed him the bathroom he might say, “fine, it’s a nice bathroom but I need to see the kitchen”. In other words, you need to show that part of the house which is relevant to the person concerned and it was like that with the Gospel writers. What they wrote was intended to show to certain groups of readers those aspects of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ which would be meaningful to the respective groups.

To begin with let’s take John’s gospel. John’s gospel was written for believers. The reason John wrote it comes out in John 20 v 30 to 31.

John 20:30-31

30 Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book.

31 But these are written that you may believe (and go on believing) that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

(NIV)

It was written to show that Jesus is the Son of God and that Christians should go on believing that.

Whereas, say, Mark could be readily picked up and understood by a non-Christian, a non-Christian would be lost even by John's opening words "In the beginning was the Logos (translated) Word, and the Word was with God and the word was God" What would that mean to any unbeliever ? Even believers can't easily get a handle on it.

Tradition says that, John's base was Ephesus. Half a century before, a man called Heraclitus of Ephesus talked a lot about something called the Logos. (David Pawson Unlocking the Bible. See also internet references to Heraclitus) You can find info about him on the internet. His writings are hard to understand but he stressed the need to look at the Logos (the meaning of things or the reason why) for yourselves and don't just rely on others to tell you what things are about. Look for the logos. That gave rise to words such as biologos and technologos and physiologos

However, John looked beyond the earthly the realm and stated "In the beginning was the Logos" – the real reason why. Jesus is the real meaning of life, the real reason for everything, he is before everything and behind everything and the true logos is God. See, using Myles Coverdale's approach we need to look at "with what words" (Logos) what time (A time when the teaching of philosophers such a Heraclitus was around in the Greek world) and "where" – Ephesus where the one who mooted the Logos approach had lived. (With acknowledgement to David Pawson in his book Unlocking the Bible). It helps to interpret what was being said.

The other gospels were around when John wrote his. Mark began at John the Baptist, the forerunner but it's as if Matthew said that he needed to go back earlier and he begins at Abraham. Luke says, no we need to start before that and he goes back to Adam whereas John says none of you are right, we need to start "In the beginning". (David Pawson –Unlocking Bible)

John is aimed at believers to show that Jesus is divine, the I Am, and records Him receiving worship from Thomas in the upper room who calls Him my Lord and my God. Not the best Gospel, though, to give to non-Christians because much of what is said would be lost on them.

The other three Gospels are quite different. Rather than aiming to convey who Jesus was, they concentrate on what Jesus said and did. They are called synoptic gospels. Synoptic – common view-.

Matthew

If we take Matthew, he was a Jewish person and a tax collector well able to make accurate records. The object of his Gospel comes out in the last few verses and is all about making disciples. Matthew's Gospel is a book which tells us how to live the Christian life as disciples of the Lord Jesus – hence lengthy teaching in the Sermon on the Mount about the way individual believers should conduct themselves.

His Gospel is addressed to Jewish Christians hence he begins at Abraham in the genealogy of Christ, is repeatedly referring to fulfilment of OT writings in the life of Christ and refers more to the kingdom of Heaven

than the kingdom of God because the Jews don't like to pronounce the name of God. (G-d Rohn Price on e-mails in New Wine). Matthew is a good gospel for new believers. It refers to the church and new believers need to become rooted in the church. As well showing the Jews that Jesus fulfilled what was written in the Old Testament, it also showed that God accepted Gentiles by recording how Jesus commended the Centurion's faith and healed the child of a cyrophenician woman.

Mark

Mark, records in a short space much of what Jesus did and was probably helped very much by Peter. It's a good gospel to give unbelievers as it give an exciting journey through the life of Jesus beginning with John the Baptist and then speeding on.

Luke

Luke was a doctor and travelling companion to Paul. Possibly one of the seventy or so disciples sent out by Jesus as he is the only one who mentions them. He writes his Gospel to a gentile addressed as Most Excellent Theophilus. Paul use such a greeting with the most excellent Festus and most excellent Felix and so Theophillus was probably some gentile dignitary. It has been suggested that he was Paul's defence lawyer who needed a full record of the basis for Paul's faith but we don't know. We do know that Luke wrote his gospel so that a respected gentile would have an accurately investigated and orderly account based on testimony from eye-witnesses and those who ministered the word of God. Hence Luke

addresses his record of the life of Christ to someone who knows something of the gospel but needs to know it more accurately and who probably needs to get to know the Lord as well.

Luke begins with the life of John the Baptist and we can see a parallel between Elisabeth and Zechariah and Sarah and Abraham. Neither couples could conceive for a child and went past the age where they could.

Isaac, was a foreshadow of the Lord Jesus in that He was offered for sacrifice and in type rose from the dead and needed a miraculous birth to complete the shadow.

John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Lord Jesus and also needed a miraculous birth as recorded by Luke. Luke also records in detail the miraculous conception and birth of the Lord Jesus and as made clear later in John's gospel :-

All those who are true followers of the Lord Jesus Christ also need a miraculous birth by being born again of the Spirit.

Luke being a doctor was well able to record very accurately what he investigated and Luke includes in his gospel many things not found elsewhere. For example, he records the parables of the prodigal son, the good Samaritan, the rich fool, the lost coin and the rich man and Lazarus which I want to look at. He is very detailed. He records teaching of Jesus on use of money, on management and on banquets – the kind of things which might well interest a senior dignitary and probably a fairly wealthy gentile official. This is a good gospel for unbelievers.

Having set out a very short overview of the Gospels, I want to return to Luke 16 and look at the rich man and Lazarus.

This is an unusual parable. Some argue that it's not a parable because it begins by saying

Luke 16:19

19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

(NIV)

If there was rich man then there was a rich man. However, other parables begin in a similar way. For example earlier in the chapter Jesus begins a parable in a similar way by saying

1 Jesus told his disciples: "There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. Luke 16:1

I think it's a parable alright but it's unlike any other because it's the only one in which names are give to persons in the parable. Jesus refers by name to Lazarus and Abraham. Even if Lazarus was not a real person but just a person in the story, Abraham certainly was a real person and was in existence at the time that Jesus told the parable.

This parable forms a climax to a run of parables largely about issues which would be of interest to a dignitary. Such as:-

Taking the right seat at a banquet,

Not starting a building before counting the cost and being certain that you have enough resource to complete it,

Negotiating a settlement if you can't win a coming confrontation,

Misuse of inheritance by a member of a family,

The way in which an estate manager can make a bad situation good for himself by making shrewd investments,

How God requires faithfulness in small things before he will trust a person with bigger things

And to finish, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus which shows that whilst eternal destiny is not dependent on whether one is rich or poor in this life but that those who are or would be rich need to take care.

Now let's look at this.

19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

Who was this man and how did he get his riches. We don't see anything that suggests gaining riches in a dishonourable way. There's no hint that he was a sharp operator or cheated the system or that he exploited staff. He was just rich. He could have inherited it or he could simply have been a self-made made person who had got his riches by hard work.

He might have been born into wealth and he may have been the kind of person who was generous and gave lots of money into the treasury in the temple and he was probably envied by many who had nowhere near his wealth.

In this parable the Lord Jesus does not criticise the man for being rich or say that he should not have been well off.

He was dressed in purple and fine linen. That is not a criticism either. Some godly people in the Bible were dressed that way including the godly wife of proverbs 31. Joseph was dressed in fine linen in Egypt and Lydia in Acts 16 was a seller of purple cloth. The wealthy and posh dressed in purple. Purple clothes were expensive and indicated that the person wearing them could afford to splash out but the Lord didn't criticise that. As far as we know, neither did Paul say to Lydia "If you want to be a Christian, the first thing you must do is stop selling expensive cloth for fine clothes".

Then we read that he lived in luxury every day. I like the KJV which says that he fared sumptuously every day. I guess that Solomon fared sumptuously every day and I guess David did too, at least when he was king. We know that Joseph did in Egypt after he was promoted and so here too, is no criticism of the rich man. It would seem strange, in fact, if he was a rich man who didn't eat well.

Earlier on in his gospel Luke tells of a man who has a servant and when the servant comes in from working in the field the man says 'Prepare my

supper, get yourself ready and wait on me while I eat and drink; after that you may eat and drink'

Luke 17:7-8

I guess it was the same here. The man would come home and a servant would serve his meal for him. That's how a servant earned a living and there's no hint of criticism here.

So what was going wrong in the life of the rich man? The key is in some preceding verses in the chapter and we'll look at that next time.

(Luke 16:14-15

14 The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus.

15 He said to them, "You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight).

(NIV)