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THE PERVERTED PARABLE.

THE RICH MAN AND LAZARUS.

LUKE XVI. 19-31.

IN spite of the many plain statements of Scripture regarding the utter unconsciousness of the dead—such as, ‘The dead know not anything’—(Eccl. ix. 5); ‘The dead praise not the Lord, neither they that go down into silence’—(Ps. cxv. 17); ‘When man’s breath goeth forth, he returns to his earth; in that very day his thoughts perish’—(Ps. cxlvi. 4)—this parable is constantly brought forward as demonstrative evidence to the contrary. Surely this, to say the least, is making a different use of the parable from what our Lord intended. Besides, it is a fair rule to apply to the teaching of Scripture, that those parts which are parabolic, metaphorical, or obscure, must be understood by the light of those parts which are plain, direct, and explicit. We must not understand parables literally, if, by doing so, we require to make plain, direct, or explicit statements figurative. Dr Kitto wisely remarks: ‘The rule seems to be, that in parabolical discourses, provided the doctrines inculcated are strictly true, the terms in which they are inculcated may be adapted to the prevailing ideas of those to whom they are addressed. If any question arises about the particular circumstances, in such a discourse, the clue for our guidance to the correct interpretation must be sought in those parts of Scripture which speak to us plainly, and not in parables.’ Thus, in the parable before us, *two dead men* are represented as conversing with each other—suffering, desiring, and reasoning; while, in the Scriptures already quoted, we are distinctly told that ‘the dead know not anything;’ that in the same day that man ‘returns to the earth, his thoughts perish.’ These direct statements regarding the condition of the dead are not to be understood by the representation given in the parable, but as containing in themselves an expression of absolute truth; while the representation in the parable must be understood in a sense harmonious with these direct statements regarding the condition of the dead. This, we submit, is fair dealing.

No one supposes that the story told by Jotham (Judges ix. 8-15) of the trees electing and anointing a king to reign over them, is a description of facts; and when we read of the blood of Abel crying unto God from the ground—(Gen. iv. 10)—and that ‘the blood of sprinkling speaketh better things than the blood of Abel’—(Heb. xii. 24)—we never imagine that a real voice was heard. And if shed blood be represented as speaking, as well as other inanimate objects—such as mountains breaking forth into singing, and trees of the field clapping their hands—(Is. lv. 12)—is it at all wonderful that dead men, who know not anything, should be (for a purpose) represented acting as if they were alive? Surely not.

This is not the only instance in which the dead are represented as speaking. In Is. xiv. 10, the inhabitants of Sheol are represented as rising up to meet the King of Babylon, and exclaiming with astonishment: ‘Art THOU also become as weak as we? Art thou become like unto us? Thy pomp is brought down to the grave, the worm is spread under thee, and the worms cover thee;’ yet no one would affirm that those thus covered with worms in the grave were at the same time in a state of conscious being; and it requires no great endowment of ideality to perceive the beauty and force of the figure. Let the parable in question be viewed in a similar way, and its teaching shall be found in no degree contradicting the direct testimony of Scripture regarding the unconscious state of the dead.

To understand the parable to be a real description of the condition of the righteous, and the wicked dead, *before* resurrection and judgment, is to ignore not only the plain and direct teaching of the Bible regarding the condition of the dead, but also its positive testimony that we ‘must appear at the judgment seat of Christ, to receive the things in body, according to what we have done, whether it be good or bad’—(2 Cor. v. 10).

The Lord himself taught plainly that it is ‘AT the resurrection of the just,’ that recompense shall be given to those who are worthy (Luke xiv. 14); and this truth is strikingly illustrated in his memorable words: ‘Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name, and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you; depart from me, ye that work iniquity’—(Matt. vii. 22, 23).

The *day* here referred to, is evidently the day of judgment, and the parties introduced are represented as being surprised at the fate

awarded to them. But why should they be surprised at their rejection if they had been suffering in Hades ever since the day of their death, till they came forth to judgment at 'the resurrection of damnation?'—(John v. 28, 29). The idea that the wicked dead are punished by the Judge before resurrection and judgment, is thus utterly at variance with the teaching of the Lord, as it is opposed to the principles of reason and justice.

Whatever, therefore, be the import of the parable, we cannot believe that our Lord used it to teach a doctrine so utterly opposed to his own testimony on other occasions, and at variance with the uniform testimony of Holy Scripture.

Here the matter might be left to rest; but in confirmation of what has been advanced, we submit a few animadversions on the common method of understanding the parable as setting forth a conscious state of disembodied existence between death and resurrection. The representation in the parable gives no countenance whatever to a disembodied state of conscious existence. By what process of reasoning could we infer the consciousness of a *disembodied spirit* from the declaration that, in *Hades*, the rich man lifted up *his eyes*, and felt his *tongue* tormented in a flame, requesting that Lazarus might dip his *finger* in water to cool his burning tongue? Besides, the scene of the representation is in *Hades*—the grave, or state of the dead, where there is neither 'knowledge, wisdom, nor remembrance,' and where the blessed Redeemer himself lay for three days (Acts ii. 25–30).

The rich man *died*, and was *buried*, and in the grave he lifted up his eyes, being in torments. Does it not meet all the requirements of the case to understand our Lord as making use of a parable to convey reproof or instruction to his prejudiced auditors, the Pharisees?

According to Whitby, this same parable was contained in the 'Gemara Babylonicum,' and was probably familiar to the Jews at the time our Lord repeated it in their hearing. His object seems to have been to reprove the Pharisees for their covetousness (see verses 14, *et seq.*)

While this parable by no fair means can be held to militate against the positive declarations of the Scriptures regarding the condition of the dead, it contains strong presumptive evidence against the theory that men exist consciously, as spirits, between death and resurrection. Observe, that the rich man is represented as pleading that Lazarus should be 'sent from the dead,' to warn his brethren. From the answer given, it is assumed that, in order

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to do this, Lazarus would require to 'rise from the dead' (verses 27-36). This certainly does not favour the notion that, at death, or what is vulgarly called death, the soul, or man proper, only bursts the cerements of his chrysalis covering, and soars forth unfettered to the exercise of nobler and transcendent powers, capable of performing far more arduous duties than that of carrying a message of warning to men in the flesh. Having never ceased to live, such a person had no need to *rise from the dead* to perform that service. The spirit mediums manage such affairs otherwise, though, unfortunately for them, and the philosophy which sustains them, the words of the living God proclaim them 'deceiving and being deceived.'

From such seductive and ruinous devices, let the reader turn to and rely on the sure Word of God, which tells us of a coming judgment and a coming Judge, who will render to each one according to his work. For 'all that are in the graves shall hear his voice, and shall come forth; they that have done good, to the resurrection of life, and they that have done evil, to the resurrection of condemnation.' Above all, make sure that you are 'in Christ Jesus.' To such, 'there is no condemnation'—(Rom. viii. 1).

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