

Did Jesus Talk About Prayer to Abraham?

LUKE 16:19-31

Jesus said,

There was a Rich Man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day.

At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores,

and longing to eat what fell from the Rich Man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side (bosom in some versions). The Rich Man also died and was buried.

In Hell, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire'.

But Abraham replied, 'Son remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.

And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone else cross over from there to us.'

He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my father's house,

for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.

Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.'

'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'

He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead' (NIV)

Jesus told the chilling horror story of the Rich Man who went to Hell while a beggar who used to lust after his table named Lazarus who went, according to Roman tradition, to the paradise of Limbo where Abraham was (Luke 16) for Jesus had not opened Heaven yet. The paradise is described as Abraham's bosom meaning it was a place for comforting. That is why we read that Abraham said that the beggar was receiving comfort there.

Heaven is supposed to be the fulfilment of your existence so you will be so happy there that you won't need comforting.

Heaven in Christian teaching is the presence of God directly enjoyed and experienced. But Heaven could be a comfort as a whole. There is no comforting there in the sense that somebody in Heaven gets annoyed and needs comfort.

The Rich Man was speaking to Abraham who was in Paradise. Is Paradise Heaven? Had it been Heaven, perhaps we would be reading that the Rich Man called to God not Abraham.

Catholics pray to saints for they are with God in Heaven. Some say that Abraham is not that kind of saint and that Heaven isn't in the text at all. Catholics however do regard Abraham as that kind of saint. Also, paradise could be Heaven.

We do not know then if Abraham and Lazarus are depicted as being in Heaven or elsewhere. I think it does not matter. The story is about the inability of holy people to help you when they are invoked (among other things).

Catholics cannot find any instance in the Bible of praying to saints. They think that story is the exception.

They say the Rich Man prayed to Abraham who was a saint. They say he praised him as Father and called to him for pity.

Though Abraham was far away he could hear him just like the saints supposedly can hear us in Heaven.

They say the Rich Man invoked Abraham and not Lazarus because Jewish tradition regarded Abraham as a saint and he would have been a more powerful saint than Lazarus.

The Rich Man implored Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his burning tongue with a few drops of water. The Rich Man was really asking for Lazarus who was a saint to do a miracle for him by the power of God but at Abraham's request.

Anyway the prayer to Abraham did no good. Abraham told the Rich Man things he must have known already - surely the Rich Man would have pleaded for help before that and would have been told about the chasm etc? Abraham was only tormenting him by talking to him. Also, Abraham said he was not going to help the living avoid Hell for they had the word of God and that was enough. The parable clearly debunks the usefulness of prayers to saints. It implies they are useless. The Rich Man did not invoke the invisible God but Abraham for help and it only made matters worse.

The Rich Man wanted Lazarus to help. Abe replied that there was nothing he could do for nobody could cross the abyss between Paradise and Hell. God could make it possible but it was not possible since God did not will it. God made communication possible but nothing else. There was no transporter beam.

The implication is that the Rich Man had a cheek expecting Lazarus to help him even a little when he did nothing for Lazarus when they were alive. That was probably why God set up the barrier. Lazarus was not to help even if he wanted to. If it is true that Jesus forbade revengeful attitudes, then this only applied in earth life. After death such attitudes are allowed.

The story does indeed back up the Protestant denial that the saints can help the living. The Rich Man asked for a tiny miracle so imagine how sinful it is to ask for a bigger one!

Objections to the story being intended as a true story do not work. For example, the Rich Man's tongue being in such agony is thought to be strange for his sin was neglect of the poor. He had failed to notice the plight of the poor. The story scares Christians for they worry about what they might be failing to notice. But the narrative doesn't say the neglect of the poor was the only sin he was damned for.

It could be argued by Protestants that the Rich Man's tongue was in such agony because he was invoking a saint, Abraham 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire'. Perhaps the pain got so bad as the Rich Man called to Abraham that he ended up praying for relief for his tongue! Indeed the fact that it is said to be his tongue that gives him the worst trouble would support that. It was so bad that even a few seconds relief were priceless.

Some argue that he was not invoking Abraham as a god or saint for Abraham could have a conversation with him so it was only a chat. It was no more invoking the saints than Pilate talking to Jesus was praying. The text has the Rich Man talking to Abraham the same way as you would when praying to God. The text even has Abraham being asked to raise Lazarus from the dead! It was not only a chat - it was prayer.

Abraham also says the reason Lazarus cannot help is not because he doesn't want to but because he cannot cross the chasm between Paradise and Hell. So God then lets nobody cross. Saint Lazarus cannot help. Neither can Saint Abraham.

Abraham said that another reason there could be no help was it was time the Rich Man suffered when he had good things in life. No saint can ask God to change what he gives out to people.

Abraham said he could not help the five brothers to convert for they had the scriptures and that was all the help they needed. This is a clear refutation of Catholicism when it calls on saints to convert sinners and heretics. They pray to Mary and Joseph for the conversion of sinners.

We conclude that Christ regarded praying to saints as a serious matter and not as merely useless but as extremely dangerous.