

## Care for Those Around You

Luke 16:19-31

Money and possessions form a central theme in Luke-Acts. Mary's Magnificat where she praises God for providing for the poor and reversing the fortunes for the rich (Luke 1:46-55), the necessity for Jesus' parents to sacrifice the turtledove instead of the lamb when they present him at the temple (Luke 2:22-24), Jesus' stark teaching about rich and poor in the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:20-26), the parable of the Rich Fool (Luke 12:16-21)—these are but a few of the many passages that tell the tale of Jesus and wealth or lucre. Amid all these vivid and noteworthy texts, the problem of wealth may be most directly and clearly treated in the powerful parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

Did you notice that Lazarus is the only character in any of Jesus' parables who is named. In contrast to him, the rich man has no name, though Christian tradition sometimes calls him Dives, a Latin adjective meaning "rich." Jesus' story is told in light of "the Pharisees, who were lovers of money" (v. 14) and who ridiculed Jesus for what he had said about people not being able to serve God and wealth at the same time (v. 13).

The story is about two men with very different financial circumstances. The rich man dressed in purple and fine linen clothes. Maybe he was descendent from royalty. He lived in a "gated" community. He was not an evil person; he simply did not "see" the man at his gate, though he himself ate "sumptuously every day." The poor man, on the other hand, apparently came to the gate regularly, desiring to be fed some scraps of the sumptuous food that the rich man ate. He was a man who was abjectly poor, with sores that the dogs came to lick, probably leaving him degraded and also open to infections and slow healing process.

Then both men died. This be often this is the great equalizer, but not in this situation. Only the rich man is buried. Angels carry off the poor man to Abraham's bosom, whereas the rich man died and ended up in Hades, the abode of the dead. The vision of the other world corresponds to the first-century writing of 2 Esdras 7:36: "The pit of torment shall appear, and opposite it shall be the place of rest; and the furnace of hell shall be disclosed, and opposite it the paradise of delight." In Hades the rich man observed Abraham and Lazarus together. He called out to father Abraham (the Father of the Faithful) to have mercy on him and to send Lazarus, still thought of as a servant, with water to cool his thirst. Abraham reminded the rich man that during his lifetime he enjoyed the good things of life and Lazarus had nothing. Furthermore, there was a great gap between where Abraham and Lazarus were and where the rich man was, "and no one can cross from there to us" (v. 26).

This story of Lazarus and the rich man is full of contrasts and reversals. The poor man is named, while the rich man is not. The rich man is dressed in purple, while the poor man is "dressed in" sores. The rich man feasts sumptuously, while Lazarus, looking up, longs to be satisfied with what falls from the table. The rich man has a proper burial, while Lazarus is carried away by the angels. By the end of the story, Lazarus, the poor man, is looking down from heaven, and the rich man is the one looking up, begging.

The rich man saw no relief for himself then remembered his five brothers who were still alive and begged Abraham to send someone to warn them, lest they end up in the same predicament as he. Abraham said, "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them." "No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent" (vv. 29-30). With this obvious allusion to Jesus' resurrection, father Abraham responded that they would not be convinced even if someone rose from the dead.

This rich man was not pictured as inherently wicked. He did not persecute Lazarus, nor did he refuse him food, nor did he sponsor legislation to rid the gates of poor people like Lazarus. As John Donahue points out, the problem is that all those days on earth the rich never "saw" the poor. "One of the prime dangers of wealth is that it causes blindness." In modern times Lazarus corresponds to the person who begs, but we dare not look into his or her eyes, lest a claim is made upon our compassion. It is acceptable for us to give aid to the worthy poor, but it is also socially permissible to regard some as not worthy. But we forget that Jesus told us about the sheep and the goats in Matthew. Therefore when we fed the hungry; clothe the naked; visit the sick and imprisoned, Jesus says we do it to him.

We may find it hard to identify with either the rich man with all his wealth or the poor man with devastation. They both represent people other than us; but perhaps we can identify with the five brothers, those who can be instructed by Moses and the prophets and can come actually to "see" the beggar at our gates. The parable becomes a word for those left behind to "warn them (we) so that they (we) will not also come into this place of torment" (v. 28). Also inherent in Jesus' teaching is the word of reversal that the first become last and the last first (Luke 13:30; 14:9-11; Mark 10:31; Matt. 19:30; 20:16). From Mary's Magnificat (1:46-55) on throughout Jesus' teachings, we learn of the God who "has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (1:53). **Charles B. Cousar**

This message is directed to "lovers of money" (v. 14). Apparently Jesus wanted to reveal through this story that they loved their money more than people, their possessions more than the poor, their clothes more than compassion, and their extravagant feasts more than sharing food with the hungry. Perhaps Jesus had been a guest at one of his listener's homes and had witnessed a scene similar to the one with which he begins his parable.

What does the parable tell us? First, the ever-widening gap between the rich and the poor is one of the most important issues of our day. The intrepid "moral of the story" expressed in this parable is that if you do not cross the gaping chasm between the rich and the poor in this life, you surely will not be able to do it in the next. At least for those who hoard and have more than their share on this earth, there is no respite to be offered in the life to come. Warnings and messages come in every form, but they remain unheeded. In the final day, this chasm cannot be crossed.

This is a parable urging "the haves" to do justice now, for there will be no opportunity later. The saying "Justice delayed is justice denied" extends even further through this teaching of Jesus that seems to imply that *redemption delayed is redemption denied*. We are to care for those around us while we have life and opportunity.

Second, this parable is a warning to the wealthy and a word of comfort and hope to the poor. Jesus' identity as a prophet who was anointed to "preach good news to the poor" ([Luke 4:18](#)) was manifested in living color as he told this parable. Jesus did not promote some pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by. He spoke out against the real inequities of his day by his stern and unrelenting admonition to the wealthy to share their earthly resources and to cease oppression wherever it existed.

Third, by the parable's end, the rich man is in a place of torment, yet he is still entrenched in his privileged attitude. He still wants to order Lazarus to do something for him. In fact, he does not even speak directly to Lazarus but entreats Abraham to send Lazarus to do his bidding. The rich man, who would not lend a hand to Lazarus, whose only solace was the dogs' tongues, now is asking Lazarus to provide him some relief from pain. He also begs Abraham to send a warning to his brothers, but Abraham replied that even if one were to rise from the dead, that

would not be enough. Abraham's words suggest that stepping out of one's privilege is perhaps one of the most difficult journeys of transformation.

We know from the parable that because of his lack of action and compassion, the rich man could not cross over to the place of faith, nor did he have a place by Abraham's side. To an impoverished group of people, this parable offers great comfort that God sees our suffering and is on our side. To most of us, however, steeped in a consumer society and often on the wrong side of the chasm, this parable is one of the hardest to hear ... if we really hear. The parable powerfully calls into question how we handle our money today and raises the question of whether we "see" the poor at our gates. **G. Penny Nixon**

So we must care for those around us when given the opportunity. This is the way we witness to the world that we serve a God of abundance, in whom we trust!

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