

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

The *Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus* takes up a universal theme and one which enjoyed wide popularity in antiquity: the notion that wealth and poverty will be reversed in a future life. Jesus had just given a parable about wealth and taught that you cannot serve both God and money. The Pharisees were lovers of money and often scoffed at Jesus. So, he tells them this new parable about trusting in money. Jesus also taught that while *they* looked at the *outside*, God looks at *the heart*. When Jesus refers to the prophets here, he is reinforcing the idea that their function had been to condemn Israel for oppressing the innocent and the poor. They proclaimed the importance of loving one's neighbor, whereas today's parable portrays one who does not do this.

When Albert Schweitzer was asked why in 1912 he gave up his status as a professor, along with his organ playing to which he was devoted, to become a medical missionary in Africa, he pointed to this parable which seemed to offer a message to Europeans to heed the call to go to the rescue of "*Lazarus*" (that is, the metaphor for the people of the colonized regions of Africa and Asia) who lay suffering in the areas of the world conquered by the English, French, Germans and other peoples of Europe. And today in the West, of course, from the perspective of the developed world, Lazarus still lies there burdened with poverty and disease and hopelessness.

The Pharisees thought that wealth was a sign of spirituality and blessing from God, a confirmation of their own righteousness. They also thought that poverty was a result of sinfulness and condemnation from God. They were sure that poor people were not going to heaven. And this is an attitude that survives into the present age. How often do we hear politicians blame the poor for their poverty? We hear it all the time from people who take their own affluence as a sign that they are superior morally as well as materially. The prevailing trend in our age is to demonize the poor, which is another way of ignoring them because it does not take into account anything other than material goods.

But "the poor are not faceless people with no stories (as anyone knows who has actually encountered *real people* who happen to be poor). The poor are...people with names, identities, and a history. They are not statistics, they are human beings. (*When we regard them as a mere number, it is easy to ignore them, but...*) they are not a one-size-fits-all economic category that we can describe in broad strokes but specific individuals." It is only when we can view them as individual humans that we can take seriously their plight.

Jim Wallis of *Sojourners*, an organization of evangelical Christians which takes as its mission the need to remind other evangelicals of the meaning of scripture as it intersects with public policy, has often

pointed out that you can hardly turn to any page in the Bible and not stumble upon a verse about economic justice and God's concern for the poor and the marginalized.

Certainly, Luke's gospel talks about these matters repeatedly. Yet, somehow people who call themselves Christian can be absolutely blind to what the Bible actually teaches. Some Christians can be remarkably resistant to who actually has God's favor. And note that in the parable, we learn that "those who find it easy to ignore Scripture will find it equally easy to ignore anyone who quotes scripture **to** them. They have Moses. And if he's not good enough for them, neither would Lazarus be. Or anybody. The rich man before he died, and now his surviving brothers, had every opportunity to know better all along. When it comes to just treatment of the poor, no one with a Bible can claim not to have known any better."

We can't ignore the context if we wish to really understand this story. In the words of one expert, "we should not underestimate the originality of Jesus' parables...although they have no exact parallels in ancient literature...they were not written in a vacuum, (and in them) we can see both Jewish and Greco-Roman elements (along with clues about the culture of Palestine in which the story was told)." For example, we can understand this parable better if we look at it from the perspective of first century peasants in the Middle East. Since they "subordinated in deference to wealthy patrons in return for their support," they would have assumed that "the rich man is evil and worthy of punishment."

They envisioned the patronage relationship as a moral obligation of the wealthy...to help those who were less fortunate. Since the rich man in Jesus' parable does not live up to this obligation, peasants would conclude that he amply deserves the punishment he receives." Isn't it interesting how this lines up with one of the lessons of the parable: that *we have to put into practice* what is presumed to occur in the afterlife --- that it is incumbent upon those who have resources to turn gross inequality into bright opportunity for those who are least fortunate?

Jesus takes us beyond the idea of wrongs being righted in the next life to a new level of understanding of our obligations *in the present*. Rather than accept the fact of poverty juxtaposed against great wealth, he asks us to actually *accomplish* in our own time what is presumed to occur automatically in the next life.

Thus, the age to come is to be *anticipated in the present*. In doing so, he is asking the Jews to do little more than what Moses and the prophets would have asked of God's people, Israel. Thus, in Jesus, God is bringing to conclusion the mission he envisioned for the Jews, to complete the story of their role in history, to bring a blessing to all of humanity as promised to Abraham.

For Jesus' original audience it was clear that the more you have, the more responsibility you bear for society. This may also have been true in America in the distant past. It does *not* seem to be the prevailing value in our time. In the parable, however, "Jesus surprises his hearers. No contact takes place between...the rich man and Lazarus, the poor one.

“The rich man has only cared for (measurable accomplishments in the material world) and for others who achieve; he had never known the man at the gate (that is, not anyone *even remotely like* that man). And note that only the poor man has a name in the story Jesus tells. He is called Lazarus. The rich man has no name. In the kingdom, he will not be recognized because he did not even notice the poor, much less reach out a helping hand.

The parable attacks not wealth in general but a particular kind of wealth which does not see poverty and suffering. Possessions are not just for one’s personal use without any sense of responsibility to God and others. It also suggests that the juxtaposition of wealth and poverty cannot be tolerated in God’s world. The way in which our world tends to be divided into the “haves” and “have-nots” is intolerable.

The issue here seems to be our willingness and ability to see persons in need. “The rich man’s wealth and self-centeredness do not allow him to see Lazarus.” The ability to see needs is the mark of the genuine Christian, whereas to see and not care, to be aware of a need and not be willing to respond, these are the intolerable positions for those who love God.

“They have Moses,” Abraham tells the tormented rich man in hell. We have Moses too...What’s more, now we have *Jesus*. In this powerful parable our Lord asks us what we will do with the knowledge we have by faith as that knowledge comes to us from the word of God.” Will we listen?

AMEN

(Sources: N.T. Wright, Luke for Everyone, SPCK, London, 2001;

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