

### *The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus*

The parable we have before us in our Gospel reading is one of contrasts. There is a rich man and a poor man. While the rich man is left nameless, the poor man is afforded dignity by being identified as Lazarus. The rich man is covered with expensive clothing while Lazarus is covered with sores. The rich man feasts while Lazarus fasts; the rich man has everything while Lazarus has nothing. The rich man walks tall, proud, while Lazarus lies in wait for the crumbs that fall from the master's table. In death, however, the roles are reversed. Lazarus becomes the exalted, the wealthy, the fulfilled, while the rich man is humbled and emptied. Lazarus status is quite literally lifted while the rich man's is lowered. Lazarus is blessed beyond measure, while the rich man is cursed beyond help.

As important as these superficial contrasts are, if all there was to this parable was the contrast between the rich and poor, I think we would all be slightly disappointed. Now I'm not saying this theme isn't a good one, but it's rather played out. We have heard it so many times that it has become like white noise, a constant humming in the background, which is easily ignored after a while. We've gotten a lot of miles out of this theme, but perhaps it's time to move and ponder what else Christ might be saying to us. Jesus is anything but superficial, and He often hides the greatest insights under the simplest of stories. I think it would be a mistake on our part to say that the poor man entered heaven because he was poor, and the rich man entered hell because he was rich. But superficially, this is an easy conclusion to reach. So, what are we to take from this parable? Actually, I think the key to understanding this text is found in what Jesus said right before he told this parable: "For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God." The parable this morning then complements that verse by proving the opposite to be true, as well: "What is an abomination in the sight of men is highly esteemed by God". Poverty and riches become the easiest way to highlight this contrast between God ways and our ways. And the real lesson Christ wishes to impart is how to recognize the difference; how to avoid the abominable, how to call a sin

a sin. For this is our perennial curse—we no longer know what is right or what is wrong, which way is up or which way is down. Good and bad have become relative concepts, ever-changing, moving, adapting. We have so many thoughts, so many ideas, that after a while they all run together; they get muddled in our heads. Vice is turned to virtue and vice versa. Consider how greed nowadays passes as talented, smart, careful stewardship. The miser is no longer considered greedy, but only as a man of business who prudently provides for himself. Such a resourceful person who knows how to take care of himself should be admired, right? The same holds true of many other sins, as well: Pride is no longer pride, but honor. The proud man is no longer deemed arrogant, but honorable, a commanding, confident person, worthy of respect, a credit to his generation. Anger and envy are no longer a sin, either, but righteousness and zealotry. The man who rages or is envious or who loses his cool is now considered an industrious, strong-willed, passionate, type A personality, who might be hot-tempered, but accomplishes many things with his anger. We currently live in a world where there are no sinners, only good people with a talent for survival. Self-respect not self-denial is the world's modus operandi. It was the same in Jesus' day. When greed masquerades as productiveness or arrogance as honor or anger as zeal; then we have to leave them alone; we have to leave them unrebuked, unchecked, unaddressed. These sins must be given free course to fester and destroy. A world without repentance is the same as world without God. And where God is not all things are permissible.

Jesus doesn't pick on the rich man because he is rich, He picks on him because he is indifferent. The rich man doesn't abuse Lazarus or even speak harshly to him. In fact, he doesn't see him at all. He is blind to the common lot shared by all humanity. Blind to the fact that he is not only his brother's keeper, he is his brother. The parable is not about the benefits of charity, it's about solidarity. The real abomination is when we view each other as competition; scraping and clawing and fighting for a limited number of resources. Some have more and some have less. That's just the way it is. This is the bankruptcy of sin:

sin makes us accept the world for what it is: fragmented, isolated, individualized. But in doing so, we miss our God given right to something better, something more; we settle for the crumbs rather than sit at the feast. So here is the real contrast: the opposite of God is not the silence of His extinction. The opposite of God is to be compelled to endure that state in which you get everything you wanted in this life, but at the very same time forfeit forever all that is most needed. The real irony is the rich man lives in eternity the same way he lived on earth. He got exactly what he wanted, but this is hell. To behold, but not partake; to see but not be seen in return. To live, but to do so in this state of deathless existence. For what passes as the chief blessing in this life: to live for yourself, to live only for yourself, where you are most important, and no one or nothing else matters, is the very curse in the life to come. Amen.

In Christ,

Pastor Jeremy Mills