

**“You are the (Rich) Man”**  
**Luke 16:19-31**  
**Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost**  
**September 30, 2007**

*“Besides, in all of these matters there is a huge chasm set between us...” Luke 16:26*

After our worship service a couple of weeks ago, several people came up to me and said something like: “I really liked what you had to say today, Tom. That parable of the prodigal son always hits close to home, especially if you’re a parent.” Well, that’s true enough. I will have to confess that thoughts about my three kids often cross my mind when hearing that story. And if you happen to have children who have made questionable decisions at some point in their lives, then this familiar story can certainly bring a tear or two to your eye. But even though that may be so, and as much as I appreciate your very generous comments, if I had really been a good pastor I should have grabbed those people who made those comments by the neck and given them a good shaking. Then I should have looked them straight in the eye and shouted something like: “You’ve missed the whole point! That story has nothing to do with how you as a parent should accept your wayward son or daughter. Jesus did not tell that story so that you can see yourself as the forgiving father. He told it so that you would see yourself as the prodigal son. You are the one who has wasted his inheritance in the far country. You are the one who needs to come to their senses and come home. You are the one he was talking about!”

After hearing your comments, and as we are about to deal with another of Jesus’ parables, I am worried that many of you will hear the story of the rich man and Lazarus the same way. I am worried that you will hear the words of this very familiar story and not really grasp what Jesus was trying to say. I am worried that you will miss the point. I am worried that you will think that you... Well, before I get into all of that, let’s take a closer look at the story and maybe you will begin to see the source of my worry.

Once upon a time there was a rich man. He not only wore purple robes during important “state” occasions, but also dressed in purple every single day. Now purple cloth was the most expensive cloth available in the ancient world. It was so expensive

that usually only royalty wore it. But this guy wore it every day. Not only that, but Jesus said that the rich man also wore “busos,” a Hebrew word that refers to high quality Egyptian cotton that was usually used for—get this—expensive underwear! Even this guy’s boxers were the very best. As my Italian grandfather, who spent most of his adult life working hard in Omaha for others in financial brackets a little bit higher than his own might say, “He acts like a George-a Brandies.”

Speaking of tastes, this rich man ate fairly well too. As a matter of fact, he did not only eat fairly well once in a while, he ate meals of banquet quality every single day. Now I could spend a bit of time telling you what he ate, but it is far more interesting to note the two little words that Jesus used to end his description of his eating habits: *every day*. If the rich man was eating whatever happens to be the Jewish equivalent of “high of the hog” every day, then there were people having to prepare those meals every day. And by preparing those meals every day, the people who did so were not able to observe the Sabbath. But it is obvious that the rich man didn’t care if his employees weren’t able to fulfill their religious obligations. After all, it is all about him.

Now just outside the rich man’s gated community was a man named Lazarus. He was sick, so sick that he was unable to work. All he could do was beg. And it seems obvious that since he was carried to the rich man’s gates every day, Lazarus concluded that this particular rich man was the only one who could give him the help he needed. But as you know, that didn’t happen. Despite being in clear sight of the rich man, Lazarus did not get the help he so desperately needed. Instead Lazarus only got worse, with sores erupting all over his body. And Jesus even said that it got so bad that the dogs would come and lick those sores, a sign of the utter futility of his situation. Now some commentators have taken exception with that assessment and think this to be a sign of God’s providential protection, putting stock in the old wives’ tale that the saliva of man’s best friend has certain medicinal qualities. But after doing a lot of reading and consulting with Dr. Paul, that’s just not the case. I love my dog but his spit is not a wonder drug—especially after he munches on some of those little gems he leaves out in the backyard. The dogs in this story simply show how bad the situation had come to be for Lazarus.

As a matter of fact, the whole point of all these contrasts is to remind you that the rich man and Lazarus were in two different worlds. The rich man was so wrapped up in his world of excess that he refused to take note of Lazarus, who was mired in his world of hurt. Then one day, the situation suddenly reversed itself. Lazarus succumbed to his sickness and soon found himself carried away by angels to the lap of Abraham. The rich man also died, was buried, and to his utter shock, found that his riches did not secure the place in paradise for which he had hoped. Worst of all, he discovered that it was that sick fellow who used to sit outside his gate that was now lounging in the seat of eternal honor. So he cried out and said, “Father Abraham, send over Lazarus with a cup of cold water. It’s hot as hell down here! Hey, wait a minute; it is hell down here!” Interesting that he knew the poor man’s name, don’t you think? It is also interesting that even in death, the rich man was very conscious of his presumed station in life. To him, he was still a rich man, and Lazarus was still a lackey. But Abraham informed the rich man that there is a great chasm, a gap of enormous proportions between him and the poor that simply can’t be crossed, a gap that shouldn’t have come as that big of a surprise to him, as by ignoring Lazarus he had a hand in creating it.

And this, you see, is where I get worried. This is where the rubber hits the road for us with this parable. That gap, you see, is still around—and it is getting bigger every day. Alexis de Tocqueville was a nineteenth century French aristocrat who was enamored with the newly emerging America and its government. In 1832, he and a companion traveled throughout the U.S. interviewing persons on all levels of society. He commented on all kinds of issues, yet is best known, I suppose, for his conclusions that three opposing forces—the law, voluntary associations, and religion—helped keep American society from degenerating into the selfishness and materialism he regularly saw in his own country. He was also struck by what he called the “general equality of condition among American people.” Few were very rich, few were very poor, and that combination enabled this land to be very fertile ground for democracy.

Well, it doesn't take a genius to realize that something has changed dramatically between then and now. You don't have to be an astute observer of our society to realize that selfishness in all of its forms is probably a bit livelier today than it was yesterday. Compare the average American lifestyle of 1832 with what we find in 2007 and you would probably be of the opinion that materialism has a just bit more influence now than it did back then. And just by about any measure you choose, it seems that you would have to conclude that there no longer exists that "general equality of condition among American people." Today the gap between rich and poor is greater than it has ever been at any time in our nation's history. A recent article by the New York Times used Internal Revenue Service figures to conclude that in 2005, the most recent year such data is available, the top 1% of Americans received the largest share of the national income since 1928—the year before the Great Depression began. Those figures also indicate that the top 10% of Americans had an average gain in income of almost 14%, while the other 90% had an average loss of income of 0.6%. Data also shows that the top 330,000 Americans collectively enjoyed as much income as the bottom 150 million Americans. The article said, "Per person, the top group receive 440 times as much as the average person in the bottom half earned." I have a feeling that old de Tocqueville would find that to be a rather disturbing development, don't you think?

Now I would imagine that most of you here this morning don't fall into that group of 330,000 Americans. If you did, then you certainly wouldn't be stuck with me as your pastor! Most of you don't fall into that bottom group of 150 million Americans either. As a matter of fact, compared to the rest of the world, most of you in this room are fairly well off. In more statistics that I read somewhere, I discovered that the average family in our nation has an average income of about \$55,000. I realize that with the cost of gas and Hannah Montana tickets being what they are, \$55,000 a year doesn't exactly make one rich. But when one considers that about half of the world lives on less than \$2.00 per day, and another 1.5 billion live on even less than that, we might as well be the Clampetts. The World Bank says that "an American having the average income of the bottom U.S. decile is better-off than 2/3 of the world's population." The gap between the haves and the have-nots of the world is greater than it has ever been at anytime in world history.

And the presence of that gap is why I worry about this parable of the rich man and Lazarus. It is important that you know a few things about this parable. First of all, it is just that—a parable. Despite the fact that this is the only story Jesus tells that contains a proper name, and despite the fact that we find that proper name elsewhere in the four gospels, these words of Jesus do not reflect something that actually happened. “Any similarities to actual people or events is purely coincidental,” or however that disclaimer usually goes. Again, this is just a parable, a story that finds its origins in the very creative mind of Jesus. Secondly, this story is neither a description of the nature of heaven or the temperature of hell. Despite being filled with some very vivid details, the purpose of this story is not to give us a glimpse of what happens to us after we die. Rather, the purpose of this story is to give us a look at what is supposed to happen with us while we are alive. The focus of this parable is on this world, not the next. Finally and most importantly, while this very detailed story is just a story, Jesus intended us to recognize ourselves in it—just as he did with the telling of all of his parables. It is that which gets me so worried. For more often than not, when we listen to this story we tend to see ourselves as Lazarus. We hear these words and believe ourselves to be that poor, broken man who eventually finds himself sitting in the lap of Abraham. And we like thinking like that!

But to borrow a line from the late Lloyd Bentson, “I know Lazarus. I have worked with Lazarus. My friend, you are no Lazarus.” In this parable, you are not the poor guy at all. Oh, you may have issues with your health insurance coverage every once in a while, but I don’t know of a person in here today who has ever been so down and out that dogs have licked their sores. Milk and orange juice may be getting expensive, but I don’t know anyone in here who finds him or herself in a situation such that he or she would be content with dining on some of the crumbs that fell from their neighbors’ table. Jesus did not tell this parable so that you could think of yourself as that poor, sick man, you see. There is no one in this room this morning that has anything in common with Lazarus. No, you are the rich guy in the story. You are the one in the fancy clothes who eats sumptuously every day. You are the one who see the hungry, but do not feed them, who notice the thirsty, but do not give them something to drink, or who stumble upon the sick,

but do not stop and help those who are lying on your very doorstep. And quite frankly, since you are the rich guy, unless you change your rich guy ways, you are going to hell pure and simple.

Now I want you to listen closely. Jesus didn't have a problem with anybody being rich. Jesus had a problem with being rich and not using one's riches wisely. Jesus took issue with those who could have done something about the Lazaruses of the world, but for whatever reason, chose not to do so. I read a commentary the other day that explained this nicely. It said: "At the end of the day the parable [of the rich man and Lazarus] offers a profound insight into the ambiguity of possessions. While they have an indispensable potential for good, possessions can also create and feed self-aggrandizement and, in the process, dull sensitivities to both the rights and the needs of others."<sup>1</sup> I like that. The first part of that statement reminds us that people can and have done great things with their wealth. Bill Gates and our own Warren Buffett are now giving most of their fortunes away to those institutions that help others. Tom Pittman, a Methodist preacher's kid from Mississippi, who founded MTV and later became president of AOL/Time Warner, has spent the last few years making sure that every classroom in his home state has access to Internet. He has spent millions of his hard earned dollars on computers for schools in one of the poorest states in the country. I think it was Andrew Carnegie who said that you should spend the first half of your life making money and the second half giving it all away. Jesus didn't have problems with people making money.

He did have problems, however, with those who did not use their wealth to help others. He did have problems with people and institutions that, like the rich man, used their resources to feed their pride and self-indulgent lifestyle. That is what we are reminded of with the second part of that statement. Wealth—mammon, as Jesus called it—has the potential to dull personal and national sensitivities and allows those who are poor to be seen as objects rather than as people. They become nothing more than "problems" with which we are forced to deal. When that happens we are robbed of our compassion. The way individuals and governments spend their money ceases to be a

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Kenneth Bailey, "The Clothes Horse and the Beggar," [www.shenango.org](http://www.shenango.org)

moral issue. Ethical compasses become broken. And we become either unaware, unmoved, or both by the many people named Lazarus who are lying at our doorstep. Or, like that commentary went on to say, we become like the alcoholic who was unaware of his self-destructive behavior even after it came to its bitter conclusion.

No matter what you think of his politics, Jimmy Carter was right when, in 1999, he said that “the greatest challenge we face is the growing chasm between the rich and poor people on earth. There is not only a great disparity between the two, but the gap is steadily widening.”<sup>2</sup> Whether on a personal or national scale, the only way to face that challenge and close that gap is to recognize that there is a person on our doorstep: a person with a name, a person with a history, and a person with every bit as much right to be on this earth as you. Those of us who live in this most prosperous side of Douglas County, those of us who have incomes far above the national average, those of us who are citizens of the richest country of the world, are not to be confused with that fictional character named Lazarus. We are the rich man in Jesus’ parable. We are those who are totally missing the point. And because that is so, we are those who are going to have to change or end up being very, very thirsty.

And if you have ears to hear, use them.

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<sup>2</sup> Jimmy Carter, Our Endangered Values, Simon and Schuster, New York, 2005, p. 179