

Handling Riches  
Luke 16:19-31  
Amos 6:1a, 4-7

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Luke 16:19-31

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.’ But Abraham said, ‘Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.’ He said, ‘Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father’s house— for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.’ Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.’ He said, ‘No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.’ He said to him, ‘If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.’”

Amos 6:1a, 4-7

Alas for those who are at ease in Zion, and for those who feel secure on Mount Samaria, the notables of the first of the nations, to whom the house of Israel resorts! Alas for those who lie on beds of ivory, and lounge on their couches, and eat lambs from the flock, and calves from the stall; who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music; who drink wine from bowls, and anoint themselves with the finest oils, but are not grieved over the ruin of Joseph! Therefore they shall now be the first to go into exile, and the revelry of the loungers shall pass away.

This parable that Jesus told is not a comforting one for those, who like a certain rich man, have more than we need. I cannot imagine that it was comforting for those Pharisees who were “lovers of money” who heard it. But truth is more important, and more useful, than false comfort.

We would love to “spiritualize” this. Make it about anything other than money. Wouldn’t we? Whenever anything in the Bible is this blunt, some people want to sublimate it, “refine it,” “elevate it,” “moralize it.” They immediately try to redefine what Jesus says, before anyone

might get an idea that that might make them uncomfortable. They say things like, “It is not just the financially poor who are blessed and not just the financially rich who would be damned.” “The main thing is always what a person’s attitude is toward poverty and wealth.” “Those external aspects don’t matter, compared with the inward aspects: rich in God or poor in God.”

The most dangerous thing about this kind of spiritualization of the gospel is that it contains some truth, but the truth is not the point of what they are doing. The point is to provide themselves and us with an excuse not to be uncomfortable. It is very easy to speak of the good news of Jesus Christ as if it were all about inner belief and outward action did not matter. It’s easy to back away from doing something in the world, if we can just rationalize it.

There is some truth in that interpretation of this parable. Just enough truth to inoculate us against what Jesus was actually saying.

It is true that our attitudes toward money are important. It is true that all of us have riches of one sort or another.

But, did you notice? Jesus says nothing about Lazarus’ attitude toward his poverty. He may have been a meek, unassuming beggar, staying out of the way of those the world would say were his betters, or he may have been a very pushy, in-your-face kind of guy. Given that he seems to have set up housekeeping in this particular rich man’s gateway, where the rich man and the rich man’s family and guests had to walk past or over him every time they came and went, I’m inclined to believe the latter.

Jesus says nothing about the rich man’s attitude toward his wealth, except what we infer from the story. We know that he had a particular beggar sleeping in his gateway long enough to learn his name. We know that Lazarus longed to have even the crumbs from the feasts that the

rich man held, and the rich man did not give him anything. Yeah. He knew Lazarus' name, but he did not see a need to help Lazarus when he was so bad off that half-feral neighborhood dogs were licking his running sores, right in front of his own home.

And even after death, when he has seen that Lazarus has gone to Heaven and he himself has not, he still wants to send Lazarus off to run his errands, as if he is still more important than Lazarus is. Even when God has shown this to be false, he still sees Lazarus as one of *those people*, unimportant except as they are useful to him for his purposes.

This parable of Jesus' is frightening. There is little room for shading here, little room for reading it in a way that does not challenge us. For Jesus, riches and poverty were never trivial matters or worldly things that he and his followers should not be involved with. For Jesus, all of human life is included in what he came to redeem. The Gospel says that, "For God so loved the *kosmos*, that he sent his only Son..."<sup>1</sup>

For Jesus, riches and poverty are things to be taken seriously, as seriously as physical health and suffering, things to which they were connected, then and now. Jesus healed the sick and the suffering, because suffering was important. The blind seeing and the lame walking were signs of the kingdom of God. But, inseparable from physical healing, in the same sentence, both in the Hebrew Scriptures and in Jesus' own words, was, "the poor have good news brought to them."<sup>2</sup>

We live in a world with large and growing gaps between white and black, liberal and conservative, rich and poor. We live in a world where people who are not like us, whoever we

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<sup>1</sup> John 3:16. *Kosmos* is the original Greek word that is conventionally translated (and weakened) as "world."

<sup>2</sup> Luke 7:22, Isaiah 61:1-3.

view as “us,” are routinely demonized. The rich are portrayed as uniformly corrupt and cruel; the poor as unvaryingly dishonest and violent. Liberals are described as all heart, but stupid; conservatives as devoid of all empathy for anyone. From whatever vantage point you view the world, *those people* look to be all alike.

These misperceptions are made worse by our social divisions. It is a cliché routinely ridiculed that most white people do not have any friends who are black. The joke is that a particular person is a white person’s “Black Friend,” capitalized like a job title, and it kind of is, in that the white person has exactly one, and, by their existence, they allow the white person to claim that they are not racist.

Most people who make more than the United States median household income of fifty-six thousand, five hundred dollars<sup>3</sup> don’t know anyone who brings home significantly less than that number, and vice versa. We live in different neighborhoods, shop in different stores, and send our kids to different schools.

The media, including social media, increases these divisions to boost their profits. It is easier to arrange things so that you do not see or hear things that upset you. Whether you get your news from MSNBC or Fox News, Daily Kos or Breitbart News.com, you inevitably see a distorted view of our world.

So, what do we do about this situation? Each of us is only one person, and we are not inordinately rich and powerful people, at that. It is easy to look at the world and lose hope.

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<sup>3</sup> 2015 data at <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2016/demo/income-poverty/p60-256.html>

The situation may look bleak, but we are not without hope. Following Jesus Christ, we always have hope.

The good news and the challenge of Jesus' parable is that every one of us is the rich man. Every one of us has gifts, not truly given to us for us, but entrusted to us for the good of the Body of Christ.

- Some of us have money. Our money is not given to us to hoard, but entrusted to us for the good of the Body and the whole world.
- Some of us have time, time that we could use doing good in the world. Our time is not given to us to waste. Our time is little bits of life, entrusted to us by God.
- Some of us have education, learning and wisdom that can help make our lives and others' lives easier and better. That education, no matter whether it came from formal schooling or the school of hard knocks, is not our exclusive possession, but something entrusted to us by God, the source of all truth and wisdom.

These are just a few examples. No matter what our individual riches are, we need to practice good stewardship of what does not belong to us, but, rather belongs to God.

Every one of us needs to view each of our neighbors not as *those people*, but as our individual brothers and sisters. The rich man knowing Lazarus' name was good, but not good enough. He needed to view him not as a frustration, or an obstacle, or as a challenge, but truly as a human being, made uniquely in the image of the Almighty God, just like he himself was. He needed to reach out and get to know this man who lived right there, in his own doorway.

The other good news, and the other challenge of Jesus' parable, is that every one of us is Lazarus. No matter how much we pretend, or how much we might like to be, not one of us is

truly self-sufficient. We need our brothers and sisters, and the gifts that they have. We need God, the source of all good gifts. We were all made to be in relationships, loving and being loved. This is what it is to be human, made in God's image.

We do not get to set the terms for our relationship with God. When God offers God's grace and love, it is like the rich man offering food to a beggar. We do not choose the menu or our table company. It is take it or leave it.

The good news is that Lazarus came to be in the bosom of Abraham. He got to be with God forever. That is the goal state, as an engineer would say. That is better than anything that we would choose, if we were able to choose.

So, this next week, as you look at your life, pay attention to where you are Lazarus. You are beloved by God, far beyond anything that you deserve.

But also pay attention to where you are the rich man. Reach out to Lazarus. Give him what you can of your riches.

For that is how we can follow Christ in the world.

AMEN.