

The comedian George Burns once said, the secret to a good sermon is to have a good beginning, and a good ending, then have the two as close together as possible. So, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Give all your money away to the poor and you will go to heaven. Amen.

Ah, if only it were that easy... But it isn't that easy. There are some situations where Jesus just comes out and says it. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind and Love your neighbor as yourself." Or "When you pray say "Father, hallowed be your name..." But that isn't what happens in the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man. Jesus is in some public setting surrounded by tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, scribes, disciples, all sorts of people from all sorts of socio-economic status. Rather than making a definitive statement about money and wealth to these folks, he chooses to tell this parable, this story about how money and wealth can affect the way that people interact with one another. In the first part of this parable, Jesus is putting a new spin on a classic folktale that is believed to have originated in ancient Egypt.

This folktale was likely told amongst the gentiles of Luke's audience, and has been recounted by Charles Dickens in a Christmas Carol, by Mark Twain in *The Prince and the Pauper*, and by Eddie Murphy and Dan Aykroyd in the classic 1983 comedy "Trading Places." All these stories deal with a reversal of fortunes. Yet, while this folktale in all its reimagined versions ends up benefitting everyone involved, Jesus' parable about the Rich Man and Lazarus does not. So, what do we do with it?

If we take this literally, we might think that Jesus is proclaiming that all wealthy people are going to hell and all poor people are going to heaven. If we take this literally, we might view this passage as a geographical sketch of hell. But this is a parable, a literary device that is one part metaphor, one part truth, one part tragedy, one part humor. It is meant not to be taken literally, but rather to be taken seriously. In Paul's letter to Timothy, he does not write "Money IS the root of all evil." Rather he says "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." He goes on to say:

"Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant not to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

Paul presumes that some of the Christian community will be wealthy but offers a warning about falling into the temptation and traps that come with accumulating and hoarding wealth. Rather use what you have to honor God by conducting yourself as God mandates us to, recognizing and helping those in need. One cannot serve both God and wealth because there are sacrifices and commitments that must be made that prevent one from serving both masters. Jesus tells this parable because dealing with money and wealth in a way that honors God by providing for those in need mattered to the people listening to him, and it continues to matter to us in our present contexts.

Money and wealth are in the forefront of our consciousnesses these days. Inflation, interest rates, recession, and income disparity are among the most trending topics across all media platforms right now. There is good reason for this. It matters.

The accumulation and use of money, wealth, possessions, however you want to phrase it, matters. Money and wealth are in the forefront of our consciousnesses these days as were they 2000 years ago and will probably be that way 2000 years from now. Money and possessions are a central theme in Luke's Gospel, and frankly in much of the Hebrew Scriptures and New Testament. Even before he was born, when Jesus is in Mary's womb, Mary proclaims the words of the Magnificat saying "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of the Almighty's servant." Jesus was born to a family that probably struggled, living a life that was hand to mouth, paycheck to paycheck in the parlance of our times. When he was presented in the temple his family sacrificed a turtledove rather than a lamb probably because theirs was a humble situation. Shrewd use of money, proper stewardship of wealth, and importance of living a life of awareness and generosity are central themes in Luke's Gospel because it matters.

The Sermon on the Plain and the Parable of the Rich Fool are crucial reminders of the seductive dangers of greed. The Gospel lesson from three weeks ago ended with the lines "None of you can be my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." The point here being that our compass must always be oriented toward God.

Rather than us possessing things, often things seem to possess us, shifting our focus away from God and away from doing godly things, like caring for the poor.

Last week's Gospel lesson was the Parable of the Dishonest Manager. Jesus, who seems to always have an eye for seedy characters, uses this story to recognize that while wealth can be corrupting, managing it shrewdly is a necessity because doing so allows some people to help other people, people like Lazarus. People like Lazarus, sitting next to Abraham in heaven, and people like Lazarus sitting cold and hungry on our sidewalks and benches. People like Lazarus who welcome others to the heavenly courts of God. People like Lazarus desperate to be seen and cared for by those who through their faith are convicted to use their resources, often hard-earned resources, for the care of God's people.

Perhaps a serious and faithful reading of the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich man allows us to picture ourselves in each of the characters rolls. Perhaps we can identify with Lazarus in some way. Desperate, unseen, and alone. If this is the case, please know that like Lazarus you are loved and valued by God.

Perhaps we can picture ourselves as the Rich Man. The Rich Man doesn't actively do or say anything mean to or about Lazarus (the only person Jesus names in any of his parables by the way), the problem is that he doesn't see or even recognize Lazarus's humanity, during life or even after death. He doesn't see that this person is worthy to be lifted by Angels to sit with Abraham, much less that he is sick, starving, in need. He just doesn't see him. He could help him, but a gate, a wall, a chasm exists between him and Lazarus. I know I have, and I think we have all been guilty of not recognizing and honoring God's presence in and love for all God's creation. We honor God by recognizing those in need and using what we have to care for them. The rich man has erected a barrier perhaps a foot thick, but it may as well be a vast chasm, between himself and God. Perhaps we are called to identify what barriers, what gates, walls, chasms, we have erected that separate us from God. Perhaps Jesus' words call us to identify and recon with the barriers that we erect and hide behind such that we don't see the humanity, the suffering that exists mere feet from us.

I wonder also if we can picture ourselves as the brothers of the Rich Man, having heard Moses and the prophets proclaim God's call to help those in need, and then making the choice to do so or not.

I wonder what gates, what walls, what chasms we build or hide behind that keep us separated from people like Lazarus here and now. The beautiful punchline of the parable is that that fully knowing what will happen to him in a relatively short time from then, Jesus says, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." If we have listened to Moses and the prophets, if we are truly convinced that Jesus has risen from the dead, then no one may remain invisible to us. Without even saying it out loud, the real zinger here is that as Jesus looks out at the crowd gathered around him, he is also looking at us here and now, and he asks us...what are you going to do now?