

# Lazarus and the Rich Man

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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.’”

So what are we to make of today's Gospel? It's a hard reading. Brutal, even, and certainly graphic. Here we have the rich man "dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day." And 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." At the day of reckoning, according to the story, Lazarus was ushered into heaven, while the rich man went in the opposite direction, where he lay in torment.

This passage presents a reversal of Jewish logic, the notion that worldly goods are a sign of one's righteousness. Jesus begs to differ.

What do we make of this reading? We Americans like to think of ours as a classless society, an absolute meritocracy where everyone can be upwardly mobile. It's a myth, of course. Some are born into wealth, passed from one generation to the next. Others are privileged by birth – by race or circumstance or even the accident of geography. A recent study, released by the Census Bureau just last week, showed that the poverty rate in the United States, defined as an annual income of \$22,000 for a family of four, rose to 14.3 percent. That's 43.6 million Americans who live in poverty. On the other hand, in the four years leading up to the 2008 recession, according to a report in the *Wall Street Journal*, the income of America's wealthiest citizens rose 13.9 percent a year as compared with 1.8 percent for the rest of the population.<sup>1</sup>

Those are sobering statistics. But if we compare ourselves with the rest of the world, even most Americans classified as poor would be considered wealthy by Third World standards. The average annual income in Haiti, for example, is about \$730, roughly \$2 per day.

So there is a certain logic in today's reading. Jesus, after all, said many times that the first shall be last and the last first. Perhaps we should take him at his word: On the day of judgment, those who live sumptuously in this life

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Whitehouse, "It's Getting Riskier to be Rich," *Wall Street Journal*, September 16, 2010.

will be forced to endure suffering in the next, while those who suffer in this life will be rewarded.

I suppose that, at this point in the sermon, my task is somehow to get us off the hook. We don't want to leave here thinking that only the poor will gain entrance to heaven. That's not really a feel-good message. But before I do that, I think it's worth dwelling for a moment on this notion of economic disparity, which makes us so uncomfortable. Throughout the New Testament, Jesus enjoins his followers to care for "the least of these," those on the margins, and we must never ignore that responsibility.

But what is it that makes the rich man so despicable in today's Gospel? First, the finery. The color purple was reserved for royalty, for people of wealth, and for those with connections to the Roman Empire. The rich man in today's Gospel may well have been one of the colonizers in Palestine, those who collected exorbitant taxes and sometimes drove people off of their land and forced them to be servants.

The rich man's failing, however, was not necessarily that he was wealthy. It was his actions and, more important, his demeanor and lack of repentance. Notice the text. The rich man, in the midst of his torture, cried out for Lazarus to provide him with a drop of water. But consider how he framed that request. The rich man addressed himself not directly to Lazarus, but to Abraham. "Father Abraham, have mercy on me," he pleads, "and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames."

Even in his agony, the rich man could not bring himself to address Lazarus directly, as an equal, for he still regarded Lazarus as beneath him. He directs his plea to Abraham, whom he apparently considers his peer, and asks Abraham to dispatch Lazarus with water.

Therein lies the meaning of the passage, I think. Despite his torment, the rich man still doesn't get the point. His crime lay not so much in his status

or the size of his bank account but in his unwillingness to recognize his shared humanity with Lazarus, the beggar.

Abraham tries to explain. “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things,” Abraham reminded the rich man, “and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony.” Then Abraham goes on to explain that there is a great chasm between the rich man and Lazarus. Yes, indeed, I can imagine the rich man muttering to himself: I’m important, and Lazarus is a beggar. But that misses the point, as Abraham tries to explain. Lazarus is every bit your equal, he tries to tell the rich man. But again the rich man, perspiring now in his torment, doesn’t get it. Rather than address Lazarus directly, he asks Abraham to tell Lazarus to deliver a warning to the rich man’s brothers.

You should know better, Abraham responds. All of the Law and the Prophets tell the same story about the need for justice, the mandate to treat everyone with kindness, not to think of oneself, in St. Paul’s words, more highly than we ought to think. The rich man should have known that; the rich man’s brothers should know that too, and no visit from the other side would convince them otherwise. “They have Moses and the prophets,” Abraham says, “they should listen to them.”

And so should we. The scriptures call us to compassion and kindness, to treat others as fellow human beings, not as servants or inferiors. Love the Lord your God, Jesus tells us, and your neighbor as yourself.

One of the best orators around these days is Cornel West, a professor at Princeton University. If you ever have a chance to hear him, you should. I recall once when he was speaking on campus, I was invited backstage before the event, along with other so-called VIPs. Cornel was kind and gracious to all of the guests, as might be expected. But he also went out of his way to greet others – the custodian in the hallway, the electrician checking out the sound system, the servers carrying champagne flutes on

silver trays. This man with an international reputation extended his hand, asked their names, and introduced himself.

No pretence. No suggestion that, despite his intellect or his education or his many books, he was better than they. That simple gesture of extending a hand was a powerful acknowledgement of our shared humanity, all of us, the lecturer and the custodian, the educated and the not-so-educated, the rich man and the beggar.

The sweaty rich man in today's Gospel could take a lesson.

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Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut