

The Rich Man and Lazarus

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, October 1, 1995.
Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 32:1-3a, 6-15; Psalm 91:1-6, 14-16; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

A rich man dressed like a king. See him? Living in luxury. Surrounded by barbed wire fences. Beggar man Lazarus lay at his gates. Lazarus longs to eat the scraps the rich man scrapes off his plate. One morning Lazarus is found dead - looked like he'd been dead for a week. Nobody missed him. The rich man died too.

But notice - the fortunes of the two men - rich man and poor man - are suddenly reversed when they die. Lazarus suffered misery and poverty in his former life, but after he dies angels place him next to one of the richest men in the Old Testament, Abraham. Abraham - the friend of God and the friend of strangers. Remember how Abraham used his wealth to feed strangers and welcome them into his tent. Lazarus ends up after his death next to Abraham. But the rich man ends up in hell. He used to be dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury. But now, Jesus says, he's in hell, in torment. Everything is reversed.

Wealth and possessions are dangerous. Wealth and possessions so easily keep us from seeing Lazarus on our doorsteps. Live for increasing comfort and conspicuous luxury and we leave this world and enter the next empty, lonely, and tormented. Make money the chief end in life and go to hell. That's what Jesus says.

Hell, Dante the great Italian poet wrote in his great epic poem The Inferno, hell is not where God sends anyone. Hell, he said, is where our will is done. In hell, we get everything we've ever wanted - only to discover that those things don't satisfy us. They leave us empty and thirsty and tormented.

The rich man ended up in hell, not because he was rich, but because he ignored his relationship to Lazarus. His wealth and his love of luxury blinded him to poor Lazarus. He didn't use his money and possessions to minister to Lazarus. He also ignored his relationship with God. He ignored what God said about the dangers of wealth and the love of money. Hell comes as a result of broken relationships. Broken relationships with God. Broken relationships with our neighbors. Broken relationships that are never restored in our lifetimes. Wealth can make us ignore our relationship with God and with poor people. Broken relationships, not wealth, lead to hell.

Wealth and possessions so often control our lives. We Christians have a long way to go in letting Christ control our lives rather than our money and possessions. The longest journey begins with a single step. We may not be ready to go sell all, give to the poor and follow Jesus. But we can take mini-steps. Open our eyes to see people in need in Oxford. Try to find ways that really help poor and hungry people, not just things that increase dependency. Help to shape Public policy. Read about people who minister to Lazarus through our church. Volunteer in places that try to help Lazarus. Walk in the CROP walk. Pledge \$10 dollars to sponsor a walker. Bring canned goods for the basket. Volunteer at a soup kitchen. Tithe your income - give 10% of it away. Seek first God's kingdom.

Here's another thing you can do. Come to this Table hosted by Jesus Christ: Confess sin and brokenness. Seek reconciliation with God and neighbor. Trust in Jesus Christ for cleansing and renewal. Let the Risen Christ take control of your wallet and pocketbook.

Let us pray: Make us worthy, Lord, to serve our fellow human beings throughout the world who live and die in poverty and hunger. Give them through our hands this day their daily bread, and by our understanding love, give peace and joy. Amen.