

The Punishment of the One who Never Noticed

A sermon preached by the Revd. Theodore S. Atkinson at the Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the 19th Sunday after Pentecost, September 28, 1986. Scripture Lessons: Joel 2:23-30; Psalm 107:33-43; 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.

Did you know that we're rich? We really are. When we have to pay our monthly bills and make unexpected repairs on our homes and cars I know we don't feel rich but you have to admit that we do project an image of wealth and comfort to many people in this town. First of all we have God who gives us so much every day and who's promised still more to come in eternity. St. Paul tells us that if we have food and clothing, with these we shall be content. If we have more than that we're rich. As men and women who confess that Jesus is Lord we need to take stock, every once in a while, of our resources of wealth in God. We need to say *no* to unbelief which tells us that we're really poor. And then we need to struggle with how to obey Jesus in practical ways when it comes to the use of wealth. We need to hear what the Bible says about the rich and poor *especially* if we're rich.

The Bible has so much to say about riches because God wants us rich people to see ourselves in the light of eternity and make a life-changing decision that affects our lifestyle. Many extraordinary rich people like Albert Schweitzer and Mother Theresa have heard the good news of the care of Jesus for the poor and discovered a new joy and purpose in living as they've reordered their lives. Many ordinary people also have discovered that when they systematically give a tenth of their incomes to the work of God's kingdom they're blessed in unthought of ways. But, unfortunately, some people hear the words of Jesus, and like the rich young ruler, go away sadly because they can't imagine much joy or happiness in giving and

sharing like that.

Three things stand out for me in our Gospel lesson.

First, the nameless rich man feasted sumptuously. The fact that he's nameless is a clue. Tradition has given him the name of Dives which in Latin means *wealthy*. But Jesus didn't give him a name. His namelessness is a clue to the way the world's standards are turned up-side-down in the kingdom of God. For us, it's the rich of the world who have names-- lococca, Johnny Carson, the Kennedys, the DuPonts. The poor have no names. We know the names of movie stars and professional athletes but we don't know the names of the trash-collectors. But Jesus gave this poor man who sat at the gate of the rich man a name. His name was Lazarus which means *God has helped*. That's a clue as to how Jesus looks at things.

The rich man feasted sumptuously. He was clothed in purple and fine linen. He lived like a king. He wasn't a king, but he lived like one. Most of us live like kings. In fact we live better than a lot of kings once lived. The difference between the person who makes \$30,000 a year and the person that makes a million a year isn't really that great. The millionaire can afford to buy a few more toys and gadgets but both are able to live like kings. Most of us have all that we really need and maybe far more than we should.

The rich man feasted sumptuously, but-- *and this is the second thing-- he didn't do anything for the poor man lying at his gate.* He wasn't a friend to Lazarus. Lazarus was sick and under-nourished and full of sores all over his body, and the old mongrel dogs came and licked the sores. He just lay there, wishing for some of the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table.

Try to imagine it. Day after day he lay there watching the servants carry in food; sides of beef, veal, baskets of fruit and vegetables; bottles of imported wine-- and he wished for the steak bones to suck on or the apple cores to gnaw. About thirty years ago I was at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico. For two weeks we ate dehydrated eggs and potatoes and fruit. We drank foul tasting water because we had to put iodine in it to purify it. And since we scouts had to do all the cooking the eating was terrible. We had no moms there to bake cakes. There were no candy bars for a week. Some afternoons we'd hike twenty or more miles through cloud-bursts. And as I walked through the mud and rain with twenty pounds of equipment on my back I'd day-dream about MacDonald hamburgers and Tasty-Cakes. That must've been the way it *always* was with Lazarus; always dreaming about eating but waking up every morning with his stomach gnawing and the taste of death in his mouth.

In fact, it was so bad for Lazarus that he died of hunger and neglect. He wasn't even buried but angels carried his soul to Abraham's bosom. On the other hand, the rich man died and *was* buried, probably with great pomp and circumstances but, *and this is the third point*, he ended up in everlasting anguish. While Lazarus was enjoying the afterlife, he was crying for a little water to cool his tongue. Imagine! All his life he drank Perrier water and the richest wines money could buy but after he died he cried out for a single drop of water on his tongue but nothing could be done for him. 'You already had your good things,' Father Abraham told him.

Now all my commentaries cautioned me that Jesus wasn't interested in giving information about 'the temperature of Hell or the furniture of Heaven'; but he does insist that there *is* a future life, something that the pharisees whom Jesus was especially talking to, also believed. They just

didn't think there was any danger of their ending up there. They were a lot like people today. A recent Gallup poll showed that even in secular American something like 60% of the people believe in hell but only 1 or 2% have any fear that they personally might end up there.

Now at this point some of you may be saying, 'Wait a minute! Don't tell me you believe in hell! How could a good God send anyone to hell?' It's true that there's always been a minority view in the Christian church which has insisted that all will be saved in the end. Some great Christians have believed in the doctrine of *universalism*. The majority view, however, is that there *is* a hell to be avoided. Of course, the majority isn't always right but I go along with the majority at this point. I do believe that there's a hell to be avoided as well as a heaven to gain. There's no doctrine which I'd more willingly remove from Christianity than this if it lay in my power.

But I want to make clear that many of the popular conceptions of hell come to us more from medieval and pagan sources than from the Bible. Hell is not some kind of eternal concentration camp where God, like some cosmic Hitler, tortures people. Jesus said that the judgment of hell consists in the very fact that people prefer darkness to light. I believe that if a million chances were likely to do good, God would give each one of us a million chances. The book of Revelation pictures the gates of heaven open on all sides for whoever will come in.

So I believe that the great chasm fixed between Lazarus and the Rich Man isn't a geographical chasm like some cosmic Grand Canyon. The great chasm was of the Rich Man's own creating. The great chasm existed before the Rich Man's death. The last judgment didn't create the chasm, it only revealed the chasm that was already there. Even though poor Lazarus was

at the Rich Man's gate the Rich Man had erected a great chasm separating the two of them. The Rich Man could have bridged that chasm if he'd made a friend of Lazarus by helping him in his wretchedness. And I believe the anguish that the Rich Man experienced wasn't the anguish of physical torment but the anguish of memory. It was the memory of how he'd failed to notice Lazarus before. It was the anguish of thinking how badly he'd invested his money.

What's the main teaching of this parable? It seems to me that it dramatically brings home to us the question, 'What have we done with Lazarus at the door?' It also tells us that inhumanity is a damning sin which, if not repented of, excludes us for ever from the company of Christ. It's a terrible thing to go through life blinded by self-love; to have eyes and see not; to isolate ourselves from the poor and dig a chasm that keeps us far away from them forever. Jesus by no means taught that it's sinful to be rich or that the poor are all saved. But he did mean to suggest the solemn peril of the selfish use of wealth.

This world has millions of Lazarus's laying at our doors. We'll see them if we open our eyes. What can we do to help them? Start close at home. Find out the ministries of mercy of this particular church administered by the Deacons and the Neighborhood Services Center. Then find out more about world hunger and about the agencies of our denomination that are helping those in great need; programs like the Self Development of Peoples or the Hunger Fund. We can also help by supporting the proclamation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Many times we Christians minister to the physical needs of people but are reticent about speaking of the need of people for Christ as Lord and Savior. But we need in this country and around the world men and women who know the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior and

who actually follow Christ's example by helping those in need.

Let us pray: Almighty and most merciful God, we remember before you all poor and neglected persons whom it would be easy for us to forget: the homeless and the destitute, the old and the sick, and all who have none to care for them. Help us to heal those who are broken in body or spirit, and to turn their sorrow into joy. Grant this, Father, for the love of your Son, who for our sake became poor, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.