

First Sunday after Trinity
June 6, 2010

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Minneapolis, Minnesota

✧ Jesu juva ✧

POVERTY AND RICHES

Luke 16:19-31; I John 4:16-21; Genesis 15:1-6

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

Today's parable is a fairly straightforward story. There is a rich man and a poor man. The rich man enjoyed great comfort and luxury in this life. The poor man was in real need and suffered in this life. However the poor man dies and goes to heaven, while the rich man dies and lands in Hell. And based on these elements of the story some have concluded that riches are evil and poverty is good; and that the rich go to Hell while the poor who have suffered so in this life go to Heaven. And while I am sure that there are many people in Hell who were wealthy in this life and many poor people in Heaven. I'm also sure there are many who were poor in this life in Hell, and many who were rich in Heaven.



Wealth, possessions, material things, luxuries even, are not evil in themselves; and possession of such things does not automatically cause a person to be condemned. It is true that our Lord once said "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God", but so it is with every sinner, whether rich or poor or somewhere in between. And the disciple knew it, which is why they say: "Who then can be saved?" But with God, by His grace that is, all things are possible. And so the rich can be saved by God as can any sinner that is brought by Him to repentance and faith.

If this were not the case, then why did God bless so many of the patriarchs in the Old Testament with great wealth? Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all wealthy beyond belief! They had immense herds and flocks, abundance of possessions, and literally an army of servants. Were they condemned by God for having such things? Of course they weren't. It was God, after all, who had given them their wealth.

If material possessions and comforts were evil and consigned people automatically to Hell, then we should all pray to become poor, and do everything in our power to get rid of our possessions. We should loathe any sort of material wealth as though it were the most deadly of poisons. But that is not the case, is it? And

we are taught through the Scriptures that God provides such things for us. And God never gives evil gifts to His children. Rather He gives such things as a blessing to those who have them assuming that they have gotten them honestly and honorably.

The question before us in this parable is not whether or not riches are evil; but rather what stock should one put in material wealth? And what should one do with the possessions God has given? St Paul teaches us quite clearly, in I Timothy 6, what we should think and do with the material blessings God has given. "Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life."

It is important to take seriously St. Paul's words here. The knowledge that being rich is not in and of itself evil can be used as an excuse for sin. One hears that riches are often given by God, and one thinks, "OK then. Now I don't have to worry about what I do with my wealth. I can enjoy it all myself. I don't need to consider giving to the poor or to the church. I can use it all for myself with a clear conscience." And thus the wealth that God has given can become a stumbling block and an excuse for sin. Often times, as in today's parable, the sin is a sin of omission, of not using wealth properly. But wealth can also, and most often, leads to sins of greed and idolatry. Many a pious believer has fallen for this. Luther speaks here of Christians who are so careful with their money that they become stingy and says how this is just as much a sin as that of the rich man in the parable. For the stingy give little and help little, always saving against the day of trouble, putting their trust in what they manage squirrel away and not in God. One must remember what Proverbs says: "Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, But righteousness delivers from death." And so we all, whether wealthy or not, must learn to use what we have wisely and faithfully.

But what about the poor? Just as riches are not automatically evil, so also poverty is not automatically good. Those in poverty often suffer from the same sins as those with millions. If they don't have, but they still covet wealth and luxury; if they still put their hopes in acquiring it; if they love the money that they don't have more than their fellow man, then they have fallen into the sins often associated with being rich. Moreover, the poor often use their lack of material gifts from God as an excuse in much the same way as the rich use an abundance of God's giving as an excuse. Poverty can for some become an excuse for slothfulness, for refusing to respect other people, for hatred of those who have, for violence, for a sense of entitlement, and host of other things too. And it can be used as an excuse against repentance and faith. "I'm poor, such a one says, and God loves the poor, so I don't need to repent or change. I don't have any power any way. And if God were angry with me, well, I've already received my punishment here."

And so, poverty too must be used rightly, if we can think of poverty in such terms. It ought to be used not as a tool against your fellow man or against God, but as a disciplining of the flesh, and a discipline toward faith and good works and the goal of eventually rising out of poverty so that one can help others. What Paul says regarding penitent thieves also applies here I think: "let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need."

So in the end it matters not whether one is rich or poor. What matters then? Whether or not one has faith; that's what matters. And that is the real point of Jesus' parable too. The rich man had no faith. And this is evidenced both by his lack of works toward the poor and by his lack of trust in the Word of God; for when he asks Abraham to send a messenger to his five brothers, Abraham replies: "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them." But the rich man protests that the Word of God is not enough and that Abraham should send someone back from the dead; to which Abraham replies: "If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead."

The rich man finds himself in Hell not because he failed to help Lazarus, but because He didn't believe the Word of God. And this is not just about the Law of God, but about the chief teaching of the faith. He didn't have faith in the One spoken of by Moses and the Prophets. He didn't trust in Christ.

And yet this is also about riches and poverty; but of a different sort. Think about it. In today's parable, who was really rich and who was really poor? The rich man had been given much by God in every respect. We can assume from the later dialogue that he had knowledge of the Scriptures; and so he had access to God's love and mercy there. Moreover, God had given him abundant evidence of His love for him in the wealth that He had given him. This man had more reasons to believe in the love of God than many. And he should have treasured God for all of this and believed. But he didn't. And so he shows himself to actually be poor in the end, lacking the one thing needful, lacking faith and trust in Christ.

And now to the poor man. Here is a man who had received little from God in terms of material blessing. He was a poor, sick, beggar. And yet he does not curse God for his situation. Rather He believes and trusts in God's love for him in spite of the utter lack of evidence for it. And thus he shows himself a true child of Abraham, who believed the Word of God even against the rules of nature and reason as we heard today when the Lord promised the man that he, being an old man and his wife being barren, would have a son. He believed only because God had said it. And that was enough. And so also, evidently, Lazarus; for we find him as a child of Abraham, reclining in Abraham's bosom in Heaven. This one, in his poverty, looked to the One who could save him and make him rich in grace and faith. And he became the rich one in the end.

And that is how we must be too, whether rich or poor in terms of material things. Spiritually speaking, after all, we are all poor beggars. We earn nothing from God but wrath; and yet on account of the love He has for us, He gives us not

wrath but life and blessing. His love for us, if you think about it, is the ultimate example of the right use of riches and power. St. John says today that “we have known and believed the love that God has for us.” And in the previous verses He describes that love: “we have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son as Savior of the world.” Christ Jesus who is the eternal Son of God and coequal with the Father, leaves His heavenly throne, gives up His divine dignity, restrains His almighty power, takes on our flesh and dies an agonizing death in our place to rescue us from our spiritual poverty. St. Paul says in I Corinthians: “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.” And He did this not because we loved Him so greatly or deserved His help. We love Him, as St. John says, because He first loved us.

And believing, we also do love Him who loved us. But what shape does that love take? Or to put it another way, what does faith do in love? Where is love of God expressed? First and foremost such love is shown by believing and cherishing God’s Holy Word. But assuming that the Word is believed, where else can one express one’s love for God? In worship. Yes that is one place. In offerings to God? Yes, material offerings are a way of showing love of God.

But there is another way too, a way which must not be neglected if you really love God. St. John points not to religious activity (though he certainly doesn’t reject these things) but to love of your fellow man. “And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.” Love here has little to do with how you feel about your fellow man; it has much more to do with what you do for your fellow man. It is about self-giving for the good of others, about sacrifice. Such sacrifices can be made by rich and poor alike, though they might take a different shape. It is, after all, not always money or food that your neighbor needs. Sometimes it is only a kind word, or a listening ear, or a helping hand. And such things any of us can give.

And what is such love but a reflection of Christ’s love for us; a dim reflection to be sure, but a reflection nonetheless. And His love for us is so limitless and selfless that He has taken away all of our sins and born the punishment for all our sins. And we beggars never outgrow our need for His grace; for we will never love as completely or honestly or sacrificially as He has loved; and we will never give as fully as He has given. And He still loves and still gives to cover our weakness and our sins, however great or small. He indeed became poor for us so that we believing in Him, trusting His Word, might be made rich, and might at last be taken up by His angels to Abraham’s bosom where all of the faithful enjoy at last the wealth and treasures of Heaven to dwell with Christ Himself; to whom be all glory and honor now and forever. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠