

Rich Man/Poor Man • Luke 16:19–31

It was in 1770 that the Austrian princess Marie Antoinette married the dauphin of France who four years later ascended the French throne as Louis the sixteenth. She was fifteen years old when she was married. She has not always been treated kindly by historians and perhaps for just cause. In preparation for her wedding she requested that the soldiers and police clear the route of her bridal procession through the city of Paris of all beggars and poor people so that she would not have to look at them on her wedding day. That was only the beginning, for as years went by there was a growing animosity between the queen and the poor people of France. When starvation was common in the streets and she was living opulently in the palaces of Paris and Versailles, history records her insensitive response to the poor people's lack of bread: "Let them eat cake."

While more than two centuries have passed since Marie Antoinette lost her head on the guillotine in Paris, the tension between poverty and wealth has not gone away. We still live in a world with astonishing inequities. Here in American we have citizens living in stunning luxury while others are suffering malnutrition.

In his autobiography Lee Iococca tells of Henry Ford's lunchtime excesses. He told about how he would have the

dishes that he desired to eat at lunchtime flown in specially from Paris everyday. He loved hamburgers, but instead of using ordinary ground beef like the rest of us he would have his cook purchase filet mignon and grind it up so that his hamburger would be the very best of meat.

All of these things are taking place at the same time there are children in Africa who go blind simply because they do not have fifty cents worth of eye ointment that could heal their malady. Elderly people have been discovered in America's cities who subsist by eating dog food. Or we find that there are thousands of housing units in our cities that are more in keeping with the bleak standards of the middle ages than what we would expect in modern America.

We hear all that but as Bible-believing Christians we have a tendency sometimes to respond by saying, "Wait a minute, aren't we really more concerned about people's souls than their bodies? Isn't eternity far more important than time and isn't one's spiritual well being of far greater consequence than one's physical well being?" The right answer to that is that it is not a mat-

ter of either/or; it is a matter of both/and.

Jesus makes that nowhere more evident than in the parable of the rich man and the poor man in Luke chapter 16 verses 19–31. For it is in this parable that Jesus calls us to right behavior and to right belief. It's an interesting parable in a number of ways. It is somewhat unusual in that it appears only in the gospel of Luke, whereas you may recall a number of the parables are repeated in one form or another in the various gospels. It is unique among all of the gospels of Jesus in that it is the only one that gives a specific name to one of the characters. In other gospels there is reference to a landowner or to a steward or to a woman who has ten silver coins and loses one or to a prodigal son or a father. In no other case is there a specific name given, but in this case there is an individual who is particularly named.

It's also interesting and unusual in that it lends itself to analysis in terms of twos. It is the parable of two men. It is the parable with two scenes. It is the parable unlike many of the others that contains two

principles for life. Of the two men, the first listed is the rich man and his name is not given, although when you read about him in extra biblical literature you find that he is often called Dives. Not because

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that's an actual name but because when the Bible was first translated into Latin from its original Greek the word for "rich" in Latin was "Dives" and so he became known as that. And to this day many people yet call him Dives.

His description here is brief but full. He was a rich man — we're told that up front. We're told that he wore purple and linen clothing — very expensive. The purple dye was extracted from sea animals. It was costly to get and linen was very expensive to make. It's more the type of thing that royalty would wear. In fact, if you were to estimate its cost, it would probably take a worker's entire year's wages to buy one of the outfits that this rich man would wear. By comparison, today it would be perhaps ten, twenty or more thousands of dollars for a single outfit of clothes, and yet this was the daily garb of this particular rich man. And then we are told about the sumptuous food that he ate. He had gourmet meals everyday as his routine — not just for special occasions.

Now with that introduction to Dives, one might have the impression that he was a bad man or that he

did wicked things. Although actually nothing of the sort here is said. We are not told that he cheated his employees with unfair wages. We are not told that he failed to give alms to the poor or that he neglected to pay his Jewish tithe. We are not told that he gained his money by any sinful method — none of those things at all. In fact, we might even say that there was a good side to him in that he did not in the story chase Lazarus, the poor man, away. He at least let him stay at his gate. Dive's sin was not so much in the evil that he did but in the good that he failed to do. He was never responsible to Lazarus. He never bothered to get to know him or help him.

Let me tell you that this parable makes me uncomfortable. It makes me uncomfortable to read it and it may make you uncomfortable to read it. I look at my own luxuries and I look at the clothes that I wear and the food that I eat and as I read this I'll tell you honestly that I am convicted. I'm convicted that too many times in my own life I am so busy avoiding doing evil that I often do not have the inclination to do good. And I think to myself that if that were to be a measure of one's life that at the best my score would be zero.

You might have some of the same thoughts and feelings. For I suspect that you also have your Lazarus as part of your life. In all probability it is not a starving beggar, but perhaps it is the child of a single parent family down the street whose delinquency you suspect and whose presence you avoid. You might even have installed a security system at your house or double locks on your doors to make sure that while you're away that child does not break in and take that which is of value to you. Or maybe in someone else's case the Lazarus is an alcoholic employee at work, someone whom you have been benevolent enough to not turn in to the boss, but nevertheless someone whom you have gone out of your way to avoid. You're careful not to sit at his table at lunchtime and you park at the other side of the lot at the beginning of the day so that you do not have to have anything to do with him and his particular problems.

You see, it's convicting to hear Jesus talk about Dives — not because he's criticized for having money but because he lacked compassion. He lacked compassion to do what he could do that was good for someone who was desperate and who needed his help. When I think of compassion I have a tendency to become somewhat defensive and to argue back, "But I do pray for him and I am concerned about people in the distant parts of the world. I give money so that the people in India may have food and I do my best so that the people of China may have the gospel." But what about the Lazarus who's at our doorstep? In some ways it is

far easier to be compassionate for those who are distant than for those who are near.

Those of you who are literature buffs may have read some of the writings of Leo Tolstoy. Tolstoy has been described by at least one critic as the apostle of love for the sense of compassion in which he wrote about the people of his native Russia and other hurting people in the world. Yet his wife wrote, "What amazing understanding in his writings of the psychological life of the people, and what lack of understanding and indifference to the life of the people nearest him." And then an even more extraordinary indictment for a wife to write: "I do not believe in his goodness nor his love of humanity."

The second man in the parable is Lazarus, the poor man — not to be confused with the more famous Lazarus who was raised from the dead after Jesus didn't make it in time to Bethany. Lazarus actually was a common name in those days in Palestine. It is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew name Eleazer which means "God has helped."

Physically Lazarus was a miserable man. He was poor and sick. Interestingly enough, there is nothing in the story to indicate that either his poverty or his ill health were of his own doing any more than Dive's wealth and health were of his own doing. It's simply that both men were in opposite circumstances and that's just the way they were.

In order to do something about his poverty and sickness Lazarus located himself at the portico of the rich man's mansion. Either by the grace or the neglect of the owner of that mansion he was allowed to wait there for scraps of leftover food. His only friends were the neighborhood dogs who came and perhaps with some type of canine curiosity or maybe even some measure of love licked his sores as he waited for the crumbs to fall from the table of the lord of the manor.

In those days when people ate they did not use knives and forks as we do here in the west, but they ate with their hands. As a result their hands became dirty with the food that they were eating. The wealthy people wiped their hands on loaves of bread, which were then thrown away. It was this discarded bread that Lazarus hoped that he would be able to get.

Perhaps the most intriguing characteristic of this Lazarus was neither his illness nor his poverty but his silence. For in this parable he never speaks. He never complains about his poverty or disease or condemns Dives for his wealth or lack of compassion. Even in the afterlife that is recorded here there is no indication that he sought vengeance against the man who could have treated him better. He seeks no revenge. He is a man who is simply content to trust God for everything.

I suspect there are more Lazaruses in our world than we know. They are the ones we seek to avoid who have not because of their own choices ended up in the circumstances they are in because of their own choices. They did not choose their disease or their class or their race or their poverty. They did not choose to be born in Bangladesh or war stricken Eritrea rather than the United States.

May I ask you a personal and pointed question? With which of the two men in the parable do you most identify? If this parable were cast as a play, do you think that you would be chosen to play the part of Lazarus the poor man or Dives the rich man? I think most of us would be more like Dives. I'm not trying to lay on feelings of guilt here but reminding us that Jesus calls us to right behavior. It's a parable to tell us that God wants us to do more than avoid sin. He wants us to do good. And it's concerned not just about the suffering masses of humanity on some distant continent but also about the Lazarus that at our doorstep.

We've looked at two men: Dives the rich man and Lazarus the poor man. The parable also tells us of two scenes: the first of life and the second of death. The scene of life is depicted in verses 19 to 21 and we have covered most of the information in considering these two men, although there are some interesting observations that I suppose could be added. It seems to me that we cannot help but be impressed that there is a relationship between life and death. They are not isolated volumes on separate shelves of the library. Life relates to death and death relates to life. Memories continue and relationships are not forgotten.

I also have to observe that life goes on even when some of the key characters are missing. On those days when I think of my own death I become somewhat disturbed to realize that while my loss would be grieved by those to whom I'm especially important, for most people life would be no different. Planes would still take off and land, the newspaper would still be published, the sun would rise and set — life would go on without me just as it did here in the parable for the remaining five of the six brothers. Their lives were not particularly changed because Lazarus was dead for they may not have even known him, but they certainly knew about the death of their brother Dives. However, they didn't change their living. They lived the same way as they had before, and they neglected both his death and it's implications as well as the writings of Moses and the prophets.

But the powerful scene of this parable is not the

life scene but the death scene. It's the stuff from which Dante's "Inferno" is made. For here are two men existing in a post death state. They are awake and conscious and able to communicate and to remember. Dives is in horrible torment: miserable with thirst and surrounded by flames. Lazarus by sharpest contrast is with Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish nation. We are told that he is resting on Abraham's bosom — hardly a western type of expression. It reminds us of pictures of the Last Supper where the apostle John has his head on Jesus' chest.

There is a great chasm between those in bliss and those in torment. In the scene of death, Dives asks Abraham to send Lazarus with just a drop of water to cool Dives' tongue. And Abraham says, "No, it's too late for that. You had your good life and that's gone and now you're in torment. Lazarus was in torment and now that is gone and his good life has arrived." Dives speaks again, "Send him back so that he can tell my brothers what it's like." He thought if they knew what it was like where he now was, they would live their lives quite differently. (It's interesting that Dives still thinks of Lazarus as a servant who should do his bidding.)

All of this is sobering, for it's a graphic depiction of the dual destinies of the wicked and the righteous. It raises a multitude of practical and theological questions. Put on your theological thinking caps for a moment and let me share with you that there is a basic principle for the interpretation of the New Testament parables of Jesus. The literary device is to seek to communicate a primary truth. The small details of the parables cannot stand alone nor ought they be expected

to. They do not teach doctrine or theology but simply support the primary truth that the parable is telling.

We need to understand that this is not a parable about hell's temperatures or torments. We cannot conclude that there can be conversations between heaven and hell. It is not doctrinal teaching here but background to make the parable's point. That being said, we may still safely surmise that the destiny of the wicked is terrible and that the destiny of the righteous is wonderful, but the primary thrust is that Jesus calls us to right behavior and to right belief.

Eternal destiny is serious stuff. We think a great deal about what we wear and what we eat; we become consumed with our jobs, our friendships and our relationships and all the things that make up this life. But the truth of it is that eternity is far more important. By

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comparison, our life now is the briefest scene of all of our experience and the lengthy scene that lasts for ever and ever is that which is to come.

It breaks my heart when I think about the fact that there are people who are wasting their lives away with frivolities and luxuries, neglecting the fact that as a result they're going to spend eternity with Dives rather than with Lazarus. So please, please take most seriously your eternal destiny for it is far more serious and significant than the things which usually monopolize our attention.

Two men. Two scenes. Two principles. One principle relates to this life and the other to the next. In this life the principle is to have compassion on the needy. This parable, like a number of the others that we have studied, has to do with money and could be grouped with them. It is a reminder again that we need to be responsible stewards of all the possessions that have been entrusted to us. We're accountable.

Let me address a sensitive point here. I want us to understand that this parable is not telling us to give our money to the church. It seems to me that particularly in these days we have equated stewardship with the writing of a check and putting it in the offering in a church service. But that is not enough! The Bible says far more about giving to the poor and needy than it does about supporting church programs and buildings. We each should be personally involved.

I would suggest that we look for the Lazarus that is at our own doorstep and that we consider feeding him or her without the church. We need to be aware of the poverty that may be down our street and be willing to give of our resources without the expectation of a tax deduction.

Now I know that there may be some people saying, "Is he serious?" Yes, I am. If people do that, we are doing what Jesus calls us to do. Let us have compassion on the needy because that is the right behavior to which Jesus calls his disciples. Let's meet the needs of the Lazaruses at our doorsteps.

The next principle is to take heed to the scripture. To understand this principle we need to get something straight about this parable that I fear has been horribly misunderstood. We need to understand that Dives was not condemned because of his riches. How do I know? You will recall that Dives was on one side of the chasm and Abraham was on the other. If riches were the basis for going to hell, Abraham should have been on the same side as Dives for Abraham was one of the wealthiest men in all of the Bible. So the determiner of eternal destiny has nothing to do with how much money a person does or does not have, for eternal destiny is not determined by behavior or possessions. Eternal destiny is determined by belief.

That becomes quite evident when you listen to the parable. When Dives asks for Lazarus to go and warn his five brothers in verses 29 and 31, Abraham answers saying, "They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead."

Understand what that means. It means that eternal destiny is based upon believing what the Bible says. In their case they had only the Old Testament. We have the Old Testament and the New. But the theme of salvation is interwoven throughout both the Old and the New Testaments. The Bible clearly teaches that heaven is gained by accepting God's grace by faith. That means that how we handle the teaching of Moses and the prophets plus what we have in the New Testament is what determines how we shall spend eternity.

Once again we are talking about serious stuff! For what one believes about the Bible and how one responds will determine how we will spend all eternity. That means that we must believe the right thing!

What should one believe? Well as simply as I can state it: We must believe that we are sinners. We must believe and acknowledge to God that the only remedy to our sin is Jesus' death and resurrection. We must commit to receive him as Savior and acknowledge him as Lord.

If you have not made that commitment to him, then do it right now saying, "Yes, I am a sinner and I accept Jesus Christ as Savior. I believe what the Bible says."

You see, my friend, that is the only good answer to Jesus' call to right belief and right behavior. In this parable the rich man thought he had everything and he thought that Lazarus had nothing. That's probably why he ignored him. The irony is that Lazarus had exactly what the rich man needed. For Lazarus knew how to have a right relationship with God and how to spend eternity in God's heaven and God's bliss. Dives didn't realize it until it was too late.

The message from this parable that we dare not miss is to look for the Lazaruses at our doorstep or down our street and to have compassion and to give help. We may find to our amazement that our Lazarus has exactly what we need.

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