

Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

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by

Deacon Brian Bromberger

Jay Wilkinson, son of the famous football coach Bud Wilkinson, ran for Congress some years ago. Many people thought he would win easily. After all, Jay Wilkinson was an All-American football player at Duke who married a Miss America finalist after graduating from Harvard Business School. A television commercial was designed, which pictured the young, handsome, idealistic Jay and his wife walking hand-in-hand through an Oklahoma pasture. As they walked, they looked soulfully **upward** at the sky to the accompaniment of soft music with the words running across the screen, "*A Better Tomorrow for all Oklahomans.*" The incumbent, Tom Steed, was a good ole country boy and he knew he was in for a tough fight plus he had a limited campaign budget, with barely **any** money to spend. So he scheduled only a forty-second answer to Wilkinson's commercial. He looked into a camera and said, "*I may not have a fancy degree from Harvard like young Wilkinson, but I **do** know enough **not** to look at the sky when I am walking in a cow pasture.*" Steed won!

Our Gospel parable is not meant to be a **literal** description of heaven or Hades. Nor is it a condemnation against money or meant to induce guilt or paralysis in us, but rather to induce **change**, to challenge us to think about **how** we spend our money justly, as Steed shrewdly used his money to outwit Wilkinson. As hearers, we are in the **same** predicament as the rich man's five brothers who still have time to act with social justice, rather than create their own misery. The parable does not say the rich man was cruel to Lazarus removed him from the gate, or refused him scraps of bread. The rich man did **no** such things. He did **nothing**. He **never** noticed Lazarus, nor used his resources to ease his desperate plight. He resembles Lucy in the old Peanuts cartoon who when walking with Charlie Brown notices a homeless man and Lucy comments that someone should do something about it. "You mean find a home for them?" asks Charlie Brown. "No," Lucy replies, "just put them somewhere I can't see them." The parable implies it was the rich man's wealth that **blinded** him from seeing Lazarus and relieving his suffering. His sin was **not** the evil he did, but the good he did **not** do. It was the **lack** of compassion that created the chasm between him and Lazarus. It is this inequality of life between the two men that is being denounced, not money itself. The popular theology of the day was that blessings in this life were a sign of God's favor, while illness, poverty, and hardship were signs of one's sinfulness and God's displeasure. Lazarus is the only character in all Jesus's parables who **has** a name, which literally means God is my help, **ironic** since his poverty would have made him **nameless** in his time. Instead it is the **rich** man who is anonymous. Isn't the hidden assumption among many Christians in our culture today that if we follow God, things will go materially well for us, that affluence, comfort, good health, and possessions are blessings always to our advantage? Jesus is critiquing this popular prosperity theology because it is being used, now as then, as a rationale for

maintaining the gulf between the rich and the poor. Fiorello LaGuardia, mayor of New York in the 1930s, was presiding at police court on a bitterly cold day. A trembling old man was brought in, arrested for stealing a loaf of bread. His family, the old man said, was starving. LaGuardia said, "The law gives me no choice. I have to fine you 10 dollars." Then LaGuardia pulled 10 dollars out of his own wallet and said, "Here's the 10 dollars to pay your fine." He dropped the money into his famous hat and declared, "I hereby fine everyone in this courtroom fifty cents for living in a town where a man has to steal bread in order to eat." The hat was passed and the old man, his face aglow, left the courtroom with \$47.50. The worlds of the rich and poor intersect in the parable at the **gate**, with the rich man seeing the gate as a barrier keeping the beggar Lazarus outside, cutting him off from access to the goods of this world, so that rich and poor remain separated. Jesus sees the **same** gate as a fluid entry way where insiders and outsiders mingle, connecting with one another, so that both sides can be brought into solidarity with each other. God wants to rearrange the goods of the earth so **all** people in the world can **share** them together. God **never** supports a status quo of inequality! Even though I and you, probably don't identify with the rich man and his **luxurious** lifestyle in the parable, I clicked on the web site, www.globalrichlist.com, where you can enter your annual income and see where you rank compared to the rest of the world. Even with my paltry salary, you are looking at the 164,156,522 richest person in the world, which puts me in the top 2.57% of the wealthiest people on earth, as we live in a world where over 3 billion people live on less than \$2 a day and every 3.6 seconds another person dies of starvation on our planet. Like it or not and there's no way to sugarcoat this fact, but **we** are the **rich** people Jesus is referencing in his parable. The way we use our money **is** a barometer of our present spiritual condition and the parable reminds us that **our** neglect of the poor illustrates where **our** hearts lie, just as it does for the rich man. Even in the netherworld, he ask Abraham (a rich man while alive) for consolation, but not for forgiveness. He treats Lazarus as his servant ordering him to provide the cool relief he would not give to Lazarus on earth, then be sent to warn only **his** five brothers of the same fate that awaits them. The rich man in the afterlife is as arrogant, demanding, and self-centered, as he was on earth. Inhospitable to the needs of his neighbors, contrary to Moses and the prophets, he is now excluded from the hospitality of God, which lands him in Hades. His attitude is, "I worked for this money due to **my** talents. I own and deserve this money and I'll spend it as I see fit, on **me** alone." He echoes Bart Simpson on the TV cartoon *The Simpsons* when at the meal table he prays, "Dear God, we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing," and later he gives an **old** can of lima beans to the local food bank.

But Jesus says that we **are** equally dependent on God for everything, for life itself, so we are **all** poor. It's not what **I** have in me that allows me to prosper, but what God provides **in** and **through** me. The Jewish Talmud says those who turn away from the one who appeals for charity, are considered as if they were worshiping idols. Everything we have or possess, including our ability to earn money, is a pure gift from God. God owns everything...we are allowed to be managers, communal sharers of God's creation with mutual responsibility. What makes this parable so threatening is that Jesus is asking us to surrender decisions about our money to him, yielding control in a society that idolizes control, operates under an 'I want it now' ethic, and doing what you need to do in order to advance **yourself**. We live in the middle of an American dream that identifies

success as moving up the ladder and making **more** money so we can acquire better, trendier stuff, greater prosperity, and live more comfortably **ourselves** as well as keep up with the Joneses. We are asked to believe that our direction, our safety, our **security**, our success **is** not found in the things of this world, but in **Christ**, at a time when many of us feel economically vulnerable and some of us fear being a pay check or two away from potential disaster. The core issue is **do** we trust Jesus to provide for us when we begin using the resources he has given us to provide for others? God has given us **more**, not so we can possess more, but so we can give **more** to others. The operating principle of **God's** economy says that there **is** enough, **if** we share it.

However, in the end it is not **really** risky, because we are relinquishing control to the one who has supreme love for us and knows what is **best** for us. Pope John Paul II invoked **this** parable to challenge the rich nations to see the impoverished peoples at their very doorstep. No matter who we are, where we live, or how much money we make, Lazarus is waiting for **us** at the gate. Are we able to recognize Jesus in our particular Lazaruses, whether it be a homeless derelict on 9th Avenue or a poverty/floodstricken farmer in Pakistan? Perhaps God lies just outside the gates we **never** open. Detroit Bishop Thomas Gumbleton suggests rather than publishing lists of names, such as Forbes 100 richest people in America, why not print a list of the poorest people in the U.S. so we would **all** know **who** the poor are. It might lead us to try to find out **why** they are poor, as well as learn their names, so they are made into **real** people, not just a statistic. To learn their names one would really have to get to know them, which would mean hearing their stories, seeing the poor as one of **us**, our sisters and brothers, not one of "**them**." Lest we are overwhelmed by all the poverty and suffering in our world, these problems were never intended to be solved by individuals alone. We're in this together! We need to show one another as a faith community how to give liberally and how to sacrifice our resources for the poor, so in the process we will learn to depend on one another. It is Jesus's merciful hands that reaches across this deep chasm of **want**, to close the psychological separation between life and death, rich and poor. Can we let go of our addiction to wealth, to always desiring more, so our hands are free and open to reach out and give wisely of ourselves and our money, like Steed, to those in need? Or are we **content** to offer God just the **leftovers** in our lives? Mother Teresa was walking with a visitor taking supplies of rice to the poorest of poor families in Calcutta. They went into a home where there was a mother with three children. They poured rice into the family's rice container. The mother took it and poured half into another container. They asked her why. She said, "Well, there's a neighbor family nearby and they are without food also, so I'm sharing half of my rice with them." They left the home and the visitor asked Mother Teresa, "There is **plenty**. You could have given her a double portion for the neighbor." Mother Teresa replied, "No, I would not **deprive** her of the blessing of sharing." Jesus is calling us to the blessing of **sharing** what we have in abundance. My sisters and brothers, are our hearts willing and free enough to **hear** and **answer** that call?