

Luke 16:19-31  
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“Rich Man and Lazarus”

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When we allow ourselves to listen, the facts about poverty in this nation become a depressing list of did you knows. Did you know for the last 45 years income levels have increased for the top 1% of earners, while flat-lining and dropping for all the rest of us. Did you know the 400 wealthiest Americans own half of our nation's total wealth?

Did you know Children 5 and younger represent the largest group of people in poverty, at 25% today that is almost double the percentage from 1969? Did you know sixteen million children — more than the populations of New York, Los Angeles and Chicago combined — live in poverty.

And here in Wisconsin did you know 100,000 children live in what is considered deep poverty. And it does break down around racial lines -- 50% of those children are African-American, 12% are white — that disparity is the largest of any State in the US.

Did you know just two years ago here in Wisconsin, over a half million people were paid less than the \$10.10 per hour minimum wage which was proposed by the US government in 2014, and required an executive order to get passed. Adjusted for inflation, the minimum wage then was \$2 less than it was in 1968. Two years ago full-time minimum-wage job in Wisconsin grossed about \$15,000 annually.

Talk about a chasm between rich and poor. Main street worries about day to day expenses, and the poor are left out of the conversation all together.

Today Jesus brings the poor into the conversation in the person of Lazarus. This is a scary story, especially for people like most of us who have some money. The use of heaven and hell recalls stewardship messages that turn us off quickly due to their guilt and manipulation. Effective fundraising in the church is about telling the story of lives which have been transformed by God's love and forgiveness, not using guilt and manipulation.

Here between the Rich Man and Lazarus, money itself isn't really the problem -- I timothy tells us, “For the LOVE of money is a root of all kinds of evil...” The bigger issue is how the love of money, or worship of money causes people to stray. Love of money can create a blinder making us indifferent to the needs of those less fortunate because when we love money, we begin to see ourselves as the less fortunate... we have less than the CEO in the news, less than the Athlete, less than the actor in the latest blockbuster. Love of money twists our self-perception causing us, no matter how much we have, to compare ourselves UP the economic ladder and when we are looking up we miss those below us.

Forbes Magazine took this issue even further asking, Is it a moral responsibility of those who have money to share with those who have nothing? The author answered his own question...

“Some would say it is not.” The author continued-- what if the greatest moral consists, not in giving your wealth away, but in having produced it? What if morality is really about making the most of your life, not serving the needs of others? That sounds like someone who hardly ever notices the poor anymore, and if they do they have a severe case of compassion fatigue.

But this attitude is more prevalent in our culture than we might care to admit. It is in those moral lessons we teach each other like; “You gotta pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” Or “You gotta get yours, I gotta get mine.” See what we have in this parable is a head to head clash over values.

Many scholars suggest the Rich Man’s love of money actually does blind him from seeing Lazarus, suffering and hungry, day after day, right at his doorstep. See, the Greek word used in this story to describe the man as “rich” indicates someone who has a complete obsession with wealth.

The scene in the parable quickly shifts to Hades and we begin to think Karma is at work. We see the Rich man suffering in Hades and Lazarus living it up in glory. Now the Rich man has become one of those “If Only” Christians. If only Lazarus could bring me water, if only people listened to the prophetic warnings about loving money too much, if only God would raise someone from the dead, then my brothers and sisters will believe! . . . if only, if only, if only.”

This kind of “If only” faith gives us permission to be mediocre Christians, and allows us to compromise Christian morals and values. We can accept the faith when it is convenient, and make excuses for the parts which challenge or discomfort us. “If only” faith allows us to consume God when we need it, but ignore God when God needs us. “If only” faith can prevent us from seeing someone in need laying right at our doorstep day after day, because we are gazing up the economic ladder.

So to those who think like the Rich Man in this story, I say... Someone did rise from the dead, and there is a segment of the population who find this experience so powerful they are willing to give themselves to it body and soul. But even that didn’t convince everyone.

You probably know some “If Only” Christians. “If only” the church weren’t so hypocritical I would join it. “If only” the church didn’t have all those rules I would attend. “If only” the church wouldn’t ask for money so often. On and on and on they go. Oh and by the way, there can be “If only” Christians in our congregations. “If only” the money comes in than we will start that ministry. “If only” no one is offended then we will try that idea. And so on.

I have developed a response I think we can use when we encounter these brothers and sisters. It uses their language but with a twist. “If only” everyone understood all good things come from God. And “If Only” everyone knew this life is about filling our lives with Spirit and not our homes to the roof. And “if Only” we listened to the God who is still speaking about what the world really needs like love, compassion, forgiveness and unity. And “If Only” people realized they are never alone. “If only” the church understood it’s very survival depends on

taking risks in its ministry, mission, and even with money... risks to be creative and innovative, to live or die giving the gifts of God away. "If only" we knew that we give fully rejoicing in the God who blesses us and carries us through each tragedy and not out of duty, or guilt.

Then... I suspect every one of us would turn our purses and wallets upside down and shake them till every last bill and coin fell out as we joyfully say "thank you" to God for all the goodness, all the healing, all the care we experience as a part of the family of Christ.

Don't worry I am not perfect at this either, far from it, but... imagine what could happen... If only!!!

Amen