***SO CLOSE AND YET SO FAR***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

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Texts: Luke 16:19-31 and James 2:1-10

*There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day.* Thus begins the parable Jesus told to those Pharisees who, Luke says, were *lovers of money*, the Pharisees who had ridiculed Jesus for saying, “*You cannot serve God and wealth*.” In their eyes, riches were a sign of God’s blessing; poverty was a sign of God’s judgment. Like modern prosperity gospel preachers, the Pharisees read the Scriptures and concluded that wealth was a reward for faithful living. The wealth they had accumulated was their reward for righteous living under the law. It was a self-righteous, self-serving reading of the Scriptures. Overlooked were God’s commands to give to the poor, care for widows and orphans, free the oppressed, and welcome refugees. They focused instead on the minutiae of the law and accumulation of riches; they saw no conflict between love of God and love of wealth, and there is no doubt with whom they identified when Jesus told them this parable: *There was a rich man…*

In his book *Arctic Dreams*, Barry Lopez reflects on the native peoples and European whalers who have crossed paths on the icy seas and frozen tundra of the Arctic since the 19th century. They came from vastly different worlds and held vastly different values, leading Lopez to ask:

*What does it mean to grow rich? Is it to have red-blooded adventures and to make a fortune, which is what brought the whalers and other entrepeneurs north? Or is it, rather, to have a good family life and to be imbued with a far-reaching and intimate knowledge of one’s homeland, which is what the Tunumirmiut (the Arctic natives) told the whalers at Pond’s Bay wealth was? Is it to retain a capacity for awe and astonishment in our lives, to continue to hunger after what is genuine and worthy? Is it to live at moral peace with the universe?*[[1]](#endnote-1)

What does it mean to grow rich or to be rich? Do any of Lopez’s musings resonate with you as you contemplate the riches to which you aspire – and consider this parable Jesus told to the *lovers of money*?

The wealthy man in the parable measured his riches by the trappings of his success – fine linen, purple cloth, and sumptuous feasts as a daily delight. Riches were the material possessions that made his life good. We know nothing about how he made his wealth – whether he dealt honestly or robbed banks or invented the slinky or inherited it all; that is apparently irrelevant in the parable. We know only how he spent his riches – on fine clothes, fine food, and fine wine – and all was right with his fine world! But at the edge of that fine world, *at the gate to his house, lay a poor man covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table*. The man’s name was Lazarus!

They were so close, just a gate apart, yet they were so far from one another – the rich man and poor Lazarus, one celebrating and the other suffering. Hungry and homeless, Lazarus lay at the rich man’s gate in hopes of receiving something, anything, even a crumb from the rich man’s table. The sickness that afflicted his body produced sores that ate away at his flesh and left him in misery; the dogs would come to lick at the festering sores, but no one else paid him any attention – not even the rich man who lived just on the other side of that gate. How can it be that the rich man did not help him? Was he too busy? Did he not notice? Did he not care? Or did he believe that Lazarus was not his responsibility, like Cain who asked indignantly of God, “Am I my brother’s keeper?”

In the third stanza of his great hymn, *God of Grace and God of Glory*, Harry Emerson Fosdick offers this prayer to the God of Grace and Glory:

*Shame our wanton selfish gladness, rich in things and poor in soul.*

*Grant us wisdom, grant us courage, lest we miss Thy kingdom’s goal.*

Rich in things and poor in soul – that might well describe the wealthy man in the parable. He had it all by society’s standards, but he was poor in soul. He lacked compassion and love, *for*, says Jesus, *at his gate lay Lazarus, a poor man covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man’s table*. Not in some distant land or on the other side of the city or in some back alley, but at the rich man’s own gate lay poor, sick Lazarus; and the rich man never saw him, never stopped to help, never shared with him the crumbs from his table, for the rich man’s goal was to be rich in things, eat, drink, and be merry. But that is not the goal of God’s kingdom!

I daresay our lives are closer to that of the rich man than to that of Lazarus. We may not feast sumptuously every day, but neither do we lack food; by the standards of much of the world, we are feasting! We may not be dressed in fine linen, but neither are we clothed in rags. We have a roof over our heads, heat to ward off the cold, air conditioning to make hot fall days tolerable, and doctors to treat our sore places. Not many of us sit at the gate with Lazarus asking for help, but there are a host of folks who do, and they are not far away. They live here in our community, and they sleep on park benches, beg for spare change for a cup of coffee, and stand at the door of SACRA with overdue utility bills in hand. We pass them on the street, on the sidewalk, and in the park. Some of them sit at desks beside us in school and on chairs beside us in the emergency room. For the most part we don’t know their names or their stories or their needs, because we’ve never stopped to ask. They are at best a distraction, at worst an annoyance, or perhaps worse yet – simply invisible to us! Have you encountered Lazarus in the course of your journeys this week? And if so, did you do anything more than look the other way?

The rich man in the parable did nothing. And when he died, he found that he had missed the kingdom’s goal. The goal of God’s kingdom is not to accumulate wealth; it is not to pile up things. It is to glorify God and love God and neighbor. That is what the law of Moses said; that is what the prophets said; that is what Jesus said. Yet somehow the rich man never understood or never heeded. So, at his death he found himself suffering in Hades while Lazarus was carried away by angels to the side of Abraham in heaven. Andrew Carnegie once said that “the man who dies rich dies disgraced.” The parable suggests God might agree with that assessment.

In agony in Hades the rich man pleads for Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his burning tongue. Even in death he regards Lazarus as beneath him, as a servant to help him even though he did nothing to help Lazarus. So, he arrogantly asks Abraham to send Lazarus to his aid. But his plea is rejected, for while they seemed so near, they were far from one another in death. The rich man is left to his torment having chosen to enjoy the pleasures of his life at the expense of Lazarus’ needs. And Lazarus who suffered so in life, is comforted in death. In that very comfort is a word of hope for the poor and suffering of this world, if not for us.

The parable is told to the Pharisees, to those who loved money, but also to all of us who have been tempted to love wealth. It is a cautionary tale. To us who are well fed while living in comfortable homes with two or more cars in the driveway and multiple smart devices at hand even if we don’t know how to use them, it offers a word of caution; it echoes Paul’s warning to Timothy: “*The love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, for in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.*” In striving to be rich in things, some have paid from the coffers of their souls, for ***you cannot serve God and wealth***. Many try in ways overt and subtle. According to James, some serve wealth by favoring the rich over the poor – as if the rich were of greater value. We see that favoritism at our own gates. Our criminal justice system disproportionately punishes the poor and black over the wealthy and white. Tax cuts benefit wealthy Americans far more than they do the poor. A recent proposal would increase significantly the cost of applying for asylum at our borders, so that only those who can pay the steeper fee need apply. In personal and systemic ways we perpetuate discrimination against the poor and people of color. Lazarus lies at our gates. What then are we doing to help?

Do not be misled. It is not wealth alone that leads to the damning poverty of the soul. It is riches sought at the expense of faithfulness. The rich man suffered, not just for being rich, but for being rich at the expense of the poor. It is not money that is the root of all evil; it is the love of money – a love that encourages selfishness and unfaithful pursuit of unholy goals to satisfy the desire for unsatisfying dollars. When our love of money replaces our love of God and neighbor then it is evil. But when our riches are regarded as gifts of God to be used for God’s good purposes – to meet the needs of our neighbors in need; to be instruments of God’s justice, mercy, and grace; to proclaim God’s good news in word and in deed; then in sharing our good gifts we store up divine treasures that far exceed those riches that are within human grasp.

The rich man in the parable didn’t figure that out until it was too late. And when he suggested that Abraham send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his brothers so that they might not meet a similar fate, Abraham said:

*If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead*.

We have Moses, we have the prophets, and we have the one who rose from the dead – the one who told this parable – Jesus, the messiah of God. What then will it take for you to listen to them? What will it take for you to abandon the love of riches in order to love God and neighbor more? What will it take for you to strive harder to be rich in soul than in things? What will it take for you to help the Lazarus at your gate? “*What will it take?”* asks the Lord. Amen

1. Barry Lopez, *Arctic Dreams*, Vintage Books:1986, pp.13-14 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)