

You Received Good

In the name of Jesus in whom we are confident of God's grace and forgiveness, dear friends in Christ: In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells us of a certain rich man and a poor beggar named Lazarus, and he gives a brief account of what their lives were like in time and what they're like now and will be for all eternity. It's one of the very few and certainly the most vivid glimpses the Scriptures give us of the afterlife. Lazarus who in life begged to have the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table now reclines with the blessed in a place of honor at a heavenly banquet table right beside Father Abraham. Meanwhile the rich man who had enjoyed all the finest luxuries the world could offer finds himself in torment, eternally burning but not being consumed in the unquenchable fires of hell. The latter description is particularly disturbing. So intense is the rich man's suffering that he imagines even one drop of water touched to his tongue would provide great relief. Theologians have long debated whether Jesus intended this to be understood as merely a parable to illustrate a teaching point or if he is describing what actually happened to two very real people. Either way, one thing is clear: Jesus wants us to impress upon us that hell is a place we should seek to avoid at all costs. We don't want to end up like that rich man.

But what is the reason the rich man is consigned to endless torment? On the surface, it seems that it's merely a reversal of fortune. According to Abraham, the rich man received good things during his life on earth while Lazarus suffered; now their positions are reversed: Lazarus enjoys the good and the rich man suffers – though the magnitude of each state toward the good or the bad in the afterlife is amplified immensely. Nothing on earth can even begin to approach the splendors of heaven or the agonies of hell. And if a reversal of fortune were all there was to it, then, we could postulate that our own eternal destinies depend on how well we have it in this life. If you are currently poor, starving, ill clad, disease ridden, and neglected, well then, good news: your future looks very bright. But if by worldly standards you're wealthy, well fed and clothed, and reasonably healthy, then your future doesn't look so good. And considering that as citizens of this blessed land we *are* better off than the vast majority of the world, we'd be in deep trouble.

This, however, would be the wrong conclusion to draw. As Christians we know that a person is saved by grace through faith in Christ who, according to God's eternal plan for our salvation, suffered and died as the ransom for our sins, and rose again for our justification. Everyone who believes this Good News and is baptized into Christ will be saved; it doesn't matter how rich or poor you are, or how relatively easy or difficult you had it in this life. Knowing this, we might be tempted to suppose that the rich man had no knowledge whatsoever of the Lord and the covenant he made with his people Israel – that he was not in any way religious. But this too would be a mistake. This is clear from what he says as he calls out from the flames. He sees Abraham afar off, knows who he is, and he calls him "father". And Abraham in response acknowledges him as a son. So it's evident that the man was not ignorant of God's word or the divine covenant. No doubt he attended worship, heard the Scriptures, and offered the required sacrifices at the Temple. In fact, he probably interpreted all the blessings he enjoyed in life as proof of the Lord's favor. "I'm living as a child of God should – that's why he's blessing me."

What's the problem then? Why is he in hell? The answer is that it's one thing to know about the Lord, hear his word, try to keep his commands, and participate in the rituals of worship and quite another to actually know the Lord, understand his Word, and trust in his promises. The former can be done merely on an intellectual level by any sinful human being who seeks to justify himself in the sight of God; the latter involves the work of the Holy Spirit who enlightens the mind,

gives life to the soul, and creates faith in the heart so that a person who was dead in sin *can* know the Lord, understand his Word, and trust in his promises. And when the Holy Spirit does this work the sinner in us is convicted and condemned, and a new person rises to life within – a new person who understands that he has received the unmerited grace and forgiveness of God for Christ’s sake, and who is also motivated by the Spirit to live as a child of God. And a child of God is merciful because God is merciful, is compassionate because God is compassionate, and is kind and good because God is kind and good. Always? Well, no; because the sinful nature also remains. And that nature is self-seeking and self-absorbed and couldn’t care less about other people and their problems. In a true believer those two natures are in conflict. And when a true believer recognizes in himself selfish feelings and behavior, he hates it, repents of it, and seeks the forgiveness of the Lord and the strength to do better in the future.

Our friend the rich man showed no such internal struggle. He was too busy lavishly feasting and drinking and enjoying his creature comforts to concern himself even a bit with the poor beggar that he practically had to step over every time he came and went from his grand home. He had received much good from the hand of the Lord – far more than he needed for himself. He could easily have helped out from his excess and been no less well off because of it. But his utter lack of compassion for someone in such desperate need as this man Lazarus who was literally laid on his doorstep – that he could pass him by repeatedly and go on enjoying his indulgent lifestyle without so much as a twinge of guilt – proves that he neither knew the Lord nor had any appreciation for the good gifts he’d been given. Quite the contrary, I’m sure he cursed whoever it was that deposited Lazarus there. “What were they thinking? Who is it that thinks it’s *my job* to feed every dirty, diseased, crippled beggar in the world?”

Who, indeed? I wondered about that ... until I realized that Jesus uses here what’s called a theological passive. When something is done in the Scripture and the one who did it is not specified, there’s a pretty good chance that the Lord did it. Obviously in this case he used persons unknown to lay Lazarus at the rich man’s gate; but the point is that God wanted Lazarus to be there. And it’s not hard to figure out why. Lazarus in all his wretchedness and misery was like a living sermon: a call to the rich man to see a fellow human in need, and to see his own selfishness and sin. Lazarus was the Lord’s attempt to melt the cold hard heart of the rich man, bring him to repentance, and give him an opportunity to share some of the good that he’d been so blessed with. But nothing doing. And we can hear the words of Jesus that he speaks in judgment of the damned: “I was hungry; you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty; you gave me nothing to drink. I was naked; you did not clothe me. I was sick and in prison; you did not comfort me ... For inasmuch as you did not do it for the least of these my brothers, you did not do it for me.” I might add that to the excuse, “What? Did you expect me to take care of *every* poor beggar?” the Lord might easily respond, “No; just the one I set down in front of you.” It begs the question, doesn’t it? Who is the Lazarus (or who are the *Lazaruses*) the Lord has placed in your life?

Of course we have all kinds of excuses and dodges to resort to. After all, I might argue, I’m not rich like the guy in the story. I haven’t got money to burn. Most days I’m struggling to get by myself. Besides, there really isn’t someone who’s sick and destitute physically lying on my doorstep. And I do give to a number of charities; that ought to count for something. And with respect to the bums that hit me up for a couple bucks every time I’m in the city, it’s awfully hard to distinguish between a genuine case of need and an alcoholic or drug addict who’s only going to use what I might give to make himself worse; or that subclass of criminals who go from town to town stopping at all the churches and charitable organizations for whatever they can get—who could work, but don’t; and who by their sponging off the good will of others rob the genuinely needy of resources that were set aside to help them. People like that are better helped by *not* giving to them.

All of this could be true ... and yet ... and yet we need to be careful here. I don't think any of us can deny that we have received vast amounts of good from the hands of the Lord, and that everything we have received is an undeserved gift. Oh, we may tell ourselves that we earned what we've got through our hard work and clever thinking; but who gave you the ability to work? Who gave you your strength and your health? Who gave you your mind, your wits, and your skills? Who gave you your work ethic? Without them, you'd be just like Lazarus was in his earthly life. No, all these things too are good gifts that we have received from the Lord, which makes it all the more imperative that we share the bounteous good we have received with those who lack the basic necessities of life. We have to guard ourselves against the tendency we have to engage in the same sort of self-justifying piggishness that governed the heart of the rich man, for that sort of thinking dwells in all of us. We need to recognize also that my neighbor's basic needs outweigh my desire to indulge myself in luxurious nonessentials. The sin of the rich man clings to all of us. We need to see it and repent of it. And trusting in the blood bought forgiveness Jesus gives us, we need to reach out with compassion and generosity to the Lazaruses the Lord lays before us.

But this is only a part of the lesson of this story – it's just what's on the surface. There's much more going on here. St. Luke places this account immediately after a series of four parables that stress what our attitude should be toward people who have gone astray or who have sinned against us. What happened was that the Pharisees and teachers of the law were complaining that Jesus was welcoming sinners and bringing them into his fellowship. In response, Jesus begins by telling them the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin, both of which stress how happy was the person to recover what had been lost. Jesus told his adversaries that in a similar way there is more rejoicing in heaven when one sinner comes to repentance. The clear implication being: you too should be rejoicing when sinners come to Jesus.

Jesus follows these two parables with the one about the prodigal son. It is, as you know, a story about a young man who was lost in sin and then came to his senses and returned home with a repentant heart. His father receives him with joy and orders a celebration. Everyone is happy – except the older brother. He's deeply offended that his father has forgiven his younger brother. He's mad at both of them. The father comes out of the celebration to plead with him. "Can't you see what a great thing this is? Your brother was dead to us; now he's alive! We have him back! Come, celebrate!" The story is left hanging. We don't hear whether the older brother forgives his sibling and joins the celebration or if he stays outside fuming with self-righteous anger. But the ending is Jesus' invitation to the Pharisees and their kind not to be like that older brother – to see what a great thing it is that sinners are coming to the Lord and to join the celebration.

The next parable is the one we heard last week: the one about the dishonest but shrewd manager. Without going into all the details, it's the story of an accountant who was about to be fired for doing a bad job with the bookkeeping, but who used his remaining power to forgive debts to ensure that he'd have a place to go when the life he had enjoyed thus far came to an end. Now, a lot of people think this story is about money and how it is to be handled; but I don't think that's the main point. Jesus says that the story shows that the people of this world are shrewder in their dealings than are the children of light. What he means is that the manager in the story did something with his power to forgive debts to guarantee his future that people ostensibly within God's kingdom are not doing. The implication being that those who counted themselves in God's kingdom who were not forgiving would have no place to go when the lives they had known came to an end. Jesus is telling the Pharisees that their lack of forgiveness prevents them from receiving the kingdom of heaven.

Then comes the story of the rich man and Lazarus. It is on the surface a story about worldly wealth – about one guy who has it and another guy who does not, and how the guy who has it scorns the guy who doesn't and ends up in hell. But seen in light of what has come before, it's evident that the main thrust of the story is about how we are to handle eternal wealth. You see, the Pharisees and teachers of the law are the rich ones, hoarding the rich treasures of God's Word, making themselves look good, and depriving God's forgiveness and grace to sinners who desperately need it. These sinners are the Lazaruses of the world whom they keep in a state of spiritual wretchedness and starvation by their refusal to welcome, feed, and heal them with God's Word of grace. Jesus is warning the Pharisees where they'll end up if they continue to treat with contempt repentant sinners who come to the Lord. In the story Jesus even provides a warning from a fellow Pharisee who calls up from the flames, "Send Lazarus to warn my brothers! If someone rises from the dead, they will believe!" It's probably no coincidence that later on a man named Lazarus did indeed rise from death proving the truthfulness and authority of Jesus' Words. But just as Abraham foretold in the story, it didn't cause the enemies of Jesus to believe. No, it only made them that much more resolved to do away with him.

But what about us? In a spiritual sense, we are the richest people in the world. We have the infinite treasure of the holy Gospel of Jesus Christ. We are the ones that the Lord in his mercy has clothed in splendor: Christ's own righteousness. We donned these immaculate robes when we were reborn children of God in the water of Holy Baptism. We wear them daily and they are constantly being refreshed and renewed as we confess our sins and receive God's Word of forgiveness. We eat daily of the Bread of Life as we hear God's Word, and we feast on the best of all possible meals: the true body and blood of Christ. We deserve none of it. It's all a gift. But there is no one on earth who has received more good from the hand of the Lord than you and me.

The question is: What's your attitude toward those who are without this wealth – specifically those who are seeking it – who beg to be fed with the crumbs that fall from your table? While we desire all people to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, this story is about how we treat fellow Christians: sinners just like you and me who have come to repentance and faith in Christ. Jesus has received and welcomed them; but are you holding any of them in rags and filth? Let me ask this question: who is the Lazarus the Lord has laid at your gate? Who is that person or persons that you have, spiritually speaking, left out in the cold covered with sores and starving because you are withholding from them the mercy and forgiveness that the Lord so freely gave you? Who is it that you judge to be less deserving of Christ's forgiveness than yourself? Put a face and name on them. You know who they are.

Your lack of forgiveness, your lack of mercy and compassion, prove that you hold yourself to be better and more righteous – and therefore less needful of and dependent upon the forgiveness of Christ. It proves that you think you have spiritual riches of your own that you somehow earned all by yourself and that you can depend upon to see you through. It proves that you trust in yourself and not fully in Christ for your salvation. And that is the sin that will condemn you in the end just as it did for the rich man in the story if you continue to cling to it. What have you got that you did not receive as an underserved gift? And will you now withhold that gift from someone else because you think they don't deserve it? You received good from the hand of the Lord – an overflowing amount of his forgiveness; will you not share it?

I invite you to see the spiritual Lazaruses in your life for what they are: living, breathing sermons from the Lord calling you to see your sin, your self-righteousness, and your lack of compassion so that seeing it you will hate it, repent of it, and once again receiving Christ's powerful word of forgiveness, extend that same good you have received to them. Stop stepping

over them. Stop walking around them. Stop pretending not to see them. Repent. See them as the Lord sees them – just like you, a dying beggar in need of his mercy. Reach out. Share the good you have received. Forgive them. Welcome them. Receive them as your brothers and sisters in Christ so that with them, when your last day comes, you too will be carried by the angels to a place of honor at the heavenly banquet table. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!