

## FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO BE RICH

The Rev. J. Donald Waring  
Grace Church in New York  
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*But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. (1 Timothy 6:9)*

Today's reading from 1<sup>st</sup> Timothy and the Gospel of Luke have reminded me of a parishioner I knew years ago in the first church I served. Henry was an older man who would frequently take me to lunch, and more than once told me about a curious set of circumstances that he believed forever changed his life. In the late 1940's he was a struggling high school student with two possible paths before him: college and a career, or the draft and the infantry. With the Korean War looming, the latter was not the life he wanted. The determining factor was shaping up to be a final examination in his physics class. Henry desperately needed to pass the exam in order to graduate, but his chances seemed remote. No matter how much he studied, no matter how much help he sought, the material eluded him.

As it happened, Henry's parents had a friend who was a physicist. This man, out of the goodness of his heart, agreed to tutor Henry on the day before the exam. In preparation for the tutoring, Henry brought home some physics books from the school library. When he and his tutor opened one of the books, they saw in a relevant chapter some faint check marks in the margins next to ten specific questions. Since these questions appeared to be good windows into the broader concepts that Henry needed to understand, the tutor used them as a framework for their study session. After four hours of working and reworking the questions they finally called it a night.

The next morning Henry dragged himself into class and focused his eyes on the dreaded examination. To his utter astonishment, what came into view were the exact ten questions that he and his tutor had studied the previous evening. Henry had done no dumpster diving, no scouring of his teacher's garbage pail, nothing unethical at all to obtain the questions. He'd merely pulled a book from a library shelf without the slightest inkling that he held in his hands the source of the examination. Then with the help of a gracious tutor he'd studied the problems that were marked in the book. Henry still sweated through the final exam. When the grades came in, his was a C+. It was enough to pass. It was enough to graduate. He went to college. He signed up for the Air Force ROTC. He served in Japan, not Korea. Passing the physics exam changed the course of his life.

Today's reading from the Gospel of Luke (16:19-31) is a parable that Jesus told in hopes of changing the course of our lives. Quite frankly, Jesus means for it to haunt the hell out of us. The parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus is essentially a three-act play with three principal players: the rich man, Abraham, and Lazarus, whose name in Hebrew means, "God is my help." Over the centuries Biblical commentators and preachers have given the rich man a name, too. They call him "Dives," because *dives* is a Latin word for rich. As for me, I don't know Latin. English is my first and only language. So today, I propose that since the English word for rich is rich, and since Rich is also a proper name, let's refer to the rich man as Rich, whose name in English means, "I have a lot of money."

The curtain rises for Act I. In the first scene we find Rich in the lap of luxury, dressed in an expensive, fetching purple outfit that could not have been easy to find. He feasts sumptuously every day. In second scene we meet Lazarus, who is a poor beggar at the gate of Rich's home.

He's full of open sores, and fends with stray dogs for the table scraps that fall from Rich's table and go out with the trash. In the third scene of Act I, both men die. Rich is buried, probably with an elaborate funeral. Lazarus, we are told, is carried by the angels to be with Abraham. The curtain comes down on Act I.

The curtain rises on Act II and we have moved from this life to the next. In the first scene we learn that a great reversal has taken place; we see Rich in the underworld, being tormented in the flames of Hades. In the second scene we see Lazarus now in the lap of luxury with Father Abraham. And here, finally, we get some dialogue. Rich calls to Father Abraham and begs for mercy. He asks if it might be possible for Lazarus to bring him a drink of water. "Not possible," replies Abraham. "You're getting what you deserve, and the chasm between is too great. It's fixed in place. This is permanent." Rich presses on, asking Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers. Rich thinks his brothers will pay attention if someone returns from the dead. But Abraham is less optimistic, saying that they already have Moses and the prophets. "*If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.*" The curtain drops on Act II.

Finally, Act III. Act III isn't staged. It's only implied in the parable. Act III asks us to return from the afterlife to this life, and imagine the five brothers. You see, Act III is supposed to haunt us. The five brothers are you and me. Will we pay attention? The suggestion is that like my old friend, Henry, we have everything we need. We have Moses and the prophets and even one risen from the dead – Jesus – to tutor us. With this parable and others like it we have the test in advance. What is more, with this life we have time: time to amend our lives. The parable is full of red herrings that can throw you off the path of its meaning: the temperature of hell, the furniture of heaven, the chasm, the angels, the color purple. Don't be distracted by these details. The gift the parable offers is the tutors, the test itself, and time to do something about it. Act III is this life, yours and mine, now.

"What just a minute," is what many people say. Not so fast. They are not convinced they want to buy into the picture of reality the parable puts forth. It isn't fair that Rich should spend all eternity in torment because, for a few decades at most, he ignored the needs of Lazarus. His was only a crime of omission, and the punishment doesn't fit. The parable is unjust. The great reversal merely reverses, not heals, the conditions we deplore on earth, and projects them onto a heavenly stage. One could argue here that Rich's temporary negligence actually earned Lazarus an eternal reward. "O happy fault," is a phrase that Augustine coined to describe how God can wring good out of evil. Would you like to hear the phrase in Latin? Again, I don't know Latin, but to impress you, it goes like this, *O felix culpa*. O happy fault! In the end, Rich's fault brought blessing upon blessing to Lazarus. So perhaps in the bigger picture we should be thanking Rich, not condemning him. He was instrumental in securing eternal glory for Lazarus.

We can say more in Rich's defense. It's important not to read too much into the parable, but I can imagine that Rich did, in fact, reach out to Lazarus over the years. It could be that the reason Lazarus was at Rich's gate every day is precisely because there he found food. Rich knew Lazarus' name. Perhaps when Lazarus was well enough Rich would pay him to run minor errands. He gave him work. Did it help? It did not. Did Lazarus ever change? He did not. Day after day Lazarus would return. Rich was completely unsuccessful in getting Lazarus off the street, to say nothing of encouraging him to take hold of a better life. How easy it is to imagine that over time any youthful, can-do idealism that Rich harbored waned, until he just gave up trying.

This brings us back to Act III, starring the five brothers of Rich in this life, otherwise known as you and me today. What must we do to inherit eternal life? What must we do to avoid Rich's mistake? Are we to plunge ourselves into a flurry of good works in the effort to save Lazarus? Perhaps. But beware. Lazarus is a complex being, hindered by the same stubbornness and

willfulness that beset you and me. In order to sustain your effort you will have to remember that the calling of Jesus is not to be correct and successful, but loving and faithful.

So then, is the answer that we should divest ourselves of worldly goods? Was Rich's mistake as simple as being rich? No, being rich is not a sin. In today's portion of Paul's First Letter to Timothy, we've heard that possessing wealth isn't sinful in and of itself. But it does pose risks to the soul. *But those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.* The temptation of the wealthy is to buy into a delusion that what they have sets them on a higher, wiser, more sophisticated plane of existence than those who lack basic resources. Apparently, the temptation was one that Rich could not resist. Rich goes to Hades not because of his riches but because of his superiority complex. His downfall is his haughtiness.

Consider: even in the flames of torment Rich still thinks of himself as a winner, an insider. And Lazarus? Well, Lazarus is nothing better than his errand boy who should fetch him a drink. Rich's superior air is intractable. The great chasm between heaven and hell is in his own heart. Those who want to be rich need to be careful of Lazarus lying at the gate. Lazarus may be the gate. The challenge all along was to treat Lazarus neither as a bum nor as a charity case, but as a brother. Hear again the words of St. Paul: *As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.*

God richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. We who are on stage in Act III have everything we need for salvation. We have Moses and the prophets and even one risen from the dead to tutor us. We have time for amendment of life – time to realize that life is a school for learning to be brother and sister to Lazarus. And we have today's parable and others like it even as my old friend Henry had the questions of a critical test before him in advance. Henry never forgot it. The experience changed him, saved him. He lived his life in deep gratitude to God and in service to others.

When I read the story of the rich man and Lazarus, I think not only of Henry, but also the main character in Charles Dickens', *A Christmas Carol*. You know his name: Ebenezer Scrooge. And you know the story. Over the course of a harrowing night's sleep Scrooge is haunted by a series of ghosts who try to disabuse him of his love of money. When the ghost of Christmas future finally shows Scrooge his own, unkempt, unvisited grave, Scrooge cries out, *"Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"* In the parable, the news is bad for Rich. But in Dickens' story, the news is good for Scrooge. He is not past all hope. My favorite scene in the book is the final chapter, when he wakes up on Christmas morning and realizes that he has time, *"that the Time before him was his own, to make amends in!"* Then with a joy he'd never known he embarks on taking hold of the life that really is life.

Likewise, the news is good for you, and me, and all of us on this side of eternity. We are not past all hope. The effect of today's parable on us can be the same as the effects of the ghosts on Scrooge. It can haunt the hell out of us. It can send us into this broken world in witness to God's love, not in order to be saved, but because we already are.

The curtain rises on Act III. You and I are on stage today, now. This is the day the Lord has made, and we have everything we need to take hold of the life that really is life.