

ARE YOU EAGER TO BE “RICH?”

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Jesus said, “*There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores.*” (Luke 16-19-20)

I can never hear Jesus’ parable of the rich man and Lazarus without suspecting that it was the inspiration behind Charles Dickens’ great novella, *A Christmas Carol*. Since its first publication in 1843, *A Christmas Carol* has never been out of print, and its main character, Ebenezer Scrooge has been the poster-boy of greed and callous indifference for the past 176 years. Dickens describes him as not just a rich man, but “a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner.” Even at Christmas time Scrooge refuses to support any charities, and famously suggests that those who would rather die than go to the poor houses “had better do it, and decrease the surplus population.”

One night, shortly before Christmas, Scrooge receives a visit from the ghost of his deceased business partner, Jacob Marley. Marley is a frightful sight, fettered in a long heavy chain that he must drag with him wherever he goes. “I wear the chain I forged in life,” he says. “I made it link by link, and yard by yard.” He explains to Scrooge that in the time of this mortal life, the spirit of every person is required to walk abroad amongst humanity. If you don’t do so in life, you are condemned to do so after death for all eternity, witnessing the good you might have shared, but did not share on earth. Jacob Marley cautions Scrooge that he too already wears a ponderous chain, even though he can’t see it.

All seems to be lost for Marley, but perhaps not for Scrooge. “I am here to warn you,” says the ghost, “that you have yet a chance and a hope of escaping my fate. A chance and hope of my procuring, Ebenezer. You will be haunted by Three Spirits. Without their visits you cannot hope to shun the path I tread.” Scrooge politely declines the offer, but Marley won’t take no for an answer. So Ebenezer Scrooge is in for the night of his life. It will be a harrowing ride.

Today, by virtue of being in church and hearing the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, we too are in for a harrowing ride. Quite literally, Jesus means for the story to haunt us, even to haunt the hell out of us. The parable 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, wiping his greasy fingers and messy mouth with chunks of bread that he uses like a napkin and throws to the floor. The script is lean on dialogue, but you can imagine the laughing, joking, arguing, and family drama that goes on every day while they are at ease in Zion, singing idle songs to the sound of the harp. 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 looks longingly at the scraps that fall from Rich’s table – scraps to be fought over by the dogs and then thrown out with the trash. In the third scene of Act I, both men die. Rich is buried, probably with an elaborate funeral. The script is still spare

of dialogue, but we can imagine the crying, sobbing, and nose-blowing at the funeral. And the eulogies: “What will we do without Rich? Why do the good die young? God must have needed him in heaven.” Lazarus, we are told, is carried by the angels to be with Abraham. No funeral, no mourners, no tributes. That’s it. 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 hell. Apparently, God did not need him in heaven. In the second scene we see Lazarus in heaven – 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. “No can do,” replies Abraham. “You’re getting what you deserve. You sit in the fire you forged in life. You built it log by log. Besides, 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 Rich’s five brothers. You see, Act III is supposed to haunt us. The five brothers are you and me. Will we pay attention? Will we avoid Rich’s fate, which is Jacob Marley’s fate? The suggestion is that we already have all the warning and inspiration we need. We have Moses and the prophets. We even have one risen from the dead – Jesus – to save us. With this parable and others like it we have a chance and a hope. 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 great chasm, the angels, the color purple. Don’t be distracted by these details. The gift the parable offers is the haunting, and the time to do something about it. Act III is this life, yours and mine, now. Suddenly, you and I are in the script.

Perhaps, like Scrooge, you wish to decline the offer. You don’t want to play the part. You don’t 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 how long, a few years at most? – he ignored the needs of Lazarus. His was only a sin of omission, and the punishment doesn’t fit the crime. 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, and perhaps we should, because in defending him, we’re defending ourselves. It’s important not to read too much into the parable, but all of us who walk the streets of New York City can imagine that Rich, in fact, did 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. Abraham himself was fantastically wealthy, and Jesus had no problem imagining him nicely situated in heaven. Also, in today's portion of Paul's First Letter to Timothy (6:6-19), 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 hell not because of his riches but because of his superiority complex. His downfall is his haughtiness.

Consider: even in the fire of his own forging Rich still thinks of himself as a winner, an insider. And what does he think of Lazarus? Well, he still thinks 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 lead 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 to warn us. If you let the story go to work on your soul, it can haunt the hell out of you. It can change you, even save you.

As the story goes, it certainly saved Ebenezer Scrooge. It's been 176 years since the *A Christmas Carol* first went to print, so I don't think I need to issue any spoiler alerts. After the ghost of Jacob Marley departs, Scrooge indeed is visited by three spirits: the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future. When the ghost of Christmas future takes Scrooge to a forlorn cemetery, and finally shows him 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. We have time: time to amend our lives. We have time to go forth into the world in witness to God's love. We have time to take hold of the life that really is life.

Take hold of the life that really is life. And God bless us, Every One!