

Is it a sin to be rich? Is it a sin to live comfortably, to eat well and dress in nice clothing? In the parable we just heard things did not go well for the man who lived a comfortable life. What sin did he commit that merited the punishment he received?

When we look at our readings today, the Old Testament reading from Amos, the Gospel, and the Psalm, we see that they all point out the importance of responding to the needs of the less fortunate. Amos, a prophet in the northern kingdom of Israel just before the Assyrian exile, reproaches the Jews who live a life of luxury, heedless of the misfortunes of others. Their fate will be exile from their homes and lavish lives. Jesus gives us a parable that addresses the eternal consequence for living in such a way, oblivious to the poverty of our neighbors, and the consequence is more than exile to a foreign land, but eternal exile to hell.

The fate of the Jews in the 8th century BC may not be of much concern to us today because we may find it difficult to identify with their situation so long ago, although there are similarities with our modern way of life. However, that is not so much the case with today's Gospel. Luke's account of the rich man and poor Lazarus speaks more directly to us today. It challenges us to consider that the moral lesson taught through the parable, indeed applies to us today. I don't know about you, but this parable makes me uncomfortable and Jesus meant for it to make us uncomfortable.

A question we might ask when we hear this parable, is to which individual do we identify, the rich man or the beggar, Lazarus? Most of us should identify with the rich man, although we may not want to. We are more like him than we are like Lazarus. We are all relatively rich compared to the homeless and destitute in our society.

It is interesting to note that the rich man is not named in this parable, a reflection on his lasting unimportance. So, what can be learned from this parable? What was the rich man's sin?

Both of these men live in isolation from the human family, Lazarus because of his poverty and deplorable physical condition, the rich man because of his pride, ego and self-centeredness. When they both die, Lazarus' isolation is ended when he is taken to the bosom of Abraham, whereas the rich man's isolation becomes acute when he goes to the netherworld, another name for hell. When he calls to Abraham there is no help or comfort for him, his fate is sealed for eternity. And therein lies the source of our discomfort, the man we are most like does not go to heaven.

Catholic social teaching tells us that all we have comes from God. We may object and say that we worked hard for what we have, but in truth, even our ability to work is itself a gift from God. The Church teaches that we are only stewards of what we have received from God, it is not our possession. The very purpose of our stewardship is to cooperate with God's plan. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that although we have a right to ownership of private property, our use of private property must include sharing our possessions with our neighbor in need (*part 2-2, Q66, 1&2*). It is all about how we use our wealth.

If we recognize that all people are children of God and part of our family, then our concern for family will include the entire human family, including those with which we would rather not deal. The question we should ask ourselves is *“why has God permitted me to have the wealth I have?”*. Our wealth, as small as it might be, can and should be used to serve God’s purposes.

The rich man lived in a kind of isolation because he did not recognize that he was a member of the entire human family and had a role to play in God’s kingdom. If we to isolate ourselves from some of the members of our human family, as the rich man did, we also isolate ourselves from God. The more we are in touch with our neighbors in need, the more we will be in touch with God. The presence of the hungry, the sick, the stranger, and the needy, should remind us of Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Matthew, *‘Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me.’* (Mt 25:40).

I heard a story about the late Cardinal George from Chicago who was addressing a group of donors at a charity fund raising event. He thanked the potential donors and he reminded them that the poor needed them to get them out of poverty. It was their opportunity to reach out to the Lazarus on their door step. But then he added, that they, the rich, needed the poor to get them out of hell. That’s a sobering thought.

The Psalm today points us to the answer to the question, is it a sin to be rich and comfortable when it says, *“Blessed [is] he who ... secures justice for the oppressed [and] gives food to the hungry”* (Ps 146:7).

So what was the rich man's sin in Jesus' parable? It was a sin of omission. His failure to show charity to the poor led to the loss of eternal life. What would have kept him out of hell? A generous outreach to Lazarus at his door step would have made all the difference. Perhaps it was God's providence that Lazarus was there at his door step, to give the rich man an opportunity to escape the trap of self isolation he had fallen into, to give him a chance to get out of hell. Maybe that is why there are beggars out there, whether or not their need is real, to free us from the isolation that blinds us to the needs of others, to give us a way out of hell. If we look at it this way, it may change the way we respond to those uncomfortable situations in which we sometimes find ourselves.

We have many ways to reach out to the Lazaruses of our time beyond just handing a couple of dollars to someone on a street corner. Here at IHM we have the Homeless Bag ministry that provides us with something useful to give those on street corners, Loaves and Fishes which provides meals for the homeless in Santa Fe, the Christian Concern Committee that provides financial assistance to those in need, My Brother's Keeper who make sleeping bags for the homeless, food collection for the needy at Thanksgiving and Christmas, the Angle Tree ministry that provides Christmas gifts for families that cannot afford any themselves. There are also many other opportunities outside our parish to aid the Lazaruses at our doorstep. So when we are confronted with someone we can concretely help, maybe we should ask, why has God given me the wealth I have and why has God put this person on my door step? Is he giving me an opportunity to avoid the rich man's fate?

Please pray with me.

Lord Jesus, forgive us for failing to see you in the poor, the distressed and the troublesome, and for our failure to reverence you in their persons. Grant us the wisdom and courage to reach out to them in their need. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.