

There was a rich man, Jesus says. What his name was? We don't know. It ultimately doesn't matter. But what we do know is that this man was incredibly wealthy. For one thing, Jesus says that he dressed in purple. Purple was the color of kings in those days. He was dressed in the very best clothes that money could buy. And he was also dressed in fine linen. He had the best undergarments that money could buy. He was the kind of man that lived every single day in the lap of luxury, a man who threw feasts on a daily basis that would make anybody envious, even other rich people. Here was a man of means, a man for whom money was no problem. He didn't have a care in the world. Life was good for him!

But before we get ahead of ourselves, we have to understand, Jesus is not saying the problem with this rich man was that he was rich. Because sometimes you do hear that in the world today. People will say that it's a sin to be wealthy, that it's evil to have a lot of money. They will say that rich people are privileged, or they exploit the poor, or whatever it may be. And that's not necessarily true. The Bible shows us that it's not a sin to be wealthy. Many of the saints of God were incredibly wealthy. Take Abraham, for example. Abraham's servant in Genesis 24 says: "I am Abraham's servant. The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become great. He has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male servants and female servants, camels and donkeys." So on top of all of the other blessings that God had given to Abraham, he also made him fabulously wealthy. So it's not a sin to be rich. You can be rich and a Christian at the same time.

And this rich man certainly claimed to believe in God. After all, he calls Abraham "father." He knows the promise that God made to Abraham to make his offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven, and he considers himself to be one of that offspring. And he also knows Moses and the Prophets. He is a man who knows the Bible, a man who probably reads the Bible pretty frequently, maybe even daily. And I'm sure that he considered himself blessed by God, especially because he had given him all this wealth. For this man, life was very good!

But there was also a poor man, Jesus says. His name was Lazarus. Lazarus means "God has helped" or "God is help," and it's especially fitting for this wretched man, because he had no earthly help. The only help he had was God. Lazarus, we are told, was laid at the gate of the rich man. He's probably crippled, can't walk at all. He is covered with sores, we are told. If I had to guess, it's probably bedsores from laying around all day. And Lazarus wanted to be fed with what fell from the rich man's table. He wanted to eat anything, because he was always hungry. And I think that actually shows just how wretched he actually was, because the word for "fed" there is a word typically used of animals. Lazarus wanted to graze, he wanted to feed on whatever fell from the rich man's table. He was willing to be treated like a dog if all it meant was getting something to eat. It's kind of like the Phoenician woman says in Matthew 15: "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." But the dogs were even in a better position than he was, because they came and they licked his sores, making his suffering worse. Here was a man who had nothing, a man who was suffering, a man who was waiting for help that never came. His life was wretched indeed!

So what should the rich man do in this case? What would be the just thing to do? What would be right? What would be good? That's pretty straightforward. It seems very clear. He should help Lazarus. He should give to him and provide for all of his needs. God says in Deuteronomy 15, for example: "If among you, one of your brothers should become poor, in any of your towns

within your land that the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart or shut your hand against your poor brother, but you shall open your hand to him and lend him sufficient for his need, whatever it may be." The right thing for the rich man to do in this case would be to help Lazarus, to give him food, to give him clothing, to take care of his sores, whatever it may be. That's the godly thing to do. And the rich man certainly had the means to do it. He's rich! He has wealth. He could take care of Lazarus a hundred times over and probably still not make a dent in what he had. He probably wouldn't even have to stop his feasting. It seems to be the clearest and the easiest thing in the world to do.

But it's not that clear. It's not that easy, he might say. There's other things to consider. There's a whole bunch of factors that you have to take into consideration. On the one hand, I don't have any time. I have a bunch of stuff I need to do, places that I need to go, business to take care of. I don't have time to help Lazarus right now. And besides, I don't really have anything to spare. All the money that I have is going to go for this or that. It's already tied up. I don't really have anything that I can give him. And someone else will take care of him anyway, right? Someone else will take care of his needs. He will be taken care of one way or another. I don't need to worry about it. And if nothing else, I can get to it tomorrow. He's going to be there tomorrow too. It's not like he's going anywhere! And I can take care of him then if I have something to give him. And maybe, just maybe, what God says doesn't actually apply here. Maybe he's talking about something else, some other situation, but he doesn't have all the facts of this one. So I will get to taking care of Lazarus later. But do you hear what that's doing, Christians? Behind all of these is the same idea: I don't want to. I know what God says, but I don't want to do it. The trouble is not the Word. The Word is perfectly clear. The trouble is so often a hard heart.

Jesus goes on to show this as he continues the story. He says both of these men die. Lazarus goes up into heaven, to a feast which will never come to an end. But the rich man is thrown into hell, to a fire which will never come to an end. But the rich man doesn't think that this is fair. He doesn't think that what is happening is just or right. That's why he says, "Father Abraham, have mercy on me! Send Lazarus to dip his finger in water and to cool my tongue, because I am in anguish in this flame. I don't deserve what is happening to me!" Isn't it interesting, too, that the rich man who was unwilling to lift even a finger for Lazarus in life now wants Lazarus to lift his finger for him? "Send Lazarus to help me, because I am being tormented in this flame!" "No," Abraham says, "that's not going to happen. Because you are getting exactly what you deserve. You chose what you thought was good in life. You thought it was good to live it up, to live for yourself. You thought it was good to ignore Lazarus. You thought it was good to ignore God. You made your choice, and now you have to live with it. And it is just for you to be tormented in this way, because you did not relieve Lazarus' torment in life."

"Well, then, send Lazarus," he says. "Send him to warn my brothers." Notice that he still wants Lazarus to do something for him. "Send Lazarus to my brothers to warn them, so that they won't end up in this place either." Which, of course, is a very subtle way of him saying that "God held back information from me! He didn't tell me everything I needed to know, and that's why I ended up here!" Even in hell, the rich man is convinced of his own righteousness. "Send Lazarus back from the dead to warn my brothers, so that they will pay attention!" "No," Abraham says, "that's not going to happen either. They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them. The problem is not that God was being unclear. God was not holding anything back from you. The problem was you didn't want to listen."

"Well, send him anyway! Because if someone comes back from the dead, then they'll wake up. They'll pay attention. They'll really listen to what God has to say." "No, that doesn't need to happen," Abraham says. "God is perfectly clear. God has told them what they need to know. He doesn't need to explain himself further." It's like Micah chapter 6 says: "He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

So Christians, if we want to know what is right, what is good, what is just, we just need to listen to God. God is perfectly clear what his will for us is. And if we think that it's unclear, we need to ask ourselves: is it actually unclear? Or am I just unwilling to do it? And if that's the case, then we should repent and listen to what God has to say. And when it comes to the poor, to our poor brothers who are in need, God's will is clear: help them! Provide for their needs. Take care of whatever they need. Give them money, give them clothing, give them food, give them shelter, whatever it is that they are lacking. Make sure that their needs are taken care of. That is what is good and right and just in the eyes of God.

But don't let the world make that unclear either, to distort what it is that God is saying here. God is not saying that that means that we have to have government welfare or vote for those who want government welfare. Because far too often leaving it for someone else to do leads us to ignore the person who's right in front of us. Because God isn't calling us to just let other people take care of the poor while we do nothing. God wants us to take care of this poor man right in front of us, the one that we can actually see, the one that we can actually interact with. Because it's far easier to take care of somebody that I'm never going to meet. It's far more difficult to take care of the person that I have to talk to. But that's what God wants us to do.

And we're not called to help the poor everywhere. It's not our mission to take care of every poor person in the world all by ourselves. We couldn't do that even if we wanted to. We are called to take care of the one next door, the one who is close to us, the one that we can interact with. Yes, it's good to take care of those who are far away too, but not at the expense of those who are near!

And above all, we as Christians are called to help fellow Christians, to take care of the family first. It's like Paul says in Galatians 6: "So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith." That's our calling. That is what is good and right and godly: to take care of our poor Christian brothers in the name of God.

"Why should we do this, though?" we might ask. Because of who God is. God says in Leviticus 25: "You shall not lend your poor brother your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit. I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan, and to be your God." So God called Israel in the Old Testament to do all of these things because of what he had first done for them. He had brought them up out of Egypt. He had brought them out of slavery. He had given them the Promised Land. Not because they deserved any of it, but because he loved them, and because of the promise that he had made to Abraham. And if that was true for Israel in the Old Testament, how much more is it true for us, who have been made Christians through Jesus Christ? We love because he first loved us, as John says in 1 John. And as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become

rich." We are spiritually rich. We have the riches of faith. We have the riches of heaven. We are heirs of eternity because of what Jesus Christ has done for us!

So Christians, let us use what we have--our money, our possessions, whatever it may be--in the service of God. Let us care for our poor Christian brothers, because this is what is good, what is right, what is just in the eyes of God.

Let us pray. Lord Jesus Christ, open our hearts to listen to your Word so that we may know the way of righteousness and follow after you in all things; for you live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.