

Trinity Lutheran Church, Gillette, WY
September 30, 2007

Rich or Poor

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, amen. The text for the sermon this morning comes from the Gospel, which was read earlier.

Preaching at a funeral service, a pastor made the statement, “My friends, we are living for two worlds.” He was challenged afterwards by a successful businessman who said, “We are living for one world and one only. We do not know of any other world than this one.” The pastor thought for a moment and then asked, “If you did believe in another world, would it make any difference to you?” The reply came without hesitation: “Of course it would. If I had the slightest suspicion that we are really living for any other world than this, I should change every major business policy I have before the end of the night.”

Where do we put our trust? Do we put it in our family, our friends? Do we put it in the bank? Do we put it in ourselves? It is very easy to put our trust into the things of this world as the business man did; it's something which we are very good at. But at the end of the day, what can this world do for you? We think that the world will do everything for us. It will provide us with what we need, the necessities, like the new Mercedes or the half-million dollar house. Putting our trust and seeking our pleasure in the things of this life can cause us to forget about God and to suffer eternal punishment in the life which is to come.

With just a few words in our text for today, Jesus describes two men for us. First He tells about a rich man. The rich man dressed himself in purple, a color associated

with royalty, and in linen, the most expensive cloth of those days. The rich man was not what we would call a bad man. He was very likely a respected man in the community. But his goal in life was set too low. He honestly believed that the important thing in life was to enjoy the good things life has to offer.

The picture of Lazarus is the exact opposite. He was poor and living from the rich man's table scraps. He was sick; he suffered from painful sores. Since he was unable to help himself, he was carried by others who unloaded him at the rich man's gate as though he were an unwelcome burden. The rich man's busy life and his constant search for enjoyment didn't allow him any time to be concerned about the needy man at his gate.

The rich man, according to Luther, "is not punished because he indulged in sumptuous fare and fine clothes, but because his heart was attached to them, sought them, trusted in and chose them, and because he found in them all his joy, delight and pleasure; and made them in fact his idols."

Luther goes on to say in the explanation to the First Commandment in the Large Catechism, "Many a person imagines that he has God and everything he needs, provided he has money and property. He relies upon these, boasts about them, and feels so immovably secure that he cares about no one. But look, he too has a god, named mammon, that is the money and property to which he has given his whole heart. Mammon is the world's favorite idol. One who has money and property has a sense of security and feels as happy and fearless as if he were sitting in the middle of paradise. On the other hand, one who has nothing is as insecure and anxiety-ridden as if he had never heard of God. Very few can be found who keep a cheerful spirit and neither fret

nor complain when they are without mammon. The desire for riches sticks glued to our nature right up to the grave.”

Here one traces the secret sins of his heart. For the rich man, he had his idols of wealth and property. As long as he had those, he had everything else; he didn't need anything else. Faith didn't enter into the equation for him. Look on the flip side of the coin. For where faith is, there is no anxiety for fine clothing and sumptuous feasting; there is no longing for riches, honor, pleasure, influence and all that is not God himself; but there is a seeking and a striving for and a cleaving to nothing except to God, the highest good alone.

We don't want to be the rich man, but more often than not, we are. We may not necessarily go looking for the riches, but the riches find us in one form or another. We put our trust into the things of this world because, at least for the here and now, that's where our faith is. The more we have, the better we are. The bigger we have, the more important we are. That's what our American way of life tells us. However, our spiritual life does not depend on the earthly goods that we have. When we live for our own pleasures, we're left with nothing. People “feel” or “know” they are in the faith – however, they find themselves outside of the faith. We put our faith in money, possessions, etc. When we put our faith in our possessions, they can keep us from heaven and send us to hell.

In our text, both the rich man and Lazarus, the poor man, died. Lazarus was carried away to Abraham's side, while the poor man was buried and found himself in Hades. When the rich man died, undoubtedly his wealth was able to provide an elaborate funeral for him. But what good did that do him in the grave? During his earthly life the

rich man had been too concerned with the affairs of the day to devote much thought to life beyond the grave. But now he knew the awfulness of an eternity without God. He was experiencing the punishment by fire of which the Bible speaks.

In Lazarus, we see a complete opposite with regards to one's thought process regarding this life and our eternal home in heaven.

Weakened by his disease, by lack of proper nourishment and medical care, Lazarus died. He did not have many people interested in him during his life, and nothing is said to indicate that it was any different at his death. Although he may not have had people waiting on him during his life, angels, the servants of God, served Lazarus in death. He was received into the rest and comfort and companionship and love of heaven. He was taken to Abraham's side where he would be with God.

Lazarus' focus wasn't on earthly possessions; he didn't have them. Instead, he lived a life of suffering. He not only suffered, but he was patient under suffering, submitting to the will of God, whom he had learned to know as his heavenly Father. Lazarus knew how to do without what are usually considered the good things of life, but he enjoyed his Father's assurance of forgiveness and peace of conscience. In this faith he fell asleep, and in this faith he woke up in heaven in the presence of the Savior in whom he had trusted.

The rich man found himself in Hades. He found himself forever separated from God. He found himself in forever torment. What could be worse than that? What could truly be worse than not being with God? Looking up at heaven and seeing those in heaven. Jesus tells us in our text that from hell you can see heaven. That alone is sheer torment, seeing the heavenly bliss that could have been yours.

Looking up, he saw the poor man Lazarus. He sees Lazarus whom he disdained before now lying in Abraham's bosom, like a mother holds her child in her arms. Before, Lazarus was a nobody; now, he is someone special in the eyes of God. For the rich man, it must have been hard to accept. How could this poor man be in heaven while he, the rich man, is in hell? It should be the other way around.

Jesus is teaching a hard lesson for all to hear. There are only two possibilities. Either a person is like Lazarus forever with the Lord and with the saints made perfect, or like the rich man forever separated from the Lord. This lesson is not one which is easily accepted by people, especially people like the Pharisees, nor is it an easy lesson accepted by us as well.

There is truly a hell. Hell is truth seen too late. That is what happened to the rich man. He realized the truth too late. The truth is your eternal reward cannot be found in earthly gains. When the rich man realized that, he feared for his five brothers because they were living the same way he was. Once again he showed his unbelief and tried to invent a new means of grace for his brothers—the appearance of one returned from the dead. Abraham is quick to point out that they have the Moses and the Prophets, the words of the Old Testament. More was needed for the rich man than that. He wanted a visit from the dead to his brothers because that would be more convincing. If you want a visit from the dead to convince you, listen to the resurrection words of Jesus. *“Do not disbelieve, but believe.”* Abraham simply reaffirmed that sinners are saved not by supernatural appearances from the dead but by hearing and believing the Word of God. Luther emphasized, “The Holy Ghost does not wish to work in us in any other way than through the Word and sacraments.”

Jesus Christ gives to us His Word, His body and His blood as means of grace. The Holy Spirit gives to us faith so that you and I will not go to hell, but instead have a resting place in heaven, with the angels, the archangels, and all the company of heaven, including Christ Himself, with God the Father.

We may be rich in this life, and there is nothing wrong with earthly riches. But when you place your faith and trust in the things of this world, you will always be destined for the road of hell as the rich man was. Only when you place your faith and trust in the Word of God will you be given the keys to everlasting life. In Jesus' name, amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, until life everlasting, amen.