

The Rich Man and Lazarus

The gospel for this coming Sunday (Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost) is Luke 16:19-31. The story of the rich man and Lazarus provides a fitting conclusion to this chapter on the attitude toward possessions in view of the life of the age to come and the Gospel preaching to prepare people for it. The account has two parts, but there is no doubt as to its unity and its intent. The first part (16:19–26) describes love of worldly wealth and failure to heed the witnesses (cf. 16:14–15), and the second part (16:27–31) presents the importance of the testimony of the Law and the Prophets (cf. 16:16–18). (CC p. 632)

The story sets up a contrast between two men: a rich man and a poor man. This is accomplished by four verses in a simple chiasm that briefly and succinctly describes the life and death of these two men. The hearer should not have difficulty seeing that the rich man represents the Pharisees who were earlier described as “lovers of money” (16:14), and the poor man stands for all the outcasts of Jewish society whom Jesus has made the special focus of his ministry and addressees/hearers of his preaching. (CC) This is not the brother of Mary and Martha. Lazarus here means “one whom God helps.” (TLSB)

Lazarus is a perfect recipient for almsgiving, through which the rich man may demonstrate how mercy may be expressed through the proper use of possessions. In keeping with his excessive lifestyle, the rich man’s obsession with the pleasures of possessions causes him to ignore Lazarus. Instead, the dogs lick his wounds! (CC p. 634) He is helpless to keep the dogs from his undressed wounds. (TLSB) This made the sores even worse.

In verses 23-31 there is a break. The chiasm comes to an end. The scene now shifts from earth to heaven and hell. The main focus is on the rich man and his conversation with Abraham. This dialog has two parts: (A) a description of the heavenly life of Lazarus in contrast to the eternal torment of the rich man (16:23–26), which sets the stage for (B) a discussion of how to be prepared for the life of the age to come (16:27–31). (CC p. 634)

Curiously, the rich man does not speak words of repentance, for he seems to realize that his condition of torment is permanent. His cry for mercy is *not* a cry of repentance, but a plea for help that results from a desperate situation. (CC)

When it says “*Moses and the Prophets*” it is a way of designating the whole OT. The rich man had failed to pay attention to Scripture and its teaching, and feared his brothers would do the same.

Jesus challenges the belief that earthly blessings are a sign of God’s eternal favor. He teaches us to heed the Word of God now while faithful mercy can be shown, for this is God’s good and gracious will.

Prayer: Lord, teach me to read and trust in your gift of Moses, the Prophets, and all faithful witnesses to the Gospel. May my tongue speak now of your grace for all who have ears to hear. Amen. (TLSB)

