

✠ *In the Name of Jesus* ✠

How much money would you need to have in order to say, “Wow! I am very wealthy!”? As you are calculating your number, or reciting it from memory, here’s a more important question: what would you do with great wealth? Would you move to a better house, buy a sleeker car, wear nicer clothing, eat finer food? What would be your relationship with wealth? Would you be any different from the rich man in today’s Gospel? Let’s think about this rich man and learn as much as we can from his mistakes.

Jesus said, ¹⁹*There was a rich man who would dress in purple and fine linen, feasting lavishly every day.* In Bible times purple was a rare color. In order to get purple dye, you had to search in the sea for special shells and hopefully find the animal inside still alive. Then you would crush the shell, and when you crushed it, the animal inside would give off two drops of purple dye as it died. So you can imagine how many of these shells you’d have to collect and crush in order to get enough dye to stain a few yards of fabric. Purple cloth was so expensive in Bible times that only a few of the rich people could afford to wear it. Yet this rich man in Jesus’ story dresses himself in purple garments every day. See how rich he is?

He eats rich too, feasting lavishly every single day. It’s a sin to eat more than we need, whether we’re rich or poor. God calls this sin gluttony. When we eat more than we need, our actions yell, “I love food more than I love you, God, more than I love this body you gave me!” So gluttony is a sin.

But is it sinful to be rich? No. Abraham was rich, and he ended up in heaven. But it is

sinful to love money enough to want to be rich, because love for money leaves no room in our hearts for loving God most. And this was the rich man’s sin. He let things become more important to him than God. He had a harmful relationship with wealth.

This becomes clearer as Jesus contrasts the rich man with someone else. ²⁰*A poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, was left at [the rich man’s] gate.* Can you relate to Lazarus? Did you grow up poor? Are you right now as poor as Lazarus was? “Well, no. Nobody’s that poor.” Oh, yes they are. Many of the people you and I are trying to reach in our mission fields, trying to share the good news about Jesus with, are pretty poor. Think of them when you fill your offering envelope. Go ahead and designate one of every ten dollars you give the Lord as a gift for “Missions.” Think of the poor when you give your Last Sunday Offering every June for our Helping Hands fund, which helps the poor right here locally.

I wonder why Lazarus is poor. The only detail we know for sure is that he has been cast down by his circumstances. Somehow he turns to begging, but that hasn’t been working well for him either. Like about half the people alive in his day, Lazarus eats fewer calories than a body needs to sustain itself. It’s been this way quite a while. Look how weak he’s gotten. Someone has laid him down at the gate of this rich man—he’s been too weak lately to walk there himself. Lazarus is so malnourished that his cuts don’t heal anymore. He has open sores, which, by the way makes him unclean to all of God’s people at that time. No one wants to touch him or else they will become unclean and won’t be able to enter the Temple to worship

the Lord until they go through the prescribed cleansing ritual.

Maybe outside the rich man's gate Lazarus can get a few scraps. In our text he *21longed to be filled with what fell from the rich man's table*. Jesus isn't talking about the dribbles that fall to the floor when people don't carefully eat over their plate. See, in those days people ate with their hands. Where today people might wipe their hands on a napkin, back then the wealthy people wiped their hands on bread and then threw the bread under the table. The rabbis taught that this bread had to be given to the poor. Lazarus would love to eat this "floor bread." It would probably taste pretty good with all that finger fat. But now he's too weak to get any floor bread. Lazarus just lies there. The dogs, the mangy street mutts, probably get to the bread first, and then *come and lick his sores*, you know, for the salt and the moisture. Everybody takes from Lazarus.

It's sad when people are poor. But there's something wrong when those who can do something to help the poor don't. This is one of the points Jesus wants us to take into our hearts. We are much closer in wealth to the rich man than we are to Lazarus. What are we doing to help the poor? We pay taxes, yes, and some of that helps the poor. But we have no choice about paying taxes. Where is our heart? The Bible doesn't teach that we have to give all of our possessions to the poor. But our generous God definitely wants us to acknowledge that our possessions really belong to him. We're just managing them for God. Our generous God also sent us the thing we need even more than wealth—a Savior from sin. We've been washed clean of all sin through

Jesus' blood, shed on the cross. We have felt the compassions of our gracious God. So now, with some of the wealth God has temporarily placed into our hands, we get to show compassion for people like Lazarus. We get to be like God is to us. We get to give. We get to live our faith. See how blessed we are?

Lazarus was blessed too because God helps. *22One day the poor man died and was carried away by the angels to Abraham's side*. Lazarus had learned that the Lord would send a Messiah to redeem his people—God helps. There was truth in the name 'Lazarus' and in its older Hebrew form 'Eliezer.' Both names mean "God helps." Lazarus died believing God helps. He went to heaven in that faith. It wasn't Lazarus' poverty that caused God to open a spot for him in heaven, like some sort of cosmic justice bringing balance to the universe. He was a child of Abraham by the same faith through which Abraham was saved. So, at the time of his death, God helped Lazarus by sending angels to carry Lazarus' soul to heaven. The Lord will do this for you also, dear fellow believers in Jesus.

Not so the rich man. He had no saving faith, as evidenced by his selfish relationship with earthly things. While he feasted lavishly, Lazarus died of starvation. So here comes a warning for our sinful flesh. *22The rich man also died and was buried. 23And being in torment in Hades, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off, with Lazarus at his side*. Torment. Jesus wants everyone to know how bad hell is because he doesn't want anyone to go there. Lots of people who suffer here on earth say

hell is here. But that shortchanges hell. Yes, we get a temporary taste of hell here through our sufferings, but only so we look to God during this life to save us from the real hell for eternity. Since Jesus hasn't returned for Judgment Day yet, there's still time for anyone who is alive to learn about hell and learn about what Jesus did to rescue us from hell.

The rich man hasn't learned anything, not even from being in hell. ²⁴*“Father Abraham!” he called out, “Have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this flame!”* Still talking like a rich guy. What gall! Ordering Abraham to send poor Lazarus on an errand, as if Lazarus should continue living a lowly life. And what's with a drop of water? As if that's going to help.

Wait a minute. The rich guy knows Lazarus' name! Could it be that he knew Lazarus by name while on earth, knew Lazarus was out there at his gate, and still did nothing to relieve Lazarus' earthly suffering? Evidence of 'no saving faith.' The agony is deserved. God is just.

²⁵*“Son,” Abraham said, “remember that during your life you received your good things, just as Lazarus received bad things. But now he is comforted here, while you are in agony.”* Jesus, the world's Savior, seems to be teaching that those who hate him, as evidenced by their lives, will have to think about this sin as part of their eternal suffering.

Abraham continues: ²⁶*“Besides all this, a great chasm has been fixed between us and you, so that those who want to pass over*

from here to you cannot; neither can those from there cross over to us.” Jesus, the world's Savior, wants us to know that upon death we go either to heaven or to hell, and that where we go, there we will stay. In this life we have the option of turning away from Jesus. But once the angels take us to heaven, we can never be expelled, not even to run an errand for the arrogant, like the rich man...

...who still doesn't get it, by the way. Listen to how he talks to Abraham. ²⁷*“Father,” he said, “then I beg you to send [Lazarus] to my father's house—²⁸because I have five brothers—to warn them, so they won't also come to this place of torment.”*

Does this seem like a reasonable request? We live in a culture where you can usually get a second chance, and a third, and a fourth, and a fifth, and where some people get special treatment, as if standards shouldn't apply to them. Jesus, the world's Savior, wants us to know that this life we are living on earth is our one chance, our one “time of grace,” and that he has opened up for us sinners one narrow path to eternal joy. So he has Abraham reply, ²⁹*“[Your brothers] have Moses and the prophets; let them listen to them.”* Moses and the prophets. Moses and the prophets. We've heard of them before. Didn't they write the books of Holy Scripture during the time before Jesus was born? Uh-huh. So what's Jesus saying? That if people listen to the message contained in the first $\frac{3}{4}$ of the Bible, they can learn enough to stay out of hell? Yes! This is why I urge everyone to read the Bible. And if a friend tells me, “Well, I don't accept the New Testament,” I ask them to read the Old Testament with me. How about Isaiah

1:18? “Come now, let us reason together,” says the LORD. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.” There it is! The saving message: our sin and God’s grace. How about Psalm 130? “*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD; 2O LORD, hear my voice. Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy. 3If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins, O LORD, who could stand? 4But with you there is forgiveness.*” There it is! The saving message: our sin and God’s grace. SEE HOW EFFECTIVE GOD’S WORD IS? It can keep those who listen out of hell! That’s God’s plan: save everyone through his message about sin and grace.

³⁰“**No**, father Abraham,” the rich man said. “God’s Word isn’t enough. They’ll never listen to a boring old message, especially if an ordinary person speaks it. God’s plan won’t work. You need to send my brothers something extraordinary, some razzle-dazzle. *If someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.*”

³¹But [Abraham] told him, “*If they don’t listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be persuaded if someone rises from the dead.*” Oh, the irony. Do you see where Jesus is going with this last statement? He himself will rise from the dead. His enemies will hear about his resurrection from the soldiers guarding the tomb before most of Jesus’ friends hear the news. The enemies will not believe, will not be persuaded by someone rising from the dead. They will pay the soldiers to lie about what they saw. They will suppress the truth. That’s the nature of all unbelief—suppress the truth (see Romans 1:18ff).

Do you see? God’s Word is the only way, God’s only plan to save us sinners. But God’s Word works. SEE HOW EFFECTIVE GOD’S WORD IS? It led you and me to believe in Jesus. It leads us to see that we are even richer than the rich man. We get to dress every day in the robe of Christ’s righteousness—God sees us as pure—no sin. We get to feast lavishly every day on God’s saving Word in our devotions so that we can cogitate on it day and night (Psalm 1). We get to feast lavishly on God’s Word when we gather for worship in God’s house every week. God’s effective Word leads us to care about those in need and to help the hungry with gifts to the Food Shelf. We have the privilege of aiding those who are thrown down by their circumstances. Every January we gather a Last Sunday Offering for WELS Christian Aid and Relief. Even more important: God’s Word leads us to see the thousands of people in our neighborhoods, laid at our gates like spiritually poor beggars, starved for the bread of God’s Word and too spiritually weak to help themselves. So God’s effective Word moves us to give our offerings regularly for the gospel ministry of our home church and for the joint gospel ministry that we do throughout the world with our sister churches in the WELS. Through our offerings we all bring God’s Word to those who don’t know Jesus yet. And we feed our faith with God’s Word, because we want to stay on the path to the place of eternal joy with Jesus. SEE HOW EFFECTIVE GOD’S WORD IS? Let’s read it, hear it, love it, memorize it, live according to it, share it. To God be the glory.