



“Conversion”
Scripture – Luke 16:19-31
Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, September 25, 2016

Which do you think Jesus spoke of more often: prayer or money? If you said “money” you would be on target. Why? Wasn’t he a spiritual leader? Of course he was, and that is why he knew that one of the most powerful forces exerting its influence on us is the pull of wealth. It tugs on our heart, our mind, and our soul. The desire for wealth and the resistance to sharing it have likely lured more people away from God than anything else.

Today’s parable from the Gospel of Luke paints a stark contrast between a rich man and a poor man. As the stories of Jesus often do, it contains exaggerated details to underscore its point. We read that the rich man dressed in purple and fine linen.

In the ancient world, anything that was purple screamed, “Expensive!” The purple dye trade was centered in the Phoenician city of Tyre – located in present day Lebanon – and the color was produced from a particular sea snail. Dye-makers had to crack open the snail’s shell, extract a purple-producing liquid and expose it to sunlight for a precise amount of time. Moreover, it took thousands of snails to yield just one ounce of usable dye.¹ Thus, purple was exorbitantly expensive.

However, the rich man not only possessed the finest wardrobe, he “feasted sumptuously every day.” Most people in first century Palestine existed on a meager starch diet. Only occasionally would they sit down to a meal that could be called a feast. Yet, this man gorges himself daily.

The other man in the story has a name: Lazarus. He is at the opposite end of the economic spectrum. He is not merely identified as poor; we are told that he is covered with sores. He is so destitute that he longs to satisfy his hunger with the scraps that fall from the rich man’s table. He is so weak and impoverished that dogs lick his open wounds. Jesus paints a scene intended to repulse us.

As Jesus continues with his tale, he says that both men die, but both do not end up in the same place. The rich man ends up in hell where he is tormented. Lazarus is carried into heaven by the angels and stands at the side of Abraham, the father of all the Jewish people. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to him with just a fingertip of water to cool his tongue. But Abraham says there is a great chasm between them and no one can cross it.

The wealthy man knows that his brothers will suffer the same fate if they do not change their ways toward the poor and he pleads with Abraham to warn them. Abraham points out that they already know what to do. Moses and the prophets clearly instructed people how to treat those in need.

It is a haunting parable with a crucial message. When those who have, fail to share with those who have not, it creates a great gulf between God and those who withhold.

Keep in mind the wealthy man did not commit a heinous act. When he walked through his front gate, he did not curse Lazarus. He did not order his servants to drag Lazarus away from the front of his house.² No, his was a sin of omission and he had no excuse for his behavior. He knew he was obligated to care for the poor man lying at his gate. Not only were there ample Jewish laws that commanded just treatment of others, one's obligation to the poor was spelled out in unambiguous language. In Deuteronomy 15, we read: "If there is among you anyone in need...do not be hard-hearted or tight-fisted...You should rather open your hand, willingly lending enough to meet the need, whatever it may be. Be careful that you do not...view your needy neighbor with hostility and give nothing...Give liberally and be ungrudging when you do so, for on this account the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all that you undertake. Since there will never cease to be some in need on the earth, I therefore command you, "Open your hand to the poor and needy neighbor in your land." (Deuteronomy 15:7-11)

The wealthy man could not feign ignorance and neither could his brothers. "Father Abraham," he cried out, "Warn my brothers so that they do not end up in hell with me!"

What was Abraham's response? "They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them."

In the 16th century, Martin Luther wrote, "The rich man's life glitters and shines beautifully but his sheep's clothing conceals a wolf inside. The parable does not accuse him of adultery, murder, robbery, of violence or of having done anything that the world would censure...But we must look into his heart and judge his spirit...[That is where the problem is.] He has no heart for his neighbor."

Pastor Chris Tuttle remembers when his high school youth group visited the Church of the Pilgrimage in Washington. "One evening they brought in a few homeless and formerly homeless men to share their stories. One of the students asked a man what to do when a person on the street approached him asking for money. The man said, 'Do what you feel like doing. But, if you give someone money, be fully aware that it may be used for food, but just as well may be used for something else. Follow your instincts as you make that decision.' Then he added the critical point: Say, 'yes,' or say, 'no,' but treat me like a person. We spend our whole day not being seen. Do not act like we aren't there.'"³

While they were both alive, the rich man never recognized Lazarus. He did not speak to him as he entered and exited his home. He did not share even the scraps that fell from his table. He acted as if Lazarus was not there. He painted himself in an alternative reality; one devoid of a poor person just outside his door.

The rich man was badly in need of a conversion. He needed to be converted from "Life is about me" to "Life is about us." He needed to be converted from "You have to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" to "We are all in this together." He needed to be converted from "If I give away some of what I have, I'll have less" to "If I give away some of what I have, I'll have more (of what is important)." He needed to be converted from "Success is measured in terms of quantity of shekels" to "Success is measured in terms of quantity of compassion." He needed to be converted from "Indulging myself is good for my well-being," to "Giving away a portion of my wealth is good for my well-being."

In nearly 40 years of ministry, I have become convinced that one of the greatest measurements of a person's spiritual life is his/her financial giving. People do not give away their money if there is not a compelling reason. However, if you know that God is in the business of transforming lives – if you have had your own life transformed and you have seen transformation in others – you want to play a role in changing lives and changing the world.

For the next 15 seconds, I want you to think about your personal worth. [Pause] How did you think about your personal worth? Did you think about it in terms of what you are worth financially, or what you are worth to your family and friends and community?

Personal worth is an interesting phrase, isn't it? Sometimes we forget or downplay our worth, our value, to others.

You are valuable in terms of emotional support. There are people who rely on you to lift their spirits when they are hurting. You may be valuable in terms of your knowledge or wisdom. There may be people who rely on you for advice. If you are a parent, you have enormous personal worth to your children. They depend on you to teach them, to guide them, to support them and to love them – no matter how old they are.

When you write a check or use your credit card or debit your account, your financial assets decrease. However, if that money goes to help someone, your personal worth increases.

Watch your mailbox this week because the annual stewardship letter is coming your way. When you receive it, I hope you will ponder your personal worth and how it will multiply through your financial gifts to Westminster, because our community of faith touches our lives and so many other lives in critical ways.

Boost your personal worth by insuring that Westminster will continue to have worship services every Sunday with a marvelous choir singing inspiring music and an extraordinary organist who makes our hymns soar. Boost your personal worth by insuring that there will be challenging and thought-provoking classes to stimulate our thinking and deepen our faith. Boost your personal worth by insuring that there will always be programs for our children to learn the stories of faith, to learn they are loved by God, and to earn that God has a purpose for their lives. Boost your personal worth by insuring that we will have ministries that feed the poorest in our community, house homeless families, give rides to people who need to get to a doctor's appointment, and provide a safe after school mentoring program for children who come from rough neighborhoods. Boost your personal worth by insuring that there will be ministries that build friendships and cooperative ministries with people in Guatemala and Congo and the Holy Land. Boost your personal worth by insuring that we will be able to provide a meeting place for people overcoming addictions and people needing help with parenting skills. Boost your personal worth by insuring that when someone faces a crisis, a pastor will be there for him/her and when a loved one dies, a pastor will be there to celebrate the person's life and give witness to the resurrection. Boost your personal worth by insuring that there will be a place to celebrate weddings and a place to have our children and grandchildren baptized.

The rich man in Jesus' parable was badly in need of a conversion. He needed to know in his body, mind, and soul that his personal worth was about so much more than what he had. He needed to know what you know – that your person worth is tallied by what you give.

NOTES:

1. History.com, "Why Is the Color Purple Considered the Color of Royalty?"
2. William Barclay, *Daily Devotions with William Barclay*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2008), p. 339.
3. Chris Tuttle, "Blindness and a Vision of Community," *Day1.org*, September 29, 2013.