

How much time do you take in your life to enjoy the nice things you have? I know some people, when asked that question might respond with an indignant sort of, "What nice things?" But that sort of failure to appreciate what God has given a person is an entirely different matter that I'm not going to get into today. So instead, let's just consider the good things you do have. Most of them are things we've worked very hard for, and in general, stuff we're proud and happy to own. So again, how much time do you take to enjoy the nice things you have? I'd wager the common answer to that question would probably be, "not enough." Now, some things we have aren't about enjoying them so much. Any kind of collectibles, the fun is in the pursuit, not so much the having. Once you've gotten the whole set of whatever you can look at it every now and then and be like "hey that's pretty great", but there's not much to actually do with it. Okay but even putting that aside, God has blessed us all with riches to enjoy, and the question is, do you enjoy your riches?

That might seem like an odd question to ask, given our reading for today. After all, here in our gospel we've got a seemingly pretty clear message about what happens if you spend your life indulging versus living destitute and the rewards we eventually receive for such lives. It would seem to be a cautionary tale which teaches us that if you have too much fun in this life, you only get to suffer in the next, but if you spent most of your time here unhappy, then you get to be rewarded for eternity. Of course, in practice it *can* work out that way, and does pretty often. But these are not hard and fast rules of cause and effect and since this one story doesn't exist in a vacuum we know from the rest of scripture what Jesus means with this account and the lessons he's trying to teach us.

So to look at the parable in question first. At the start we're introduced to two characters; an unnamed rich man and a beggar named Lazarus. Now, there were probably people listening to Jesus who were pretty well off, who considered themselves wealthy, and yet even they didn't live a lifestyle like the rich man of this parable. This guy wore white and purple, both ridiculously expensive to produce, so to have both each day was reserved for the top tier of the "haves". On top of that, we're told he "lived in luxury every day." A more literal way to read that from the original would be that he "celebrated" or "made merry" every day. Remember the big festive feast thrown when the younger son returned in the parable of the prodigal son? Okay, the idea here is that is how this guy lived *each day*. Not even the normal "wealthy" could afford to slaughter a calf *every day*.

And now meanwhile, we've got Lazarus. A beggar, who would be happy to eat the scraps from this man's table, but not even given that opportunity. So weak, he couldn't even keep away the wild dogs that came to lick at his sores. This wasn't some sort of Disney act of compassion by animals going on here, you know what it's like to have something even touch an open wound...and that's all I'm going to say about it. His life was miserable.

And now, as happens to us all, each of them dies. In a predictable reversal of fortunes, the rich man goes to suffer and Lazarus is carried to heaven. The rich man, in agony, begs for a drop of water as relief, but Abraham's reply to him is extremely telling, as he says, "**Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony.**" (v25) And here in this statement we come to the apparent conundrum. Is it the excess of worldly pleasures that truly condemns? Is it necessary to be miserable here in order to receive life eternal afterward? Of course, you and I know that the answer to both of these questions is no. And yet, in a way it is all related.

What was the rich man's problem? The problem was in his heart. He cared only about himself and all the great things that he had and had been given he used only to care for himself. Even in hell we see this same attitude from both his statements, he wants relief from torture, and finding that impossible, he asks after only the welfare of his immediate family. During his life he could not have been unaware of Lazarus and his needs and yet he never lifted a finger to do anything about them. Instead he continued in his love of himself. Now, even that isn't fully the issue, because everyone has selfishness, everyone gives in to this attitude regularly. So let's get really back to basics: How is it anyone is saved?

Jesus states it plain in John's gospel: "**I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.**" (14:6). It is only by Jesus' death that our selfishness is paid for, it is only by his sacrifice that we are made clean. And though the sins of all were paid for on the cross, it is necessary to *trust* that this is true in order for the benefit of this sacrifice to apply to you. To put in the plainer terms of scripture, "**Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.**" (Acts 16:31).

It is faith that receives the salvation God offers through Christ. And we know that even that is something God creates in us, because our default selfish nature cannot trust God on its own. But it's more than just trust in Jesus that's created in us when we come to faith, it's a whole new self, a new self that is the self God meant for you to be. It is a

holy self that is not self-obsessed but rather loves God and loves to follow his will, not our own. And that will is love. It's a love for him and a love for those around us. It comes out naturally, it is the sign that we children of God, that we care for others without caring about what we get in return; that we care about our God and our relationship to him first, regardless of any earthly consequences that might entail.

So here it is. The one who is saved trusts Jesus, that trust is a whole new heart that loves God, and that love of God *shows* itself in the actions that come out in our lives. And that is what we find lacking in the rich man. There is no action that shows love for God. There is no struggle between good and evil, there is only the evil selfishness. The problem wasn't that he enjoyed the gifts he had, the problem was the spirit in which he used them.

Likewise what saved Lazarus wasn't his suffering, by the fact that he was taken to heaven, we know he trusted his God to redeem him and carry him home. This was no doubt a great comfort to him even *during* his days of trouble. And for those of us who know the truth, we know that our days of suffering will one day end and we will be comforted in heaven forever. For us too, this is meant to be words of peace that encourage us in our difficult days.

As always, we know that it comes down to faith. Did Jesus die to pay for your sins? Did he rise from the dead to show that it was accomplished for you? If your answer is yes, then that's it.

Well, then if that's true, why are we talking about whether or not we enjoy the things of this world at all? Why even bring it up? There's still a very good reason to talk about it, perhaps even moreso now that we know the underlying principles. Because clearly, not everyone believes. Not everyone trusts in Jesus for forgiveness, and indeed, perhaps worse, many who once did have given up that way and gone the way of the world. And the riches of this life, the stuff of this world, are one of the greatest obstacles that can cause these sad events to happen.

Everything that God blesses us with in this life has the potential to be a stumbling block if we become focused on enjoying the gift over the giver. Every treasure we collect, every experience we undertake can become the driving force of our life, our reason for living and our reason for throwing a fit when it is taken away from us. And all of that takes us away from the true treasure of this life, the word of God. Sure, we could talk about Jesus as our treasure and our Father too. But all of that comes to us through his word. If you want to talk about one thing you should value above everything else, God's word is it. God's word is what is going to keep you strong in faith and keep you on the path to heaven instead of hell. That's....kind of important. There are no second chances there. As Abraham points out, there's no crossing from one to the other after the decision has been made. That's a lot more important than anything you might have, from your house to your movie collection. That's a lot more important than any event you might enjoy, from a tropical vacation to a baseball game.

Now as usual, I'm not saying you *can't* enjoy those things. I said that when we started. The warning here is the temptation to make those things the center of our lives rather than the word of God. When we start choosing them over God, even in what we might consider "minor" ways, we're risking our lives. And really, we're trading the best treasure of this life for half-hearted ones. I don't just mean the treasure of heaven either. Some of you might know what I'm talking about. If you've ever taken the time in your life to have regular time with God's word, with devotions and regular Bible study, you know the impact of joy and peace that can have on your day to day living. There's nothing in this world like it, and when you choose to indulge the world rather than stick close to God, you're missing out on the real treasures.

The scriptures that God gives us are the greatest riches any of us have, and we all have them. They are the best thing you have in your life. Abraham told the rich man that they were more powerful than even a dead man rising from the grave (and if you don't buy that, go take a look at the fallout of what happened when a man named Lazarus really was raised from the dead in John 11 when you get home). They are the very words of God. There is nothing in your life more powerful or more valuable that you have access to.

So you know what, enjoy your riches. Yeah, go ahead and enjoy all the blessings God has given you in your life, there's nothing wrong with that. But let the real riches rise to the top, let the word of God be your joy and your comfort in every area of your life. Let the message of salvation by faith alone be your comfort in the worst life has to offer. Let your joy be in a God who loved the unlovable. Let his voice be your guide in this world of darkness. In our Lord, we are truly rich. Enjoy your riches. Amen.