

# THE END OF WEALTH

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*He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.- Luke 1: 52-53*

The very fact that Lazarus is named in Jesus' parable found in Luke 16:19-31 is evidence for some that the short story ought not to be regarded as a parable (read: fictitious) at all, but rather, a pericope grounded in actual events, albeit with the metaphysical curtain drawn back. The drama maintains a brisk pace—the audience is introduced to a nameless rich man, “who feasted sumptuously every day”, yet shows a heartless disregard of Lazarus, the poor man laid at his gate. Lazarus is destitute, physically unwell, and famished. In a cruel inversion of the status of the rich man who feasts, Lazarus is (figuratively speaking) feasted upon by the dogs of the city. Death, as they say, is no respecter of persons and both men pass through the veil to their eternal reward; Lazarus, to Abraham's bosom, and the rich man to hades where he is in torment. The rich man vainly attempts to identify with “Father Abraham” and presumes upon him to send Lazarus to soothe his torment amidst the flames of hades (v.24).

Notice how the rich man's neglect of Lazarus dehumanizes both parties. Lazarus is certainly dehumanized in that

he is deemed unworthy of even the most fundamental of human comforts, but also, the rich man too suffers from his own callousness as he, in the words of Kenneth Bailey, “cannot imagine a world where social stratifications do not apply. All he can think of is demanding help, even from the man he injured deeply.”<sup>1</sup> The rich man's conception of humanity is perverted, believing that the social order exists to ameliorate his own eschatological suffering. The rich man has failed to grasp Israel's robust theological tradition that points to a society righteously administered, one in harmony with God's original design. As one scholar has pointed out, according to the prophet Amos, “It was ‘in the gate [of the city]’ that justice was to be served, not where the needy were to suffer from disregard.”<sup>2</sup>

Yet this justice for the poor transcends the mere placation of physical needs. How often are we tempted to over-sim-

1. Bailey, Jesus, 389.

2. Green, Luke, 609. See also Green's comments on the “irony” of the rich man's plea to Abraham, 608.

plify the plight of those in need and so believe that the core of their concern is merely to have a square meal, or new clothes, or perhaps a place to sleep at night? These basic provisions are necessary, to be sure, but how much greater is the need to be loved? Considered? Even at the most basic level: seen? Bailey argued that a similar dynamic is at work in Jesus' parable: "Abraham affirms that [Lazarus] was comforted, which demonstrates that outside the rich man's gate he was in anguish. It was his psychic pain that hurt the most...the source of the most painful evil Lazarus endured was the treatment he received from the rich man."<sup>3</sup> The irony here is that Lazarus received no actual treatment from the rich man at all; rather, abject neglect. This view harmonizes well with James Edwards' assertion that in this parable, "the decisive eschatological issue is not wickedness but neglect...here it is neglect of a man in need whom the rich man could have helped."<sup>4</sup>

Without pronouncing judgement on the historical veracity of the parable, we do well to note that the name Lazarus means "God helps."<sup>5</sup> The point that follows from this is that we must understand that God will help the poor. It is therefore eminently necessary to ask ourselves, as people of means and wealth: "whom, and what, is important to Jesus Christ, and in what way might I be an instrument of his love?". It is in our own interest as the church, the body of Christ, to be a vessel of divine assistance to those who find themselves in places of obvious, or even not-so-obvious, need. The incentives to do so are numerous—the caution inherent within the parable is the most obvious one. If we neglect the downtrodden, the abused, and the abandoned at the gate we will have ignored the scriptures.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, we will expose ourselves to the liability of offering an unsatisfactory answer when Jesus himself asks what we have done for "the least of these."<sup>7</sup>

The law of love, however, opens us to a deeper understanding of the parable. We may reasonably infer from Lazarus'

plight that such care and concern for the poor is, in itself, a humanizing activity. When we "spend [our]selves on behalf of the poor"<sup>8</sup>, we are not meriting salvation. Rather, when engage in the work of justice and compassion we become more fully citizens of the Kingdom of God, not as a function of being, but rather, of doing. As we align ourselves with the plight of the poor—when we share God's concern for "the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith"<sup>9</sup>—we will use our wealth, resources, and even privilege for a higher end. This use of our mina is fundamentally humanizing, as it exists for the glory of God and betterment of others.<sup>10</sup>

Without putting too fine a point on it, who lies at "our gate"? Is there a person, an injustice, a cause, that we simply step over on our way to things that we deem of greater importance? The question is not an indictment, but rather, an invitation. We all await the arrival of the King, and we his children have the opportunity to feast sumptuously every day. What would it look like to invite others to that same feast? To welcome Lazarus in? To see him? To laugh and weep together and share in the goodness of the King who nourishes us not exclusively from the food that passes away, but rather, the bread of life.

3. Bailey, Jesus, 391.

4. James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 470. See also Green's comment, "This is [Jesus'] indictment against [the Pharisees]: in neglecting the poor, they have disregarded the will of God so clearly expressed in the Scriptures." Green, Luke, 610.

5. Darrell L. Bock, Luke 9:51-24:53, *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 1365.

6. Edwards, Luke, 473.

7. Mt.25:40.

8. Is. 58:10.

9. Mt.23:23.

10. Many of the themes Luke presents in the story of Lazarus are mirrored in the parable of the minas, Luke 19:12-27; particularly, the gift of the mina (financial resource) to the servants of the nobleman while he is away—the servant's attitudes towards, and use of, the nobleman's material wealth forms the basis upon which they are judged.

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