

Luke 16:19-31  
Income Disparity and Jesus  
WRCoB 3.14.21

Jesus begins his ministry with this statement.

**Luke 4:18 The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.**

I take it to mean the economically poor. Wouldn't you?

If this is the case

Then Jesus didn't come just to save souls.

There is a significant social dimension to his Gospel.

There is a God-given responsibility to alleviating poverty.

Correct me, if I am wrong.

Pope Francis, the Pope for the poor, feels strongly about this

*“Poverty is precisely at the heart of the Gospel. If we were to remove poverty from the Gospel, people would understand nothing about Jesus’ message.*

Jesus came in the flesh to teach humanity

That things we deem important, really aren't.

That what we think can make us happy, really doesn't.

And that the pursuit of those things

Comes at the detriment not only to us but to others as well.

Jay Perini, who teaches at Middlebury College in VT asks

*Does money make you happy? Does being rich contribute to your spiritual life and its possibilities?*

*Is the gap between the rich and poor a religious problem as well as a social problem in desperate need of solutions?*

*Jesus, Pope Francis, and brain scientists have asked these questions, and the answers are clear if unnerving. Wealth and power are dangerous for your mental health, your spiritual condition, and for society in general – especially when they contribute to the neglect of the poor.*

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Jesus had a lot to say about the dangers of wealth.

Jesus' concern is no more clearly stated

Than in today's passage

Known as the Rich Man and Lazarus.

Its lesson is indeed meant to be a warning

To all who believe that the pursuit of wealth

Is the path towards the good life.

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The rich man, in our story, is nameless.

I sense Jesus uses him

As a caricature of wealth's overindulgences.

He wears very expensive purple cloth

The kind dyed from the mucus of snails.

He wears luxurious linen underwear.

He not only eats well

He eats like every day is Thanksgiving.

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However, we do know the name of the man on the doorstep

His name is mentioned four times in the passage.

Lazarus.

It is the only character in Jesus' parables with a name.

I wonder?

Did Jesus know him?

Or did Jesus want the significance of his name  
*God has helped*, to be of impact?

Or maybe, Jesus wanted to personalize the poor man.

The interesting thing about the poor man's name though

Is not only that **we** know it

But the **rich man** knows it.

The rich man knows Lazarus

As the one laying at his doorstep!

He calls him by name.

But even in death as in life, the rich man

Would not directly acknowledge Lazarus' existence.

The rich man's questions went to Abraham.

**Luke 16:24 NRSV Father Abraham . . . send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue . . .**

The socioeconomic chasm between the two is clear.

Lazarus lives in poverty.

He spends his day at the rich man's doorstep  
In hopes of a handout  
But no one from the house cares.

Even the dogs show him more mercy.

Lazarus dies and is gently carried away by angels.

The rich man dies and is buried  
Probably in his purple cloth and linen underwear  
Most likely in a lavish burial ceremony.

We're not sure who shows up for the funeral.

They meet in the afterlife.

In the story's imagery  
Heaven and hell are within eyesight of each other.

A huge chasm separates the two.

Lazarus is comforted in the presence of Abraham.  
While the rich man suffers the tortures of hell.

The great eternal reversal  
The first shall be last, the last shall be first.

The rich man begs for mercy

That in life, he himself denied Lazarus.

When the rich man realizes this is his eternal reward

For the life he lived on earth

He pleads with Abraham

To send someone to warn his brothers.

But Abraham refuses saying

They should listen to Moses and the prophets.

But the rich man insists, they would listen

If someone comes back from the dead.

And Abraham's last and final response to the rich man.

**Luke 16:31 NRSV If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.**

If there ever was a clearer warning

Against the love of money in the Bible

I don't know where it is.

And yet, what have we learned in 2000 years?

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In Jesus' time

There was great income disparity

Between the rich and poor.

Historians Walter Scheidel and Steven Friesen

Tried to determine just how great.

They studied papyri ledgers, previous scholarly estimates  
Imperial edicts, and Biblical passages.

I quote from the website, *Radical Discipleship*

*Their target was the state of the economy when the empire was at its population zenith, around 150 C.E. Schiedel and Friesen estimate that the top 1 percent of Roman society controlled 16 percent of the wealth*

During his time on earth in Roman-occupied Palestine  
Jesus took issue with the socio-economic chasm  
Between the rich and the poor.

If Jesus had an issue then

I wonder how he feels about today's income disparities?

In Jesus' day, 1 percent held 16 percent of the wealth.

How does that compare with today?

From Forbes, October of 2020

*According to the latest Fed data, the top 1% of Americans have a combined net worth of \$34.2 trillion (or 30.4% of all household wealth in the U.S.), while the bottom 50% of the population holds just \$2.1 trillion combined (or 1.9% of all wealth).*

1 percent of the Palestine's wealthy  
Held 16 percent of the wealth

To today's 1 percent of Americans  
Holding 30 percent of the wealth.

And the pandemic has just exacerbated the problem.

It has negatively impacted the lower end of the spectrum  
With people's health, income, and well-being  
Including the majority of minorities.

From [www.inequality.org](http://www.inequality.org)

*As ordinary people around the world suffer from the health and economic impacts of the pandemic, billionaires have actually seen their fortunes expand.*

*According to Institute for Policy Studies analysis of Forbes data, the combined wealth of all U.S. billionaires increased by \$1.138 trillion (39 percent) between March 18, 2020 and January 18, 2021, from approximately \$2.947 trillion to \$4.085 trillion.*

*Of the more than 600 U.S. billionaires, the richest five (Jeff Bezos, Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Warren Buffett, and Elon Musk) saw an 85 percent increase in their combined wealth during this period, from \$358 billion to \$661 billion.*

Does all this wealth really make these people happier?

In a study in the Journal of Experimental Psychology.  
Three Canadian neuroscientists suggests

*Being rich and powerful actually makes you less happy and, even worse, **unable** to sympathize with the poor. They find that the rich and powerful among us show less brain activity in that region of the brain where human sympathy is excited.*

If these neuroscientists are on to something  
Then, going back to our today.

The rich man's inability to be sympathetic  
Concerning Lazarus' condition  
Is specifically **due** to his extreme wealth!

He was callous to the needs of the poor  
Because, according to research  
Rich people show less brain activity  
In the area where sympathy originates.

On the other hand, the same study shows  
Poorer folks are more sympathetic and generous.

Well, we Halloween Trick-or-Treaters knew that.

You don't go to the fancy rich houses for generous handouts

You go to the poorer neighborhoods!

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Jesus spoke clearly on the dangers of wealth.

Though he admits income inequities will always be with us

**Matthew 26:11 NRSV For you always have the poor among you.**

He makes perfectly clear.

**Matthew 19:23-24 NRSV Truly I tell you; it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of**

**a needle that for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.**

The Apostle Paul chimes in on the subject.

**1 Timothy 6:10 NRSV For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains.**

Alan Bean, the founder of the organization

*Friends of Justice* writes:

*“The American marriage between market capitalism and American evangelical piety makes Jesus impossible. His words are inconvenient at best and heretical at worst.”*

It's no wonder then

When a rich man went to Jesus asking him  
What he must do to inherit eternal life

That Jesus challenged him to give up all his possessions  
Give it to the poor  
And come and follow him.

He grieved so, because he could not/would not do it

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Jesus, Pope Francis, and brain scientists

Have proclaimed wealth is not the means to happiness.

But why is it so hard for us to learn?

Jesus came in the flesh to teach humanity  
That things we deem important, really aren't.

That what we think can make us happy, really doesn't.

And that the pursuit of those things  
Comes at the detriment not only to us  
But to others as well.

It's a lesson we need to learn.

Because ultimately it is a matter of life and death.