

A Mission, If You Will Accept It
Luke 16:19-31

Cecil Rhoads was an enormously wealthy man. One day a newspaperman said to him, “You must be very happy.” Rhoads replied, “Happy, No! I spent my life amassing a fortune only to find I have spent half of it on doctors to keep me out of the grave, and the other half on lawyers to keep me out of jail.”

Guideposts magazine some time ago published an account of how a young woman named Mary Bowers found an effective weight loss plan. Mary’s doctor told her she needed to lose several plans, calorie counting, and dietetic foods, but found she just didn’t have the necessary willpower.

One day she received a pamphlet about needy people in her e-mail. Pictured on the pamphlet was a dark-skinned, scrawny, near skeletal boy. Bowers said she experienced a kind of spiritual shock treatment at the sight of the starving child. She began to think more seriously about how she could take off unnecessary pounds and put them where they were needed – on this starving child.

“At last I had a spiritual motivation for reducing,” she said. “Under God’s guidance I formed a practical plan and carried it through. For a period of ten days I ate only two meals a day, skipping lunch.

Each day at the lunch hour I sipped a sugar-free drink and looked at the picture of the starving boy. I prayed to god to bless him and let my extra weight be transferred to him or someone like him. For each lunch I omitted I placed in a box for missions one dollar saved.” Now there’s a diet plan I can recommend!

Jesus told a story about a rich man and a very poor man named Lazarus. The rich man drove a Mercedes, lived in a fifteen-room mansion, ordered his suits tailor-made from Europe. Poor Lazarus was a street person. The public library, where he tried to rest during the day, threw him out. Everyone turned their heads when they drove by. He had nowhere to sleep except a hard sidewalk. There was a gate in front of the rich man’s mansion. So, Lazarus, tired and hungry, dirty and covered with sores, sat on the sidewalk and propped himself against the gate and tried to sleep. The rich man’s Doberman’s wandered out to see the sleeping man. They perceived that he was no threat and quietly came over and licked the sores on Lazarus’s face. Each time he drove out the gate, the rich man looked in disgust at the filthy piece of humanity leaning against the gatepost of his house and wondered why somebody didn’t do something to get people like that off the street.

But that’s not the end of the story. Both Lazarus and the rich man died. Lazarus went up to heaven, but the poor rich man went to hell. The very affluent rich man had made it a personal rule in his earthly life never to experience any discomfort.

It was his conviction that he deserved to travel in style – after all, as the commercial says, he was worth it! But now he was experiencing an eternity of stark discomfort. The air conditioner had failed, and the water was turned off. “Please Father Abraham,” he cried out, “have mercy on me and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am in anguish in this flame.” Interesting, isn’t it? The rich man is in hell. Lazarus is in heaven, but the rich man still thinks of Lazarus as no better than an errand boy.

Abraham answers the rich man, “Son, remember that you in your lifetime received many good things, where Lazarus here suffered all kinds of indignities. Now he is living the good life and it’s your turn to be uncomfortable. Besides, there is a great chasm between your world and ours. No one may cross from here to there.”

There are several things that Jesus seems to be saying to us in this popular story of the rich man and Lazarus. The first is that we are our brother’s keeper. Or, better yet our brother’s brother and yes, our sister’s sister. We are living in the day of the “ME” generation. Looking out for number One is the style of our times. We don’t really want to be told that looking out for # 1 is exactly antithetical to the gospel. But it is.

In responding to the rich man’s requests, Abraham appeals to Moses and the prophets. Immediately we think of Amos and Micah and some of the other prophets who challenged Israel to remember its responsibility to its poor.

Do you recall also that as far back as Leviticus, God instructed the farmers of Israel not to take all the grain out of the field or all the grapes off the vines, but to leave some there for the poor? In Deuteronomy 15 people are instructed to deal graciously with the poor. There is that recognition that while a few poor people are that way because they refuse to work, most though are the victims of circumstances over which they have no control. Throughout the entire Bible, Old Testament and New, there is a concern about the poor.

Jesus was concerned about the poor, as this story and several of his other teachings reveal, as was the early church. There is no distinction between the personal gospel and the social gospel in the scriptures. If you love God, you care about people – all people, rich and poor alike.

You and I are not Rockefellers, but we, too, have so much. Others have so little. Most of us have never seen real poverty. We drive past homes that are run down and see children who are neglected. We say, that's poverty. Someone has noted, however, that what impresses people in deprived countries about America is not how the wealthy live, but how the poor live. Our poor are wealthy compared to the poor in many developing countries. That is not to say that poverty is not a great problem in America. It is probably more painful to be poor in America than in any other country upon earth, because everywhere you look, you see other people with so much.

It is to say, however that we are living in a world where there are millions of people who face such grim lives that even death can be a welcome prospect. And in Jesus name we must care about these people.

But there is a second thing to be said, judgment is a very real fact. Remember Jesus' parable of the last judgment when the sheep are separated from the goats. What was the decisive factor between heaven and hell? "I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink...I was naked, and you gave me no clothes." We are not advocating a theology of works, but if we are faithful to the scriptures, as a whole, we have to declare that caring about the down and out is very important spiritual business.

That brings us to a final thing that needs to be said. More than ever before, YOU AND I NEED A MISSIONS CONSCIOUSNESS. One day Wilfred Grenfall, medical missionary to Labrador, was guest at a dinner in London together with a number of socially prominent British men and women. During the course of the dinner, the lady seated next to him turned and said, "Is it true, Dr. Grenfall that you are in missionary?"

Dr. Grenfall looked at her for a moment before replying, "Is it true, madam, that you are not?" That is a powerful question. Is it true that you are not a missionary? How would we like to deal with that question when we stand before the throne of God? Is it true that you lived only for yourself and your own family?

Is it true that you had opportunity to help the hungry, the thirsty, the lonely, the dying and you walked by as if they weren't even there? Is it true that you weren't a missionary? Wow - that hurts. But somehow, I feel that is the question that God poses for each of us today.

You and I are the rich man in today's parable. We know that. We are surrounded by Lazaruses. We have a response to make. We can live our lives as if we were the only ones on this earth who matter. Or we can become missionaries – people living in mission to other people right where we are today.