

Luke 16:19-31

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today, brothers and sisters, the Lord speaks to us the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

The story is about two men, one rich and the other poor. The rich man lived a life of luxury, feasting and enjoying the wealth which God had given to him. The poor man, Lazarus, lived a life in sickness and poverty, lying at the rich man's gate seeking to be fed from the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table.

At the appointed time, both men died and each received his just reward from the Heavenly Father; the rich man, the torments of hell because he lacked love for his poor neighbor, and Lazarus, the good things of the Abraham's bosom because he endured his sufferings patiently.

While the message of the parable is very clear to all of us, sometimes we may wonder how it really applies to our own lives. Few of us are as wealthy or as selfish as the rich man, and probably none of us here are as poor or longsuffering as Lazarus. And don't those of us who are wealthy give alms to the poor and charity to those in need? And don't those of us who are not so well off financially patiently make due with what we have?

Yet, we know that in our Christian lives we are called to go from virtue to virtue, strength to strength, and from glory to glory. And we know that there is always room from improvement, we can always become more generous with the prosperity entrusted to us, and we can always become more patient in the undergoing of trials, sickness, and suffering.

But, if we think that this is the only message of the parable, we are gravely mistaken, for our Lord never speaks to us solely about material things.

Our Lord first told this parable to the Jews, a people rich in spiritual heritage, the chosen people of God, the people of the Covenant, those gifted with the Law and the Prophets, and those to whom was given the Messianic Promise.

These chosen people of God were spiritually trained and they already knew their responsibility to love and take care of their neighbor – they already knew that the rich man should have shared his wealth with poor Lazarus. And so why then was our Lord giving them this parable? Was it to strengthen them in what they already knew and understood? Or was it to reveal to them something greater?

Let us remember that the Jews were seeking from Christ an earthly kingdom, a kingdom of material wealth and prosperity, while our Lord was preaching a heavenly kingdom, a kingdom of spiritual joy, peace, and love. And so there was a disconnect – the Jews were minding the things of the world, but Christ was speaking to them of heavenly things.

However, the disconnect didn't stop there, for the Lord's plan of salvation was to include all of mankind, but the Jews thought that they would be the sole inheritors of salvation. If we know our Scriptures we know how difficult it was for the Jews to hear that the salvation brought by their long-awaited Messiah would be extended outside their race, to the Gentiles, to those whom they considered godless and unclean.

Yet, according to the Fathers, this was exactly what Christ was telling the Jews in this parable. Christ was telling the Hebrew people, whom He likened to the rich man, that they must now share their spiritual wealth with those outside their gates, those outside their race, those who were Gentiles, those who were sunk in spiritual poverty, paganism, and unbelief.

And so, Christ gave the parable not only to strengthen the Jews in their understanding of caring for the poor, but also, and more importantly so, to let them know that they could no longer hoard the spiritual riches they had received. For if they chose to selfishly disregard the spiritual state of the Gentiles, they too would suffer the fate of the rich man who selfishly disregarded the plight of poor Lazarus, that is they would lose the riches God had entrusted to their care and they would find themselves outside of the kingdom.

Now we know that our Lord was not only speaking to the Jews in Palestine some 2,000 years ago but He is also speaking to each one of us personally, right here and right now. So, with the help of the Fathers, let us reexamine the parable and apply its lesson to our own lives.

Who is the rich man? Clearly it is no longer the Jews, who have turned their back on God by rejecting His Christ. Instead, it is us Orthodox Christians. Those who have received from the Lord immeasurable spiritual wealth, those to whom it has been "given to know the mysteries of the Kingdom of God".

As members of the Christ's Church, we have been given the gift of abiding in the Kingdom of God on earth. We have the fulfillment of the Law and Prophets in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God. The Church to which we belong has preserved without change the traditions and writings of the Holy Apostles. And we benefit from the spiritual experiences and counsels of the Saints who from all ages have been well-pleasing unto God.

We have been baptized in the Spirit, chrismated with the oil of gladness, and fed with the Life-giving Body and Blood of the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The Apostle Peter summarizes the spiritual gifts of the Christian race in his first epistle. He writes, "We have become a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, [God's] own special people, that we may proclaim the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into His marvelous Light!"

However, we must always be mindful that our calling is not just to sing praises to our God. For just as with the rich man in the parable and the Jews of the Old Testament, our Lord will chasten us if we refuse to be faithful stewards of His Vineyard by extending His good things to those in need.

Today, we do not find ourselves in the rich man's palace feasting sumptuously on perishable food, nor do we find ourselves in the wilderness of Sinai feeding on the manna which fell from heaven but could not give eternal life. Rather we find ourselves with greater riches, in the Temple of the Living God, proclaiming "Blessed is the Kingdom", and feasting on the Bread of Eternal Life, the Body and Blood of Christ.

Therefore, let us pay heed to the lesson of today's parable. Let us seek out the Lazarus's of our lives. Most likely, those we already know by name. They are the ones who lie at the gate of our Church, the ones afflicted by the sores of the passions and the sufferings of life. Those who find themselves turning to worldly means for comfort but find no peace, like Lazarus who turned to the dogs who licked at his wounds but could provide no healing. And they are the ones who, starving for the spiritual nourishment of the Heavenly Table, are forced to fill themselves with the perishable food of this world, food which brings no spiritual sustenance.

And when we have found these Lazarus's let us offer to help bring them through the gates of the Church, those same gates that we ourselves went through. And Christ will wash their wounds with the purifying waters of Baptism, anoint their sores with the healing oil of Chrismation, and strengthen them with the divine sustenance of His Holy Body and Blood.

In so doing we will imitate the Good Samaritan who refused to pass by the man beaten and left for dead on the roadside of life, but instead washed and anointed his wounds with water, oil, and wine.

We will prove faithful servants to the Lord, Who has commanded us to "go into the highways and hedges, compelling them to come in, so that His house might be full."

We will heed the Great Commission of the Lord, Who commanded us to "go into all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

And when the time appointed for our death comes, when our accounts are settled, we will hear the words of our Lord, "Well done, good and faithful servant, you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many. Enter into the joy of your Lord!"

However, if we disobey the Lord, by not doing everything we can to share the wealth of our Orthodox Faith, then surely, like the rich man in today's parable we will hear the condemnation, "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted and you are tormented."

"For to whom much is given, much will be required!"

May our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, help us to see the spiritual riches entrusted to us, so that we may use them not only for our own salvation, but also for the salvation of all in need, the salvation of all mankind. To Him be the glory together with His Father Who is without beginning and His Most Holy Good and Life-creating Spirit, now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!