

21st Sunday After Pentecost

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

In today's Gospel reading we heard the parable of the rich man and the poor Lazarus. This is a story with which we are all familiar, and the moral and ethical lessons are very straightforward.

There are two primary teachings. The first is that we must learn to share the good things we have in this world with those who are less fortunate, we must learn to be compassionate, not over looking the need of our brother or sister because we are so focused on what is happening in our own lives.

And the second lesson is that in our own poverty and needs, whatever they may be, we must learn to be more patient and long suffering, practicing thankfulness to God for what we do have, while at the same time not envying others or reviling the Lord for what we do not have.

Now when we listen to this parable, we cannot help but wonder who we resemble most – the rich man or poor Lazarus. And most likely we ourselves exemplify the traits of both but probably not to the extremes that we find in the parable. Most likely, we aren't as self-centered or consumed by our possessions as the rich man, nor as patient and long suffering as Lazarus. And so, usually we end up thinking that we are somewhere in the middle, and that's pretty good.

Yet, the Lord didn't give this parable to reassure us that we are doing pretty good in our spiritual life. The Lord gave this parable so that we could do better in our spiritual life, so we could grow, so we could mature – the Lord gave us this parable so that each time we hear about the rich man and Lazarus we could benefit from the lesson.

So how do we benefit from this parable, or really any other parable for that matter?

Well, to benefit from the Lord's parables, the first thing we need to realize is that all the externals in the parable don't need to apply to us exactly as they are given in order for the parable to be about us. In other words, we don't need to be as rich or poor as the men in today's parable, nor say as righteous or sinful and the men in the parable of the publican and the Pharisee.

This is because the Lord's parables are not about the externals, the Lord's parables are about the internals, about what goes on in our minds and hearts – the Lord's parables are about the spiritual life. And what happens in the spiritual life and the laws that govern the spiritual life apply to all of us independently of the external circumstances we find ourselves in.

What does this mean? It means that no matter how wealthy or poor we are, at different points in our lives we will all have to struggle with the same temptations that faced the rich man and Lazarus.

Sometimes we will face the temptation to be more concerned about the things of our lives (our material possessions, or social status or our image and appearance) rather than the Lord and the people He has put into our lives (our family, friends, and those in need) – and this is usually the temptation when things are going well for us in a worldly sense. Yet at other times when things don't seem to be going so well, we will have to struggle against the temptation to grumble against God and to envy our neighbor. At sometimes the temptation which the rich man faced, at others the temptation which poor Lazarus faced.

But now if we think about it, most often we have to struggle against both these temptations at once. Most of the time, we can find ourselves both relishing in the things we have, while at the same time inwardly complaining about the things we don't have. Haven't we all found ourselves both walking past the beggar at our gate indifferent to his needs, while at the same time pointing the finger at the rich man whom we think has so much but cares so little about others.

At these times, we find ourselves succumbing to the temptations which plagued both the rich man and Lazarus. And why is this? Is it because financially speaking most of us are "middle-class", we don't find ourselves in extreme wealth or poverty? Well, perhaps, this has something to do with it. But the main reason why we face both of these temptations at the same time is because they are two sides of the same coin. The temptation to be indifferent to those in need and the temptation to complain about our own needs are the two sides of self-centeredness and self-absorption.

Now, this sickness of self-centeredness and self-absorption is one of the hardest spiritual sicknesses to identify within ourselves, yet it is a spiritual sickness from which we all suffer at times. Whether we be rich or poor, the spiritual sickness of self-centeredness can and will afflict us, if we allow it to.

So how do we know if we have this spiritual sickness? As with any sickness or disease we go to the doctor, and in this case the doctor is the Physician of souls, the Lord Jesus Christ. So we go to Him and we ask Him to examine us, to test to see if we have any symptoms of self-centeredness, if we are showing any signs that something might be wrong with us. And like a medical doctor, the Lord will run a series of tests before giving us His spiritual diagnosis.

He'll probably start by taking our spiritual temperature. He'll read our conscience to see if we are burning up with egoism and worldly desires – if we become easily agitated or heated when things don't go our way. Or if we are running a low temperature because of coldness or indifference to our neighbor and his or her needs.

Then He'll probably poke and prod us to see if we are hurting in areas where we shouldn't be, just as a physical doctor presses in areas where there might be trouble.

Most likely this means that the Lord will ask us about those ever difficult subjects: like what we do with our money, or whether or not there are people that we hold a grudge against, or whether or not we are really focusing on loving God and our neighbor more.

And then He'll probably advise us to have some tests done on our minds and hearts. He'll instruct us to undergo the spiritual brain and heart scans of self examination and Confession. And no doubt, when the sickness manifests itself to a greater or lesser degree through these tests, the Lord will encourage us to receive what the Fathers call the medicine of immortality, the Body and Blood of Christ, which washes away our sins and helps to fill us with genuine love for God and each other.

And in this way, the Lord will take us from sickness to health – from hearers of His parables to beneficiaries of His teachings. And in this way we will be strengthened in our struggle to overcome the temptation which faced both the rich man and Lazarus, the temptation to live our lives in a self-centered and self-absorbed way.

Brothers and sisters, the rich man failed to overcome this temptation but Lazarus was successful, the one entered into torments in the next life, while the other entered into the joys of Abraham's bosom. These same two options are before us.

Let us go to the Spiritual Physician our Lord Jesus Christ, and let us ask Him to examine us and to prescribe the appropriate medicine, so that with His help we might overcome the temptation of self-centeredness so that we all might enjoy the good things of the Lord's eternal Kingdom both now and in the age to come. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!