

Using Your Resources Wisely

The Pharisees were the religious leaders of Israel.

They dedicated their lives to studying and interpreting the Mosaic Law— instructions for living that God had given the Israelites through Moses.

They were pious and God-fearing men and they were greatly admired by the people.

So it must have come as quite a shock to them when Jesus called them hypocrites.

Their problem was that they had come to enjoy the admiration they received so much that they had started to “believe their own press” and regarded themselves as being as righteous as the common people thought them to be.

In order to live up to their reputation they had to hide their sins in order to maintain their public image.

The problem was that as they hid their sins from others, they began to hide them from themselves.

In the course of time they had become so good at it that Jesus called them, “whitewashed tombs”: attractive on the outside but rotten on the inside.

If you've ever seen a mausoleum you know that on the outside it is beautiful, polished marble with the names of the people inside engraved on shiny metal plaques.

Inside are the rotten remains of those same people.

It's a good analogy for a person who appears to be outwardly perfect but inwardly a moral mess.

A person like us.

We want people to have a good opinion of us and we're afraid that if they know about our sins, they won't, so we conceal our sins just like the Pharisees.

The problem is that we end up thinking of ourselves in terms of the image we present to the world instead of facing up to what we are really like inside.

And as we come to base our self-image on what the world thinks of us we drift away from God.

And when we drift away from God, who is the source of all life, we begin to spiritually die and finally end up in that state of eternal separation from Him which is called hell.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus issues a somber warning to everyone who heads down that path.

His warning takes the form of a story, the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

Jesus announces the theme of His story before he tells it.

He says to the Pharisees—and to us: *“You are the ones who justify yourselves in the eyes of men, but God knows your hearts. What is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.”*

Then he tells the story.

There was a rich man and a poor beggar whose name is Lazarus.

Lazarus lay dying at the gate of the rich man's mansion.

As the rich man went out and came back home every day he ignored Lazarus

After they both die, the rich man finds himself suffering in hell and sees Lazarus in heaven.

He pleads to Father Abraham to send Lazarus to bring him water but Abraham refuses to do so for two reasons.

First, the rich man has already had his “good things” while Lazarus had none and justice demands that the tables now be turned.

Second, there is an unbridgeable chasm which separates those in heaven from those in hell.

The rich man then pleads with Abraham to at least send Lazarus to his brothers to warn them of the coming judgment, but he is once again refused on the basis that his brothers already have the Scriptures to warn them.

"But Father Abraham," he argues, "if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."

A major miracle will persuade them even if the Scriptures don't..

*"Not so, my son," he is told. "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced **even if someone rises from the dead.**"*

And of course someone did rise from the dead and they were still not convinced.

Why did the rich man ignore the beggar who was lying there dying at his gate?

He was in plain sight—and it would have taken so little to care for him!

Was it meanness—or was it blindness?

Wealth does have a way of blinding us to poverty, you know.

Poverty is an ugly thing and it can make us feel guilty about how much we have compared with how little other people have.

So we'd rather just avoid seeing it.

When I was a kid, we lived four miles outside town. There were two routes into town: North Main Street and Lone Elm Road.

Lone Elm Road was quicker, but there were a lot of poor people living in shacks on Lone Elm Road.

We always took the other way into town.

It was more pleasant.

At one time I worked at University Hospitals—at the main campus in University Circle

I lived in Bainbridge and I took a route to work that went through Chagrin Falls and Shaker Heights.

My ride to and from work was enjoyable because I was passing through pleasant neighborhoods with beautiful homes all the way.

I didn't consciously plan that route to avoid other parts of the East Side of Cleveland where people like Lazarus lived, but it did keep me from seeing them.

I wonder if the rich man in Jesus' story unintentionally did something like that.

But unintentional or intentional—there was a price to pay.

After he died, he was confronted with the truth that he had spent his life avoiding: that what is highly valued among men is detestable in God's sight.

His situation was utterly reversed: he once lived high on the hog, but now he was worse off than a hog.

During his life he had wanted for nothing; now he was a hopeless beggar.

He ended up in hell, suffering the torments of the damned while Lazarus enjoyed the blessings of heaven.

Was his life a failure of love, a failure of compassion, a failure of awareness or a failure of humility?

In any case, it was a failure of *stewardship*.

His riches were not the problem; his use of them was.

He used his riches to reign in the kingdom of this world rather than to serve in the Kingdom of God.

But when he insulated himself from Lazarus he also insulated himself from God and the separation finally became irreversible.

It is no coincidence that this story follows on the heels of Jesus' story about a shrewd who used his master's wealth to build personal relationships with other people.

His questionable motives and tactics notwithstanding, Jesus commends the manager because he practiced wise stewardship over the resources that had been placed at his disposal.

Had the rich man been equally shrewd, he would have used some of his wealth to help Lazarus.

Then Lazarus would have welcomed him into the eternal dwellings of heaven.

Instead, he used it to maintain walls of status and prestige and power and privilege between himself and the dying man and when the man died, the walls came tumbling down.

He who dies with the most toys may win, but he is still dead.

And being dead in God's creation doesn't mean "ceasing to exist" for there is a life beyond this one.

And in that life, "dead" means spending eternity in a place where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth, being relentlessly consumed with loneliness, remorse and despair.

The picture of hell Jesus gives us in this story is terrifying.

Not only is the rich man in hideous pain, but pain is his only companion.

He got exactly what he craved during his life: separation.

Lazarus can no longer provide him with the opportunity to connect with another human being.

Even his compassion for his brothers is ineffectual.

He is utterly and completely **alone**.

You and I have a daily choice to make between using our resources to serve our fellow human beings and having relationships with them, or using them to isolate ourselves.

We can use our time and our talents and our money to reach out to others or we can withdraw from them like the rich man did, turn a blind eye to human need and revel in the illusory security that we will live in this world forever.

God will honor either choice.

It happened to the Pharisees and it can happen to us.

They were sincerely religious people who spent their lives studying the Scriptures and living in expectation of the coming Messianic Kingdom.

You would think that they would have been prime candidates to become disciples of the Messiah when he appeared.

But they were blinded by their addiction to human admiration and didn't sense their need for forgiveness—**or their need to forgive.**

They forgot the most important thing of all: that they were poor miserable sinners like you and me and they needed a Savior.

They couldn't find joy in sharing God's grace with other sinners in need of grace, so they sought it in maintaining images of honor and respectability and exalting themselves over those they considered inferior to them in status, privilege and power.

"God, I thank you that I am not like other men," the Pharisee prayed, "—like robbers, evildoers, adulterers—or even like this tax collector."

We live in an age when technology has made it easy for us to isolate ourselves.

Garage door openers and lawn services make it convenient for us to disappear into our homes every night and emerge in our cars every morning.

E-mail and smart phones and texting and Facebook minimize our need to meet face to face with other people—even including our friends.

A lot of people—especially young people—would rather text each other than talk to each other on the telephone.

I have two 21-year-old grand-daughters who are actually uncomfortable having a conversation on the phone.

Interacting face-to-face with other people means having to deal with them: to understand their words and thoughts and needs and respond to them accordingly.

It's tempting to formalize our communication with them—"put it in writing" so to speak, so that we don't have to risk reacting spontaneously.

Thus we move further and further away from each other.

According to the values of this world, in the extremity of his need for help from another human being Lazarus was the epitome of human failure, while in his independence and lack of need, the rich man was the epitome of human success.

But God looks at things differently.

You can use your time and energy to connect with other people or you can build a cocoon and hide in it.

It's a choice we make every day.

I pray we will all choose wisely.

Amen.

