

# Lazarus, the Rich Man, and the Sin of Pride

On the Readings for Sunday, September 29, 2019

September 27, 2019 Carl E. Olson The Dispatch 1

Print



"A rich man and Lazarus" (1873) by Vasily Surikov [WikiArt.org]

## Readings:

- Am 6:1a, 4-7
- Ps 146:7, 8-9, 9-10
- 1 Tm 6:11-16
- Lk 16:19-31

As we hear the various parables from the Gospel of Luke it is good to keep two things in mind. First, the context of these teachings, which were given by Jesus as he made his way up to Jerusalem to “be delivered into the hands of men” (Lk. 9:44) and enter into his Passion. That journey was not just a physical journey, but also a sign of obedience to the will of the Father, a concrete expression of perfect humility and self-gift.

Secondly, his parables and discourses given during the journey were not haphazard or random in nature, but form a cohesive and focused whole. They are like different paths leading to the same place and shedding light on the same event: Jesus' death on the Cross for the salvation of mankind. Some of them were meant specifically for the disciples; others for the crowds following Jesus; still others for the Pharisees and other religious leaders.

Between last week's reading of **the parable of the dishonest steward** (Lk. 16:1-15) and today's parable is a little bridge of five verses (16:14-18). That passage states that the Pharisees—"who were lovers of money"—had heard Jesus say, "You cannot serve God and mammon", and had sneered at him. Jesus then said to them, "You justify yourselves in the sight of others, but God knows your hearts; for what is of human esteem is an abomination in the sight of God."

This sets up the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, a story sometimes interpreted solely as a renunciation of greed and a call to treat the poor with justice. That interpretation is, of course, both correct and important. Today's reading from the prophet Amos takes up the same issue, directing a curse toward the complacent wealthy who stuff themselves with rich meat while starving themselves spiritually. And the first half of the parable (vs 19-26) is directed toward the same sort of opulent self-indulgence and gluttonous revelry.

But there is more to it, for Jesus took what was quite possibly a well-known motif—a rich man descending into Hades—and suddenly, as the saying goes, brought it home with an unexpected epilogue. The rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers so they might escape eternal torment. Who are the five brothers? In the immediate context, they are the Pharisees, the ones who have and know the law of Moses and the prophets and yet fail to pursue the will of God and die to pride.

St. Jerome, commenting on this passage, said the rich man is not accused of greed, theft, adultery, "or, in fact, of any wrongdoing. The evil alone of which he is guilty is pride." Pride, says St. Thomas Aquinas in his treatise on evil, signifies an intentional contempt of God. Every sin, in fact, is infected to some degree by pride. The *Catechism* explains that "hatred of

God comes from pride. It is contrary to love of God, whose goodness it denies..." (par 2094).

Pride destroys love for God and love for others; it seeks only itself and its desires, without thought for tomorrow or the afterlife. The Pharisees, as Abraham tells the rich man, have Moses and prophets. They, more than anyone else, had no excuse for being prideful and refusing to repent. But they failed to heed John the Baptist's warning about believing that because Abraham was their father, they had no need for repentance (Lk 3:8).

Jerome, providing a spiritual interpretation, likens the five brothers to our five physical senses. Pride often comes through physical, sensual pleasures; materials things meant for our good can become our masters. "Blessed are you who are poor," Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, "But woe to you who are rich..." Regardless of income and social status, all Christians must pursue a spirit of poverty, for without it we cannot take up the cross, die to sin, and enter eternal beatitude.

(This "Opening the Word" column originally appeared in the September 26, 2010, edition of *Our Sunday Visitor* newspaper.)