

In the Gospel yesterday, a rich young man went away sad because he was not willing to sell all he had and give it to the poor so he could follow Jesus. Following his departure, Jesus explains to his disciples, “It will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a parable about a rich man and Lazarus, a beggar. After both die, the beggar who had known suffering all his life and been ignored by the rich man was carried by the angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man now becomes the beggar. He is tormented by both the suffering he endures, and in seeing the fate of the beggar. The rich man calls out to Abraham for the beggar to help him. Even in death, the rich man maintains his sin of pride and asks to be waited on by the beggar. Indeed, it is hard for this rich man to do anything on his own to change his fate.

When a person dies, their soul leaves the body behind. The soul can go in one of three directions:

- Heaven - Those who die in God’s grace and friendship and are perfectly purified live for ever with God. “This perfect life with the Most Holy Trinity..., with the Virgin Mary, the angels and all the blessed - is called heaven. Heaven is the ultimate end and fulfillment of the deepest human longings, the state of supreme, definitive happiness” (CCC 1023-24).
- Hell – “Those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, ‘eternal fire.’ The chief punishment of hell is eternal separation from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs” (CCC 1035).
- Purgatory - Some speak of the chasm after death that separates the rich man from Lazarus as Purgatory. Many souls need to be purified before entering heaven and living in unity with the Trinity. One is “indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven. The Church gives the name Purgatory to this final purification of the elect, which is entirely different from the punishment of the damned” (CCC 1030-31).

Saint Faustina’s Diary gives us a glimpse of what Purgatory is like beyond the description of the rich man who is tormented in Luke’s parable (Luke 16:19-31). Sister Faustina had a vision of a sister who had died two months earlier. She was all in flames and her face was painfully distorted. Faustina could not distinguish if the suffering was in Purgatory or in hell. After great and intense prayer on behalf of the dead on the part of Faustina, the sister’s situation seemed worse than ever. There are many suffering souls in Purgatory, and Faustina’s prayers helped others but not the sister in question. Sister Faustina kept on praying. In her Diary, Sister Faustina writes:

After some time she came back again to me during the night, but already her appearance had changed. There were no longer any flames, as there had been before, and her face was radiant, her eyes beaming with joy. She told me that I had a true love for my neighbor and that many other souls had profited from my prayers. She urged me not to cease praying for the souls in PURGATORY, and she added that she herself would not remain there much longer. How astounding are the decrees of God! (Diary, 58)

So what are we to make of Jesus’ explanation? “Amen, I say to you, it will be hard for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 19:23-24)?

- Hard does not mean impossible. Certainly, the story of the rich man and Lazarus, can be taken as a cautionary parable to repent and believe in the Gospel. It is in this life that we need to feed the hungry, offer drink to those who are thirsty, and work to alleviate suffering.
- Hard does mean that the purification of purgatory is at times painful. The rich man could do nothing for himself to lessen the pain he experienced in death. However, the living can pray for the dead. Saint Faustina's prayers helped many others before eventually helping the Sister she saw in purgatory. On a regular basis, we should all pray for the long-suffering souls in purgatory.
- Hard can also mean that it is difficult to part with riches. The rich young man went away sad at the end of yesterday's Gospel because he was not yet ready to part with his wealth and follow Jesus. While every person may not have the wealth of the rich man, we all hold onto sins, or hurt, or material possessions and find it hard to let go. God keeps on reaching out to us, keeps on trying to encourage us, keeps on sending us messengers that we might let go of whatever is holding us back. All things are possible with the help of God.

Jesus is most encouraging to his disciples that respond in love and sacrifice. "Everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands for the sake of my name will receive a hundred times more, and will inherit eternal life" (Mt 19:29).