

FOR RICHER, FOR POORER?

The satirical story Jesus told about the poor man, Lazarus, and the unnamed rich man is rather like a cartoon of heaven and hell. The rich man is arrayed in purple, the colour of royalty, and one who feasts sumptuously everyday. Poor Lazarus lies outside the city gate, hungry and riddled with body sores. Both men die – Lazarus, probably of starvation and the rich man probably of a heart attack due to clogged arteries. Lazarus goes to heaven to be with God. The other man goes to the other place where God is not present. That's hell!

"Send Lazarus to me," cries out the rich man, "so that he can cool my thirst." No go. Lazarus has found rest and isn't going to be anybody's lackey. There is this insurmountable problem of a chasm between the two men that cannot be crossed. Then, in an uncharacteristic burst of altruism, the rich man worries about his five brothers back on earth and asks that Lazarus be allowed to go and warn them about what has happened to him. No, to that too. If they aren't willing to listen to the prophet's call for justice, scaring the hell out of them won't do any good.

As Lazarus was stuck with his lot in *life*, so the rich man was stuck with his lot in *death*. His sin? He refused to cross the chasm between him and Lazarus in their first life. His inability to walk outside his gate, to share his abundance, doomed him forever. Such was his sentence for eternity. He became what he loved. However, this parable is not about the afterlife – the poor are at our gate now. Salvation is impossible for any who promote a situation that causes inequities and who gorge themselves on the illicit fruits of injustice.

Jesus permitted no one to be his disciple while clinging to wealth. His followers shared what they had in common. Jesus spoke literally when he referred to forgiving one another's debts – 'forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors'. Matt. 6.12. The New Testament abounds with reflections of distress that the poor suffered at the hands of landowners, bankers and creditors. There was little hope for the poor without a wiping clean of the slate in accordance with the Sabbatical year and the year of Jubilee when all debts were forgiven. Jesus identifies the greatest idol as MAMMON by which he means money and property as *accumulated* wealth. When a rich young man asks the way to eternal life, Jesus says, 'Sell everything you have.' And when he also says that, 'It is easier for a camel to squeeze through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven', he's talking about the eye of a sewing needle.

Our entire social system is a giant machine of production. People are 'units of production' and the public, consumers. We have made economic growth the primary social good. We pass off the problem of poverty as an outstanding debt to be paid off by further economic growth. Greed is therefore inherent in our system. 'We are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness.' Eph.6.12 We are contending against the greed by a host of people over a long time.

We Christians need to find ways to hold global corporations responsible. But the basic contradiction of capitalism is the most fundamental issue. We can no longer sanctify a system based on greed. We are not talking anarchy, but of realizing the possibility of a more just world. The church's involvement in this struggle is crucial. We have a clear mandate to act, as followers of Jesus. It is blasphemy to think that God has financially blessed America and Australia. God has done nothing of the kind. We are not rich because we are righteous or righteous because we are rich. God did not give these countries to the white race. We took them from the American Indians and the Australian Aborigines. These races both knew that the land was not theirs, in an ownership sense, but that they were stewards of it.

God groans for our repentance and justice. In Christ, the cycles of neglect are ended. We are his hands and feet to share his goodness and to walk the talk. The gate outside our towns is not a barrier but an opening. All we have to do is to go and connect with the poor in spirit and in need. Timothy reminds us, 'to be rich in good works and generous'. AMEN



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