

## Sermon for Trinity 1 – Luke 16:19-31

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

How does a rich man rob himself? No doubt we're familiar with stories which Christ told of rich men being robbed: the prodigal son squanders the inheritance which he demanded from his father's estate; a dishonest steward's "creative" bookkeeping made his master's debtors richer while his master's accounts became poorer. A prodigal son and dishonest manager robbed their superiors, who were supposedly rich men. But how does a rich man rob himself?

Our Lord tells us in the account of the rich man and Lazarus just how this happens. The rich man robs himself of his two greatest treasures: 1. The Word of God, and 2. His neighbor in need. Did you catch that? In spite of all his wealth, his two greatest treasures are the Word of God and his neighbor in need. But how does the rich man rob himself? First he robs himself of the Word of God. Our Lord said that the rich man "feasted sumptuously every day." As far as we can judge, "every day" includes the Sabbath day. So this rich robbed himself of hearing God's Word, the means by which faith comes as the Apostle says. He refused to set aside time to hear of God's salvation for him. What's more, his servants who prepared and cooked these sumptuous feasts every day are also robbed of God's Word.

But this first treasure of God's Word was not the only riches of which this man robbed himself. Outside his gate sat his second great treasure: a hungry beggar dressed in rags and covered in sores which were licked by dogs. He was laid near the entrance to the rich man's house. Friends probably placed him there with the intent that the rich man, who would certainly had the means to help him, would have pity on him. So the beggar laid there, hungry and in pain, just a short distance from where an overfed man reclined at a full table each and every day. Help seemed ever at hand, yet always withheld.

This beggar's name was Lazarus. And that's significant. It's the only time our Lord recognizes by name a character in one of his parables. Lazarus is a combination of 2 Hebrew words which mean, "The one whom God helps." "Yeah, right," we say. "How much help is God giving to this poor man who is ill and starving in the street!?" If that's how God "helps," I'm not sure I want to be "one whom God helps." I don't want to be a Lazarus!

But that's because we operate under the rich man's philosophy. We function under the old Pharisaic lie. The devil, the world, and our very own flesh preach the sermon our itching ears want to hear. And we know it so well. What is this message? Wealth necessarily = God's blessing. And it's coupled with the devious flip side of the coin: Suffering always = You must have sinned. We trust in our experience! We want to know God's favor. We want to see God's glory in the here and now! If times are good, God must be blessing me! But if I'm suffering, God despises me! I want to know God's love, so give me the purple and fine linen and daily sumptuous feasts and you can keep your poverty and dog-licked sores. I don't want to be Lazarus ("the one whom God helps"). I want to be the rich man.

And like the rich man, we like to think of our possessions as OUR possessions. For him, he had his fine clothing and great feasts. But what about us? The car in my driveway, the house I live in, the watch on my wrist, the shoes on my feet—we claim them to be ours, but at best, we're only stewards of them. The Psalmist rightly says: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof, the

world and they that dwell therein." All belongs to God. That's every possession. But is there anything in this world that is really ours? Anything that we can truly call our own? There is. It's the small treasures with which the Lord blesses us. To the world, they're insignificant; practically nothing! But these treasures are the only ones you get to keep when this fleeting world passes away. What are they? The treasures the rich man despised (and the treasures we despise all too often, even on a daily basis!) are: #1. Our neighbor in need, and #2. The Word of God.

It's easy to despise these treasures. In regard to the first treasure of our neighbor, Luther said in his Genesis commentary: "God hides his saints under such masks and matters of the flesh so that they may seem more wretched than everything else. For the people of God live out their callings in the midst of troubles and afflictions of the world He created which has now fallen from its created goodness." Can you imagine? God is dwelling there in our neighbor's sufferings, waiting for our help! Even when we can't always see it! Whether it be in that obnoxious co-worker in the next cubical, or in an ornery spouse, or in the friend who's hard to love – there is your treasure.

It's easy to despise these treasures. And what about the second one: the Word of God? For the rich man, this should have come as no surprise. When the rich man implored Abraham to send Lazarus to his brothers so that they might not face the agony he now suffered, how did Abraham respond? "They have Moses and the Prophets [that is to say, the Word of God]; let them hear them." Both the rich man and his brothers wanted no part of the Word of God in this life; why should things change in eternal life? He said, "No, father Abraham, but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent." To which Abraham said, "If they do not hear Moses and the Prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead." The case in point for this was when a certain Lazarus, perhaps even the very same one, was raised from the dead and the high priest Caiaphas would not believe the Word of God in Christ. And even for us, it's easy to forget our daily time in God's Word. And where's the excitement and magic in the same 2 ordinary men speaking familiar words written 2 thousand year ago about a Jew who lived in a land far far away? And yet, God's Word is your treasure, because therein you have life.

How does a rich man rob himself? Of his 2 greatest treasures (his neighbor in need and God's Word) the rich had indeed robbed himself. But let us not forget the ultimate robbery: When another Rich Man (if I may so use the term) robbed Himself. Remember the Psalmist's words: "The earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof." Everything belongs to God, so how did God rob Himself? He robbed Himself of His most Precious Treasure: His Only Begotten Son. Luther gives a complete description of this paradoxical event in his epic chorale, "Dear Christians, One and All, Rejoice." Note stanza 5, "God said to His beloved Son:/'It's time to have compassion./Then go, Bright Jewel of My crown,/ And bring to all salvation./From sin and sorrow set them free;/Slay bitter death for them that they/May live with You forever." God robbed Himself so that we might truly be Lazarus, "the ones whom God helps."

So, I implore you, dearly beloved, rejoice in the rich treasures God gives in your life: Your neighbor in need and God's most Holy Word, "for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." Amen.

The Peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen. ✠BJF✠