

Historic Commentary



Fifteenth Sunday of Trinitytide - Year C

The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on Luke 16:19-31: Selections from Church Fathers & John Calvin

Jerome: The rich man, in purple splendor, is not accused of being greedy or of carrying off the property of another, or of committing adultery, or, in fact, of any wrongdoing. The evil alone of which he is guilty is pride. Most wretched of men, you see a member of your own body lying there outside at your gate, and have you no compassion? If the laws of God mean nothing to you, at least take pity on your own situation and be in fear, for perhaps you might become like him. Give what you waste to your own member. I am not telling you to throw away your wealth. What you throw out, the crumbs from your table, offer as alms.

Lazarus was lying at the gate in order to draw attention to the cruelty paid to his body and to prevent the rich man from saying, "I did not notice him. He was in a corner. I could not see him. No one announced him to me." He lay at the gate. You saw him every time you went out and every time you came in. When your crowds of servants and clients were attending you, he lay there full of ulcers... There was a certain poor man, named Lazarus." The meaning of Lazarus's name is ... one who has been helped. He is not a helper but one who has been helped. He was a poor man, and in his poverty, the Lord came to his assistance.

Cyril of Alexandria: Cut off from compassion and care, he would have gladly gathered the worthless morsels that fell from the rich man's table to satisfy his hunger. A severe and incurable disease also tormented him. Yes, it says that even the dogs licked his sores and did not injure him yet sympathized with him and cared for him. Animals relieve their own sufferings with their tongues, as they remove what pains them and gently soothe the sores. The rich man was crueler than the dogs, because he felt no sympathy or compassion for him but was completely unmerciful.

Augustine: Jesus kept quiet about the rich man's name and mentioned the name of the poor man. The rich man's name was thrown around, but God kept quiet about it. The other's name was lost in silence, and God spoke it. Please do not be surprised. God just read out what was written in his book... You see, God who lives in heaven kept quiet about the rich man's name, because he did not find it written in heaven. He spoke the poor man's name, because he found it written there, indeed he gave instructions for it to be written there.

Gregory of Nyssa: “It seems to me that Scripture uses the ‘bosom of Abraham,’ in which the patient sufferer finds rest, as a symbol of the good state of the soul. This patriarch was the first person recorded to have chosen the hope of things to come in preference to the enjoyment of the moment. Deprived of everything he had in the beginning of his life, living among strangers, he searched for a future prosperity through present affliction. We use the word bosom when referring figuratively to a part of the outline of the sea. It seems to me that Scripture uses the word bosom as a symbol of the immeasurable goals toward which those who sail virtuously through life will come to when having departed from life. They anchor their souls in this good bosom as in a quiet harbor.”

Augustine: I think that we have proved that Christ did not object to the riches of the rich man but to his impiety, infidelity, pride and cruelty....

The rich must not start saying that I have agreed to be their advocate. They felt afraid, after all, when reminded of the gospel. When they heard about the rich man hurled into the pains of hell, they felt afraid. I have reassured them. They do not need to fear riches but vices. They should not fear wealth but greed. They should not be afraid of goods but of greed. Let them possess wealth like Abraham, and let them possess it with faith. Let them have it, possess it and not be possessed by it.

Ephrem the Syrian:

This place, despised and spurned
By the denizens of paradise,
Those who burn in Gehenna
hungrily desire;
Their torment doubles
At the sight of its fountains,
They quiver violently
As they stand on the opposite side;
The rich man, too, begs for succor
But there is no one to wet his tongue,
For fire is within them,
While the water is opposite them.

Peter Chrysologus: “Send Lazarus.” As I see the matter, the rich man’s actions spring not from new pain but from ancient envy. This hell does not kindle his jealousy as much as Lazarus’s possession of heaven. People find it a serious evil and unbearable fire to see in happiness those whom they once held in contempt. The rich man’s ill will does not leave him, although he already endures its punishment. He does not ask to be led to Lazarus but wants Lazarus to be led to him. O rich man, loving Abraham cannot send to the bed of your tortures Lazarus whom you did not condescend to admit to your table. Your respective fortunes have now been reversed. You look at the glory of him whose misery you once spurned. He who wondered at you in your glory sees your tortures.

Augustine: “Remember, son, that you received good things in your life, and Lazarus likewise bad things.” He assigns pain in return for riches, refreshment in return for poverty, flames in return for purple and joy in return for nakedness. The equal balance of the scales will be maintained. The standard of measurement will not be proved false that says, “The measure you give will be the measure you get.” The reason he refuses to show mercy to the rich man in his pain is that while he lived the rich man neglected to show mercy. The reason why he ignored the rich man’s pleas in his torment is that he ignored the poor man’s pleas on earth.

Jerome: “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, they will not believe even if someone rises from the dead.” “If you believed Moses, you would believe me also, for he wrote of me.” Do you now see what Abraham means? You do well to wait for him who will rise from the dead, but Moses and the prophets proclaim that he is the One who is going to rise from the dead. Christ, in fact, speaks in them. If you hear them, you will also hear him.

John Calvin: The leading object of this parable is, to show that we ought to deal kindly and generously with our neighbors; that, when we come to the judgment seat of God, we may reap the fruit of our liberality. Though the parable appears to be harsh and far-fetched, yet the conclusion makes it evident, that the design of Christ was nothing else than what I have stated. And hence we see, that to inquire with great exactness into every minute part of a parable is an absurd mode of philosophizing. Christ does not advise us to purchase by large donations the forgiveness of fraud, and of extortion, and of wasteful expenditure, and of the other crimes associated with unfaithful administration. But as all the blessings which God confers upon us are committed by Him to our administration, our Lord now lays down a method of procedure, which will protect us against being treated with rigor, when we come to render our account.

They who imagine that alms are a sufficient compensation for sensuality and debauchery, do not sufficiently consider, that the first injunction given us is, to live in sobriety and temperance; and that the next is, that the streams which flow to us come from a pure fountain. It is certain that no man is so frugal, as not sometimes to waste the property which has been entrusted to him; and that even those who practice the most rigid economy are not entirely free from the charge of unfaithful stewardship. Add to this, that there are so many ways of abusing the gifts of God, that some incur guilt in one way, and some in another. I do not even deny, that the very consciousness of our own faulty stewardship ought to be felt by us as an additional excitement to kind actions.

But we ought to have quite another object in view, than to escape the judgment of God by paying a price for our redemption; and that object is, first, that seasonable and well-judged liberality may have the effect of restraining and moderating unnecessary expenses; and, secondly, that our kindness to our brethren may draw down upon us the mercy of God. It is very far from being the intention of Christ to point out to his disciples a way of escape, when the heavenly Judge shall require them to give their account; but he warns them to lose no time in guarding against the punishment which will await their

cruelty, if they are found to have swallowed up the gifts of God, and to have paid no attention to acts of beneficence. We must always attend to this maxim, that “with what measure a man measures, it shall be recompensed to him again,”
(Matthew 7:2.)

How disgraceful is it that the children of light, whom God enlightens by his Spirit and word, should slumber and neglect the hope of eternal blessedness held out to them, while worldly men are so eagerly bent on their own accommodations, and so provident and sagacious! Hence we infer, that our Lord does not intend to compare the wisdom of the Spirit to the wisdom of the flesh, (which could not have been done without pouring contempt on God himself,) but only to arouse believers to consider more attentively what belongs to the future life, and not to shut their eyes against the light of the Gospel, when they perceive that even the blind, amidst their darkness, see more clearly. And, indeed, the children of light ought to be more powerfully excited, when they behold the children of this world making provision against a distant period, for a life which is fading, and which passes in a moment.

Christ, therefore, exhorts his disciples to act faithfully in small matters, in order to prepare themselves for the exercise of fidelity in matters of the highest importance. He next applies this doctrine to the proper stewardship of spiritual graces, which the world, indeed, does not estimate according to their value, but which far surpass, beyond all question, the fading riches of this world. Those persons, he tells us, who act improperly and unfaithfully in things of small value, such as the transitory riches of the world, do not deserve that God should entrust to them the inestimable treasure of the Gospel, and of similar gifts. There is, therefore, in these words an implied threatening, that there is reason to fear lest, on account of our abuse of an earthly stewardship, we fail to obtain heavenly gifts. In this sense, what is true is contrasted with riches, as what is solid and lasting is contrasted with what is shadowy and fading.

We thus ascertain Christ’s meaning to be, that they who are bad stewards of earthly blessings would not be faithful guardians of spiritual gifts.