

It would be easy to read the story of the rich man and Lazarus as a story of the reversal of fortunes in the afterlife. After all, Abraham tells the rich man, “You received good things in life, and Lazarus received evil things. Now, you are in agony, and Lazarus is comforted.”

If that’s what this parable is about, all of us should go home today, give our belongings away, and live on the streets. Compared to most of the world, everyone here is rich. Eternity is long, and it would be better to live on the streets for this brief lifetime than to spend eternity in agony. That, however, is not the point of the parable.

Let’s take a little closer look at the rich man. Jesus said he dressed himself in purple and feasted sumptuously every day. There is only one reason someone would have dressed in purple and feasted sumptuously every day. A person would only do that in order to let everyone else know how wealthy they were. Royalty wore purple robes because it was the most expensive fabric. Feasts were never solitary affairs. If someone was feasting, they would invite all of the prominent people to join in their feast. This man was throwing a lavish dinner party every day to show off how wealthy he was.

In today’s terms it would be, there was a rich man who drove his Bentley to the country club every day. He wore Armani suits, and invited all of his friends to the club where they had prime rib, lobster, beluga caviar, and drank Dom Perignon. He would probably invite the editor of the style section from the Plain Dealer to make sure everyone knew what his parties were like.

Most of us would recognize that such an ostentatious lifestyle is a little twisted. The problem is not so much that the person is wealthy, as that the person is using his wealth to draw attention to himself. The love of riches can begin to twist our hearts and minds. It might begin with the simple desire to accumulate more. We say, “Look at all of this wealth.” Then it evolves to make us think that we have made ourselves great, as we say, “Look at me with all of this wealth.” Then it evolves to make us want others to see how great we’ve made ourselves, and we say, “Look at how everyone else treats me because of all of this wealth I’ve accumulated.”

The problem is not the money. The problem is when we develop a self-centered attitude. If our focus is on ourselves, then we will eventually become twisted. That’s exactly what happened to the rich man in the parable. At the rich man’s gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, and longing to be fed with the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. Lazarus longed for the stuff that would have been given to the dogs.

The rich man could not be bothered with Lazarus. Certainly he was aware of his presence, but he could not see Lazarus as a fellow child of Abraham. He was blinded by his desire to have the focus on himself and on his wealth. That was the character he developed.

Even in the afterlife the rich man held onto this attitude. From his place in torment, the rich man saw Lazarus seated at the place of honor next to Abraham. Now that the rich man was experiencing the torment that Lazarus had experienced every day, we might think he would say, “Lazarus, I’m sorry that I ignored you every day. I’m sorry that I did not see you as a son of Abraham.”

Instead the rich man still refused to acknowledge Lazarus. He thought it was beneath him to even address Lazarus. So, instead, the rich man said to Abraham, “Can you send Lazarus to relieve my torment? Can you send Lazarus to warn my brothers?” In the midst of torment, the rich man still looked at Lazarus as nothing more than an errand boy.

We don’t have to be very wealthy to suffer from the same malady as the rich man in the parable. When our focus becomes acquiring stuff for ourselves, we start down the path of the rich man. When our desire is to be esteemed by others, we start down the path of the rich man. The rich and poor alike can fall prey to these temptations.

In our reading from 1 Timothy today, Paul wrote, “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

When we consider our material possessions, we must not be arrogant, rather we must remember that everything we have is entrusted to us by the Lord. It is the Lord who created it. It is the Lord who gave us the ability to get it. The rich man in the parable thought his wealth made him great. In contrast, Abraham told him, “In your life you received good things.” Abraham did not say, “You got good things for yourself,” he said, “You received them.” What do we have that we did not receive by a gift of the Lord?

Paul also said to tell them to be, “Rich in good deeds, generous, and willing to share.” If everything we have is the result of a gift from the Lord, we might do well to ask ourselves what the Lord might want us to do with it. For what purpose has he allowed us to acquire it? Paul said that these things were given to us so we could be generous. Rather than feasting with his friends every day, the rich man in the parable might have invited Lazarus to sit at his table.

Paul says that if those who are rich remain humble and are generous, they will be able to, “Take hold of the life that is life.”

When we go to the Metanoia Hospitality Center, or Eliza Jennings, or to sit with hospice patients, there is a sense of life there that we can never get if we hoard our wealth or our gifts for ourselves. When you can share your time, your wealth, or your gifts with someone else, there is a sense of life in that act, because that is how God created you to live. Eternal life is a life of love, and we get a taste of eternal life when we act out of love here and now.

I mentioned Eliza Jennings, Metanoia, and hospice, but we don’t have to wait for those opportunities. The rich man’s mission field was quite literally at his front gate, but he refused to see it. Our mission field surrounds us every day if we are willing to see it. It may not be quite as obvious as a beggar covered in sores, but if we are willing to see people, we will discover opportunities to be generous every day. It might be a neighbor who needs someone to talk to. It might be a single mother who is struggling to make ends meet, who would love to have someone drop off a basket of fresh produce. It is very expensive to feed your children right today. It

might be a recent immigrant who needs some guidance navigating something as simple as registering their child for school.

The mission field is right there if we're willing to see it. If we are willing to see it, and willing to be generous with the gifts the Lord has entrusted to our care, we will take hold of the life that is truly life.