

COUNT YOUR BLESSINGS

Our text is the Gospel Lesson assigned to this day. From Luke chapter 16 we listen to verses 22:

*"The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side.
The rich man also died and was buried."*

Dear Friends in Christ,

What is your most prized possession? If you were to ask me that question when I was 10 years old, I would've said my bicycle, a black, 3 speed, English racer bicycle. If you were to ask me that question when I was 20 years old, I would've said my car, a 1971 gunmetal blue BMW 1600. What was my most prized possession when I was 30? I would have told you my house, a 3 bedroom ranch with a walk-out basement and a carport in Sedona, AZ. When I got to be 40 years of age, I started to think a little differently. If you were to ask me what I valued most when I was 40 years old, I would've probably said my family. When I was 50, it was something different and now that I'm in my 60's, my answer is very different from what I said in my earlier years. It is my prayer that you, too, come up with a similar response after hearing today's message from God's Word.

When you think of your most prized possessions, when you think of your greatest blessings, if you're like most of us you think of material things, possessions, or you think of temporal matters such as your health, your family, happiness. But we are reminded today that our sense of values doesn't always agree with God's sense of value.

There are lessons to be learned from the account of the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus, lessons about blessings: Blessings in Life & Blessings in Death. In just a few words, Jesus sets the stage for this account. He tells us of two men. One who was very rich, the other who was very poor. And he tells of the blessings they both received in life and in death.

Let's get something straight right from the outset. The point of this story is NOT that your fortunes in this life are balanced by their opposite in the life to come. That is, if you are rich, if you live comfortably in this life, you will suffer in the life to come. Neither is the corollary true. If you are poor, if you suffer here on earth you will have it easy in the life to come. That's just NOT what this story is about.

There are plenty of people in heaven right now who were very wealthy, lived very comfortable lives here on earth. Among them are Abraham and Solomon. And there are people who lived a miserable life here on earth who are spending a miserable eternity suffering in hell.

The point of the account of the Rich Man & Poor Lazarus is this: An improper attitude toward riches, toward material blessings, will affect your attitude toward God and toward your neighbor in this life, AND have dreadful consequences in the life to come.

The Rich Man and Poor Lazarus had very little in common. But I think you'd have to agree that in both cases, it would be hard to count their blessings. For the Rich Man this would be a difficult task because

he had so many blessings. In the eyes of the world the Rich Man was a real winner. Life was very, very good to him. He had achieved the dream. The Rich Man was able to dress like a king in purple garments. He was able to wear nice clothing, made of the finest, softest fabrics, clothing that kept him cool in the summer and toasty warm in the winter. He lived in luxury every day. It was his custom. It was the way he lived his life, lavishly. He enjoyed the finest wines and the tastiest food. He hosted extravagant parties. He was the guy you wanted for a friend because he would spare no expense when he entertained. Nothing but the best would do.

When it comes to counting blessings, it appears that the Rich Man is the run-away winner, especially when compared to Poor Lazarus. But if you'd asked the Rich Man, he might have found it hard to count his blessings. He'd say, "Why yes, I've made many millions in the stock market, but the value of my portfolio decreased by 1.4% last quarter." He'd admit, "Yes, we've had pretty good weather, but that early frost got two of my prized rosebushes. People like the Rich Man find it hard to count their blessings. They view a problem-free existence as their right, as the status quo. They only see a bumper crop as a blessing. They see the slightest downturn, the slightest hardship as affliction.

Yes, when it comes to counting blessings, it appears that the Rich Man is the winner, especially when compared to Poor Lazarus. Lazarus didn't have ANY blessings, did he? He was a penniless beggar. According to the original Greek, Lazarus had been "thrown" down at the gate of the rich man. Maybe some people hurriedly deposited him at the gate and left quickly so they wouldn't be caught. Was he unable to walk? Was he crippled? Seems so.

To make things even worse, Lazarus had sores all over his body. They were some sort of ulceration, maybe boils or some type of skin disease. The only comfort he got, the only blessing we can see with the eyes of the world, was that stray dogs came and licked his sores. Some blessing! Yet if you were to talk to Lazarus, you'd probably discover he saw blessings everywhere. That little overhang on the Rich Man's gate? What a blessing! It provided a little shade on hot days, and a little cover on rainy days. That curb stone? What a blessing! It kept Lazarus up out of the gutter, out of the sewage flowing by.

Some people are like that. They find a blessing no matter what their circumstances, no matter what their predicament. There is no condition in the world so miserable that they can't find something for which to be thankful. Those people are few and far between in today's world. I'm certainly not one of them and I'm guessing you're not either. But back to the Rich Man and Poor Lazarus, it looks like no contest. To the eyes of the world, the Rich Man got all the blessings. Poor Lazarus got none.

Quite often I hear discouraged believers echo this same sentiment. "Why does it seem like the wicked, the unbelievers, the ungodly . . . why does it seem like they're the ones who prosper, while believers can't make it from paycheck to paycheck?" Remember, our sense of value does not always agree with God's sense of value. In last Sunday's Epistle Lesson and in Pastor Kassulke's sermon last week we heard the warning: the love of money (a desire for riches) can plunge you into ruin and destruction. It can lead you away from the faith.

The problem for the Rich Man was not his immense wealth, in and of itself, but the love of money, AND selfishness, AND an improper attitude toward money, AND coldness, indifference toward God. All of this showed in the Rich Man's selfishly ignoring the beggar Lazarus at his gate. Lazarus longed to eat the table scraps from the Rich Man's meals, but none were given.

Lazarus - This is, by the way, the only instance in all of Jesus' parables where a character in the parable is named. So the name 'Lazarus' must carry some importance. The name 'Lazarus' means "The One God Helps." Oh come on! God was helping this beggar? God was helping this wretched cripple covered with sores? Yes. God was helping in the way he ultimately helps all believers. God had taken care of the biggest problem Lazarus had, his sin problem. God had given Lazarus the greatest of all blessings, faith. So Lazarus was the one who was trusting in God's promises. Lazarus was the one who enjoyed God's assurance of the forgiveness of sins. Lazarus was the one who enjoyed peace of conscience.

Lazarus lived patiently under tremendous suffering. He submitted to God's will. In this confidence and with this great blessing, Lazarus fell asleep in the Lord. Lazarus lived (as his name implies) trusting in 'God who helps.' And that's how he died, trusting in 'God who helps.' This poor beggar, who was crippled, sick and penniless all his wretched life, was tended to by angels at the moment of death.

The Rich Man lived lavishly and the Rich Man died lavishly. He probably had a huge funeral with many mourners, and a huge funeral banquet attended by many guests. The Rich Man lived trusting in himself and trusting in his wealth. And that's how he died, trusting in himself and trusting in his wealth, trusting in those things that bring no comfort in the end, things you can't take with you when you die.

You see, the Rich Man made three big mistakes and people are still making the same three mistakes today. First, he emphasized his body and de-emphasized his soul. He treated his body as if it were more important than his soul. He pampered his body and neglected his soul. Everything focused on the material things in life. There was no thought or concern or planning for spiritual matters.

Secondly he categorized man over God in importance. He imagined that he was the master of his own fate. He dared to disagree with God about what is truly important in life. He made the humanistic error. He assumed that man is the measure of all things instead of understanding the simple truth that mankind is totally subject to God.

And finally, he mistook time for eternity. The Rich Man thought this earthly life was more important than the life to come after death. Making this earthly life as pleasant as possible became his one goal. As he made his plans, he forgot to reckon with the fact that the days of this life are but a very short time when compared with eternal life which is to come. And look at where the Rich Man went when he died. He was in extreme torment in hell.

At the moment of death, there are only two options: Heaven, a place of indescribable joy and pleasure, & Hell, a place of torment, a place of separation from God. Your place in eternity is determined by your faith in Jesus Christ.

Mark 16:16 (NIV) *Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.*

It's just that simple. Your place in eternity is determined by your faith in Jesus Christ. Your greatest blessing, your greatest possession is the gift of faith in Jesus. And yes, faith in Jesus is a gift. It is not a conscious decision on your part.

Ephesians 2:8-9 (NIV) ⁸ *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith--and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God--* ⁹ *not by works, so that no one can boast.*

The Rich Man's brothers were living the kind of life he himself had lived . . . self-centered, in rebellion against God and dedicated to earthly pleasures. In hell, the Rich Man knew that his brothers were heading for the same eternal punishment he was now experiencing. So he asked for Lazarus to rise from the dead and appear to his brothers to scare them into faith with the threat of eternal death in hell.

Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' (Luke 16:29 NIV).

Moses and the prophets, that's short-hand for God's Holy Word. It (the Old Testament) was written by Moses and the prophets. (The New Testament was written by the Apostles and evangelists.) In those sacred writings God gave all people the message of heaven in the language of earth. Jesus said, "All of Scripture testifies about me." The Apostle Paul tells us that the Scriptures "*are able to make you wise for salvation*" (they tell you how it is that you are saved) "*through faith in Jesus.*" All that was necessary for the five brothers to escape the agony of hell was to hear and learn the message of sin and grace (our sin, God's grace) written plainly on the pages of Holy Scripture.

The Rich Man answered, "My brothers are used to hearing human beings preach God's Word. I know that alone is not going to move them to repentance and faith so they can escape the pain of hell. But if something extraordinary would happen, like the appearance of a person from the dead, that would reach their hearts." But the truth is, sinners are saved not by supernatural appearances from the dead. Sinners are given the gift of faith by the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel in Word and Sacrament.

Faith in Jesus means trusting in his innocent death on the cross to pay for your sins in full. Faith in Jesus is your greatest blessing, your greatest possession because along with the gift of faith comes a change in status. You are no longer outside the kingdom of God. Through faith in Jesus you become God's precious, beloved child. You can live a life of confidence here on earth, knowing that the death of Jesus has paid for all your sins. And you can live a life of confidence when the day of your death approaches, knowing with assurance that angels too will escort your soul to heaven where you, too, will begin everlasting life in the presence of your loving heavenly father.

Your greatest possession, your greatest blessing is the gift of faith in Jesus and you don't need to be over 50 or over 60 to realize this. What good are all the other blessings of this life, the material things, the temporal things, if you don't have the greatest blessing, the gift of faith in Jesus. Without it, all other blessings are worthless. With it, no other blessing can compare.

Let us pray.

Gracious Lord, you are the source of every blessing. We pause today to thank you and to praise you for you have so richly blessed us in every way. You are also the source of the Greatest Blessing, our faith in Jesus. Keep us always in the faith. Use us and our witness to take the message of salvation to those who are lost that they too, may enjoy the wonders of heaven. And when our lives are over, bring us home to you where joy and blessings never cease. Amen.