

## “The Treasure of a Good Foundation”

Amos 6:1a, 4-7; Psalm 146; 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

Rev. Bill Pinches

Mason First Presbyterian Church

Mason, Michigan

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I had not planned on talking about *money* in my second week back in the pulpit. But then I looked at the scripture passages appointed for this week. There's the prophet Amos, rebuking “those who “lie on beds of ivory and lounge on their couches.” There's the Psalmist, who praises the God “who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger.” There's the parable that Jesus tells about the rich man “who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day” and the poor man “covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table.” And there's the wisdom that the apostle Paul offers to young Timothy, which includes a warning to “those who want to be rich,” lest they “fall into temptation.” It had not been my intent to talk about money today ... but the scriptures for today told me to do so.

For those of you who are new or who are not aware, it is my custom to follow a three-year cycle of readings called the Revised Common Lectionary that is widely used throughout much of the Christian world. I started out my ministry as a lectionary preacher; then when I began to see the weaknesses of the Revised Common Lectionary I walked away from it for several years and went my own way; then when I developed a renewed appreciation for the strengths of the lectionary I began to follow it faithfully again. What really drove home to me the value of the lectionary was when I was on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land several years ago, and I was worshiping at a church in Jerusalem where there were a large and diverse array of Christians who had come from – quite literally – *all around the globe* – and the scripture passages that were read in that service were the *same ones* being read that same day in churches in a multitude of countries and in a variety of different denominations. I gained a renewed sense of our unity in Christ, a unity made more visible and apparent when we intentionally choose to share more things in common. So the scripture passages that you heard today are the same ones that are being read today in countless churches in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Philippines, Italy, Hong Kong, Ghana, and so on; and in churches as diverse as Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Methodist, Lutheran, Reformed, United Church of Christ, American Baptist, Presbyterian, and more. It is not universally used in *all* those churches, and there are also several different versions of the lectionary which are very similar but not exactly the same, but nevertheless, millions of Christians all around the world today are hearing the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, and reflecting on the words “the love of money is the root of all evil.” We should too.

Let's start with the parable, a parable that Jesus tells about two people: an unnamed rich man, and a poor beggar named Lazarus. This is not the same Lazarus as the brother of Mary and Martha whom Jesus raised from the dead; there are two different men named Lazarus in the New Testament.

The rich man in the parable is indeed *very* rich: “dressed in purple and fine linen” – like royalty – and he “feasted sumptuously every day.” There is no lack of food in this man's house, or in his

palace, which is how many artists have depicted his house through the centuries. But just outside this man's front gates lies a poor beggar, covered with sores that the dogs would come and lick. This man is in need of food, clothing, medical care, and shelter. He lacks what most of us consider "essentials."

It is noteworthy that it is the *poor* man, not the *rich* man, who is named. Jesus tells us the name of the poor man. But the rich man remains anonymous. That is the opposite of how this world works; we know the names of the richest people in the world – Elon Musk, Gautam Adani, Jeff Bezos, Bernard Arnault, Bill Gates. Everybody in town would have known the name of the *rich* man. But how many would have known the name of the poor beggar? How many desperately poor people can you actually *name*? Their numbers are legion; nearly 700 million people around the world live in extreme poverty; more than ten percent of the population of *our* country lives in poverty. To many people, these individuals are virtually nameless; we hear about them in broad categories; we see images of their hungry faces; yet we do not know their names. Jesus knew the name of the poor man who was lying at the gate of the rich man. And he considered the rich man not worthy of being named.

Lazarus, the poor man, dies and is taken by angels up to heaven, where Father Abraham, the biblical patriarch from the book of Genesis, our ancestor in the faith, is waiting for him. The rich man dies and is brought down to Hades, where he is tormented. The tables have turned; the one who was low has been lifted high; the one who was high has been brought low. The rich man begs for mercy; he asks Father Abraham to send Lazarus down to him, to bring him some comfort. Note that the rich man also knows Lazarus's name. He must have known Lazarus's name when he was begging at his doorstep – *yet he did nothing to help him*. So Abraham declines to grant the rich man's request. Then the rich man stops pleading for himself, and begins pleading for the welfare of his brothers, who are still living and who are also very wealthy; he asks Abraham to send Lazarus to them, to warn them of the fate that will be waiting for them, if they do not change their ways. But Abraham again declines. "They have Moses and the prophets" – that is, *they've got the sacred scriptures* – but they don't bother to heed them. What point is there in sending them a messenger, if they spurn the Word of God?

For the Word of God is abundantly clear on matters pertaining to the rich and the poor. The passages that we heard today from Amos and the Psalms are examples of what the sacred scriptures had to say about wealth and poverty *before* Jesus came on the scene. I need to stress that these are just two examples out of a *very great many* passages about the rich and the poor in the Old Testament. The biblical prophet Amos cried out against the injustice that he saw all around him, eight centuries before Christ. The wealthy aristocrats, who had become rich because they controlled the trade routes, would lie in comfort on beds of ivory, oblivious to the suffering of the common people. Undoubtedly, they found ways to justify their wealth in their own eyes, but the poor people felt that they had been treated unfairly. When one person prospers at the expense of another, that's not *justice*, in the biblical sense of the word. Throughout numerous books of the Old Testament there are clarion calls for *fairness* in economic dealings, and for *compassion* and *generosity* for people who are less fortunate, including both poor people and immigrants. The wealthy aristocrats in the days of Amos forgot those values and neglected those virtues. Many wealthy people today forget and neglect them too.

Psalms 146 echoes some of these same themes. This Psalm was clearly written by someone who did not trust the rich and powerful, and perhaps had been exploited by them: "Put not your trust in rulers, in mortals in whom there is no help." Rather, put your trust in the Lord, "who keeps promises forever; who gives justice to those who are oppressed, and food to those who hunger.... The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. The LORD cares for the stranger [that is, the foreigner]; the LORD sustains the orphan and widow." The Lord God Almighty, the God whom we

worship and serve, is a God of true *justice*, a God who shows a special degree of concern for the poor, the hungry, the vulnerable, the powerless, the marginalized. This has been called God's "preferential option for the poor," a term that was first used in 1968 by a Jesuit leader, and that has been embraced by both Catholic and Protestant theologians. In 2005 Pope Benedict XVI taught that "love for widows and orphans, prisoners, and the sick and needy of every kind, is as essential as the ministry of the sacraments and preaching of the Gospel." In 2013, Pope Francis declared that "without the preferential option for the poor, the proclamation of the Gospel risks being misunderstood or submerged." Christians who want to gain wealth without concern for the poor have *misunderstood the Gospel*.

Paul reminds Timothy of this basic biblical theme. "Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." You've undoubtedly heard part of that before; "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil" has become a fairly well-known proverb, although it is often shortened to something like this: "*money* is the root of all evil." That's actually not what the Bible says. It's not money that's the problem; it's the *love* of money that's the problem: the desire to amass more and more of it. Really, what we are talking about here is *greed*. Money itself is simply a tool, which can be used for good or for ill. Every year there are many wealthy individuals who give away massive amounts of money to organizations that are in the business of helping people who are less fortunate. That's called *generosity*. It's one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit. Generosity is one of the greatest Christian virtues. Greed, on the other hand, has been called one of the "seven deadly sins" for more than sixteen centuries. There were many wealthy people in the early Church. Many *generous* wealthy people, people who helped fund Christian ministry. Some of them helped fund the ministry of Jesus himself. We are given some names: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna, Phoebe, Barnabas, Joseph of Arimathea ... these were people of means, the Bible says, who chose to give significantly out of their financial resources to fund the Gospel ministry. Paul himself was a recipient of Phoebe's generosity. It's perfectly fine to be wealthy. The question is what you do with your wealth. If your goal in life is to become wealthy so you can enjoy a life of luxury, I would invite you to consider a different goal: *become wealthy so you can give generously to people in need*. "As for those who in the present age are rich," Paul says to Timothy, "command them not to be haughty or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches but rather on God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life." *Generous, and ready to share*. Paul is saying that a life of wealth and luxury, by itself, is really *not life*. "Shun all this," he says; "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith." *That's the life that's worth living*.

All of this is spelled out very clearly in these passages, and in many others. The Bible has more to say about the proper and improper uses of money than almost any other topic. But – to circle back to the parable of the rich man and Lazarus – all these biblical teachings don't do people any good if (a) they don't *know* about them, or (b) they don't *care* about them. That was the rich man's problem; *he should have known* that he ought to be generous; there were *plenty* of passages in the scriptures that told him that ... *if* he had bothered to read them, *if* he had bothered to care. He lived his life of luxury ... and then he spends eternity afterward in torment. For *Christ will come*, to judge the living and the dead. The choices we make *matter* ... *in this life, and in the next*. The parable is a warning. If the rich man could do it all over again, *would he have made some different choices?* Would you?

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