

Eye of the needle: 1 Timothy 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31

by [John Rollefson](#) in the [September 21, 2004](#) issue

Next to the window in my study, where I can't but see it every day, there's a framed cartoon from an old edition of the *National Lampoon*. It's a spoof of a Medici rose window from the cathedral in Florence, and depicts a laughing camel leaping with ease through the eye of a needle. The superscription reads: "a recurring motif in works commissioned by the wealthier patrons of Renaissance religious art," while the Latin inscription on the window itself is "*Dives Vincet*," or "Wealth Wins!"

Some wit once observed that he'd never seen a hearse pulling a U-Haul. The author of the first "pastoral epistle" to Timothy expressed the same sentiment in observing that "we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it." The "love of money" seemed enough of a "root of all kinds of evil" that it presented a pressing pastoral problem for the early church. It still does for today's church.

It's a diagnosis of our sickness-unto-death that's older than Amos—the confusion of religion with riches, of doing good with doing well: "In their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pains." The early church, as it handed down memories, remembered how Jesus himself had seemed preoccupied with *oikonomic* matters. He loved to populate his stories and sayings with references to mammon and money, to offerings and treasuries and taxes, to wages and debts and investments and rewards. In an age marked by an inequitable distribution of wealth similar to our own, Jesus knew that money mattered and that money-talk could be used to speak vividly of the clashing priorities of the culture of God with those of the present age. Jesus' "preferential option for the poor" reverberates like a *basso continuo* throughout St. Luke's Gospel (take the Magnificat and the Beatitudes as two memorable examples).

The title, "The Rich Man and Lazarus," as this parable of Jesus has traditionally been known, tips us off that something out of the ordinary is going on. This is a story of an anonymous rich man and of a poor man whom Jesus bothers to name, the only named person in all of Jesus' parables. From Jesus' perspective, Lazarus (whose name means "God helps"), although poor and hungry, is dignified with a name even though he is paid more attention by the dogs who lick his sores than by the generic

rich man. Lazarus in his evident need lay in plain sight as the rich man “dressed in purple and fine linen feasted sumptuously *every day*,” an echo in Greek of how Jesus had taught his disciples to pray for their “daily” bread. We’re meant to think of this as a repeated, even habitual, encounter between rich man and poor man.

It’s not that Lazarus never received any scraps from the rich man’s table. The poor are smart enough to know when the scraps are available, just as they know not to expect handouts from the notoriously niggardly.

In west Los Angeles, one homeless neighbor strategically assumes his place each lunchtime alongside the drive-through lane of the nearby Jack-in-the-Box, where he is happy to relieve folks of their change. Lazarus, in an earlier time, was also part of the social landscape for this rich man, and below the notice of one who had the wherewithal to inhabit a home where the poor could be “gated” outside and kept at a distance.

Part two of Jesus’ parable presents a chilling epilogue to the initial story. Both the rich man and Lazarus die—as we all will, rich and poor alike. But according to Jesus’ sequel, they land in different places. Lazarus finds himself transported by angels to the bosom of Abraham, while the rich man lands in Hades in torment. While in keeping with the overturning of the order of things that is dear to Luke’s theology, the rich man doesn’t see it this way. Even in Hades he tries to use Lazarus (whose name he now remembers) as his lackey to “dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”

But father Abraham won’t have any of it. The earthly status quo has changed, and the great chasm that divides rich from poor during life on earth now has been eternally inverted. Nothing if not persistent, the rich man pleads with Abraham (see Luke 3:8) to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers of the surprise that awaits them on the other side of death. But Abraham’s reply is a show-stopper: “They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.” They already know what they need to know. It’s clear in Hebrew scripture. “But if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent,” the rich man objects. But Abraham speaks over the head of the rich man, over the heads of the Pharisees, in what sounds like a direct address to us church types who claim faith in a certain Galilean raised from the dead, “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.” Zing!

The advice of 1 Timothy for those “who in the present age are rich” is simple. We’re not to be haughty nor set our hopes on the uncertainty of riches but instead rely on our richly provident God. “Do good” (not well!) and be “rich in good works,” “generous” and “ready to share.” We’re to spend this treasure of Christian practices now in order to fund a future rooted in “life that is really life.” In Martin Luther’s last written words, “We are beggars, that is true!”