

# THE CHOICE

## The Way of the World or The Way of Jesus

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

### The American Way of Life: More

A man named Kenneth Kantzer, who formerly served as the editor for Christianity Today, was once asked what he considered the greatest problem facing the contemporary church today and he replied, “It is not what you might expect me to say, it is not liberalism or neo-orthodoxy or the wrong views of revelation or inspiration or other controversial points in theology...The most serious problem facing today’s church is materialism – materialism not as a philosophical theory, but as a way of life. The American way of life.”

In fact, it could be said that the way of life in our Nation, can be summed up in one four- letter word: more. “More” has become America’s “Unofficial National Motto.” We simply want more of everything: more fun, more money, more stuff – cars, clothes, homes, gadgets, more of everything. What is in sharp contrast is that if you boil it all down, the theology of the Church, the message of the Church can also be summarized in one precise four letter word: love.

The problem with these two words is that they represent two very different ways of being: one way is all about us wanting more money and more stuff: and the other way is all about us wanting more God and more love. Why do we want more money instead of more God?

### The Pharisees

Our story of the rich man and Lazarus, is the second story in Chapter 16 of Luke that Jesus is teaching on money and he is directing his teaching at the Pharisees. The Pharisees believed that their wealth was proof of their righteousness. The Pharisees thought that they would get into heaven because they were good people. After all, they were religious leaders. They were at the synagogue every time the doors opened. They studied the Law of Moses. **They** were concerned with keeping everything perfect and obeying all the Jewish purity and religious laws of the day, 600+ in all. They participated in all of the annual feast and holy days of the Jewish faith. They gave ten percent or more their income to the temple.

But, their religion was outward. It was all about appearances. The Pharisees did what they did, to impress others. But Jesus was not impressed. Jesus was not impressed, because the Pharisee’s hearts were full of pride and hypocrisy (16:15). They were not concerned about their hearts and their true relationship with God.

Like the rich man in this story, they were living the good life, a life that they believed to be blessed by God. After all they were following the rules of the Law, therefore, they would go to heaven. But their love of money, not only blinded them to God’s perspective, God’s love, but it also separated them from God.

So Jesus tells us a story about two men: “**There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who lived in luxury every day. At his gate was**

laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores." (Luke 16:19-21)

### **To Have and Have Not**

The contrast between these two men could hardly have been greater. One was a "have," while the other was, most definitely a "have not." Like many Americans, the first man was very wealthy. This by itself is not a criticism. You and I know full well that there are at least some rich people in the Bible who knew how to glorify God with what they had, such as Abraham, Joseph, and David, to name three notable examples. But this particular man was self indulgent to extreme excess. He went around clothed in royal purple, as if he fancied himself to be some kind of king. He wore linen underwear imported from Egypt. He ate the finest foods, feasting on gourmet cuisine. In short, the rich man was a lover of money, just like the Pharisees. But even more than the money, it was the way he used it: You see he used his money only to gratify his worldly pleasures. He was not just rich. He was filthy rich.

### **Who Was Lazarus?**

Now, if the rich man seemed as if he had everything going for him, the poor man seemed to have everything against him: He was sick, with painful sores all over his miserable body. He was disabled; the only way he could get from place to place was for someone to carry him. He was hungry – so desperately hungry that he longed for scraps of food from another man's table. This poor man was not able to help himself; he could only beg someone else to give him what he needed. Day after day he hoped against hope that he could get something – anything – from the rich man's table. But the only comfort he ever received came from the pack of dogs that satisfied their own hunger by licking at his open sores.

Ironically enough, people called the poor man Lazarus. To be clear, this was not the same Lazarus who lived with Mary and Martha and who was famous for coming back to life from the dead. This was a different Lazarus – a man who had the same common Hebrew name meaning "God had helped." How ironic! If Lazarus believed in the help of God, it was only by faith and not because of his outward circumstances. Where was God in his poverty? Where was God in his illness? Where was God in his disability?

We do not know how this poor man Lazarus learned to trust God for the answers to these questions. What we do know is that the one human being in the whole world, the rich man, who was in the best position to help him, refused to do it. Lazarus was lying at his very doorstep! It was not just any doorstep, either; The Greek term used here, pylona, refers to the kind of ornamental gate that one would ordinarily find at the entrance to the palace. There was more than enough wealth behind those gates to provide for anything and everything the poor man needed, but only if the rich man would open wide the door of his heart.

### **The Rich Man: A Study in Being Selfish**

Now we can see just how selfish the rich man really was. Every time he went in or out of his house the rich man was literally tripping over Lazarus and was confronted with his need for care, yet he refused to show any compassion. Every day he had a chance to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and heal the sick. But he never invited the poor man in for dinner, He never told his servants to take him some leftovers. He never arranged for Lazarus to receive medical care, or help him

in any way. In other words, he did not use his earthly wealth to help this poor man. It was not simply his riches that were the problem; it was his greedy, money-loving heart.

### **Harvard MBA School**

Unfortunately, this sin is common in our contemporary culture. Students in the MBA Program at Harvard were asked to create a strategic plan for their lives under the title, **“What Do I Hope to Achieve in Life After Graduation?”** The top three answers were wealth, notoriety, and status. No one said anything at all about service or helping others. But the Bible asks, **“If anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?”** (1 John 3:17)

### **Death**

In our story, there were two men, one on each side of the gate. One was rich and the other was poor, but both men died, and that changed everything, because they ended up on two different sides of eternity: **“The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham’s side. The rich man died and was buried. In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.”** (Luke 16:22-23)

Death is the great equalizer. Whether we are rich or poor, none of us can escape the cold hand of the grave. No matter how much money we have, it will never save our lives. And when death finally happens, the only thing that will matter is our relationship with God.

From an earthly perspective, the death of Lazarus must have seemed rather pathetic, especially in comparison to the other man in this story. The rich man received a proper burial (Luke 16:22), and it must have been an elaborate affair. Yet nothing is said of the poor man’s burial at all. He simply died of starvation; his body cast aside, with his blood on the rich man’s hands.

### **Who Are We in This Story?**

Now I am not here to suggest that we are literally the Rich Man. I am not here to suggest that we literally have the poor, begging at the gates of our homes, and we are tripping over them, ignoring them as we go about our lives.

But, we all know that especially in relation to the rest of the world, we are considered to be well off. After all, we have good homes, we have cars, we have clothes, food, and can afford medical care when we need it. Some of us even have some left over to go on amazing vacations, or put in our savings accounts or 401K’s.

But, I also know from my own experience how hard we work to make a living. Most of us work 50-60 hours a week. We all have worked hard for decades, We have pulled ourselves up by our own boots straps. We have bills to pay, a mortgage to keep a float, we are struggling ourselves. Many college kids are struggling to make tuition payments, and many cannot even pay for their books for class. Many of our Senior Citizens have trouble paying their basic bills for groceries or utilities. All of us are on a treadmill of paying bills that never seem to end. Yes, we may live in the western suburbs, but we have worked for every dime, and we are still working, and besides, no one helped us out when we were struggling; yes, this is my story too.

But what I am suggesting is this: As Reverend Meyer reminded us in his sermon titled, **“Going Good in a Breaking Bad World,”** sin occurs to us in the smallest infractions. Sin occurs to us when we are not looking, when we are not

paying attention, when we are too full of ourselves, or too full of our schedules, sin can insidiously, infiltrate our lives, when we do not even intend for it to be there, and we end up tripping over the very person, thing, event, or cause that we should be helping. This story is more than a story about the rich and the poor. It is about a man who is oblivious to others who are in need. It is about us when we get wrapped up in our own lives, our own concerns, and do not see the needs of those who have less than us. And there are a whole lot of people in our own back yards who have less than us.

### **Who Is At Your Gate?**

So ask yourself this: Who is at your gate? Are you tripping over the fact that you are not tithing? Are you really giving back to God what God deserves? Are you tripping over the pledge card from Word Vision to sponsor a child overseas, or help provide clean water to a village? Are you tripping over the opportunity to invite your un-churched neighbors to go to dinner, to become friends with them, to then even invite them to your church? Are you tripping over the excesses in your life that you keep on choosing?

### **How Can We Learn to Trust God?**

So what do we do? What is the answer? How can we live out our lives in faith and learn to fully trust God? One of the best ways to learn to trust God rather than our money is to give our money away. This is exactly what the apostle Paul wants Timothy to tell the wealthy people in his congregation to do: Listen to this passage from this week's lectionary, in fact I love this about the lectionary – it gives you the problem in one passage and the solution in another. Hear the words of Paul: **“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 treasures for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”** (1st Tim 6:17-19) In other words, Paul wants us to be rich on our hearts and our actions, and to share our stuff with the world.

What is also true is that God does not come begging us for our money. What God values most from us is a servant's heart. He wants us to be rich in our hearts. It is one thing to pay for someone else to feed the hungry, or care for the sick, it is another thing altogether to feed the hungry yourself, or to dress a sick man's wounds. We are called to do both.

One way for us to practice becoming more like Christ in our giving is to train ourselves to be generous in the little sacrifices of daily life. Support your local missionaries. Give your extra clothes and food away to the poor. Do someone else's chores. Share your power tools with your neighbor. Start a small group with people you do not know. Put a little extra in the offering plate. Do it without keeping score and with unconditional love. For us, as followers of Jesus, true and sincere generosity of the heart is our way of life.

### **A Personal Story: Giving Away Our Toys**

My husband John and I joined Christ Church in 1991 and raised our two children here. Our two boys Michael and Robert are grown up now, Michael is now 22 and Robert is 16 years old.

I have to say my husband John and I went a little nuts with buying things when our boys Michael and Robert were little kids. We just had so much fun buying

them clothes, toys, books, and bedding. We were frequent shoppers at Gymboree and the Lego Store and Toys R Us. One day we got a call from church, a family had just lost everything as their home tragically burned to the ground. Thankfully the family was ok. So we prayed about it and the boys who were 10 and 4 at the time, wanted to give away their stuff, all of it, toys and all. Our boys wanted to share the toys and stuffed animals that they loved best and were near and dear to their hearts. And so we spent the next afternoon packing up 4-5 very large garbage bags full of the boy's clothes, toys, blankets, books. We gave it all to the family... and guess what? The boys were so happy, they gave from their hearts. A family was made whole again, and we still had enough toys and stuff left over. We all have enough, we do not need more stuff.

### **We Serve A Generous God**

And I know this is your story too. I know there are thousands of people in this church who give their time and their treasure to the Kingdom of God and help others year in and year out. And the reason that we are all able to be so generous is that we serve a generous God. God is richer than the richest man or woman who ever lived. God owns the universe, God is the Creator, all that we have comes from him and belongs to him. And guess what? God does not hoard his treasure. God gives his stuff away too as Paul reminds us God, "...richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." (1 Tim 6:17) It is impossible to think of God's rich giving without thinking of his most lavish gift of all: son Jesus Christ. God has already given us everything. So lets take ourselves off the hook and let go of our stuff. Picture that for a moment: what a relief that would be right? Without all of our stuff we wouldn't have so many bills to pay, we wouldn't have to work so hard, we could give up being married to our mortgages, we would be free to be with God. We can flee from all of our things, and instead, "pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness." (1 Timothy 6:11) We can be content with God.

This is the basic law of the divine economy, not culture's economy, but the divine economy. The rich became poor so that the poor might become rich. Those who have become rich by the grace of God, must therefore be willing to enrich others. "In the end," said Clement of Alexandria, "it is not the one who keeps, but the one who gives away, who is rich, and it is in giving away, not possession, that renders a man happy."

### **Conclusion**

Friends, the every-widening gap between the rich and the poor is one of the most important issues of our day. The intrepid "moral of the story" expressed in the rich man and Lazarus, is that if you do not cross the gaping chasm between the rich and the poor in this life, you surely will not be able to do it in the next. After your final day on this earth, this chasm cannot be crossed.

So the invitation, the take away this evening dear friends, is for us to come and follow Jesus, to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, and heal the sick, to share our time and our treasure here on earth "...so that we might take hold of the life that is truly life." (1 Timothy 6:19)

Let us pray.

Amen.

