

# Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

## BIG SPENDERS

Luke 16:19-31

Pentecost 17

Analysis by Jerome Burce

19 "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. 20 And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, 21 who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. 22 The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 24 He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.' 25 But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. 26 Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.' 27 He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house— 28 for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' 29 Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' 30 He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 31 He said to him, 'If

they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.'”

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Hell-Raisers**

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) – Spending like Hell**

Vv. 1-2, TAV (Today's American Version): At the Cleveland Browns Stadium, \$280 million crown jewel of the poorest city in America, A.D. 2004, beer sells this fall for \$6.50 a cup. The patrons, arrayed in their \$70 team jerseys and \$20 team caps, can't get enough of it. (Been there. Seen that.) On game nights the guzzling starts even as women and children vie for the last spots in the homeless shelters a few blocks away. A few of the kids doubtless pine for a Coke. God bless America? Let's be honest. Hurrah for the homeland where ancient habits thrive and old Amos, back from the dead, would be having a fit (see 6:4-7, today's Old Testament lesson). Football is the least of it. Try McMansions. BMWs. The 100th brand of breakfast cereal. Or how about we simply call them Legion (9:30), for who can count them, those whims we indulge on our pleasant side of the “great chasm” (v. 26) that stands between us and the deeply poor. Do you doubt the chasm? Come see the freeway that divides stadium from shelter and notice how accurately it serves as metaphor. Better still, think cruise ship gliding by Haiti.

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) – Lying like Hell**

Let's be honest, you say? Come to think of it, let's not. We feel we can't be. We simply don't dare, least of all preachers, themselves as implicated as any in the scandal of care-less spending. Lazarus lurks. I avert my eyes. The flock I'm preaching to aches to do the same and I acquiesce. After all, the SUVs are already bought. They choke the church parking lot.

They've got to be driven home. The drivers, sources of my own salary, will insist that I authorize them to drive with a clear conscience, a dependable God-bless-you ringing in their ears as they head off for another week of pursuing the wealth that enriches them and enlivens me. But whence that God-bless-you? Not from the Moses who commands the tithe and forbids interest (Ex. 22:24). Not from Amos, certainly, nor any other forthright prophet. They won't get it from Jesus either, at least not the Jesus they're hearing today. In fact he's the one who troubles us the most, not only in the present story but in the comments that set it up (vv. 13, 15, 17). Hence the overwhelming temptation to join scribe and Pharisee in a frantic parsing of the Word, tugging, teasing, twisting for an angle—any angle—that will ease our angst. 1. "Jesus exaggerates. Scribal teachers did that, you know." 2. "There's always welfare. My taxes fund it." 3. "This is the land of opportunity, God be praised. If the poor can't hack it it's their fault, not mine." 4. "I've earned it. I deserve it. Anyway, I've given my crumbs. At the office. Last week." 5. "God knows I mean well. Don't blame me for the system." 6. "Hell? What hell?"

### **Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) – Catching Hell**

As if any such dodge cuts the mustard with the Lord of this story. Spare us the gentle Jesus nonsense. This is John the Baptist squared, making fearful hay with John's big point about the futility of pleading a connection to Abraham (vv. 25-26, 29-30; see 3:8. So much, by the way, for comfort taken in the American myth—still repeated; see Zell Miller's recent speech—that the mantle of chosen people has descended on them. He who tells this story laughs, terrible Lord that he is in his telling, and terrifying, most of all in the shortness of the shrift his story gives to the rich man's biography—one verse only and only two things told, that he dressed well and "feasted sumptuously" (v. 19). Did he honor his mother? Love his wife?

Bankroll his synagogue? Deal fairly with his clients? Any mitigation at all for the implication (v. 21) that he ignored the beggar? All this is beside the point, unworthy of the storyteller's comment. And there's the rub. This makes him, in our view, an indecent storyteller, peddler of an obscenely capricious arrangement under which a person receives either "good things" or "evil things" for no apparent reason (v. 25). That would be bad enough if he were only talking "lifetime." When he talks eternity it becomes utterly indefensible. What choice have I except to hate this tale and the one who tells it, all the more when I notice to my horror that where "lifetime" is concerned the tale rings true. I was born American, as in rich, the other guy Bangladeshi, as in destitute. Was that not capricious? Is it not somehow appropriate—thus Abraham— that the tables be turned just as capriciously (v. 25)? On what grounds shall I not expect this? Forget those of Moses and the prophets (v. 29). Their fundamental requirement, long since confirmed by the storyteller (10:27-28), is that I love with heart, soul, strength and mind the God who hides behind the story, implied though noticeably unmentioned as author and enforcer of the way things work. How can I do this? Were this God out in the open I and the rest of the rich would be raising hell with him and he with us, a sure sign that the great chasm to be (v. 26) is already in place. God on one side. We on the other. Guess where that puts me. So much for the big spender.

## **PROGNOSIS: Hell-Razers**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) – Going to Hell**

No wonder the first-century rich rose up and killed Jesus. But suddenly the big surprise! Without the faintest notion of what they are doing (23:24), they've gone and killed the biggest spender of them all, Mr. Rich Himself, in comparison to whom their legendary Croesus is the lowliest scrap of back country Galilean trash, the very thing they've mistaken Jesus for. In

the process they've unleashed a whole new flood of capriciousness into the order of things, only this time it's a blessed capriciousness, one that favors rich and poor alike for the sole reason that God wants to—and gets to. “Father, forgive them,” prays Jesus of the clueless, murderous ersatz rich for whom he dies. With that he plunges into the ultimate wilderness to find the sheep who's stranded there (15:4). “He descended into hell,” says the Creed. In other words he crosses the impassable chasm (v. 26) not merely to cool the sufferer's tongue (v. 24) but to scoop him up and haul him away to the oasis of life. Impossible? For us, yes, but not for God, a point Jesus makes precisely with respect to the fate of the rich (18:27). That Jesus is God becomes apparent on the third day when he rises from the dead, i.e. from the hell that he as representative and rescuer of rich and poor alike has just gone to. No wonder those who get this wind up singing with joy (24:52-53).

**Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) – *Looking Hell in the Eye***

That joy continues for rich and poor alike, the ones who get it that is. In the case of the rich the getting begins—it has to—with a trip through the needle's eye (18:25) of honesty, a forthright confronting of one's ultimate poverty and helplessness. By the grace of God some do this. In the doing they keep discovering the sole source of comfort and hope for the perilous business of handling the wealth they're stuck with. Will they often misspend that wealth? Sure they will. Those who admit that find themselves embracing the steady invitation, week after week, to sit with Lazarus, rich and poor alike picking up the crumbs that are falling even now from Mr. Rich's banquet table, the one that awaits his saints in the age to come. For now the crumbs alone make for sumptuous feasting, and the clothing is fine (v. 19), nothing less than the perfect

righteousness of Christ himself.. No more parsing of texts, then. No more dredging for excuses! Here is the Mighty One whom God brought down from his throne precisely to exalt the lowly (1:32), the hell-bound rich among them, or again, such at least as are honest and faithful enough to rub elbows with the poor at the one elevating table. A sure sign of the elevation? The Lord starts suddenly to call the rich by name as he did not in his story, thus raising them to the poor man's level. With that he sends them to their SUVs, his own God-bless-you propelling them into the week. Now they drive humbly, ironically perhaps, with a hint of bearable embarrassment.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) – Harrowing Hell**

Here's how I learned about the price of beer at the Browns Stadium this year. I stood there selling it as a member of a church team that was down there to run a concession stand and raise some money. With Baptist readers I plead not my German Lutheran ethos—to you not acceptable—but the liberty of the Christ we confess, you and I together. Anyway. It occurs to me that the next time we're down there maybe we put a little mirror next to every cash register, and on each a sign: "To see the cheap beer the Big Spender paid way too high a price for, look here." Would management approve? Probably not. Still, that's the message that you and I are in the world to convey—to rich and poor alike. A sure way to convey it is by treating rich and poor alike not as the cheap beer that of themselves they all are, but rather as the supremely high-priced libations that Christ in his spending has made them all to be. In Christ those guzzling spendthrifts at the stadium are fine wine. So are the women and kids at the shelter. Guess what happens when people act on this assumption? Bridges show up across the chasms—flimsy bridges, perhaps, but bridges even so, with some unexpected crossing over from pleasant side to foul.. Where the poor gather, crumbs appear, and now and then one of those rich folks who

comes—surprise!—to sit with them humbly, and to learn who they are, and to honor their immense dignity in Jesus Christ. So saints have done, on and off, for 2000 years. And even this perhaps: for once a passenger on that cruise ship, catching sight of the Haitian shoreline, is seized with sudden grief “over the ruin of Joseph” (Amos 6:6). It isn’t much. It’s also something, and the likely start of something more—something that will serve, if only a little, to lessen hell on earth. To God alone the glory. Amen.