

**SCRIPTURE LESSON:** Luke 16:19-31

**SERMON TITLE:** The Poor are Still at the Gate

Have we noticed? The poor are still at the gate. I first noticed the poor when I was growing up in Beeville. I saw the poverty of those who lived on the other side of the tracks. In fact, when I was growing up, we had a Hispanic maid named Esther. I would go with my mom or dad to take Esther home on the several days a week that she worked for us. We literally crossed the tracks and drove to the side of town where the roads were not paved. We let Esther off at her house--a tiny two room building where she lived with her husband and eight children. I'm not sure if they had an indoor toilet.

I couldn't help but notice the poor in Appalachia when I took the youth group from our church in Arlington, VA to Kentucky on the Appalachian Service Project. The home we worked on was something like Esther's home in Beeville, but much worse. There was a living room, and a kitchen without running water, and one bedroom in which all five family members slept. The outhouse was behind the building. The home was poorly constructed. The roof leaked. The floor joists in the kitchen were rotted out. The walls consisted of wooden planks that had been nailed up to a frame and then covered on the outside with tar paper. In some places there were half inch gaps in the planks.

I couldn't help but notice the poverty in the cities where we've lived. The homeless poor were visible on the streets of Corpus Christi and Washington D. C., and Austin. I've walked down streets in ghettos and barrios; I've delivered food to shelters, served food at soup kitchens, conducted worship services for street people, and dealt one-on-one with poor people looking for assistance.

Have we noticed? The poor are still at the gate--and the rich are still dressed in purple and fine linen; and they feast sumptuously each day. So what difference does it make? Isn't this just the way the world is? Won't the poor always be with us? And besides, what does this situation--as unfortunate as it surely is--have to do with my spiritual health? I enjoy the worship here--I'm spiritually fed here--and even though I notice the poor at the gate, I don't think much

about them--and I feel close to God anyway?

Well, folks, beware! Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus to a group of money-loving religious leaders who believed that they too could be close to God while ignoring the poor at the gate. In fact, they most probably believed that their wealth was a sign of God's favor, while poverty was a sign of God's curse.

But then Jesus told this parable and turned the world upside down. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, in Jesus' parable, when the rich man dies and is buried, he finds himself in a place of torment called Hades. And he's calling out for mercy from Father Abraham who, by the way, is giving comfort to the poor man Lazarus. Lazarus had also died, but unlike the rich man, Lazarus had been carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. By the way, the name Lazarus literally means the "one whom God helps."

But the rich man continues to play to character. He wants Lazarus to wait on him to ease his agony and to give him the comfort in death that he refused to give Lazarus in life.

And what was it that Abraham said to the rich man across the great chasm? "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."

My brothers and sisters, beware. Could it be that in God's eyes, how we deal with the affluence and poverty is a profound spiritual issue? We may feel close to God while we're essentially ignoring the poor, but how does God see it?

Well, as the parable suggests, if we haven't figured all this out from the teachings of Moses and the prophets, we're probably going to have a hard time turning things around even if someone comes back from the dead--someone like Jesus Christ, for example.

So what does all of this mean for us? First of all, it's important for us to recognize who we are. When compared to the poorest of the poor in our world, we are extraordinarily rich--and we therefore have the resources at our disposal to help alleviate the suffering of millions. But for this to happen, giving is required.

This reminds me of the experiences of survivors of the Nazi death camps. They testified to the fact that an attitude of determined giving was one of the things that distinguished the survivors from those who perished. If a prisoner was on the verge of starvation, but he had a crust of bread or a scrap of a potato that he could share with his comrade in suffering, he was psychologically and spiritually capable of surviving. A survivor of Treblinka put it this way: “In our group we shared everything and the moment one of the group ate something without sharing it, we knew it was the beginning of the end for him.”<sup>1</sup>

Can you imagine how the rich man’s fate might have been different if he had possessed this spirit of sharing? Can you imagine how our lives and our church would be different if we possessed this spirit of sharing?

But look, there is more to alleviating the suffering of the poor than just sharing our wealth. We can also give of ourselves. Again, Jesus is our model here. Jesus ministered among the poor, and so should we.

And this is not always easy. Working with the poor can be a threatening experience. Sometimes, the poor are not easy to deal with. But somehow, in the power of God’s Spirit, it is possible to overcome our fears.

Let me tell you about Bob Barnard down in Portland, TX. Bob was a volunteer at a church supported soup kitchen in Corpus Christi called Loaves and Fishes. It was run by an ecumenical organization called Metro Ministries. Listen to Bob’s story:

“I didn’t want to go. There was a knot in my stomach that extended well into my throat. I sat in my small but very comfortable office . . . and thought of numerous excuses. I could feign illness. Maybe if I ignored the problem it would go away. I was scheduled to help out at our Metro Ministries Loaves and Fishes at lunch time and I would have done just about anything to get out of my commitment.

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<sup>1</sup> Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. Death Without Weeping The Violence of Everyday Life in Brazil (Centennial Book). New York: University of California P, 1993, 134.

“Several hours have passed since I returned to my comfortable setting, but the knot will not go away. We fed many souls. I heard quite a few very sincere “Thank-yous,” and I even saw honest smiles. Sure, there are a few that are getting a free meal that might have been able to feed themselves, and some have chosen this type of lifestyle. But just by looking around you know that this is a necessary and worthwhile mission of the combined Corpus Christi churches. We are helping some unfortunate people through had times.

“I didn’t want to go. In fact, I don’t want to go back . . . but I will!”<sup>2</sup>

Have we noticed? The poor are still at the gate. So what does this mean for us? What does it mean for us that the poor at still at the gate?

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<sup>2</sup> Metro Ministries newsletter, 1989.