

8.52

Luke 16:19–31—Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus

Pope Gregory the Great (ca. 540–604) was the son of an aristocratic Roman senator who became a monk and then used his inheritance to found seven monasteries. In 590 he became pope, and he is remembered as an especially influential and effective pontiff.

One of the many things for which he is remembered is his emphasis on charity: he devoted vast sums of the church's resources to helping the poor and encouraged individuals to be similarly generous.

This concern for the needy is evident in his comments on Jesus's Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. First, the parable:

“There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In Hades, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. 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.’ 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. 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.' He said, 'Then, father, I beg you to send him to my father's house—for I have five brothers—that he may warn them, so that they will not also come into this place of torment.' Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the prophets; they should listen to them.' He said, 'No, father Abraham; but if someone goes to them from the dead, they will repent.' 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.'" (Luke 16:19–31)

The commentary by Gregory the Great:

My dear brethren, now that you know the glory of Lazarus and the punishment of the rich man, act with extreme caution; seek out the poor, that in the day of judgment they may be your intercessors and advocates.

You have many brothers of Lazarus lying at your doors, in want of those crumbs which fall daily from your table when you have well satisfied your appetite.

The words we have been reading should teach us to fulfill the law of mercy.

Every minute we find a Lazarus if we seek him, and every day
without seeking we find one at our door.

Now—beggars besiege us, imploring alms.

Later—they will be our advocates.

Rather, it is we who should beg, and yet we are besought.

Ask yourselves whether we should refuse what we are asked,
when those who ask us are our patrons. Therefore, do not lose
the opportunity of doing works of mercy; do not store unused the
good things you possess.¹

1. Gregory the Great, *Parables of the Gospel* (Chicago: Scepter, 1960), 158.