St. John Chrysostom, second sermon on Lazarus and the rich man

I was impressed by your good will when I preached the earlier sermon on Lazarus, because you both approved the patience of the poor man and abhorred the cruelty and inhumanity of the rich man. These are no small indications of a virtuous disposition. For even if we do not seek virtue, but at least praise it, we shall perhaps be able to attain it; and even if we do not avoid evil, but at least censure it, we shall perhaps be able to escape it. Therefore, since you received that sermon so favorably, listen, I will give you the sequel. You saw him then at the gate of the rich man; see him today in the bosom of Abraham. You saw him licked by dogs; see him carried in triumph by the angels. You saw him in poverty then; see him in luxury now. You saw him in hunger; see him in great abundance. You saw him striving in the contest; see him crowned with victory. You saw his sufferings; see his recompense, both you who are rich and you who are poor: the rich, to keep you from thinking that wealth is worth anything without virtue; the poor, to keep you from thinking that poverty is any evil. This man is presented as a teacher for you both. For if he did not complain when he was poor, what pardon will those have who complain when they are rich? If he gave thanks in hunger and so many troubles, what excuse will those have who do not try to approach the same virtue when they enjoy abundance? Likewise, what pardon will the poor have who grumble and complain because they have to beg for a living, when this man, who lived continuously in hunger, poverty, loneliness, and illness in the house of a rich man, ignored by everyone, and could not see anyone else who had endured the same sufferings as he had, nevertheless showed such wisdom?

Let us learn from this man not to call the rich lucky nor the poor unfortunate. Rather, if we are to tell the truth, the rich man is not the one who has collected many possessions but the one who needs few possessions; and the poor man is not the one who has no possessions but the one who has many desires. We ought to consider this the definition of poverty and wealth. So if you see someone greedy for many things, you should consider him the poorest of all, even if he has acquired everyone’s money. If, on the other hand, you see someone with few needs, you should count him the richest of all, even if he has acquired nothing. For we are accustomed to judge poverty and affluence by the disposition of the mind, not by the measure of one’s substance. Just as we would not call a person healthy who was always thirsty, even if he enjoyed abundance, even if he lived by rivers and springs (for what use is that luxuriance of water, when the thirst remains unquenchable?), let us do the same in the case of wealthy people: let us never consider those people healthy who are always yearning and thirsting after other people’s property; let us not think that they enjoy any abundance. For if one cannot control his own greed, even if he has appropriated everyone’s property, how can he ever be affluent? But those who are satisfied with what they have, and pleased with their own possessions, and do not have their eyes on the substance of others, even if they are the poorest of all, should be considered the richest of all. For whoever has no need of others’ property but is

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ON WEALTH AND POVERTY

happy to be self-sufficient is the most affluent of all. But if you agree, let us return to our subject.

“The poor man died,” Christ says, “and was carried away by the angels.” At this point I wish to remove an evil disease from your souls. Many of the simpler people think that the souls of those who die by a violent death become demons. This is impossible, quite impossible. It is not the souls of those who die violently which become demons, but the souls of those who live in sin. Their nature as human beings is not changed, but their way of life imitates the wickedness of demons. Christ indeed made this clear in reference to the Jews when He said, “You are the children of the devil.” He called them children of the devil, not because they had changed into the devil’s nature, but because they did the devil’s works. For this reason He added, “Your will is to do your father’s desires.” Similarly John said, “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance, and do not presume to say, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’” For Scripture often speaks of the laws of relationship, not meaning the relationship of nature, but that of virtue and wickedness; Scripture calls a man son and brother of the one whose character he shares.

But why did the devil introduce this evil teaching? He tried to abolish the glory of the martyrs. For since they die by a violent death, he did this because he wanted to spread an evil suspicion against them. But he was not strong enough to do this; for they still keep their proper glory. Instead he accomplished something else more grievous, when by these teachings he persuaded the magicians who serve him to slaughter many bodies of mere children

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5 John 8:44.
6 Matthew 3:7-9.
sinks down again toward the abyss, and trembles with fear, as it is about to fly out of the flesh. For the awareness of our sins always pricks us, especially at that time when we are about to be led away to the examination of accounts in that terrible court. Then, if anyone has been guilty of theft or greed, or has cursed anyone or hated anyone without cause, or has committed any other wrong, the whole swarm of sins is revived and stands before our eyes to sting our conscience. Just as those who dwell in the prison are in dejection and distress all the time but especially on that day on which they are to be led out to the very doors of the judge, and standing before the courtroom doors, hearing the voice of the judge from inside, are chilled with fear, and are no better off than the dead; so also the soul is in great distress and anxiety at the actual time of its sin, but even more when it is about to be drawn out and led away from this world.

Are you listening to this in silence? I am much happier at your silence than at applause; for applause and praise make me more famous, but this silence makes you more virtuous. I know that what I say is painful, but I cannot tell you how great a benefit it contains. If that rich man had had someone to give him this kind of advice, instead of flatterers who always suggested what he wanted to hear, and who dragged him into luxurious living, he would not have fallen into that hell, nor undergone the unendurable torments, nor repented too late for consolation; but since they all made conversation for his pleasure, they handed him over to the fire. I wish we could always and continu-

force to the soul while it dwells in the body, obviously he will not be able to do so either when it has departed. “How then do people sin,” someone asks, “if they do not suffer force?” Willingly and intentionally, and surrendering themselves, not by necessity or compulsion. This is made clear by all those who have prevailed over his devices. For example, he was not strong enough to persuade Job to utter a blasphemous word in spite of great provocation.

From this it is clear that we have the power to trust or not to trust his advice; we do not submit to any necessity or compulsion from him. Not only from what I have said but from the parable we are discussing it is clear that when the souls leave their bodies, they do not linger here, but are promptly led away. Listen: Christ says, “He died and was carried away by the angels.” Not only the souls of the righteous but also the souls of those who lived in wickedness are led away after death; this is clear from another rich man. For when his harvest was abundant, he said to himself, “What shall I do? I will pull down my barns, and build larger ones.” There is nothing more wretched than such an attitude. In truth he took down his barns; for the safe barns are not walls but the stomachs of the poor. He who had neglected these did not need to concern himself about walls. What does God say to him? “Fool! Tonight they require your soul from you.” You see, here it says “was carried away by the angels,” there, “they require;” one was led away as a prisoner, the other was carried on their shoulders as a victor. And just as in the arena when the fighter has received many wounds and is sprinkled with blood, then puts on the wreath of victory, those who stand in front of the arena greet him with loud cheers and lead him home clapping, shouting, and marveling, so also the angels then led Lazarus away. But from

that other man his soul was required by some frightful powers, perhaps sent just for this purpose. For the soul does not go up automatically to that other life, since this is not even possible. If we need a guide when moving from one city to another, much more the soul which has burst out of the flesh and is moving toward the life to come will need guides to lead it. Because of this it often rises, and

ON WEALTH AND POVERTY

43

4Acts 16:16-17.
4Mark 1:24; Luke 4:34.

ON WEALTH AND POVERTY

45

ally preach like this and speak about hell. For the Scripture says, “In all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin.”46 And again, “Prepare your work for your departure, and get everything ready for the road.”47 If you have stolen anything from anyone, give it back, and say like Zacchaeus, “I give four-fold what I have stolen.”48 If you have cheated anyone of anything by flattery, if you have hated anyone, be reconciled before the judgment. Settle everything here, so that you may approach that bench without liabilities.

While we are here, we have good hopes; when we depart to that place, we have no longer the option of repentance, nor of washing away our misdeeds. For this reason we must continually make ourselves ready for our departure from here. What if the Lord wishes to call us this evening? Or tomorrow? The future is unknown, to keep us always active in the struggle and prepared for that removal, just as this Lazarus was patient in endurance. For this reason he was led away with such great honor. The rich man also died and was buried, just as his soul had lain buried in his body like a tomb, and had been wearing the flesh like a grave. For by shackling the flesh with drunkenness and gluttony as if with chains, he had made it useless and dead.49 Do not simply pass over that phrase “he was buried,” beloved: by it you should understand that the silver-inlaid tables, couches, rugs, tapestries, all other kinds of furnishings, sweet oils, perfumes, large quantities of undiluted wine, great varieties of food, rich dishes, cooks, flatterers, body-guards, household servants, and all the rest of his ostentation have been quenched


ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

46Sir 7:36.
47Prov. 24:27 (variant reading).
49The idea that the body is the tomb of the soul is typical of Neoplatonic philosophy; for a Christian, the body is deadly only if one chooses to make it so.
and withered up. Now everything is ashes, all is dust and ashes, dirges and mourning, as no one is able to help any more, nor to bring back the soul which has departed. Then the power of gold is tested, and of all superfluous wealth. From such a crowd of attendants he was led away naked and alone, since he could not take anything with him out of such abundance; but he was led away without any companion or guide. None of those who had attended him, none of those who had assisted him was able to save him from the punishment and retribution; but removed from all those followers, he was taken away alone to endure the unbearable retribution. Truly, “All flesh is as the grass, and all the glory of mankind is as the flower of grass. The grass has withered, and its flower has faded; but the word of the Lord remains for ever.”* Death came and quenched all those luxuries; it took him like a captive and led him, hanging his head low, groaning with shame, unable to speak, trembling, afraid, as if he had enjoyed all that luxury in a dream. Finally the rich man became a suppliant to the poor man and begged from the table of this man who earlier had gone hungry and been exposed to the mouths of dogs. The situation was reversed, and everyone learned who was really the rich man and was really the poor man, and that Lazarus was the most affluent of all but the other was the poorest of all. For just as on the stage actors enter with the masks of kings, generals, doctors, teachers, professors, and soldiers, without themselves being anything of the sort, so in the present life poverty and wealth are only masks. If you are sitting in the theater and see one of the actors wearing the mask of a king, you do not call him fortunate or think that he is a king, nor would you wish to become what he is; but since you know that he is some tradesman, perhaps a rope-maker or a coppersmith or something of the sort, you do not call him fortunate because of his mask and his costume, nor do you judge his social class by them, but reject this evidence because of the cheapness of his other garb. In the same way even here, sitting in this world as if in a theatre and looking at the players on the stage, when you see many rich people, do not think that they are truly rich, but that they are wearing the masks of rich people. Just as that man who acts the part of king or general on the stage often turns out to be a household servant or somebody who sells figs or grapes in the market, so also the rich man often turns out to be the poorest of all. If you take off his mask, open up his conscience, and enter into his mind, you will often find there a great poverty of virtue: you will find that he belongs to the lowest class of all. Just as in the theater, when evening falls and the audience departs, and the kings and generals go outside to remove the costumes of their roles, they are revealed to everyone thereafter appearing to be exactly what they are; so also now when death arrives and the theater is dissolved, everyone puts off the masks of wealth or poverty and departs to the other world. When all are judged by their deeds alone, some are revealed truly wealthy, others poor, some of high class, others of no account.

Often indeed one of those who are rich in this life turns out to be the poorest of all in the other life, even like this rich man. For when the evening took him, that is to say death, and he departed from the theater of the present life, and put aside his mask, he was revealed as the poorest of all in that other world; so poor indeed that he was not master even of a drop of water, but had to beg for this and did not even obtain it by begging. What could be poorer than this poverty? Listen: raising his eyes, he says to Abraham, “Father, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and let a drop fall into my mouth.” * Do you see how great his tribulation is? When Lazarus was near, he used to ignore him, and now when he is distant he calls to him. The man whom he did not see as often as he went in and out, now he sees clearly when he is far away. Why does he see him? Often perhaps this rich man said, “Why do I need piety and virtue? Everything flows to me as if from a fountain, I enjoy great abundance and great prosperity. I do not endure any misfortune. Why should I seek virtue? This poor man who lives in righteousness and piety nevertheless suffers a multitude of troubles.” Even now many people express these thoughts. So in order to eradicate these wrong opinions, the Lord shows him that punishment awaits evil, and a crown of honor awaits the efforts of piety. The rich man did not see Lazarus for this reason only, but in order that he might now suffer to a greater degree what the poor man had suffered before. For just as the poor man’s torment was made harsher by the fact that he lay at the gate of the rich man and saw others’ prosperity, so the rich man’s retribution was made harsher by the fact that he lay in hell and saw Lazarus’ comfort, in order that he might have a more unendurable punishment not only by the nature of his torments but also by the comparison of the other man’s reward. Just as, when God expelled Adam from paradise, He settled him opposite the garden in order that the continual sight might renew his suffering and give him a clearer awareness of his fall from the good, so also He settled the rich man opposite Lazarus in order that he might see the good of which he had deprived himself. “I sent,” He says, “the poor man Lazarus to your gate to teach you virtue and to receive your love; you ignored this benefit and declined to use his assistance toward your salvation. Hereafter you shall use him to bring yourself a greater punishment and retribution.”

From the poor man we learn that all who suffer curses and injustice among us will stand before us in that other life. Indeed Lazarus suffered no injustice from the rich man; for the rich man did not take Lazarus’ money, but failed to share his own. If he is accused by the man he failed to pity because he did not share his own wealth, what pardon will the man receive who has stolen others’ goods, when he is surrounded by those whom he has wronged? In that world there is no need of witnesses, accusers, evidence, or proof; the deeds themselves just as we have done them appear before our eyes.

“See the man,” He says, “and his works: indeed this also is theft, not to share one’s possessions.” Perhaps this statement seems surprising to you, but do not be surprised. I shall bring you testimony from the divine Scriptures, saying that not only the theft of others’ goods but also the failure to share one’s own goods with others is theft and swindle and defraudation. What is this testimony? Accusing the Jews by the prophet, God says, “The earth
has brought forth her increase, and you have not brought forth your tithes; but the theft of the poor is in your houses."¹⁶ Since you have not given the accursed offerings, He says, you have stolen the goods of the poor. He says this to show the rich that they hold the goods of the poor even if they have inherited them from their fathers or no matter how they have gathered their wealth. And elsewhere the Scripture says, "Deprive not the poor of his living."¹⁷ To deprive is to take what belongs to another; for it is called deprivation when we take and keep what belongs to others. By this we are taught that when we do not show mercy, we will be punished just like those who steal. For our money is the Lord's, however we may have gathered it. If we provide for those in need, we shall obtain

²⁶Compare Mal. 3:8-10.
²⁷Sir. 4:1.

ST JOHN CHRYSTOSOM

great plenty. This is why God has allowed you to have more: not for you to waste on prostitutes, drink, fancy food, expensive clothes, and all the other kinds of indulgence, but for you to distribute to those in need. Just as an official in the imperial treasury, if he neglects to distribute where he is ordered, but spends instead for his own indulgence, pays the penalty and is put to death, so also the rich man is a kind of steward of the money which is owed for distribution to the poor. He is directed to distribute it to his fellow servants who are in want. So if he spends more on himself than his need requires, he will pay the harshest penalty hereafter. For his own goods are not his own, but belong to his fellow servants.

Therefore let us use our goods sparingly, as belonging to others, so that they may become our own. How shall we use them sparingly, as belonging to others? When we do not spend them beyond our needs, and do not spend for our needs only, but give equal shares into the hands of the poor. If you are affluent, but spend more than you need, you will give an account of the funds which were entrusted to you. This happens also in great households. Many people have entrusted their financial affairs to their household servants. Those who have received this trust keep what has been given to them, and do not misuse the money, but distribute it where and when their master directs. You also must do this. For you have obtained more than others have, and you have received it, not to spend it for yourself, but to become a good steward for others as well.

It is also worth inquiring why the rich man does not see Lazarus with any other righteous man, but in the bosom of Abraham. Abraham was hospitable. The rich man sees Lazarus with Abraham, in order that the rich man may also be convicted of his inhospitality. For that patriarch hunted out those who were going past and brought them into his own house; but this rich man overlooked the one

ON WEALTH AND POVERTY

who was lying inside his gate. Although he had such a treasure and an aid to his salvation, he passed him by every day and did not use in his need the poor man’s help. But the patriarch was not a man like this, but quite the opposite: sitting before his door he angled for all those who were going by. Just as a fisherman casting his net into the sea not only draws up fish but often draws up gold and pearls, so this patriarch, angling for men, once caught angels as well, and (the remarkable part) without knowing it. Paul in his amazement at this praises him and says, "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for

³⁸Heb. 13:2.
³⁹Matthew 25:40.
⁴⁰Matthew 18:14.

ST JOHN CHRYSTOSOM

insignificant people. Because Abraham also knew this, he did not inquire of those who were going by who they were and where they came from, as we do now; he simply welcomed all who were passing by. For if you wish to show kindness, you must not require an accounting of a person’s life, but merely correct his poverty and fill his need.

The poor man has one plea, his want and his standing in need: do not require anything else from him; but even if he is the most wicked of all men and is at a loss for his necessary sustenance, let us free him from hunger. Christ also commanded us to do this, when He said, "Be like your Father in heaven, for He makes His sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust."⁴² The alms giver is a harbor for those in necessity: a harbor receives all who have encountered shipwreck, and frees them from danger; whether they are bad or good or whatever they are who are in danger, it escorts them into its own shelter. So you likewise, when you see on earth the man who has encountered the shipwreck of poverty, do not judge him, do not seek an account of his life, but free him from his misfortune. Why do you make trouble for yourself? God has excused you from all officiousness and meddlesomeness. How much most of us would complain, if God had bidden us first to examine each person’s life exactly, to interfere with his behavior and his deeds, and only then to give alms? But as it is we are freed from all this kind of annoyance. Then why do we bring excessive cares on ourselves? A judge is one thing, an alms giver is another. Charity is so called because we give it even to the unworthy. Paul also advises us to do this, when he says, "Do not grow weary in well-doing . . . to all men, but especially to those who are of the household of faith."⁴³ If we meddle and interfere with the

⁴²Gal. 6:9-10.
unworthy, not even the worthy will ever willingly come to us; but if we provide also for the unworthy, undoubtedly both the worthy and those who are worth all of them together will come into our hands. This is what happened to the blessed Abraham, who, because he did not meddle or interfere with those who passed by, was able once to receive angels. Let us imitate him, and along with him his descendant Job. For he also accurately imitated the generosity of his ancestor, and because of this he said, “My door was open to every comer.”

It was not open to one and closed to another, but simply was unlocked for everyone.

Let us also do this, I beg you, without making any inquiry more than necessary. Need alone is the poor man’s worthiness; if anyone at all ever comes to us with this recommendation, let us not meddle any further. We do not provide for the manners but for the man. We show mercy on him not because of his virtue but because of his misfortune, in order that we ourselves may receive from the Master His great mercy, in order that we ourselves, unworthy as we are, may enjoy His philanthropy. For if we were going to investigate the worthiness of our fellow servants, we ourselves will lose the philanthropy from above: “For with the judgment you pronounce you will be judged,” He says. But let us bring our discourse back to the subject. Seeing Lazarus in the bosom of Abraham, the rich man says, “Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus.”

Why did he not address his words to Lazarus? It seems to me that he blushed and was ashamed, and because of what had happened he thought Lazarus would certainly bear a grudge. “If I, when I enjoyed such affluence,” he says, “had no wrong done to me, ignored the man who had such troubles, and did not share even crumbs, all the more he who was ignored will not assent to the favor.” We do not say this to accuse Lazarus; certainly he had no such attitude—far from it; but we say that the rich man did not address him, because he feared this, but called to Abraham, who (he thought) was ignorant of what had happened. He asked for that finger, which he had often allowed to be licked by dogs. What did Abraham say? “Son, you have received the good things due you in your lifetime.” See the wisdom and kindness of the righteous man. He did not say, “Inhuman, cruel, wicked man, after you treated the man so badly, now do you remember charity, mercy, and forgiveness? Don’t you blush? Aren’t you ashamed?” But what did he say? “Son,” he says, “you have received the good things due you.” “Do not add grief to the troubled soul,” it is written. His punishment is sufficient; let us not trample further on his misfortunes. Besides, to keep the rich man from thinking that out of malice he was preventing Lazarus from going, he called him “son,” all but apologizing for himself by this form of address. “It is not in my power to grant this,” he says, “it is not possible for us to go from here to there any more.” “You have received the good things due you.” Why did he not say simply “you have received your good things” but “you have received the good things due to you”? I see a great sea of thoughts opening up here for us. Therefore let us keep carefully all that has been said, both now and earlier, and put it away in safety. Prepare yourselves better by what has been said to listen to what will be said. If it is possible for you, remember everything.

ON WEALTH AND POVERTY

I have said. If you cannot remember everything, instead of everything, I beg you, remember this without fail, that not to share our own wealth with the poor is theft from the poor and deprivation of their means of life; we do not possess our own wealth but theirs. If we have this attitude, we will certainly offer our money; and by nourishing Christ in poverty here and laying up great profit hereafter, we will be able to attain the good things which are to come, by the grace and kindness of our Lord Jesus Christ, with Whom (be glory, honor, and might,) to the Father, together with the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.

ST JOHN CHRYSOSTOM

54

56Sir. 4:3.