

# Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

*St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA*

*September 25, 2022*

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## Spiritual Poverty

[Readings](#)

[Bulletin](#)

Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Who were you created to be? What sort of life were you created to live? These are some of the fundamental questions of mirrorwork. These are some of the most important questions we can spend our precious and limited time trying to answer. And the troubling part is this, if you don't work on answering these questions for yourself, the world will provide answers for you...answers that will likely end up harming you and others.

God did not create the rich man to be rich. God did not create Lazarus to be poor. God created them both to be other than they ended up being. They both ended up living the world's answers to those important questions; and they were both harmed because of those answers. The harm to Lazarus is obvious, he lived in abject poverty and suffered daily because of the world's priorities, the world's obsession with things that are not life-giving. Since he was poor he was an "other," he was on the outside and deemed not worthy of kindness, not worthy of dignity, and in the end not even worthy of life.

We see that reality still at work in our world today. How often do you hear some variation of "the poor deserve their lot" today? It may not be stated quite as crudely as that, but the message is still clear. Nowadays it's said like this:

"Why don't they just get a job?" Well, you try getting a job when you don't have a permanent address for your paperwork. Upcoming job interview? Too bad you can't afford a haircut, or to clean your clothes or even shower. Need to get to your new job? Better hope public transport isn't broken down or running 30 minutes late. Never mind the fact that the vast majority of people living at or below the poverty line are working...often more than one job.<sup>1</sup>

"They've got to pull themselves up by their bootstraps." First, that quote was originally meant to be sarcastic, to suggest that it is an impossibility. Which it

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bls.gov/opub/reports/working-poor/2018/home.htm>

is. Not only that but it denies the impact of the massive support “successful” people receive. Even the people who claim to have pulled themselves up by their bootstraps always end up having had a great deal of help from others (as a quick aside, there is no such thing as a “self-made man” and we need to jettison that terrible concept from our culture completely – Elon Musk’s parents owned an emerald mine in apartheid South Africa, Jeff Bezos started off with a \$250,000 loan from his parents, Warren Buffet’s father was an important politician and investment banker, Bill Gates’ mother was influential enough to be friends with the CEO of IBM which gave Microsoft its first contract). Everyone needs help, some get it, others don’t; we shouldn’t pretend otherwise.

As a society we’ve done a great job of ignoring the factors that cause poverty. We’ve collectively decided that poor people were created to be poor, or even more bluntly, poor people were created to suffer. This is about as anti-Gospel a message as can be. Oh! Oh! What about “you always have the poor with you”<sup>2</sup> Pastor Jon! Isn’t Jesus indicating that poverty is just a reality of life, and we should expect some people to suffer its costs? Wrong!

First off you need to weigh that one verse against the numerous verses in which Jesus instructs his followers to care for the poor, to be generous and compassionate to those who are without. Second, Jesus is quoting Deuteronomy 15, which is one of the most amazing texts about the year of Jubilee in the Hebrew Bible, in that chapter God (through Moses) teaches the people that if they live by the commands of God (if they live as they were created to live) there would be no more poverty! And lastly, remember the context of that verse! It comes after Mary uses costly perfume to anoint Jesus and Judas complains because he was corrupt and greedy. Jesus is pointing out that Mary’s act doesn’t help or hinder poverty, it is intended as an act of loving service; but living as God made us to live would help end poverty!

Clearly the world’s answers to life and living lead to Lazarus’ terrible state (as well as Judas’ misplaced priorities). Now what about the rich man? Living by the world’s priorities and answers to life seems to be going well for him, at least while he’s alive, right?

Don’t be too sure about that. While our text indicates that the rich man will end up in Hades for a time of punishment, I don’t believe his punishment

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<sup>2</sup> Matthew 26:11a (NRSV)

began after he died, nor do I believe his punishment comes from any source other than himself. This has to do with my understanding of hell.

So what is hell? In my thinking it is being utterly cut off from God and others. And it is a place we put ourselves in. You all know how difficult it is to change or break a habit, right? It's really hard! And I can't help but wonder why that would change in the next life. So, if someone spends their entire life focusing on nothing but themselves, their own desires and wants, and never turning outwards towards others or towards God, why would that habit change in the next life? If the rich man could see the utter suffering of Lazarus, day after day after day, and not be able to turn towards him in compassion and love, why would that change in the next life? The rich man is living in utter, abject spiritual poverty...steeped in a myopic and inwardly focused worldview which doesn't even let him see how utterly alone he is. How completely pointless his life has become. If it didn't result in such cruelty it would almost be pitiable.

Hell, in my mind, is being in heaven, which is being in the very presence of God, and being trapped by the chasm of utter selfishness and self-worship. Being utterly alone in the presence of God and neighbor because you cannot even begin to think about turning outwards in love and compassion. I find so many of the people our world venerates today (mostly the extremely wealthy) to be sad, little, myopic people who I would pity if their actions did not harm so many around the world.

The rich man was already in hell before he died, he just didn't know it yet. So in the next life it should be no great surprise that he continues to live in the habits and patterns he had while living. Neither the rich man nor Lazarus got to live the life they were created to live. One by choice and one by circumstance. They were both poor and they both suffered because of their poverty.

And here's the thing, I don't think this parable is supposed to present us with a choice or anything like that. We're not supposed to hear this teaching and try to emulate Lazarus in order to be with Abraham in the next life. Rather this parable shows us the world as humanity has created it to be, unfair and cruel. And it shows us God's response to cruelty, which is to ultimately comfort and care for Lazarus. And lastly, it shows us that while pursuing the world's answers to life and living might be superficially beneficial in this life, it sets us into habits and patterns that make us broken and alone in this life and the next one.

Ultimately, I can't help but wonder what the world might be like if more of us rejected the world's answers about life, living, and purpose and pursued what Christ teaches instead. What if we sought to be who God created us to be and to live how God created us to live: focusing on love and grace, justice and mercy, peace and wholeness, connection and community. How might this parable have gone if the rich man saw Lazarus' poverty and responded with compassion? What sort of relationship might they have had if they were able to see each other as neighbor? What might have happened if the rich man lived as God created him to live? And would that have allowed Lazarus to live as God created him to live?

There's only one way to find out if the Way of Christ is truly the alternative we need...we've got to try to live it ourselves. As the world seems increasingly bent on self-destruction, we could maybe at least **try** to live as Christ taught we were made to live. What's the worst that could happen? There might be more compassion in the world? More love? More grace? More connection? Perhaps less wealth and riches yes, but doesn't that seem a small price to pay if it means living as we were truly created to live, in the culture and kingdom of God? A kingdom where poverty and suffering and pain and selfishness are no more? That sounds more like the life our loving and compassionate God made us for than the one we've structured our world around that leads to such pain and misery for so many.

Amen.