

One of my favorite stories of all time is Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*. It's a great story, and it's one that is deservedly popular. I even preached a 4-week sermon series on it back in Advent of 2012. In a couple of months, I'm sure that we'll all have the chance to catch it in one of its many incarnations as Christmas approaches.

But one of the most disturbing and memorable images in *A Christmas Carol* is that of Jacob Marley, or at least the ghost of Jacob Marley, who comes to Scrooge early on in the story. Marley is weighed down by ponderous heavy chains. As Dickens describes it, "(The chain) was long, and wound about him like a tail, and it was made... of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel." When Scrooge asks about it, Marley says, "I wear the chain I forged in life. I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will and of my own free will I wore it." And then Marley tells Scrooge that Scrooge's chain was just as long and heavy 7 years ago when Marley died, except Scrooge has been working diligently, adding to it ever since.

The image of the chain and of Marley's ghost is one of the most powerful images of the misuse of wealth, of poor stewardship of money. The chain weighs Marley down. It binds him. It restricts his movement. And Marley put the chain on of his own free will. Instead of owning possessions, Marley let his possessions own him.

As Americans, we are among the richest and most powerful populations in the history of the world. Average Americans are wealthy, far beyond the dreams of most people in the world. An income of \$53,000 puts you as part of the wealthiest 20% of the world's population; \$119,000 in income puts you in the top 10% worldwide.¹ Even a person at the US poverty line is still wealthier than more than half the people in the world.² Yes, we complain about taxes, and we struggle to make ends meet. Yes, we have bills that pile up, and inflation has made things tough on us. But we must never forget, that in the eyes of the rest of the world, we're the upper crust. We're rich. Thus, all of us need to listen closely to what today's scripture readings are saying.

In our Old Testament lesson, Amos has a warning for the rich. Alas for those who have wealth, who can afford to eat lambs and calves, who have so much that they drink wine by the bowlful instead of the glassful, who lounge on their couches and ivory beds. Not alas, because they do these things, but alas because they do these things and have not cared about the ruin of Joseph. In plain terms, alas because they do these things, and they don't care about what is happening to God's people. Alas because they fill their own appetites, but don't care about others. 'Well, guess what?' Amos says: 'they're going to be subjected to God's judgment.'

Our Gospel has the same message. Jesus tells the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Jesus basically says, 'There was a rich man. He dressed in fancy clothes. He ate big feasts every day. Outside his front door, at his gate, there was this poor guy named Lazarus. He was covered with sores. He was hungry, and he just dreamed about getting a hold of the scraps that fell onto the rich man's floor. And he was in such bad shape that the dogs would come and lick his sores.' Blech.

¹ <https://wir2022.wid.world>

² <https://wir2022.wid.world>, the 50th percentile worldwide is \$12,000, the US poverty line is \$13,590

Now, notice what Jesus doesn't say. Jesus doesn't say that the rich man was a bad man, or that Lazarus was a good man. All Jesus says is that the rich man feasted sumptuously while the poor man lay at his gate, hungry and covered with sores. The rich man's problem is that he ignores the problems right outside his front door.

But then, after death, reversal comes. In the realm of the dead, in Hades, the rich man is in agony. He looks up, and far away across a great chasm, a great canyon, he sees Lazarus lounging in Abraham's bosom. This is one of those images that slips under our radar, but would have been of great significance to Jesus' audience. Being in Abraham's bosom doesn't mean he was cradled in his arms. It means that Lazarus was Abraham's number one guest at the feast. People didn't sit at chairs around a table when they feasted. They lounged on pillows, lying on their left sides and eating with their right hands. If the host was lying like THIS, the guest of honor on his right would have his head right here, in the host's bosom. That's why at the Last Supper, there's that part that talks about John leaning back on Jesus' breast. If they were sitting up in chairs it wouldn't have made any sense. But since they would have been reclining at table, it would have been natural.

So now the rich man is suffering, and Lazarus is now the guest of honor at the feast with the primo seat beside Abraham his host. The circumstances have been reversed.

The message of course, is that you can't just ignore those in need, especially those who are right outside your front door. If you don't take care of the poor now, God will take care of them, and he'll take you to task.

It's all too easy for us to lock our front doors. It's all too easy for us to climb into our little cocoons. It's all too easy for us to ignore the needs of the poor all around us. This is what we must not do. The Gospel commands us, the love of our Lord Jesus Christ commands us to do our part: to help feed the hungry, to help clothe the naked, to bring the Good News to the poor. That's a part of the deal: Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor as yourself.

As middle-class Americans, we have been blessed with incredible wealth and riches. But with that material success comes great responsibilities. Our Epistle lesson from 1 Timothy says it nicely. Those who are rich (and that means us), those who have been blessed with possessions are "to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life."

As good stewards of all the riches God has given us, those of us who have are called to share with the have nots. Material wealth, material things can make you indifferent to others. They can often chain you down as much as Jacob Marley was chained down. He forged his chain link by link. Perhaps the rich man in the parable dug his own chasm, shovelful by shovelful.

Amos, 1 Timothy, and Jesus are calling us to something different. Your riches, your treasure is a gift that has been entrusted to you. Use your prosperity to help others. Don't let it

chain you down. Don't let it allow you to insulate yourself from those in need. Instead, do good, be rich in good works, be generous.

Can any of us fix poverty? Of course not—that's naïve. Poverty is an enormous problem. After all, Jesus famously said, "You (will) always have the poor with you."³

But Jesus didn't say this in order to get us off the hook. He didn't say 'You will always have the poor with you, so don't even bother with helping them—you can't fix the problem.'

No. Jesus said, "You always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish."

The implication is that we can't do everything, and we can't fix everything. But each of us can do something.

At the end of *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge has just such a transformation. Scrooge's possessions had bound him. His life was empty and self-centered. But he experienced conversion. He made a change in the way he lived his life. He took his considerable resources and used them as God intended—yes, to take care of his own needs. But also for the benefit of others. He used his resources to help those around him, not only Bob Cratchit and his family, but the poor of London as well. He became rich, not only in material possessions, but more importantly, in doing good works. He became, in other words, a good and faithful steward of the wealth entrusted to him.

In the words of Charles Dickens, "May that be truly said of us, and all of us!"

³ Mk14:7, and parallels in Mt 26:11 and Jn 12:8