

JUSTICE IN THE END

Every day.

The rich man, who was dressed so stylishly, so elegantly in his purple and fine linen clothes, walked by every single day while poor Lazarus lay at his gate in misery. I'm sure the well-off dude noticed the hungry, wound-covered Lazarus reclining there at his gate, but he didn't really see him; because, judging by the rich man's behavior, there wasn't any acknowledgment of Lazarus's pain. There wasn't the slightest indication that he'd heard Lazarus's desperate cries for help every time he walked by, or that he recognized Lazarus as a fellow child of Abraham.

How could the rich man be so unsympathetic and cold-hearted?

Where was the rich man's compassion? Or mercy?

Where was his sense of responsibility to help a fellow human being in need?

Did the rich man have even one caring bone in his body?

But who am I to judge? Because when it comes right down to it, in my own way, I'm like the rich man. I do the same thing he did. When I'm driving somewhere, especially in the Portland area, I'll sometimes see a homeless "Lazarus" standing on a concrete median in the middle of the road, holding up a crudely made cardboard sign, asking for money. I usually I try to read what's written on the sign, but rarely do I look that closely at the face of the person holding up that sign.

Is it because it might make me feel uncomfortable? Maybe guilty?

Is it because, if I look too closely at the face, I'll be reminded that the one holding up that sign is a genuine, living, flesh-and blood person?

How many "Lazaruses" have I blandly passed by in my day to day activities? How many needy, hurting people have I ignored, closed my eyes to or turned away from, like the rich man in Jesus' parable? Because I just didn't want to be bothered. Because it wasn't my problem. Because I had other things to do.

When Penny and I went to England last summer and we were walking around London, I remember passing by a middle-aged woman—she looked like she might have been from India or Pakistan—sitting cross-legged on the sidewalk. There was a bowl on the ground next to her that had a few coins in it. She was

obviously a beggar.

The streets of London were crowded at the time, and dozens and dozens of people simply walked around her and passed by her. Business people and students and tourists of every size, shape and color of skin were all doing their best to ignore her, avoid interacting with her, or pretend she didn't exist. They clearly knew, just as I did, that this woman was sitting there on the sidewalk, because they were moving to the left and right to keep from stepping on her or tripping over her.

I remember looking down at her as I was walking by. And at that moment she happened to look up at me. I wish she hadn't done that. I wish she hadn't done that because, the moment she looked up at me and our eyes met, I recognized her. I recognized her as a fellow human being. I could see that she was a child of God. And yet, I continued to walk by her and go on my way.

I'll be honest. It wasn't until I was writing this sermon that the memory of her came to my mind. I hadn't thought of her before that. But it seems our very brief encounter—I'm talking a matter of only a few seconds—must have made some kind of a lasting impact on me, or I wouldn't have remembered her more than a year later.

I wonder how different my memory of our encounter would be if I had stopped for a moment, pulled out a *pound* coin—worth a few dollars American—and dropped it into her bowl. I might not be feeling the tinge of sadness and guilt that I'm feeling right now.

And I wonder as well what kind of an effect it would have had on her if I had taken the time to stop and show her a little kindness and compassion. To give her a little money. It wouldn't have ruined my vacation. It wouldn't have prevented me from doing anything fun and exciting on my trip to England. It wouldn't have prevented me from being able to get back home.

Yes, I can soothe my tinge of guilt and sadness with logical, legitimate reasons as to why it was okay that I didn't drop a coin into her bowl. She may have been a con artist who was only posing as a needy beggar. She may have had more money than I had, and didn't actually need anything at all from me. She may have been fully capable of working to support herself financially.

But then again, she may also have been Christ, sitting on that sidewalk, hungry, homeless and genuinely in need of help, looking up at me to see what my response would be. If that's the case, may God have mercy on my soul.

"Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and

you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger and you did not invite me in; I needed clothes and you did not clothe me; I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.'

"They . . . will answer, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' "He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'

A man named William E. Barton wrote a parable entitled *The Millionaire and the Scrub Lady*, which is sort of a modern day, kind of tongue-in-cheek retelling of the parable of *Lazarus and the Rich Man*.

There is a certain millionaire, who hath his offices on the second floor of the First National Bank Building. And when he goeth up to his offices he rideth in the elevator; but when he goeth down, then he walketh. And he is a haughty man, who once was poor, and hath risen in the world.

He is a self-made man who worshipeth his maker. And he payeth his rent regularly on the first day of the month; and he considereth not that there are human beings who run the elevators, and who clean the windows, hanging at a great height above the sidewalk, and who shovel coal into the furnaces under the boilers. Neither doth he at Christmas time remember any of them with a tip or a turkey.

And there is in that building a poor woman who scrubbeth the stairs and the halls. And he hath walked past her often, but hath never seen her until recently. For his head was high in the air, and he was thinking of more millions. Now it came to pass on a day that he left his office, and started to walk down the stairs. And the scrub lady was halfway down; for she had begun at the top and was giving the stairs their first onceover. And upon the topmost stair, in a wet and soapy spot, there was a large cake of soap. And the millionaire stepped on it.

Now the foot which he set upon the soap flew eastward toward the sunrise, and the other foot started on an expedition of its own toward the going down of the sun. And the millionaire felleth down on the topmost step, but he did not remain there. As it had been his intention to descend, so he descended, but not in the manner of his original design. And as he descended he struck each step with a sound as if it had been a drum.

And the scrub lady stepped aside courteously, and let him go by.

And at the bottom he arose, and considered whether he should rush into the office of the building and demand that the scrub lady be fired; but he considered that if he should tell the reason, there would be great mirth among the occupants of the building. And so he held his peace. But since that day he taketh notice of the scrub lady; and passeth by her with circumspection.

Because there is no one so high and mighty that he can afford to ignore any of his fellow human beings.

For a very humble scrub lady and a very common bar of yellow soap can taketh the mind of a great man off his business troubles with surprising rapidity. Wherefore, consider these things, and count not thyself too high above even the humblest of the children of God. Lest haplessly thou falleth down from thy place of pride and walk off with the bruises aching a little more by reason of thy suspicion, while the scrub lady smileth in her suds, and faces the day's work more cheerfully by reason of the fun thou hast afforded her. For these are solemn days, and he that bringeth a smile to the face of a scrub lady hath not lived in vain.

Now, at the conclusion of Jesus' parable of Lazarus and the rich man, there's no indication that Lazarus was smiling and having fun at the expense of the rich man after his fall into Hades. But what is clear in the story is that, ultimately, in the end, poor, humble Lazarus found comfort and satisfaction, and received justice at the side of Father Abraham.

And the arrogant rich man . . . well, he also received justice, but of another kind: the justice of God's Kingdom, where the last shall be first, and the first last, and the proud, comfortable and well-to-do who walk around with their heads held high and their eyes closed to the plight of others who are less fortunate may suddenly and unexpectedly find themselves tumbling down a flight of stairs and hitting bottom.

As Jesus said on more than one occasion, those who have ears, let them hear. Amen.