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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 21C)

September 25, 2016

Text: Luke 16:19–31

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

A theologian once said that teaching the 10 Commandments during catechism classes is one of the most dangerous things a pastor does. The reason? A correct teaching of the 10 Commandments reveals the idols and false gods safely tucked away in the recesses of our hearts. The Small Catechism teaches us that the fulfillment of the 1st Commandment is to “fear, love, and trust in God above all things.” It’s the shortest explanation in the Catechism and the easiest to memorize. But it’s also the most revealing when we take it seriously. And sometimes, those idols of the heart are long-cherished and precious. Casting them out can be quite painful.

The gospel readings from the past few weeks have focused on how God’s people should rightly think about their earthly possessions. Let us apply the 1st Commandment’s explanation to our material possessions. Do you fear, love, and trust in God above any and all of your financial resources? Yes, is the correct answer. But what does your financial habits and priorities reveal? In other words, how do you use your money? Does your actual practice reveal that you fear God in using your money in only those things which bring glory to God’s holy name and are of service to your family, friends, neighbors, and strangers? That you love God in how your material wealth is accumulated and used in daily life? That you trust God in the distribution of your resources?

Consider what Jesus teaches about earthly possessions and wealth ...

“Sell your possessions, and give to the needy. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Luke 12:33–34).

“No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money” (Luke 16:13).

“When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (Luke 14:12–14).

Did you notice that the first two spoke directly about the heart and how it relates to wealth? Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. And you will either love money and hate God or love God and hate money; only one can be your master. The third passage, from Luke 14, spoke to giving your material resources to the poor without thought of being repaid, except by God at the resurrection on the Last Day.

Today’s gospel reading from Luke 16 comes in the form of a story, maybe a parable. It puts flesh and bone on all that Jesus has taught about possessions and faith. There are two characters, polar opposites of each other. One man is filthy rich, feasting sumptuously every day on the best food available in the finest clothing. The other is filthy poor, so dirty and forlorn that only the dogs paid him any attention as they licked his oozing sores. The rich man had everything, the poor man nothing.

We don’t know the name of the rich man but we do know the name of the poor man. Does that suggest something? The righteousness of faith endures, giving one a name remembered by God for all eternity. The idolatry of unbelief, by contrast, is like chaff driven away by the wind into utter forgetfulness.

Let’s apply the 1st Commandment’s explanation to these two men. Who did they fear love and trust above all things? Lazarus, the filthy poor man, believed in God. We know this for at his death he was carried by God’s angels to heaven, here described as Abraham’s bosom. The unnamed filthy rich man died and went to hell. He did not fear, love, and trust in God. On the surface, it looked like the rich man had all the blessings of God. Lazarus looked forsaken by God, maybe even cursed. But death revealed the truth of the matter. That too should remind us that money and possessions cannot save us from death.

Listen to what Martin Luther says about the difficulty in evaluating one’s spiritual conditions based solely on the amount of possessions one has.

Many a person thinks that he has God and everything in abundance when he has money and possessions. He trusts in them and boasts about them with such

firmness and assurance as to care for no one. Such a person has a god by the name of 'mammon', on which he sets all his heart. This is the most common idol on earth. He who has money and possessions feels secure and is joyful and undismayed as though he were sitting in the midst of Paradise. On the other hand, he who has no money doubts and is despondent, as though he knew of no God. For very few people can be found who are of good cheer and who neither mourn nor complain if they lack Mammon. This care and desire for money sticks and clings to our nature, right up to the grave (LC 1:5-9).

Luther asserts that the care and desire of money clings to our nature right up to the grave. But wealth can deceive us. There's more to this story than just mere outward appearance of things. What really counts is what God's see and how we stand before a righteous God who searches the hearts and minds of all. Before Him nothing can be concealed! Death stripped both Lazarus and the rich man of the outward wrappings that had covered their lives in this world.

God sees past the thin veneer we place over our lives. He sees things as they really are. Filthy poor Lazarus was the blessed and successful man for he feared, loved, and trusted in God above the poverty of his circumstances. In spite of what his day-to-day experiences were telling him, Lazarus believed God loved him and wanted him to have His eternal blessings. That saving faith was vindicated and justified as Lazarus died in saving faith.

The rich man, by contrast, was an absolute failure. God saw who he was and hell reveals it to us as well. The rich man did not fear, love, and trust in God. His wealth and sumptuous feasting were his gods. This rich man never helped Lazarus with a morsel of bread or draft of refreshing water though he was only a short distance from his feasting table. In hell, the rich man wants Lazarus to cross the abyss separating heaven and hell to bring him the cooling touch of a moistened finger.

Death revealed what true about each man's heart. Where your treasure is, there you heart will be also, said Jesus. Lazarus believed in the promises of the Scriptures that stated that God would redeem his people from the power of sin, death and the devil. He looked for the eternal comfort God promises to all who trust and believe. His God did not fail him. In life, Lazarus' one true desire was God, His lord and savior. In eternity, he received his heart's desire.

The rich man found comfort in his earthly possessions. He did not see the promises of God as being his lasting, true source of joy and strength. The rich man believed he didn't need God's grace and mercy – he had food, clothing, and every comfort imaginable. His gods failed him. He lived his earthly life without God's love and so his eternal life would be lived without God's love.

Lazarus seemed to be a wasted life. But in the end, God revealed it to be the greatest success story imaginable. And our Lord promises the same eternal success for you. No matter how sick, poor, or desperate your life appears to be, through faith in Jesus you are the pinnacle of success. The world may laugh and scoff at such hope. But it matters not. God sees things as they really are and so do we through faith in Jesus.

To fear, love, and trust in God above all things finds its fulfillment in Jesus. Regardless of what this world says about you, stand firm in Christ. He will not fail you. Leave this holy place today in the confidence of eternal life in Christ Jesus. Use your earthly possession for God's glory and for your neighbor's care. By God's grace in Christ, all of you shall hear those glorious words, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your eternal inheritance."

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.