**THE WAY EVERLASTING: SERMONS BY JAMES DENNEY**

**14. THE RICH MAN'S NEED OF THE POOR by JAMES DENNEY**

*"Now there was a certain rich man, and he was clothed in purple and fine linen, faring sumptuously every day; and a certain beggar named Lazarus was laid at his gate."*

*Luke 16:19 f*

Many of the words of Jesus are best understood when least explained. They are true in the immediate impression they make upon the mind of a child, and if we could only become as little children and recover it, this is the only truth they are intended to convey. The story of the rich man and Lazarus - the evangelist does not call it a parable - is a case in point. In the minds of many grown-up readers it raises only irrelevant questions - questions which it does not raise for the simple, and which it is not intended to answer. In what condition does the soul survive this life? Is its condition fixed at or by death? Is there a further probation for those who have failed here, or who have never had a chance? Is the departed soul shut up in itself, in absolute loneliness, or can it communicate with God or with other spirits in that world or in this? I do not say these are not natural questions, but they are not questions with which Jesus is here directly concerned, and to seek answers for them here is precarious.

When we survey the Gospel according to Luke as a whole, we see that one of the main interests of the evangelist is in the teaching of Jesus about riches and poverty. This was so characteristic of our Lord and so emphatic that no one telling the story of His life could possibly miss it, yet Luke has preserved a good deal which the other evangelists have overlooked. It is he alone who tells us that Jesus opened His ministry at Nazareth by applying to Himself the text, "He hath sent Me to preach glad tidings to the poor;" he alone who gives the first beatitude in the simple form, "Blessed are ye poor, for yours is the kingdom of God," and who adds as its counterpart, "Woe to you that are rich, for ye have received your consolation"; it is he alone who has the story of the rich man, who said to himself, "Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years, take thine ease, eat, drink and be merry"; and to whom God said, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee". And finally, it is he alone who has the story of the unjust steward who shrewdly used his master's money to buy friends for himself who would give him the shelter of their roofs when he lost his place. The moral of this shady story is daringly put by our Lord Himself: "And I say unto you, make to yourselves friends with the mammon of unrighteousness, that when it shall fail they may receive you into the eternal tabernacles". As if He had said, "You are going to lose your place too, like the unjust steward: be as sensible as he was. Spend your vile money in buying friends - you will need them - who can bear witness to you and welcome you as you pass from this world to the other." It is a daring moral, not to be legally interpreted or applied, but with living power in it for those who are willing to take it as it is meant. Of course there will always be those who think they can refute it. "The Pharisees," we read in v. 16, "who were lovers of money, derided him." They scoffed at the idea of a man investing in charity with the dividend in his mind which he would draw in the world to come. It is always easy to misrepresent when you do not want to understand; and the story of the rich man and Lazarus is the answer of Jesus to those who scoffed at the moral He drew from the unjust steward. It is the story of a man who forgot to invest in charity till it was too late. It consists of a visible scene, a scene behind the veil, and an appendix. It is worthwhile to look steadily at each, and then to summarize the teaching of the whole.

**1.** First there is the visible situation in vv. 19-21. The rich man's life is pictured before our eyes with all its indulgence and ostentation; he was clothed in purple and fine linen and fared sumptuously every day. There are lives like this, and people who can afford them. There is nothing they cannot buy - yachts, motor-cars, champagne, pictures, new and old books; no wish need be, and no wish is ungratified. There is no needless exaggeration in the picture, and not a touch of animosity or of class feeling. It is not said that the rich man made his money unjustly, still less that he coined it out of the sweat of Lazarus; his way of living is exhibited - that is all. Then side by side with him we have the picture of Lazarus. It is given more fully, and of course more sympathetically, but quite as impartially. It is a statement of facts and nothing more. Lazarus was a beggar man, whose body was covered with ulcers, and he lay at the rich man's gate, desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from his table. What is meant by the dogs coming and licking his sores is not quite plain. Perhaps the suggestion is that even the offensive animals that roam the streets of eastern towns were kinder to the poor wretch than his fellow men or his rich neighbour; but perhaps it is meant as the last touch of aggravation to his misery: these unclean beasts rasped his sores and he had not the strength to keep them at a distance. How desperately the poor man needed a friend! Yes, but not so desperately as the rich. What an opportunity, Jesus would have us understand, the rich man had to make Lazarus his friend - to buy his friendship with some of his miserable money. How much his friendship would have been worth to him in the future! But no such thing happened. The rich man was there in his purple and fine linen; the beggar was there in his rags and sores; and that is the whole story.

Perhaps under the influence of political economy we pity a little the rich man as well as the poor. Wesley tells us somewhere in his Journal that he met a man who proved to his own satisfaction that everyone who could afford it ought to wear purple and fine linen and to fare sumptuously every day; and that by doing so he would do more good to the poor than if he fed the hungry and clothed the naked. Even if we have not an unsolved doubt that there may be something in this, we have a lurking sympathy with the rich man saying to himself, "This is endless. Relieve one and you bring ten. This man is a product of social conditions for which society is responsible, not I; society should put him in a hospital and keep him out of sight; and if the hospital were put on the rates, I should not refuse to contribute my share." But the very point of the story is that Jesus takes no account of possible explanations or excuses. He deals only with facts. There is a poor man, destitute and in misery, at a rich man's gate, and nothing is done. Is that all?

**2.** No, in vv. 22-26 Jesus goes on to unveil the invisible situation. In the world into which Lazarus and the rich man are alike ushered by death, the parts are reversed. It is now Lazarus who feasts. He reclines on Abraham's bosom at the heavenly banquet, as John did on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper. It is the highest conceivable honour and felicity for a Jew. But the rich man is in hell, in an agony of thirst, tormented in flame. And there is something more terrible still. We are not told in the earlier part of the story whether the rich man had seen Lazarus at his door, but he saw him now afar off. He saw him, and would fain have had him as a friend. But it was too late. He had his chance of making Lazarus his friend while he lay at his gate, but he did not take it then, and it would never come back. There is something inexpressibly awful in the words, Son, remember. This lost soul, too, is a son of Abraham; he might have been where Lazarus is; nay, he ought to have been there. To understand why he is not, it is only necessary to recall the past. It is the very misery of hell to remember the lost opportunities of life, the chances that were given but not taken of winning the heaven for which men are made. Inexpressibly awful, too, is the finality implied in the words: "between us and you there is a great gulf fixed". The scene in the invisible world represents God's judgment on the earlier one, and against that judgment there is no appeal. This is to all eternity God's verdict on such things. The rich man may have thought little or nothing about Lazarus while they were both on earth, or he may have excused himself from doing anything for him by the kind of sophistries with which we have sometimes excused ourselves; but in neglecting to make Lazarus his friend he decided his own destiny for ever.

**3.** At this point, it is natural to think, the parable might have ended; the lesson which Jesus intended to teach - that we should provide for the future by making friends of those who will welcome us into the world to come - has been powerfully and solemnly taught. The inhuman man is a lost soul: he enters eternity without a friend. But in point of fact the parable does not end here: there is a curious addition (vv. 27-31) in which the rich man appeals to Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers, and Abraham persistently refuses. How is this connected in thought with what precedes? There are those who take it as a symptom of some surviving good in the rich man, an indication that he is not so destitute of humanity after all; there is a root of kindness and sympathy in him to which hopes of his own final restoration may be attached. Others, again, find in the appeal to Abraham only a symptom of latent rebellion; the rich man is virtually charging God with having been unjust to him, and making his restoration, if we may put it so, more impossible than ever. Both of these explanations fail in this respect: they introduce something which is irrelevant to the story as a whole. The idea in the appendix or supplement to the parable, however we define it, must be one which reinforces the main lesson, not one which (as with the interpretations supposed) distracts attention from it. The way in which it is to be woven into one whole with what precedes is, I believe, something like this. "That is final," we can imagine Jesus' hearers saying to themselves when He had finished His unfolding of the invisible situation; "that is final; but is it fair? The rich man did not know about the unseen world. If he had seen hell fire as clearly as he saw the wretchedness of Lazarus or his own sumptuous table, he would have acted differently. He should have been more distinctly warned of the consequences of inhumanity, and so should others be." It is to meet such thoughts as these, which would be sure to occur to others as they occur to us, that the parable is continued beyond v. 26. There is no further interest in the rich man on his own account; he is only used to state the objection which is sure at some time or other to present itself to every one - that the in visible world of which the parable speaks is without evidence. Men do not know about it, and if motives from it are to enter life and influence conduct, they ought to be told about it by a witness they could not doubt. "Let someone go to them from the dead." The great thing to notice is that Jesus treats this objection as mere trifling. "They have Moses and the prophets, let them hear them ... if they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead." What is wanted is that men should be humane; and if the revelation of the character and will of God in Scripture, and the appeal of the beggar at the door, do not make them so, what will? They must become humane from considerations of humanity, or not at all. If they can be inhuman with the Bible in their hands and Lazarus at their gate, no revelation of the splendours of heaven or the anguish of hell will ever make them anything else. So, at least, Jesus teaches, and so God acts. Who will venture to dispute the truth?

When we take the parable as a whole, therefore, it is not a lesson on the other world, but a lesson on humanity. In particular, it is a lesson on the opportunities which the rich have (and need), in presence of the poor, of making friends who can welcome and bear witness to them in the world unseen. I shall conclude with some reflections which it suggests for the mind and conditions of our own time and country.

The constitution of society is such among us that it is possible for great numbers of people to live almost without seeing the poor. There is a west end in every large town, and people can live exclusively in their own class. The destitute are not exposed as they are in civilizations of another order. There are poorhouses, infirmaries, asylums; the defective members of society, those who have been defeated in the battle of life, those who are physically and mentally, not to say morally, incapable of taking care of themselves, the poor, the maimed, the halt, the blind, are accumulated there; they do not shock us at our doors. But this is not all gain. What is unseen is too often unthought of, unfelt, not responded to. It does not constitute a motive for, and does not produce, humane and unselfish acts. The actual needs and woes of multitudes are hidden from multitudes of others; and there must be many who (apart from their own families) have never once considerately, spontaneously, unselfishly, and from motives of pure humanity, helped the sick or the poor.

This is a loss to the poor, but what the parable invites us to consider is that it is a greater loss to those in whom humanity lies dormant, or is selfishly re pressed. It is a loss to society when all help is organized and rendered through institutions, which however humanitarian they may be in their origin, tend constantly to fall short of being humane in their actual working. The personal contact of those who minister to the poor and destitute with those to whom their help is given sweetens the breath of society. Once when he thought himself dying Sir Walter Scott called his children round his bed and said to them: "For myself, my dears, J am unconscious of ever having done any man an injury, or omitted any fair opportunity of doing any man a benefit." What kind of life is it, which in a world crowded with appeals for humanity, never gives a man or a woman the chance of being humane? It is precisely this which is wanted to enrich and render happy lives which are stale with selfishness and satiety. Lazarus needed the rich man, undoubtedly; but do not let us forget that the main lesson of the parable is that the rich man needed Lazarus more still.

The difficulty of helping the poor must not be made an excuse for inhumanity. It may be very difficult to do it wisely, and in such a way as not to injure those whom we would fain help. No doubt in a world like ours there are parasites, professional beggars, and sponges of all kinds, who prey upon charity and are ruined by it. Men who are rich and are known to be kind are besieged by petitioners, sometimes no doubt necessitous, but sometimes false, importunate, and shameless. Often they are embarrassed, and sometimes when they find out that they have been defrauded they are tempted to give up interest in their kind, and to lapse into indifference and a stony heart. But anything is better than that. "Blessed," says the Psalmist, "is he that considereth the poor." Probably there are cases in which his consideration will lead to the conclusion that a touch of law is wanted to help with effect, and that the Charity Organization Society, or some institution which can deal with the shifty on the basis of rules, is better adapted than he is individually to do what needs to be done; but on the whole, this is not likely. It is the contact of man with man by which humanity is quickened and enriched on both sides, and when we can exercise it directly, it is twice blessed.

Another reflection germane to this story is that the great impediment to helping others is the love of pleasure. It is the desire, or what is perhaps stronger still, the unconscious tendency, to live as the rich man lived, that defeats the claim of the poor. One of the inevitable results of civilization is the multiplication of artificial necessities, and of those who are eager to meet the demand for them. We need or think we need a thousand things which we could very well do without, and there are a thousand people importuning us to spend our money upon them - thrusting them into our very hands on the most tempting terms. Plainly there are many people who find the temptation to spend so strong that they simply cannot keep their money in their pockets. It is drawn from them as by an irresistible attraction. They have no bad conscience about it, but they just do not know where it goes. It goes on dress, on travelling, on trinkets, on personal adornments, and indulgence of every kind; and the result is, that when the call of charity comes there is nothing to meet it. All works of love, from Christian missions down, are carried on under the pressure of a perpetual deficit. When people say they have not anything to give for such causes, they are as a rule telling the truth. They have nothing to give because they have already spent everything. But the true moral of this is, that the call for charity is often also a call for self-denial and thrift. No one will ever have anything to give who has not learned to save, and no one learns to save without checking the impulse to spend his money for things which it would no doubt be pleasant enough to have, but which he can quite well do without. The rising generation is credited rightly or wrongly with excessive lack of restraint here. Everything goes. They live up to their means and beyond them, and have nothing to give away. This is not the way to become rich on earth, but what the parable teaches is the more serious lesson that it is not the way to become rich toward God. The man who has spent nothing on charity has no treasure in heaven. He is as poor as Lazarus there. He is on the way to a world in which he will not have a single friend.

The main teachings of the parable may be summed up in two further thoughts which it might almost be said to force upon us. The first is, that God appeals to us at our doors, and in ways which it is impossible for us to misunderstand. Many people believe themselves to be interested in religion, in whom nevertheless everything which could truly be called religious life is held in abeyance because of what they consider religious difficulties. They cannot properly be religious - they cannot, so to speak, get their religious life under way - until these difficulties are disposed of. They read this story of the rich man and Lazarus, for example, and their minds immediately go off on the familiar line. Where is Hades? Do all people enter it when they die? Is the state of those who are there affected by the resurrection? What is the authority for us of the words here ascribed to Jesus? Are they literally true, or are they true only in the impression they make on the moral imagination? These, to their minds, are the religious questions raised by this narrative, and religion seems to them to be somehow barred or held in suspense till these questions are answered. I do not say they are never to be asked, or that it is no matter how they are answered. But surely if anything is plain, it is plain that to the mind of Jesus the one important religious question is none of these. It is a far simpler question: What have you done with Lazarus at the door? No one will come from the dead to give you the clear and distinct knowledge of the unseen world which curiosity craves. But no ignorance, suspense, or indecision about these remote questions has any vital relation to religion. It is in the situation which we have to deal with at our doors that all real religious motives are to be found. It is in that situation, and under the influence of the motives which it yields, that we have to make - and do make - to God and man the revelation of what we are.

The second thought, and that in which we may say the parable is summarily comprehended, is that men are judged finally by the standard of humanity. The sublime picture of the last judgment in Matthew xxv. 31-46 may be said to be our Lord's own generalization of what is here presented in a particular case When the Son of Man sits on the throne of His glory and all nations are gathered before Him, He judges them by the rule which is here applied to the rich man. If there are those to whom He must say, "I was an hungered, and ye gave Me no meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave Me no drink: I was a stranger, and ye took Me not in; naked, and ye clothed Me not; sick, and in prison, and ye visited Me not": if there are those to whom He must say this, there is nothing to say in reply. It is a final condemnation. Inhumanity is the damning sin which excludes for ever from the company of the Son of Man those who are guilty of it. The man who needs our help at this moment is trying what we are, and at the Last Judgment will be the decisive witness for or against us. True religion is as simple as this, and it is a fatal blunder when we allow a truth so vital and indisputable to be blurred or shadowed or thrust into the background by those philosophical or theological perplexities which are so commonly spoken of as religious difficulties. It is humanity - I mean humanity in the ethical, not the metaphysical sense; humanity as opposed to insensibility, selfishness, cruelty - which by uniting us to man and to God assures our future. It brings us into a common interest with God and His children. He who feeds the hungry and clothes the naked has treasure in heaven, and the very fact makes heaven real to him as it cannot be to the hard hearted. The invisible world will never be more than a source of unanswerable questions, which will take the delusive form of religious difficulties, to the unfeeling and inhuman; but to those who live in a love and humanity like that of Jesus it will be what it was to Him - another part of the Father's house, and as real as that which we see.