

The context of our Gospel reading is a fairly common one – Pharisees disputing with Jesus. St. Luke notes that the Pharisees were lovers of money, and when they took exception to Jesus' teaching on that matter, Jesus replied with the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

In this story, Jesus teaches that money itself isn't the issue, but rather the condition of a person's heart, and how that leads them to use what they've been given by God. This inward character or identity, whether or not faith is present, this has eternal consequences, both for those Pharisees who heard this for the first time and for us still hearing it in God's word today.

In this story, we meet two people, a nameless rich man and a leprous beggar named Lazarus. Each of them have been given certain things by God.

The rich man has been given riches. He dresses himself in soft, luxurious clothing, dyed with the same expensive purple dyes that the Roman Emperors used on their clothing. In addition to wearing expensive clothes, the man is "feasting sumptuously every day." For most, a feast is a big meal of celebration, held every once in a while to mark a special occasion. For this man, every day is a celebration, every day is a display of abundance and plenty. The tables are overflowing, cleared away only to make room for the next course, the next day's feast.

This man has been given much by God, as it is God who gives everything, not only in the life to come, but also in this life here and now.

In stark contrast to this rich man, we have Lazarus. Lazarus is covered in sores, a leper, one whose disease made him unclean, a social outcast avoided by the proper types. And not only does he have leprosy, but he also suffers from some sort of paralysis or lameness, as he is dependent on others even to bring him places, such as laying him at the gate of a rich man's residence.

Lazarus obviously cannot work or earn a living; he is completely dependent on others to provide for him out of charity. Hence he is laid at a rich man's gate, that the man and his guests might care for him, even if they'd just give him the scraps which fell on the floor and would otherwise just be tossed into the trash.

Yet all Lazarus receives is the comfort of dogs, who come and lick his sores, trying to provide comfort but really just adding to the repulsiveness of Lazarus's condition. Lazarus has been given a life full of suffering, suffering which is a result of sin, but which at the same time comes from God, who controls all things – not just the outwardly good and pleasurable.

This would be known to Lazarus through something which had been given to both him and the rich man: God's word, spoken through Moses and the Prophets. In the end of the story, Jesus makes it clear that Moses and the Prophets are known by both men, either by their eternal fate or their express recognition of having had them.

This word, the Old Testament, contained the story of God's working throughout history, His great deeds of creation and deliverance, His unyielding faithfulness, and His promises to save those who – like Abraham – trust His word and put their hope in Him.

The word of God would enable both men, and all men of all ages, to rightly understand and respond to what had been given them. Yet sadly it is not both men who respond accordingly.

The rich man would have heard how it was God who provided riches. Moses and the Prophets are clear on this, speaking of how God enriched Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, how He brought the people of Israel to a land flowing with milk and honey, how He had made the kingdom of David and Solomon full of earthly splendor and glory.

The rich man also would have heard God's commands concerning riches. He would have read in the Law how the beggars, the sojourners, the widows, and the orphans were to be cared for by those with material blessings. He would have heard how the prophets condemned the rich in the Northern Kingdom who went through the motions of worship but then robbed and abused the poor in the land. He would have listened as the Psalms proclaimed that the earth was the Lord's and the fullness thereof, that man is just a caretaker of God's creation, to use it to God's glory, not his own.

And most importantly, the rich man would have heard Moses and the Prophets say that man is not to put his trust in the things of this life but rather in God's promises and His promised Savior.

The rich man heard all this, but he rejected it. He figured that God's must have given him all this blessing for his own enjoyment, and so he spent it on himself. He wore fancy clothes that others might take notice of him, be jealous of him, want to be like him. He threw continuous feasts, to show off his abundance, not caring about what fell on the floor because for someone like him, that didn't matter.

And in all this, he continually, pointedly ignored the need and the suffering of Lazarus at his gate. Lazarus had been placed there, not only by well-intentioned people so that he might be cared for, but by God, to call the rich man to repentance. Lazarus is at the rich man's gate by an act of God's love, so that the rich man might be convicted of his sins against God and then given opportunity to repent and show the fruits of repentance by caring for Lazarus.

But these cries go unheeded, with the rich man drowning out the pitiful begging of Lazarus, the calls of Moses and the Prophets, with more clothes, more food, more parties – numbing his conscience through earthly pleasure.

In contrast to the rich man and his rejection of God's word, Lazarus seems to have heard and embraced what God had spoken through Moses and the Prophets.

Hearing the stories of God's care for those seemingly forgotten, such as barren women like Sarah and Hannah, Lazarus trusted that God had not forgotten him.

Throughout the long period of misery, with the pain of the sores and the cold-shoulders of the rich man and his guests, Lazarus would have dwelt on the account of the people in Egypt, suffering there for hundreds of years. And just as the suffering in Egypt was not random but was used by God for the purpose of calling both the Egyptians and the Canaanites to repentance, Lazarus would have

taken comfort in the fact that God was using his suffering for good, even if he could not have known for sure what that good was at the time.

Though it may have seemed at times that the whole world was against him, Lazarus would have been reminded of all the times when God was faithful – faithful to Noah and his family, faithful to Abraham and his offspring, faithful to the people of Israel in bringing them to the Promised Land both from Egypt and again from exile in Babylon.

Lazarus would have read about all the times when God stripped away the material blessings from Israel, and how this was a blessing as it brought them back from idolatry and destruction, and he could even rejoice that God was keeping him from the temptations of such idols.

It's no coincidence that Lazarus's name means "He whom God helps." His whole life became a testimony to relying on God and God alone for help.

This might not have seemed obvious to anyone during their earthly lives. It very well may have appeared like God was helping the rich man and was hurting Lazarus. But then came the moment that revealed the truth, both the truth of God's word and the truth of each man's heart: death.

Both men suffer that fate common to all men, the fate which you and I will suffer, unless Christ returns first. And as Jesus shows, death is the moment of truth.

Lazarus dies, and He is truly shown as He whom God helps. He passes through the valley of the shadow of death, but the Good Shepherd in whom He has hoped does not abandon him. God sends His holy angels to carry Lazarus to Abraham's side, to join him and all the faithful in the eternal peace and rest of God. Lazarus has trusted that God would care for him, and now God provides comfort and gladness without end.

Lazarus didn't earn this through his poverty; he didn't build up his heavenly merits through suffering itself. No, Lazarus is there in paradise because He clung to the faith which God had given him through His word.

This faith let Lazarus know that, even though he was given to suffer in his earthly life, God was using it for his ultimate, eternal good. This gift of faith alone credited Lazarus with righteousness, just as it had with Abraham, and the patient suffering was a fruit of that faith, evidence of who it was who dwelt in Lazarus's heart.

The absence of faith in God's word shown in the judgment spoken to the rich man. Upon his death, he isn't carried up by the angels, but is sunk down into Hades, hell itself. While he could ignore God's word in his earthly life, drowning it out with pleasure, there is nothing in hell that can drown out the torment, because there is only torment.

There is physical torment with the flames, flames that bring excruciating pain but never the "deliverance" of having the nerves seared.

There is emotional and spiritual torment, as when Abraham tells the rich man to remember his previous life, to recall that he is in hell of his own choice, and that he didn't have to be there. He'll have an eternity of regret, but never any closure.

And there is the torment of relationships. The man doesn't want his brothers there, and if they are damned alongside him, that will only make things worse. Our society loves to mock this, saying things like, "I may be in hell, but all my friends will be there." Friendship, love, empathy, trust, happiness – everything that makes a relationship good is a gift from God. And in hell, those good gifts are stripped away. In hell, there are only enemies.

But if only God did more! If only God worked more signs, gave more blessings, showed more earthly power, then no one would go to such a miserable place! If only Lazarus would go to the rich man's brothers and warn them, then they'd repent and believe!

No. "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them hear them." It is the Word that brings to life. "Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ."

God's word tells us that we are poor, miserable sinners, and the wages of our sin is death. And His word also tells us that He took on flesh and paid the price for those sins, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.

He tells us that every good and perfect gift we have comes down from Him. He tells us that He uses even suffering to refine us like gold refined by fire, that we may not be dulled but shine with the angels in heaven.

The power contained in the word, be it spoken, joined to water, or under bread and wine, makes us new creations, children begotten from above. That word tells us who we are and makes us who we are: Lazarus – he whom God helps. We should rejoice in this word, embrace this word, and look forward to the day when we are at Abraham's side.

Or we can decide our own way. We can try to establish our own identity, replace Moses and the Prophets, Christ and the Apostles, with our own pursuits and desires.

But if we do this, we reject that very thing which tells us and makes us who we are. It wasn't the rich man's riches that damned him – Abraham was rich – it was his rejection of his identity, his name, as a child of God.

It's no coincidence that the rich man has no name. He had been given one, given when he was circumcised and joined to the children of Abraham, just like we today are given names in Holy Baptism and joined to the children of Abraham. But through rejecting God's word, he has rejected his own name, and thus blotted it out of the book of life. Jesus says that, at the Judgment, He will say to such nameless people, "I never knew you."

Brothers and sisters in Christ, let us not reject our own names as God's children, no matter how great the temptations of comfort and pleasure in this life may be. Let us rather cling to God's word, which tells us that we are Lazarus – he whom God helps, helps in times of both plenty and want, in comfort and in suffering – and let us rejoice that Christ Himself has written our names into the book of life.

In the name of Jesus, amen.