

SERMON

# Sermon for the First Sunday after Trinity

*Gustaf Wingren*

Luke 16:19–31 · 1940

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*26 June 1940*

*Gamleby Church*

*Text: Luke 16:19–31*

*Hymns: 474:1–3; 297:1–3; 175:8–9; 122:1–4; 119:5*

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

Let us pray.

*Let no delight and no distress  
so great ever befall me,  
though it were a matter of life and death,  
that it could turn me from you.  
Let nothing become so dear to me  
that it can draw me from you  
and can weaken  
my heart's desire  
to please you alone. Amen.*

(Swedish Hymnal 343:4)

“Irreplaceable values” — so runs the motto for today, the First Sunday after Trinity. And by this is meant the treasures in heaven, not the treasures on earth.

For a long time, and the time is not over yet, the Christian preaching about the great importance of earthly poverty has been among the most hated and reviled teachings in the eyes of this world. The church, it is said, has stood in the way of all social progress with its endless preaching that heaven is far more important than earth. In this way it has dulled people's will to improve their outward situation, and has become "opium for the people." What are we to say to this?

The first thing we must note is that Scripture really does give earthly poverty great spiritual value. The first Christian congregation won most of its members among the lowly and the destitute. The evangelist Luke in particular seems anxious to collect those very sayings of the Lord and Master in which the poor man is called blessed. Our text today, too, is taken from his book. Jesus himself was born in a stable, and afterward, as he says himself, he had "no place to lay his head."

Experience also tells us that too many earthly possessions are a hindrance to the one who is striving forward in the spirit. Practically every deepening of the ideal of piety in the course of history has had its root among simple people. And on the other hand, every revival that sets out especially to reach so-called fine people ends in spiritual shallowness. The revival that does not reach the people who strive and toil with their hands and have about enough for the day can never become a spiritual power in a people. It remains a ripple on the surface. It also lacks inner spiritual power.

But what is true of poverty is also true of sickness. Health has a unique ability to make a person shallow. When the strength of the body is broken, a person often enough begins to discover spiritual realities he did not see before. "If in good fortune you are forgotten, in distress men seek you... In the house of sorrow, on the bed of pain, your comfort alone avails."

But although we know that sickness can awaken a person, it does not occur to us to strive for anything but health — health for others and health for ourselves. That is right. God has entrusted human beings with this commission: to spread the forces of health, to fight against sickness and death. Who is to be sick in spite of all the art of healing and all health care is for God to decide, not us. We are not to meddle in God's work. We have nothing to do but our own work: to help the sick, to seek out doctors, to look after health.

In the same way, the Christian church and the individual Christian are to join with other sound citizens in the search for improvements in our earthly society. We have the Lord's

commission to prevent the distress of the poor, and this can also be done by taking part in common measures, through legislation, in local government and in parliament. It is true that our Bible speaks of the poor man as blessed. But our Bible speaks, broadly, of the suffering man as blessed. Who is to suffer want, in spite of all good striving, is for God to decide.

So it must be said that the Christian, as a Christian, is to strive for the kind of society that distributes earthly goods as reasonably and justly as possible. But when this has been said, it is just as important to stress that the one whom God lets be poor, and who is content in his lowliness, is blessed. In a way this beatitude applies even to his life on earth — at least if we keep to the moderate poverty that may be found in one home or another in Sweden today, which cannot be compared with the distress Lazarus suffered, as our text describes it.

Everyone who has tried living his life in different classes of society knows this: joy is seldom purer than in a poor home where all hold together, where every object, every simple household thing, is the fruit of toil and thrift, where the meal is a fellowship around God's gift, the daily bread, and where the weariness of life of the man of property is unknown. A Swedish poet who grew up in humble circumstances wrote these words in a song to his father: "As though bright with blessedness was your brow many a time, when you had given us all bread and saw us content." The contentment and good conscience of the humble home are caught in those lines better than in many more eloquent descriptions.

But above all our text wants to tell us that poor Lazarus was blessed in heaven. Nowhere does our Gospel say that Lazarus was a godly or believing man. Nor does it say that the rich man was unjust or vicious, in any other way than this: that he let Lazarus stay poor, though he saw his misery every day and could have helped. The only explanation the text gives us for the two men's different destinies is that Lazarus in his earthly life received evil things, while the rich man "received his good things."

How is a Christian to think about his earthly possessions in the light of this text? Is it a matter, then, of stripping oneself of earthly goods as far as possible? Is the rich man condemned simply for being rich? The first thing to say to this is that it really is a matter of being poor "in spirit" as well. The man of small means who hears our Gospel today with this thought alive in his heart — "There, the rich man got something to chew on!" — is using his own poverty as a way of raising himself at the expense of others, a way of judging others. He does not hear the gospel of the blessedness of the poor with joy, but with malicious joy. He is not really poor — not poor through and through. He does not receive God's word. He sits and

“receives his good things in his lifetime.” He is like the self-righteous rich man in the passage from Luke. God has no leniency toward self-righteousness, even if it lives in crying outward distress.

On the other hand, the one who has received more of this world’s goods than he needs for the day, and who trembles at Christ’s words about the power of earthly possessions to harm the soul, fears God — and he may know that he is pleasing to God as long as he fears God. It is better for him to keep the good position God has given him than for his property to be split up for no reason into small pieces and handed out aimlessly to right and left, as a pet doctrine that is not yet quite dead would have it. If a life above what is necessary and indispensable is possible at all, if a surplus of earthly goods can exist anywhere, then it is better for it to be found with the one who trembles before God’s judgment than for it to fall into the hands of those who care for neither God nor man. The one who, after a thorough examination of conscience, can say of himself that he feels he is a steward of earthly goods may know that God wants him as a steward. He can be one with a good conscience, without being troubled by the accusations of the crowd.

For the most important thing of all is still the heart’s true humility before God. Our whole New Testament impresses this on us without ceasing, as the foundation for a genuine and pure fellowship with God. We must not overlook, to be sure, that this humility of heart thrives best where outward circumstances are poor and small. Whoever has been given such circumstances to live in, let him thank his God that he is spared the many temptations that too much prosperity brings with it. But far be it from us to prescribe poverty as a law for the Christian. That would be to make too much of this world’s goods. It would also be a sacrifice to the fateful illusion that the perversity of the heart could be rooted out by outward measures.

So in the end the Christian message does not set up rules about the proper amount of possessions for a child of God. In the end we come to this after all: the essential thing is that all these earthly questions be put in their right place, as less important. Neither riches nor want matters so very much. We do not ask about that. We declare that these are side issues — and in that the church’s detractors are right. And this attitude of ours toward earthly goods depends on our knowing that “our citizenship is in heaven.”

It would seem that this is being forgotten more and more in our day — not only where the question of riches and poverty is concerned, but in other ways too. We are so desperately set on our position in the world, our unshaken reputation, and our security on earth. This is one

of the many reasons why faith breaks so easily in the face of war and violence. We have come very far from the firm certainty of the martyr church in the midst of suffering, the certainty that found expression in the ancient prayer: “May your kingdom come, and this world pass away.” It has come to this with us: when evil goes out over the earth, our eyes search for some spot on earth — a land, a people — that still stands as a dwelling place of the good, a land that has not yet been laid waste. Perhaps a land far away on the other side of the ocean, but a part of our earth all the same. If the whole earth fell victim to what we regard as evil, our hope would be gone. Here no one can accuse anyone else. We all must take the guilt of little faith on ourselves. We all must confess that we still put our hope in the princes of this world, that we tie our dream to earth and not to heaven. Our text today wants to make us let go of this cramped fixing of our eyes on the earth. It wants to make us see that all this “soon passes by, as if we flew away.” Everything essential lies on the other side of the border of earthly life, as Lazarus and the rich man came to find out. Only the one who has a firm faith in the eternal, invisible world can endure this life on earth, where our hope is always being disappointed.

But when we begin to ask about this world hidden from the eye, the world of the dead, we have a strange tendency to search, in morbid doubt, for signs and for the testimony of false prophets. Who can count up all the superstition that still to this day wins hearts when the question of the world of the dead becomes real for people — seeing spirits, séances with mediums of every kind, table-rapping, and other forms of pious fraud? Those who are far too enlightened and educated to believe in Christ’s cross and resurrection not seldom believe in spirits and ghosts in secret instead, much as the peoples of Africa do. The rich man’s five brothers evidently belonged to this sort of people. They would not believe until a dead man came back to them with a message from the spirit world. The Lord’s words, and Abraham’s answer to the rich man’s request, are forever the right word against all such hunting for signs and visions. Whoever will not believe the word gets nothing else to believe in. He must live out his life in the notion that this earth is all there is. No miracle will happen to him. “We have Moses and the prophets; let us listen to them.” We also have the Lord Christ himself, whose whole life was one unbroken labor to open the doors of God’s kingdom to the children of men. He has conquered death in the deed of Easter and given us the promise and the word of the resurrection. “No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

In faith in this Lord and in fellowship with him, the certainty and reality of the eternal world dawn on our hearts. In faith in this Lord we dare to say that there is no more condemnation

when the day of reckoning comes. In faith in this Lord we bear the meagerness of our outward life with joy. And if you have more of this world's goods than you need, then you know, if you have Christ as King, that you are a steward, to the glory of God. "If we live, we live to the Lord. If we die, we die to the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord." Amen.

*Translator's notes. The typescript dates the sermon "26/6 1940." In 1940 the First Sunday after Trinity fell on 26 May, so the month may be a slip, but the date is left as written. "Oersättliga värden," the motto for the day, is rendered "irreplaceable values." The Swedish poet's song to his father is not identified in the sermon, and the lines are translated for sense. The comparison with "the peoples of Africa" is kept as he wrote it in 1940. The hymn stanza is translated for sense, not as a metrical stanza.*

Gustaf Wingren · draft translation ·