

BaptistWay Bible Series for March 21: A fatal mistake

March 9, 2010

God is concerned for the plight of the poor. Jesus spent much of his time upon this earth with the poor, the downcast and the marginalized ones. How we treat the poor and how we minister to their needs says much about our love for God regardless of how spiritual we claim to be.

What the Bible says ...

The parable found in Luke 16:19-31 is the only one where Jesus gives a proper name to one of the characters within the story. His name is Lazarus, a man who represents the poor and outcast. He will be made rich in the kingdom of God. The unnamed rich man represents the arrogant wealthy who will be left destitute in eternity. Two themes emerge as the story is told: people who value riches over God will be rejected and God demands justice and mercy for the poor.

Religious imagery would not have been missed by those who listened to Jesus—the Jewish religious leaders. When Lazarus was carried by angels to Abraham's side (v. 22), this beggar was given the place of prominence reserved for the most pious of Jews. In contrast, the rich man, at the time of his death, was sent to hell or Hades.

The great divide between Lazarus' place of rest and the rich man's agony underscores the permanence of divine reward and judgment. This central idea is found in Luke 16:25 when Abraham speaks to the tormented rich man: "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony."

Connected to the reality of divine judgment is the principle that people are accountable for their actions. The rich man entreats Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his family so they will not end up in his eternal torment. Jesus intended Abraham's answer to send a message to those who knew the truth but rejected its claim upon their lives: "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead" (v. 31).

What the Bible means to me today ...

This passage strikes at the heart of all who love Jesus. These words are a wrenching "gut check" for those who take seriously their commitment to God's world. It serves as an examination. Have we passed the exam? As with any test, it depends on one's answers to the questions asked.

Does God have concern for the poor? This is not a trick question nor is it a political question. A survey of Scripture will convince the open-minded student of God's deep love for impoverished people. This truth flies in the face of what has been called "name it and claim it" theology. God is not an open checkbook waiting to fulfill our every desire. We would do well to use the resources and wealth he has given us to improve the plight of the marginalized.

Do you value possessions more than you value God's love and concern for the poor? If you live in America, then you are wealthy when compared with the standard of living across the world. Abraham's stinging assessment of the rich man who spent his life enjoying his wealth while Lazarus languished within plain sight is an indictment against most people I know, including myself.

Does this parable teach that all poor people go to heaven and all rich people go to hell?

No. People go to their eternal destination based upon what they do with

Jesus. The point of this parable is to make very clear that God loves and cares for the poor and that our love for him is reflected in the way we minister to the least among us. We are told not to judge one another, so God will be the one who judges the person who says, "I love you, Lord" but does nothing to improve the plight of the poor. Christians are not perfect people, but followers of Jesus cannot ignore the pressing needs of those who suffer. Actions speak louder than words.

What am I to do? This is a question that can lead to action. Get involved in relieving the suffering around you. Not all government-sponsored agencies are ineffective. Find the ones making the most impact and get involved. If your church does not involve its members in feeding, clothing and relieving the suffering of marginalized folks, then you might want to find a church that does. Most likely, your church provides opportunities but only a few are involved. If this is the case, it is unacceptable.

Above all, keep your eyes and ears open. If you do not see the needs around you, then you are of the same mind as the rich man. He ignored Lazarus all of his earthly life only to see and understand the truth too late. We must recognize the tsunami, the earthquake and the hurricane as more than natural disasters. We must see the faces of those we are commanded to comfort, feed, clothe and restore. And such people do not come just from disasters—they live all around us.