

# SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE


THE MAN WHO WOKE UP TOO LATE

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## THE MAN WHO WOKE UP TOO LATE

Call me Ichabod for my glory has departed. But before it vanished I gave it quite a ride!

I was young then and I had it made. My father had been a man of means and status and as his first-born son I came into a pretty penny when he died. From my earliest years I was tutored by the ablest teachers that money could procure. I had travelled some. It was only natural that I should have succeeded my father on the City Council.

Yes, I had it made -- plenty of leisure, plenty of money, plenty of power, and lots of life to live. That's why it is unaccountably strange that I should ever have risked so much -- more than I knew at the time -- to go out and meet the man they called the Nazarene.

It started innocently enough. I chanced upon him in Jerusalem a time or two as he addressed a crowd. I was always sure to stand way back. A man in my position cannot be too careful. In his presence I felt an emptiness inside. Something about him took me in. I had never met his like before.

Then one day I decided to swallow my pride and venture out to meet him. Venture out -- that's right. I waited until his travels took him beyond the city line. It would be safer there.

Normally good with words, I didn't quite know how to begin. I had rehearsed several different openings. One night I dreamt that I was standing in his presence and I woke up to find that I was. I blurted out, "Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

He didn't go for the word "good" and told me so. Then he made reference to the Commandments. Swallowing a little, I held my ground and said defiantly,

"All these I have observed from my youth up." For reasons unknown to me he let my unctuous boasting stand. I thought I was off the hook.

Then he let fly! You see, all the while we were talking he had an annoying way of staring at my money pouch. Not that I was carrying much. It's what it symbolized, I guess, that prompted him to note it so.

His words were clear and measured. "One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor....and come, follow me."

I wasn't looking for that. I was prepared to exchange ideas in a reasonable, civil way. But this? It was a frontal attack on my existence. Why, he was a fanatic! Yes, a fanatic, that's it. But fanatics do not love as that man loved.

And he wasn't after anything for himself, that was evident. Those men and women who tagged about with him were as little concerned about worldly advancement as some of the prophets I'd read about. And the Nazarene didn't want me to liquidate and give him the proceeds -- he wanted that the poor should receive it!

It was either/or. All or nothing. He didn't simply want to make me a better man. It wasn't my improvement he was after but my salvation!

As you know, I turned and went away. I half expected him to follow and entreat me further. But he never did. His word stuck as and where it landed. He refused to amend or qualify it in the least. Sell what you have...distribute to the poor...come, follow me.

I can't deny that I was sorrowful as I eased away. Shaken would be a better word. But I stumbled over a fallen branch and it jarred me just enough to make some coins that I was carrying jingle. That familiar sound restored my senses and brought me back to reality. That and the sight of a camel caravan passing in the

distance bearing spices from the east.

## II

I aged into middle life still going strong. My Council duties were more perfunctory than anything, so I had lots of time on my hands -- and I used it well. Know what I did? I bought a farm. Not to work myself, mind you, but to own and develop. I found an ambitious and industrious steward and let him run it.

Everything we touched turned to profit. I doubled my holdings every two years. I'll grant you that we kept costs down by exploiting unskilled labor, and prices up by holding crops off the market now and then. All the same it was a good operation and I was looked up to and respected.

I said before that I went away from Jesus. But no one ever does that -- not really. And I was no exception. The conversation I had had with him never fully left me. I could suppress it for a time by an act of will. Lose it in a spurt of busyness. Drown it in my mounting profits. But always it came back and was there -- especially in the night as I readied my mind for sleep. "Sell....distribute....come."

No one else, of course, talked to me about such matters. In the company of my peers we reinforced each other in our common point of view. We were on top because we deserved it. There's no denying that. And the poor were at the bottom because that's what they deserved. Life is honest. Give it your best shot and it will be good to you. Laze your way through and you'll wind up with nothing.

Once in the dead of a sleepless night I thought about the system that had rewarded me so. I couldn't lose, really, and the impoverished, poor devils, couldn't win. The game was being played with loaded dice. But such thoughts were heavy, and with the morning light I washed them from my mind.

No one talked to me about the matters Jesus raised. Not even at church. Church -- does that surprise you? I was a religious man. I was at the temple an average of 3 sabbaths a month. Even drifted into a synagogue near my farm occasionally. I knew the Scriptures. My favorite Bible character? It was Solomon. I like the way he was able to think of God and wealth in the same breath. (I confess to having wondered some whether in Jesus a greater than Solomon had come.) I didn't care much for the prophets. Most of the Psalms I found comforting. And good old Cain, so much maligned, asked my question for me, "Am I my brother's keeper?"

In the little synagogue that I supported some and attended now and then nothing too disturbing was ever uttered. The rabbi knew where his next shekel was coming from -- if you know what I mean. I didn't belong to the synagogue -- the synagogue belonged to me.

Oh, did I make it clear that I didn't live on the farm? No, I had a house on the edge of the city on the brow of an attractive hill. A strong iron fence protected my interests and guaranteed my privacy. At the base of the hill where the fence had its center there was a massive and, if I may say so, attractive gate.

But, and here's the drawback -- every day, week after week and year after year, a beggar sat at my gate. Why he thought I'd be a soft touch I do not know. He was a lamentable figure -- meagerly clothed, gaunt, dirty and covered with festering sores from head to foot.

It was embarrassing to say the least. He was on public property so I couldn't force him off - not without making an ugly scene. I had one of my servants offer him a bribe to leave but the stubborn fool wouldn't take it. Some of the most important people of the day passed through that gate and I found myself having to apologize for the presence of that wretched human being.

Why did I not give him something? Out of the question. Inertia should not be subsidized or encouraged. Besides, where would it all end? Get him straightened out and a thousand others would line up to take his place.

Gradually, as I see it now, I hardened. My wealth made me heavy, protective, suspicious and uncaring. I got to where I could pass that beggar by without so much as a qualm. He became a blur in the scenery of my world.

I didn't plan to stay that way, mark you. I would run my gains still higher 'till I had enough -- do it my way for a while and then try His! Till I had enough. In point of fact one never has enough. The arteries of my life were clogged by my possessions. Rather than love people and use things, I had settled into the habit of loving things and using people. My thirst for more was strong and rising.

Well, the farm prospered so that my problem was one of storage! It wouldn't do to flood the market with my bumper crops. Prices would fall. So, I made plans to expand. I would take a thorough inventory, tear down the old barns and build new ones in their stead. Then I would take my ease -- eat, drink and be merry.

Smug in the knowledge that I had devised a perfect plan I went off to bed that night. I fell asleep quickly. All was well. Then with terrifying force I was routed from my sleep. Plain as day and loud as thunder a voice exploded in my brain: "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee. Then whose shall these things be!"

### III

Small comfort to me now that my passing was widely noted. A two column spread in "The Jerusalem Times." Many tributes to my honor. Much weeping. Considerable interest in my will.

I was in torment. Engulfed in the flames of remorse. Suffering the burning anguish of a missed destiny.

I cut my eyes toward the sky and could scarce believe what I saw. That beggar, Lazarus, whom I had so carefully avoided was reclining in the arms of Abraham. His time had come as well. But his end was different. I had presumed that I was a son of Abraham but I was not. I had presumed that Lazarus was a stranger to the Covenant, but he was safely in. I would have given anything for a drop of the water that he had in such abundance. But I could not go to him and he could not come to me. Different roads had led to different destinations.

My brothers then -- I thought. They should be warned. We had never talked of anything but money -- and that rarely. "Abraham," I cried, "my brothers -- my brothers. Warn them. For the sake of all that's holy, warn them!"

But Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the prophets, the same means of grace you had."

"But that's not enough," I cried. "They need a miracle. If one would appear from the dead this would turn them around."

But Abraham would not yield. "If they won't heed the Scriptures," he said, "neither would they be impressed if one were to rise from Sheol."

He was right, of course, for one has come back from death and the world continues in its unbelief.

#### CONCLUSION

I intrude my story upon you for the same reason that I wished my brothers warned. Competition, ambition, and greed were the values that governed my life -- or should I say my death. Those values you have elevated to a system. Do you wonder at your



pain and the world's unrest.

Understand me correctly. It was not my wealth per se that placed me beyond the reach of hope. Nor was it the poverty of Lazarus that carried him to Abraham.

It was the relationship between the two of us that counted. I had the power to help him and I failed. It was compassion that I lacked.

What I was too blind to see is that the Lazaruses of this world announce the shape and content of the coming Kingdom of God. They are there for more than the prodding of our consciences. Their presence is meant to do more than evoke our guilt. They are not simply a problem to be solved. There is another plane on which they must be viewed.

It is clear to me now that the poor, as Jesus understood them, are related not only to the world and the systems of men, but to the Kingdom of God.

The poor exist as a sign of the promises of God. They expose our cruelty and sin. Through them God acts to topple systems and effect his will. No one is free until the poor are free. No one is safe until the poor are safe. I see it now. In their suffering they call attention to the unfinished business of the King! The vindication of the oppressed is the burden of the Lord.

Nations have a way of forgetting this -- and always to their peril. Governments tend to serve the interests of the strong and to regard as incidental the cruelties inflicted on the weak. Even our City Council operated along those lines.

So revolutions come and the face of history registers its pain. The poor with nothing to lose resist. The rich toss uneasily in their beds as power shifts and puts their plenty under threat. Wars and rumors of wars - is it any wonder?

Lazarus may not have much. But behind his seeming impotence are the legions of the Lord. His future is secure with him who scatters the proud in the imagination of their hearts, pulls down the mighty from their seats, exalts those of low degree, and the rich sends empty away.

"Sell...distribute...come." That's what it's all about, and I missed it! My destiny was there in the scaly hands of Lazarus and I failed to see. The gate that shut me in shut me out from God.

My awakening came too late. My time has come and gone. My fate is sealed. Not so with you. Today if you hear his voice harden not your hearts!

#### CLOSING PRAYER

*O Thou who art busy with us  
each one, not willing that  
any should perish,*

*Let thy word have its way in our hearts --  
until what we are and what we ought  
to be are one and the same.  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

#### FOOTNOTE

Background reading for this sermon are these passages from the Gospel according to St. Luke:  
18:18-27, 12:16-21, 16:19-31.



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