“I used to think I was poor,” says one comedian. “Then they told me I wasn’t poor, I was needy. Then they told me it was self‑defeating to think of myself as needy. I was deprived. (Oh, not deprived but rather underprivileged.) Then they told me that underprivileged was overused. I was disadvantaged.

“I still don’t have a dime,” this comedian concludes, “But I have a great vocabulary.” Maybe that comedian was laughing to keep from crying, because whatever you may call it, being poor isn’t any fun.

“There was a rich man,” said Jesus, “who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores and longing to eat what fell from the rich man’s table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.”

If there ever was a parable of Jesus that should keep us awake at night, it is the story of the rich man and Lazarus. Why? Because, compared to most of the people in the world, we are quite rich. That is why most of us would prefer not to think too much about this parable.

And, skipping to the Epistle to Timothy for just a moment – money isn’t the problem. We often hear, “Money is the root of all evil.” But Paul writes, “The LOVE of money is the root of all kinds of evil.” Money is just s commodity to be used. In itself, it is neither good nor bad. How we use it, or maybe more specifically, how we regard it – is either good or bad. Do we love it? Do we serve it? Or does it serve us, or more importantly, do we use it to serve God?

As we look at this parable, we are still with the group of disciples, people, Pharisees and scribes that we began with in chapter 15 several weeks ago. God is still looking for the lost. And God wishes that they be saved spiritually, but God also cares about their temporal needs. Thus we have this parable today. And it’s another that makes us more than a little uncomfortable. Luke’s Gospel, more than the other three, has a focus on the poor and needy.

“We’re saved by grace, not by works,” we rationalize to ourselves and this parable looks like it’s works that save us. So we gloss over this parable and other teachings of Jesus similar to it concerning our responsibility to the disadvantaged of our world using grace not works as our excuse. Indeed, we are very much like the rich man in our ability to see only what we want to see. We are sometimes guilty of doing this regarding some of those hard teachings of Jesus.

Matthew’s Gospel also gives us a picture that is seen by some to be salvation by works but it’s not. It is action as a result of faith. Jesus said, the Son of Man will say on the Last Day, “For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me.

“They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’

“He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me’” (Matthew 25:42-45).

And that is the problem. Jesus was there in a person who was hurting and we didn’t even notice. Because it is easier sometimes not to notice than to do something. How many of us ever really notice the problems of the poor in our society? In our community? Most of us are unaware of what miserable conditions many people live under.

One pastor tells how some years back he watched a political advertisement for presidential candidate Ross Perot. Remember Perot? He had those big, wide ears that political cartoonists just loved to draw. The pastor notes that on that paid political advertisement, Ross Perot brought out several charts that described economic life in America. One of those charts showed the level of poverty of our nation’s children compared to the levels of poverty of children living in European democracies.

“What percentage of the children who lived in European democracies were poor? About five to seven percent. What percentage of American children were poor? About 20% . . . No industrialized democracy was even close to the high number of 20% of American children living in poverty.

“Then Ross Perot said, with his Texas accent and big ears wagging, ‘It ain’t right, folks!’”

And Perot was correct: it ain’t right! Many of us who follow Jesus look away or close our eyes and don’t even acknowledge the problem. Like the rich man in Jesus’ parable we are the people who refuse to notice.

The rich man in this parable, of course, is not alone, or Jesus would not have told this story. All over the world in every generation, those who have much in terms of the world’s goods often turn a blind eye to those who have practically nothing.

Now I’m not saying that we should try to save every poor or needy person we see. But I’m also not saying that we should pass every one by either. We need to do something. Feed My Sheep is one way for us to do this. And it’s a good way. What more can we do? Well, I’d say lots because many of us have resources beyond our needs that we can use for others.

Notice that Jesus said in his parable that Lazarus “was laid” at the rich man’s gate. He was an invalid who had to be laid there. Lazarus was totally helpless. He apparently had no family to care for him. All he could do was beg, but the rich man couldn’t be bothered even to share a few coins. He refused to even acknowledge Lazarus’ existence but he knew Lazarus was there. He even knew his name because when he asked Abraham to send him over to cool his tongue, the rich man asked for Lazarus by name!! He was the man who deliberately ignored the poverty at his gate. Let’s not be him!

Why do you suppose the rich man was in Hades? There is no record of a vicious, glaring sin; no record of a vulgar, public sin. He was not cruel, as far as we know. He never ordered Lazarus from his gate or refused Lazarus the crumbs from his table. He was not a tyrant; not an oppressor of the poor, not a monstrous member of society. In society’s eyes he was probably honored and highly esteemed. What then was his sin? Ignorance! By that I mean he ignored what he could have changed. It was what we call a sin of omission or as we confess, “what we have left undone.”

How often do you and I take time to notice the people around us their needs, their concerns? Do we even notice what other people around us are going through? I know some of you do notice. But none of us notices everything. Can we notice more? Can we do more? Probably yes! Sometimes we are so preoccupied with our own cares and concerns that we give no thought to the problems of those about us. That’s normal. Sometimes. It’s sinful if it’s the way we are always.

Professor Robert Wuthnow once conducted some research about why some people are generous and compassionate, while others are not. He found out that many compassionate people at some point in their lives had someone act with compassion toward them. This experience of having someone show compassion toward them had transformed their lives.

For example, Wuthnow tells the story of Jack Casey. “All I ever learned from my father is I didn’t want to be like him,” Jack Casey once said.  He was raised in a tough home. His father was an alcoholic.  But something happened to Jack when he was a child that changed his life.  Jack needed to have surgery and was terrified.  But there was a nurse who remained by his side, holding his hand, reassuring him that everything would be okay.  “I’ll be right here, no matter what,” she told him.  And she kept her word; she was there and greeted him with a smile the moment he opened his eyes.

Years later, Jack became a paramedic and he was called to the scene of an accident.  A man was pinned upside down in his pickup.  Jack did his best to free the trapped man even as gasoline dripped down on them.  The man was afraid that he was going to die as the rescuers worked to free him.  One spark and the whole scene would go up in flames.

Jack remembered back to that time when he was a child and the nurse who never left.  He took the man’s hands and squeezed them as he said, “Don’t worry!  I’m right here with you!  I’m not going anywhere!”

Days after the rescue, the two men embraced as the driver said to Jack, “You know, you were crazy to stay there with me.  We both could’ve died.”

Jack smiled.  “I just couldn’t leave you,” Jack said.

Here is the point of this message. There was a time, spiritually, when each of us was a beggar lying at the gate totally helpless, and Christ noticed us and Christ loved us just as we are. As we remember that truth, that compassion, that grace, Christ calls us to look around and see someone who needs our attention, our compassion, our love.

And what the research shows is that such a person might just remember our generous attention when he or she is in the position to help someone else. And so that original act of kindness and love is extended - perhaps forever. Sort of paying it forward. But you can’t be part of this chain of love if you never take time to look beyond you own cares and concerns. Don’t be like the rich man who will forever be remembered as the person who refused to notice. Look around you today, to someone who needs your love. And then step out and give it. Amen