

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from Christ our Brother
amen.

On November 25, 1835, little Andrew Carnegie was born into a poor family in Scotland. He grew up in extreme poverty, and often would sleep to “forget the misery of hunger.” To save themselves from starvation, his family came to the United States when was 13, hoping for a better future. While here, Andrew got his first job as a bobbin boy in a Pittsburgh cotton factory, where he would change spools of thread 12 hours a day, 6 days a week. He later became a telegraph messenger boy, and later was promoted to an operator. He then moved onto railroad jobs, where he learned about the industry and business in general. During this time, Andrew began making investments in steel and oil companies that netted him huge returns. Some 65 years later, his Carnegie Steel Corporation became the largest steel company in the world, and he went on to become the richest man in the world, worth over \$450 million at that time... Not bad for a poor little boy from Scotland! Who doesn't love a good rags-to-riches story?

It's neat to see how people who come from nothing can become something. That is the American dream, at least it was when I grew up... We love to see how hard work can pay off. We enjoy these rags to riches stories, whether it is the story of people like Andrew Carnegie, Oprah Winfrey, Steve Jobs, Tom Brady, or Cinderella. Their stories are encouraging, instructive, and inspiring. Equally

interesting and instructive, though, can be the opposite: riches to rags stories. It's common to hear stories about celebrities, athletes, and investors who had it all and then lost it all. Their stories often serve as great warnings. This morning, Luke shows us both sides of life in our parable as he builds on his great reversal theme that began even before the birth story of Jesus when the angel announced to Mary she would give birth to God's Son. If you remember, Mary sang that beautiful Magnificat where she described God filling the hungry with good things even while sending the rich away empty. Then, later when Jesus gave the Sermon on the Plain He said blessed are the hungry for you will be fed; blessed are the poor for the Kingdom of Heaven is for them. Luke doesn't try to soften Jesus' words by spiritualizing them as Matthew does, saying the poor in spirit and those who thirst for righteousness. No, in Luke we're talking about real poor people and people whose thirst is for water, not righteousness. Jesus didn't stop with the rags to riches either. To make his point perfectly clear, he went on to say, woe to the rich for they have received your reward and woe to those who are full now for you will be hungry. This morning we see a rags-to-riches and riches-to-rags story that gives us a concrete example of the great reversal Luke has been writing about since the beginning of his Gospel. The purpose of this story is to inspire, warn, and instruct us on how to live under the Kingdom of God.

Jesus begins our parable by introducing us to two different and opposite men. The first man we meet is the rich man, who is historically called “Dives.” (*Dee – vayz*) “Dives” means “rich” in Latin. The rich man wears purple clothes, which screams, “I have money! I’m rich!” Purple was an expensive color and came from snail’s blood. Can you imagine how many snails it would take to make something purple?! Purple is an expensive color! Along with that, the man wore fine linen and feasted sumptuously every day. This would be extravagant and unheard of.. I mean even by today’s standards, who feasts and parties daily? The man is a picture of excess and self-indulgence.

Just outside his door we find our second character, Lazarus. This is the only time in any parable, where Jesus gives a character a name. The name Lazarus means “one whom God helps” and the fact he has a name tells us he’s important to God and precious in his sight. Lazarus finds himself on the other end of the spectrum, though. Lazarus is a poor man who is posted in front of the rich man’s gate, just outside of where he lives and feasts in luxury. Unlike the rich man who is dressed in purple and fine linen, Lazarus is dressed in sores that immobilize him. Maybe someone there will help... At least the dogs help, you might be thinking... Not so fast. While the licking of the dogs may have helped Lazarus get some relief from his sores, it humiliated and hurt his reputation in the process. This pitiful aid came at a cost! As he sits outside the gate, he also starves, wishing for just the

crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. You probably couldn't find a pair of more opposite men!

To no one's surprise, Jesus says that Lazarus died. Instead of being tossed down to hell, he is lifted up by angels to heaven. He receives divine help where human aid was lacking, and he is taken to Abraham's side, perhaps the place of honor at a heavenly banquet! There's your ultimate rags-to-riches story! What about the rich man, Dives? What happened to him? Poor old Lazarus winds up at Abraham's side, but Dives ends up in the opposite side of that coin in H-E-Double Hockey Sticks also known as Hades, where he finds himself in great torment. In his agony, he lifts up his eyes and sees Abraham with Lazarus. He knows those guys, maybe they can help! That formerly rich man, Dives, must have been in such anguish that even a drop, a single drop of water, would help! Now the shoe is on the other foot and we see the ultimate Riches to rags story as only Jesus can tell it. To me this is a frightening story of riches-to-rags—none too comforting for those of us who are used to having our Gospel tailored to our sensitive egos...

Why does Luke tell this tale of the great reversal? Why is Lazarus in heaven, and the rich man in hell? Lazarus isn't simply rewarded for being poor and the rich man punished for being wealthy. If that were the case, we would all be in big trouble. In the US, even the poorest of us is the rich man compared to the rest of the world. Imagine living on less than \$600 per year as they do in the

Congo and Mozambique. They'd be more than happy to eat their fill from our dumpsters. In 2019 the average US family threw away over \$1,600 of food. If we could just reduce or garbage, we wouldn't need a stimulus check from the government... Maybe some of what we throw away could be used to feed the hungry around the world... Yes, we should all try to do better in stepping up to feed the hungry, but that isn't why the rich man ends up in eternal torment and Lazarus at the Banquet feast of the Lamb. It's because of faith. Lazarus wasn't saved because he was poor, but because of his faith. The rich man wasn't condemned because of his riches, per se. His love of money not only blinded him to the needs of the poor, but also of his truest need, that of the amazing grace of our Amazing God. It wasn't what he did or did not do that condemned him. It was his lack of faith. Even in death the rich man was still depending on his former power and prestige as he asked Abraham to order Lazarus to bring him water and later to return to earth and warn his brothers. He never once trusted God to provide for his or their daily bread. God's Word is enough. No miracle or divine display is needed. Today, in addition to the Word of God provided through Moses and the Prophets we have Jesus, God's Word become flesh; to see, hear, and even taste. Jesus is our Lazarus, returned from the grave to give us faith and someone to trust in for our eternal needs. Now there's a story of rags-to-riches, and riches-to-rags! What a reversal!

To finish my story about Andrew Carnegie. Proclaiming that, “the man who dies rich dies disgraced,” Carnegie spent his later years donating his fortune to charitable causes, eventually giving away some \$350 million. I wonder if he read this story about the rich man and Lazarus... The greatest missionary of all time puts it this way: “though He (Jesus) was in the form of God, He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” I can’t say it any better than that, so I’ll stop right here...

May we all learn from the rich man that money, status, and power might keep our stomachs full, but our souls will starve until we fill them with faith and trust in Jesus Christ. May God give us the faith to imitate the example of Jesus as we empty ourselves for the poor Lazarus’ at our gates. Amen.