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True Riches

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Text: Luke 16:19-31

My brother died last week. Perhaps you heard the news. It was in all the papers for he was well known. Why, he was one of the richest people around these parts. Lived like a king you might say; he had the finest clothes and he feasted every day, as if each day was Christmas. In his life he lacked nothing. If he wanted something, anything, he could have it.

As a matter of fact, our whole family is well off. There were six of us brothers and every single one of us was wealthy. That's why it hit us as such a shock when my eldest brother died. Somehow you think that when you're wealthy your money will solve *all* your problems. My brother had the finest doctors and the best care that money can buy. So, you don't expect that he'd die like that. But it seems that there was nothing we could do for him although you can believe that we tried everything.

And my, how he died! He died pleading that someone do something, anything to save him. He had so much to live for and no one it seems could keep him from death.

That's the great irony of life, isn't it? When we die we all go out the same way. He died just as surely as that old beggar, Lazarus, died. You remember Lazarus. He was the one who used to hang around outside my brother's gate begging every day. He'd lie there pleading for mercy, shouting for a handout, some money, a crust of bread, any old leftover morsel of food. And my word, what a horror he was. His whole face and arms and legs were covered with sores, open and oozing. It was enough to make you sick. It was so revolting. Why, even the

wild dogs which roamed our neighbourhood used to sneak up to him, lying there, and lick at his wounds. Absolutely disgusting.

But in the end, when Lazarus died he had such a peaceful look upon his face. It was as if the very angels of heaven had come to carry his soul away to be in the arms of our father Abraham. I doubt that he knew such peace in his entire life, yet he didn't even have a funeral. I don't know what happened to his body, but I suppose that someone must have carried him off and thrown his body into the common grave they keep for those with no one to bury them. Either that or the dogs got him first.

Now my brother's funeral, on the other hand, that was some kind of show. He went out in real majesty. We'd hired professional mourners and musicians, the mayor himself took part in the procession and gave the eulogy. There were literally hundreds of friends and family present to see him go. After all, we *are* a large family and each one of us is highly influential in our own field of endeavour. We pulled out all the stops. I assure you it was quite the occasion. Yet, somehow underneath all the pageantry, it seemed empty, hollow. To me it felt like one big show, with no real substance. There was no real foundation of truth to it all, just a whole lot of people there trying to impress other people who were there, as if being there was all there was to it.

In the end it turned out to be a mockery of life. As Solomon the Wise once said, in the end it is all vanity. "For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity and a chasing after the wind."

My brother's death has left me with a haunted feeling and I'm not even a religious or superstitious person. But since he died I've had this recurring dream each night. In my dream it seems that my brother is in this great pit of agony. It's as if he has an unbelievable fever and he is burning up from the inside out. I hear him crying out for a drink; he's pleading for just a little water to relieve his suffering but far off, high above him I see this man dressed in great riches, and here if it isn't that old beggar, Lazarus resting at peace right in the bosom of Abraham. And there is this tremendous chasm separating them so even though it seems like this Lazarus wants to go and

help my brother he can't, for there is no way to bridge that gap and no one can cross over to bring my brother aid.

At that point I suddenly wake up with this great sense of emptiness all around me and deep inside me and there is nothing I can do to help my brother. All his riches and the good life he has had have disappeared. It's as if all the good things my brother had in this life have now been passed on to that poor beggar, Lazarus, while all of Lazarus' sufferings in this world have been exchanged and dumped on my brother. The whole thing seems most unfair to me—unless you're Lazarus, I guess. Then it might look a whole lot better. But *who* would ever want to trade places with a beggar?

I heard a teacher the other day. He had some radical ideas. He kept saying that we must use our wealth in this world to help others so that in the end we would gain spiritual treasures which would be far greater than we can imagine. Why, he even told a young friend of mine who is very wealthy and who lives a devoted spiritual life following the commandments of Moses as best he can—he told him that if he wants to gain eternal life for himself then all he has to do is to give away everything he has to the poor and then follow him. Have you ever heard anything so absurd? Needless to say my friend left deeply dismayed, for he could not possibly do such a thing. How could *anyone* give up all his wealth and then live like a beggar?

Yet, this teacher seemed to feel that he had the answers to life. He urged people to take all their worries and problems, all their cares and anxieties and give them to him for he would take them all and do away with them. He said that he was the one who could bridge the gap between us and God. He kept saying that we could have an abundant life now and forever, all we needed to do was to truly love God and others just as Moses and the prophets have always taught us. The only difference seems to be that he actually means it. He says that he is living out his own life as a fulfilment of all the Law and the prophets and that we can live the same way if we put our trust in God and if we follow God's way of living just as he is doing. We are to do this instead of trusting our riches and the things we have accumulated for ourselves. He says that we are to give all these riches away to the poor and we will have our treasures in heaven. Makes it seem like that dream of Lazarus being in

the lap of Abraham is the true reality and all our wealth is the dream.

But I don't know. After all, I've spent my whole life, morning, noon and night, working hard to get where I am today. And he wants me to give it all for others? I don't think so. But I just don't know. If only my brother could come back from the dead and tell me what it's really like. Then, I'd be certain.

On the other hand, why shouldn't I trust in what Moses and the others have taught? Then, I might have faith to believe this Jesus when he tells us that "there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age and in the age to come eternal life." O God, give me the faith to believe this! If only I didn't have to give up so much!