

Sept. 24

The main theme of this Sunday's readings is the warning that the selfish and extravagant use of God's blessings, like wealth, without sharing them with the poor and the needy is a serious sin deserving eternal punishment. Today's readings stress the Covenant responsibility of the rich for the poor, reminding us of the truth that wealth without active mercy for the poor is great wickedness. It warns us against making money the goal of our existence.

Amos, in the first reading, issues a powerful warning to those who seek wealth at the expense of the poor and who spend their time and their money on themselves alone. He prophesies that those rich and self-indulgent people will be punished by God with exile because they don't care for their poor and suffering brothers. In the second reading, Paul admonishes us to "pursue righteousness, devotion, faith, love, patience, and gentleness" – noble goals in an age of disillusionment – rather than riches. In today's Gospel, Jesus gives us a warning, pointing to the destiny of the rich man who neglected his duty to show mercy to poor Lazarus. The rich man was punished, not for having riches, but for neglecting the Scriptures and what they taught on sharing his blessings with the poor.

Jesus told this parable to condemn the Pharisees for their love of money and lack of mercy for the poor. He also used the parable to correct three Jewish misconceptions held and taught by the Sadducees: 1) Material prosperity in this life is God's reward for moral uprightness, while poverty and illness are God's punishment for sins. Hence, there is no need to help the poor and the sick for they have been cursed by God. 2) Since wealth is a sign of God's blessing, the best way of thanking God is to enjoy it by leading a life of luxury and self-indulgence in dress, eating and drinking, of course, after giving God His portion as tithe. 3) The parable also addresses the Sadducees' false doctrine which denied the soul's survival after death, and, so, the consequent retribution our deeds and neglects in this life will receive in the next. Jesus challenges these misconceptions through the parable and condemns the rich who ignore the poor they encounter. The parable also offers an invitation to each one of us to be conscious of the sufferings of those around us and to share our blessings generously.

We are all rich enough to share our blessings with others. God has blessed each one of us with wealth or health or special talents or social power or political influence or a combination of many blessings. The parable invites us to share what we have been given with others in various ways instead of using everything exclusively for selfish gains.

We need to remember that sharing is the criterion of Last Judgment: Matthew (25:31ff) tells us that all six questions to be asked of each one of us by Jesus when He comes in glory as our judge are based on how we have shared our blessings from him (food, drink, home, mercy and compassion), with our brothers and sisters, anyone in need, for Jesus identifies himself with each of them.

We need to treat the unborn as our brother/sister Lazarus. Lazarus in the 21st century is also our pre-born brother and sister. Many of these babies are brutally executed in their mother's wombs. Their cries for a chance to live are rejected 4400 times a day in our country. The rich man was condemned for not treating Lazarus as his brother. We also will be condemned for our selfishness if we do not treat the preborn as our brothers and sisters.

Our choices here determine the kind of eternity we will have. It has been put this way: "Where we go hereafter depends on what we 'go after,' here!" Where we will arrive depends on what road we travel. We will get what we choose, what we live for. We are shaping our moral character to fit forever in one of two places.