

4 LENT  
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PSALM 41:1-3, 11-13; LUKE 16:19-31

*In God we trust?*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we may believe and in believing we may obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*



OK, the next thing I'm going to say will make some of you – or most of you – a little nervous...but it won't last long, I promise. I want you to **open your wallets or purses**...then take out a coin or a bill... Now, look on the **front** of the coin or the **back** of the bill and tell me the phrase that's stamped or printed there...

OK, you can tuck your money away now... just remember where you put it when the offering plate comes around!!! The phrase ***In God we trust*** is printed on our money – coins and bills alike. Wikipedia (!) says that this practice began during the Civil War.

*In a letter dated November 13, 1861, the Reverend M. R. Watkinson petitioned the Treasury Department to add a statement recognizing "Almighty God in some form in our coins..."* It appears that *At least part of the motivation was to declare that God was on the **Union** side of the Civil War* [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In\\_God\\_We\\_Trust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_God_We_Trust).

In a certain way, it of reminds me of the *death-and-disease* warnings stamped on cigarette packs. Anyone want to share what's printed there?

CAUTION: CIGARETTE SMOKING  
MAY BE HAZARDOUS TO YOUR HEALTH

The statement is very specific: it tells us what we should or should not be doing... And yet...it really means...very little to the people who imbibe. Believe me – as an ex-smoker, I remember being very good at **reading** the warning...and even **better** at

*ignoring* it. Unfortunately, I'm afraid that the same can be said for the phrase, ***In God we trust***.



That's not a cynical judgement of mine. It's part of the reason why no legal challenges have been able to remove "**In God we trust**" from our money or "**One nation under God**" from our pledge of allegiance.

A ruling by the Supreme Court in 1984 says that these instances, in which God is mentioned *ceremonially*, are *protected...chiefly because they have lost, through rote repetition, any significant religious content* (*LYNCH v. DONNELLY*, 465 U.S. 668 (1984) U.S. Supreme Court). [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In\\_God\\_We\\_Trust](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/In_God_We_Trust)

Did you catch that? The phrases "**one nation under God**" and "**In God we trust**" really **don't mean anything religious anymore** to our society! Kind of like when we hear someone in public say, *O my God* – I think it's safe to assume that they're not about to fall on their knees and offer a prayer!

In ***God*** we *trust*?

I wonder if the rich man in Jesus' parable *trusted in God*...or if God just didn't mean anything *religious* to him anymore... The problem with trust is that it's a double-pronged thing. On the one hand, we hope that the person we trust will have our back if something bad happens.

But on the other side of the coin, so to speak, trust requires us to count on that same person to hold us accountable if we stray off the path of truth, honesty, friendship, service to God, etc... So the question is: can we trust God to ***provide*** without trusting God to ***provoke***???

So what can we deduce about the Rich Man from this parable? First of all, if we'd been reading Luke's Gospel straight-through as a story, our minds would instantly kick back to four chapters earlier where we met **another** rich man, the Rich Fool (Lk. 12:13-21).



In an amazing book Undaunted Courage, Stephen Ambrose tells the definitive story of the Lewis and Clark expedition. That was the effort by President Thomas Jefferson to look for a water passage to connect the Eastern half of the country with the West Coast.

An argument could be made that the men of that group *feasted sumptuously* as they made their way up the Missouri River deep into Montana. In his journal, Merriweather Lewis wrote that they were consuming nearly 10 pounds of buffalo and deer meat...per man...per day...that's how hard they were working to pull, row and tow their boats against that mighty current.

Then after nearly starving to death crossing the Rocky Mountains, the Native American woman, Sacagawea, (or Sakakawea) helped make it possible for them to get to the mighty Columbia River. There they were delighted to switch menus, and dine on the fresh, pink flesh of salmon... which they ate...all the way *down*river to the West coast (around what is now Portland) then all the way back *up*river to the mountains on their return trip, happy in the reverse to switch back from salmon to meat.



Our family ate a lot of fish when we lived in Alaska - partly because we could buy it fresh year-round, and partly because we managed to stock our freezer with what we caught.

One summer I got to go dip-netting and came home with 25 salmon that weighed between 7-10 lbs. each. The good news is that Carolyn and I had all the fish we wanted. The bad news is that it took us about 10 hours of work to clean and cook, brine and smoke, or vacuum seal and freeze that abundant supply of fish.

Still, one of my favorite *sumptuous feasts* is salmon on the grill. At least it was until about a month ago. We were invited to a dinner over at Bruce and Vicki Lamprecht's house with a group of friends, and turns out the main course was going to be salmon. I was prepared to enjoy the fish (even if it wasn't going to be cooked the way I like it best!!).

Well, I have to tell you that after the first bite, I discovered that there are other people in the world who know how to cook salmon very well – and Vicki Lamprecht is one of them. That meal quickly jumped into my top-ten list of best meals ever. But here’s the deal – even if I can fix salmon that comes anywhere near what Vicki made, I STILL couldn’t enjoy it as much if I *feasted sumptuously every day*... I can’t even begin to imagine the money it took to do that, to say nothing of how the rich man felt about life, about himself, about Lazarus...

**So again, do you think the rich man in Jesus’ parable trusted in God?** I’m thinking that the answer’s no...and here’s why:

When *I* have feasted sumptuously, when I’m stuffed and drowsy, when I’m contented and sated and sleepy, I think my awareness of, concern about, devotion to serving God takes a bit of a hit...And if I were to feast sumptuously every day of my life, I’m pretty sure that my thoughts about God would lose any *significant religious content*...like the slogans on our money or in our pledge of allegiance...

So, let’s turn our attention to Lazarus – what do we know about him?

- Destitute – beyond poor.
- Laid by the rich man’s gate covered in rags and sores
- Far from feasting sumptuously every day, poor Lazarus longed to eat the garbage from the rich man’s table
- Didn’t even have the strength to shoo away the dogs

As will happen to all of us, they both die...



And NOW...their roles are **reversed**. The Rich man suffers while Lazarus is held in the bosom of Abraham. Think of what that means for our poor beggar. With his emaciated,

unclean, sore-covered body, he, no doubt, had forgotten what it meant to even be touched by someone, let alone held lovingly in their arms.

And at the opposite end, I'm not sure that the rich man *gets it* about what it means to go from obscenely powerful to depressingly powerless... He still seems to be operating with an attitude of entitlement by asking Abraham to send Lazarus on an errand of mercy. *Maybe he should have asked Lazarus for forgiveness???* Plus, he wants special treatment for his 5 brothers (again, with Lazarus doing the work like one of his household slaves!)

The rich man could not imagine how it was any concern of his that Lazarus had suffered just outside his gate, a stone's throw from his dining room table where he feasted sumptuously every day...

He needed an experience in life that would open his heart to helping his neighbors in need. And that is the plot summary for the 1997 movie, As Good as it Gets. Have any of you seen it? Jack Nicholson plays *Melvin Udall*, a misanthrope (which means he hates people) who also suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder. Yet in spite of all that, and very ironically, he's also a wildly successful *romance* novelist.

It's made Melvin very wealthy, which means that he can feast sumptuously every day and pretty much ignore the rest of the world. At his best, the author is uncaring about people – and nasty to anyone who crosses his path. One of his favorite targets is his neighbor – Greg Kinnear – who plays the role of Simon Bishop, a gay man who's an artist. Even when Simon is horribly beaten and left for dead, Melvin finds it impossible to show even an ounce of compassion for the man.

With his arm in a cast the artist can't paint, which means he can't earn money to pay his bills. His family has shunned him, and his friends don't have the means to help, so Simon is faced with homelessness.

It sounds kind of bleak, but it's really a delightful show – and the agent of change, or angel of change for Melvin, turns out to be Simon's little dog. While recovering in the hospital, a friend of the artist convinces Melvin to keep the dog and care for it until Simon is back on his feet.

At first the cold-hearted romance novelist simply tolerates the dog's presence. But in no time at all, that pup manages to worm his way into Melvin's affections, and that, of course, causes the ice-cold covering around the author's heart to start to melt.

What happens in the movie is exactly what we pray will happen in real life – that *Someone* (like God), or *something* (like a little dog!) will be able to touch our stony, cold or lost hearts. And through that touch, come to know God's Spirit who will invite us and

entice us to be rich... toward God. Which also means, being rich toward our neighbors in need.



So let's re-visit the rich man one more time. **What are some simple things he could have done to help poor Lazarus in life?** I'm talking *rock-bottom, no-sweat-off-his-brow, no-sacrifice-required, no money spent* sorts of things...what could he have done to be a neighbor to Lazarus?

1. **Say hello** – My wife Carolyn tells the story of how one project of our faith-based community organizing ministry in Anchorage introduced us to some homeless people. One of the struggles they face, they said, is that they feel *invisible*...no one makes eye contact with them, no one stops to say hello. It certainly doesn't take any money to look a person in the eye and say hi. That's one way the rich man could have started treating Lazarus like a neighbor.
2. How about giving him some **table scraps**? Remember, he **feasted sumptuously daily**. Somebody had to take out the garbage – why not add another bag of table scraps for poor old Lazarus??
3. The man could have instructed his servants to give Lazarus his old, **worn-out cloaks, bedding**, much better than the rags he had.
4. Finally, how about simply letting Lazarus lie **INSIDE** his gate, give him at least a measure of protection... Those are four things to do without even spending a penny...

And I'm fairly certain that by developing a relationship with Lazarus, the unfortunate rich man would also soon discover the joy that comes from serving our neighbor.



Because...it feels good to lend a helping hand, doesn't it? And in case we forgot this, or failed to learn it, there's research now that proves it scientifically.

*The Greater Good Science Center, at Univ. of Cal. Berkely...(conducts) scientific research into social and emotional well-being, exploring the roots of happy and compassionate individuals.*

In an article entitled 5 Ways Giving Is Good for You, Jill Suttie and Jason March of the Center identify some benefits that come from simply being generous with one's time, talents and treasures.

-[http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/5\\_ways\\_giving\\_is\\_good\\_for\\_you](http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/5_ways_giving_is_good_for_you)

1. Giving makes us feel happy: *when we're generous, the pleasure center of our brain is activated, giving us a warm glow effect.*
2. Giving is good for our health: *A 1991 study showed that elderly people who volunteered for 2 or more organizations were 44% less likely to die over a 5 year period than those who did not volunteer.*
3. Giving promotes cooperation and social connection: *When you give, you are more likely to be rewarded by others down the line.*
4. Giving evokes gratitude: *and gratitude, the researchers have discovered (!) is vital to a person's happiness and health.*
5. Giving is contagious: *This is the Pay It Forward idea where one person's generosity inspires observers to be generous later to different people and on, and on.*

So, ultimately, that question for the rich man is the same question that Jesus asks of us: ***Do you trust in God?*** If so, the Lord asks us to dare to embrace a generous life – and then have fun watching the blessings flow. This is how we're called to be rich toward God. Amen.