

ON WEALTH AND POVERTY (SAINT JOHN CHRYSOSTOM)

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As far back as I can remember, I wanted to be rich. I was not wealthy growing up, nor was anybody I knew. Today, however, as I state perhaps too often, I am rich. I bathe twice daily in French champagne and always cover my burgers in gold leaf. The problem is, as most everybody knows, that being rich sits very uneasily with Christian faith. At a minimum, being rich is a grave danger for a man's soul. To gain insight into this problem, or maybe seeking reassurance, rather than rely on my personal interpretation of Scripture, which is worse than useless, I turned to one of the Fathers of the Church, Saint John Chrysostom.

This book, *On Wealth and Poverty*, is a compilation of six sermons delivered by Chrysostom, probably in A.D. 388, when he was a simple, but very popular, priest in Antioch, after being a monk for some years and a decade before he was sent as bishop to Constantinople. The book is one of the "Popular Patristics" series offered by St. Vladimir's Press, sixty or so relatively short and quite readable paperbacks. I liked it so much I have ordered the entire series, which will fit nicely into the giant rich man's library I am currently building.

Saint John was not called "Chrysostom," which means "golden mouthed," in reference to his famous sermons, until after his death. He was simply "John of Antioch," the city where he was born and spent much of his life. Antioch was not some random provincial town, but one of the largest cities in the Roman Empire, with a population of hundreds of thousands (and a church founded by Saint Paul), though very little remains (at least above ground). The "Antiochene School" of Scriptural exegesis downplayed allegory, which elsewhere was very popular among the early Fathers (especially Origen and the Alexandrian Fathers), in favor of a more straightforward, less ornamental, reading. This is, according to the translator's notes in this book, the school to which Chrysostom belonged, and it is certainly true that, at least in this book, there is little allegory.

A very large amount of Chrysostom's work, mostly homilies but some longer works, has survived. This seems odd at first, given how much writing from the Classical world has disappeared (including, fascinating

to me, the entire twelve volumes of the autobiography of Augustus). Maybe it's not that surprising, however, given that Chrysostom lived in the East, not the West. Under the influence of anti-Christian writers such as Edward Gibbon, and more recently of philo-Muslim writers, modern Westerners often ignore the Eastern Roman preservation of Classical literature, and instead incorrectly ascribe most of what was preserved to Muslim scribes (or non-Muslims in Muslim lands), who in reality were largely irrelevant to preservation of ancient writings. Believing this myth is like believing the old story that Europeans liked to put ultra-expensive spices on rotten meat to cover up the putrid taste. Presumably so much of Chrysostom's work survived simply because it was originally in Greek (his homilies were taken down by stenographers as he spoke) and was widely distributed for a thousand years through the East, while Latin works from the late Roman Empire disappeared along with the western Roman Empire, except to the extent copied by monks, preserved on palimpsests, or translated into Greek in the East (and surviving the Muslim conquests).

In any case, we have these sermons, which strike a contemporary tone, despite their great age. They all revolve around one of Christ's most famous parables, that of Lazarus and the (unnamed) rich man. It is found in the Gospel of Luke (and only in Luke), Chapter 16, verses 19 to 31. Even today, most people are probably familiar with the parable. In short, there was a rich man, who lived life luxuriously, sensuously, and without worry, while ignoring the pitiful and diseased beggar Lazarus who lay paralyzed at the rich man's gate. When each died, Lazarus was found righteous and sent to live forever in Paradise with Abraham, while the rich man was found unrighteous and was sent to Hell. Suffering, the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus with some water to cool his tongue, but Abraham said that was impossible, nor could Lazarus be sent to warn the rich man's still-alive brothers, "for if they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." The end. For two thousand years, men have wondered, with trepidation, what this story means for them. Chrysostom offers a detailed, and practical, exposition.

The purpose of Chrysostom's sermons is to address those "who are troubled by the prosperity of the wicked and the poverty and tribulation of the righteous." That is, he is tackling a challenge to Christian faith

presented by an apparent absence of justice. He also aims to guide, to “provide the remedies, self-control for the rich and consolation for the poor.” Chrysostom’s ultimate purpose, naturally, is to bring his listeners to a life of eternal happiness, rather than torment (no Origen-style universalism for Chrysostom). “As a little drop is to the boundless sea, so much a thousand years are to that future glory and enjoyment.”

At one point (not in these sermons), Chrysostom says that ten percent of Antioch is rich and ten percent is poor. His main audience, therefore, is neither the rich nor the poor, but rather what might be called, somewhat anachronistically, the middle class. This was, at that time, those not in immediate danger of actual starvation, but not living in luxury, who therefore partook of both elements of being rich and of being poor.

Direct injunctions meant to jar the listener occur throughout the sermons; you have to remember these were originally speeches, not writings that could be re-read and pored over. “Pay attention to me!” “[T]he failure to share one’s goods with others is theft and swindle and defraudation.” The Sabbath is not a day for idleness, but for “spiritual work.” Chrysostom also attacks the dubious activities of his parishioners outside the church. In fact, he begins the first sermon with an attack on the Saturnalia, which occurred “yesterday,” praising his parishioners (perhaps with faint sarcasm; it is hard to tell) for avoiding participating in “drunkenness” and “disorderly dancing.” Throughout the sermons, he also decries the “racecourse” and its “spectacles of Satan,” directly criticizing the parishioners for frequenting the (chariot) racecourse. It’s not clear exactly why, but presumably it was not merely racing that Chrysostom disapproved of, but other associated entertainments, vices, and occasions of sin.

In addition to these injunctions, interesting asides also pop up. Chrysostom notes at one point that it is acceptable to dull emotional pain with alcohol, to drink, as Noah did, because he did not “desire drunkenness and passion but used them to heal his wound,” and that this is commonly done at funerals, to give “undiluted wine” to those closest to the dead. And contrary to the silly myth propagated by Protestants and modern anti-Christians that the pre-modern Church forbade reading Scripture, Chrysostom insists his parishioners read the Bible. “I also always entreat you, and do not cease entreating you, not only to pay attention here to what I say, but also when you are at home, to persevere

continually in reading the divine Scriptures.” He makes explicit that this is not a mere aspiration, but required for every single person, whatever his occupation or station in life—and in fact that the Scriptures are more important for those living in the world than for monks.

The first sermon focuses on the lives of each man in the parable. Chrysostom emphasizes that the rich man behaved not just badly, but as badly as was possible. He ignored the cardinal commandment of almsgiving, and he had no possible excuse. Lazarus was very visibly present, in his sight, every day, a constant reminder. The rich man had no worries that he could claim distracted him from his duty of charity. He lived in luxury, a debilitating luxury of excess, particularly of food, that not only of itself was bad, but made him unable to perform necessary work, spiritual work. By contrast, Lazarus had, perhaps, adequate excuse to complain of his lot, but did not. He suffered, and Chrysostom enumerates them, nine “misfortunes,” not merely poverty and ill-health, but friendlessness, being reminded of his wretched state continually, being slandered (for many would have considered his state a punishment for his sins, a claim Chrysostom emphatically rejects) and more. All these would “darken the soul” of any man, yet Lazarus persevered. Thus, each man received his just deserts, the fruit of his chosen actions.

In the second sermon, Chrysostom deepens his analysis, turning to each man after death. What seemed obvious to everyone, that the rich man was fortunate and Lazarus unfortunate, turns out to be an inversion of the true reality. Even before death, “the rich man is not the one who has collected many possessions but the one who needs few possessions, and the poor man is not the one who has no possessions but the one who has many desires.” In the end, it is Lazarus who is rich, and the rich man who is poor. Chrysostom compares the two men to players on the stage—a man who plays a king, when he takes off his mask in the street, is a mere coppersmith. So with many of those who appear fortunate in this life. It is not money itself, however, but greed, the lust for material things, that is the core vice—both of itself, and even more to the extent it results in not generously giving alms.

Chrysostom here emphasizes that the duty of almsgiving is completely disconnected from the moral status of the recipient. “When you see on earth the man who has encountered the shipwreck of poverty, do not judge him, do not seek an account of his life, but free him from

his misfortune.” “Charity is so called because we give it even to the unworthy.” This is an important principle, although it is true that some people are looking for aid when they have no need. If the asker is merely a fraud, perhaps he should be denied alms, but I doubt if Chrysostom would encourage excessive investigation. Too much focus on this question backs you into seeking an “account of his life.” For example, what if someone asking for, or receiving freely offered, charity carries a new iPhone? Chrysostom would no doubt say that is irrelevant; if he is now hungry or cold, how he unwisely earlier spent his money so that he ended up hungry or cold now does not matter. Similarly, “get a job” is not a good response to someone asking for help, even if it is true that jobs are easy to get and a job would alleviate the asker’s need. Who knows why he does not? Maybe he is an addict, or simply unable to hold a job, due to one character defect or another. Or maybe he is just very unintelligent, and cannot plan for the future. Giving alms is the core matter, and distractions from that goal should be minimized.

In the modern world, however, most people don’t give alms to the poor, though they often give money to political causes and claim that as alms, but they are very insistent that the government hand out money to those they consider, from a distance in most cases, to be in need. Chrysostom, no surprise, never mentions any duty of the government to give alms; his is a personal command, for each person to take action himself. The late Joseph Sobran (another far-seeing man of the Right cut off at the knees and reduced to obscurity and penury by that Judas, William F. Buckley) used to joke that the Left had combined the two commandments, “Love thy neighbor as thyself” and “Give all that you have to the poor,” into a new command, “Give all that thy neighbor has to the poor.” This captures the problem (or rather one of several problems) with turning over our personal responsibilities to the government. When the government becomes the main almsgiver, not only does this enable people to choose not to give alms at all while soothing their conscience, but the system, as with all government action, tends to corruption, both in the looting of money destined for the poor, and in redirecting aid for the needy to other, political ends (as well as encouraging characterizing as alms insane demands not found in any legitimate Christian doctrine, such as willy-nilly allowing aliens into our country). The government should give no “alms”; giving should be done exclusively by individuals

and institutions such as churches—although, to be sure, it is hard to see how that could be implemented today, since the habit of almsgiving has largely disappeared, and moreover many churches are extremely corrupt in their giving of “alms” (notably Catholic Charities, the largest charitable organization in America). When all the West is broken and remade, hopefully soon, then this can and should be done.

The third sermon focuses on the rich man’s request for a drop of water to be placed on his tongue, and the uncrossable gulf that separates the rich man from Paradise. Repentance before death is essential; Chrysostom paints a chilling picture of the soul, having just left the body, in terrible fear of judgment. At some length, Chrysostom states how evil men almost always do some good thing in their life, and good men almost always do some evil thing. Both good and evil are recompensed, either in this life or the next, and we should wish to make recompense now, rather than later, for if we sin extensively in this life and face no punishment now, it will be required later—thus, we should weep for someone such as the rich man, seeing him as the most unfortunate of men.

Here, Chrysostom seems to imply some type of zero-sum game, where we can choose suffering now or suffering later, but a more subtle reading is that receipt of only good things in this life tends to prevent a man from spiritual growth, and encourage spiritual backsliding—and that the opposite also tends to be true, that the poor necessarily find it easier to attain to the Kingdom of Heaven. The obligation of the rich, other than almsgiving, is “to bridle foolish desire, to stop vainglory, to restrain presumption, to refrain from luxury, to persevere in austerity.” A man may not suffer, as such, but he cannot enjoy total comfort and ease on Earth, refusing to restrain himself in these ways, and still attain the Kingdom of Heaven. He must choose a “hard and laborious” life—not by becoming poor, but by spiritual focus, and by sharing. It is not possible “to enjoy relaxation both here and hereafter.”

A similar lesson, mentioned by Chrysostom in passing, is found in the related Parable of the Rich Fool, found also in Luke, at 12:13–21, who, having gained riches, wanted to relax and enjoy his wealth. I note that Chrysostom does not focus on any difference between striving for riches and having riches already, although it seems to me these are conceptually distinct, if closely related. True, in the ancient world most

rich people were probably rich because their ancestors were rich, but even those already rich frequently strive continually to gain more, and those who are not rich strive to become rich. Seeking wealth, whether as an occupation (or avocation), or by dubious shortcuts, seems to present somewhat different spiritual pitfalls from possessing wealth, yet this question does not seem to draw attention from Chrysostom.

The fourth sermon occupies itself with the rich man's second request, that Lazarus visit his brothers. Aside from that Scripture is a better guide than any possible non-divine messenger, being given to us by God directly, Chrysostom claims that if the dead were to return on a regular basis, "in time we would hold even this in contempt." Moreover, the Devil would twist this channel of communication and use it to transmit lies. Thus, in His wisdom, God has "shut the doors." Scripture, combined with the sure guide of conscience, provides all the help we need.

Chrysostom often recurs to the conscience, though I think he perhaps overrates its efficacy. "For the righteous, both the life hereafter and this life provide great pleasure; but the wicked and greedy are punished both here and hereafter." He explains that he means the unrighteous are tormented in this life by a bad conscience. But I doubt if that is generally true, in his time or ours. It is usually accepted that a conscience must be correctly formed by upbringing and prayer; when both those are lacking, you may get ennui, a feeling of meaninglessness, depression, or existential dread, but I think it very unlikely most unrighteous people are tormented by their consciences. People have a great capacity for self-deceit and self-justification. (For example, the slimy billionaire Michael Bloomberg, not known as a paragon of virtue, famously said when asked, "I am telling you, if there is a God, when I get to heaven I'm not stopping to be interviewed. I am heading straight in. I have earned my place in heaven. It's not even close.") Certainly the parable itself does not suggest the rich man had any such internal worries. Similarly, Chrysostom assures his listeners that the conscience is always neither too severe nor too lax, which seems a bit optimistic, given that it appears obvious many people have consciences that are too severe or too lax.

The fifth sermon, given some months later and immediately after an earthquake had shaken Antioch, causing considerable damage, mostly reiterates much of what Chrysostom had earlier said. Interestingly, it adds some thoughts on slaves. For Chrysostom, no surprise, slavery is

incidental to a man's character. "Slave and free are merely names." To a Christian, slavery is irrelevant to how a man lives his life, although presumably most slaves in the ancient world were closer to Lazarus than the rich man in the quality of their earthly lives. But we should remember that slavery was ubiquitous in the ancient world, and slaves occupied a wide range of roles and statuses. A rich slave, one with power, influence, and comfort, was not unheard of. How slavery could be countenanced by Christians, including Chrysostom, in the ancient world, while most Christians today think it is always and everywhere a great moral evil, is perhaps a topic for another day. And the sixth sermon mostly glosses and summarizes the first five.

In all six sermons, theological claims not directly tied to the main thrust appear. For example, Chrysostom claims that the rich man was judged by Christ, but did not hear, much less see, Christ. Rather, Abraham conveyed the judgment to him, in a practice similar (apparently) to some law courts of the Roman Empire. This seems contradictory to the general understanding of the Particular Judgment, and also to the theory that mere exposure to the unshielded and unalloyed love of God is heaven to some and hell to others. The sermons also contain some asides that seem strange. For example, Chrysostom says, "Many of the simpler people think that the souls of those who die by violent means become demons," stating this is a falsehood perpetrated by the Devil in order to "abolish the glory of the martyrs." He adds that "by these teachings [the Devil] persuaded the magicians who serve him to slaughter many bodies of mere children in the hope they would be demons and serve them in return." I'd never heard of such a belief, but it, and its nasty consequences, was prevalent enough to receive a public attack from Chrysostom.

So what does all this mean in practice, for the actually rich, or for any of us with more than we need? We should remember that in modern America, the vast majority of people are rich, by the standards of the first or fourth century A.D. With a few exceptions, Americans live in what Chrysostom would have deemed luxury (though in many cases the vices enabled by modern life make their lives seem very not luxurious). We should pity those who are "rich and greedy," Chrysostom says, not envy them. As with a robber chieftain who enjoys the fruits of his crimes but comes to a bad end when he is delivered to the executioner,

so with the rich and greedy. The poor are not spared exhortation. At a minimum, the poor should “bear their poverty with equanimity.” But it is the rich, or more precisely every man with more than he actually needs, who are the main target of Chrysostom’s teaching.

It is the second descriptor, greedy, that seems the ultimate key for Chrysostom. He does not outright condemn the rich, only the greedy. But he has a strict definition of greed, which (although he never says it quite explicitly) seems to be that any spending not necessary, especially that designed to impress others, is a form of greed, along with, obviously, acquisition of wealth by any dishonest means. All spending by the rich that is not strictly necessary should be done for the poor. We should “use our goods sparingly, as belonging to others,” in the same way as an imperial servant tasked with distribution of the Emperor’s money. The rich should not “waste on prostitutes, drink, fancy food, expensive clothes, and all the other kinds of indolence.” “Wealth will be good for its possessor if he does not spend it only on luxury, or on strong drink and harmful pleasures; if he enjoys luxury in moderation and distributes the rest to the stomachs of the poor, then wealth is a good thing. But if he is going to give himself up to luxury and other profligacy, not only does it not help him at all, but it even leads him down to the deep pit.” (Presumably Chrysostom would not think any more highly of miserliness, of a rich man not spending but merely sitting on his money, but he does not directly address that circumstance, rather he focuses on spending.)

Modern thinking about wealth and Christianity, to the extent it is not conflated with Left doctrines of envy, emancipation, and forced egalitarianism, none of which have any grounding whatsoever in Christianity, usually revolves around the “rich young man” of Matthew 19:16–30 (and also in Mark and Luke) who was instructed by Christ, if he would be perfect, to sell all that he had and give it to the poor. This passage is used to attack Christians, as well as, sometimes, by Christians to tell themselves they cannot do that, so they will do nothing. But at no point does Chrysostom bring up this parable, and traditionally, back when moral teaching was actually taught, this has been viewed as a “counsel of perfection,” applicable to those wholly devoted to God, such as monks, not an absolute moral requirement such as almsgiving. Nonetheless, I think it would be interesting to hear what Chrysostom says about this

young man (probably he says something elsewhere in his writings; I just don't know where).

And what of me? Well, Chrysostom is very down on what we would call "conspicuous consumption," and at one point specifically criticizes "ostentatious houses," something, as I say, I am currently building (though I refer to it as a "bungalow"), thereby taking dead aim at me personally. Oh, I can argue that spending on beautiful things is a benefit to all, and that supporting craftsmen is also a form of alms, and that the house can be, as I often say, the "locus of all things" for our extended family, from gathering place to fortress in the wars to come, and I can come up with many other justifications. But those claims ring somewhat hollow. True, I tend not to wallow in any other form of luxury (food, clothes, cars, travel), and my children do not exude any flavor of wealth (their friends, they say, are always astounded the first time they come to our compound, having no pre-existing idea of the scope of our wealth). It could be worse.

So maybe I'm not the most terrible rich man ever. I do give alms, both in money and in the giving of time. But I don't give of my substance, as did the widow in Luke 21. And on a related front I also fall down pretty badly. Chrysostom does not discuss the use of money to provide security, a feeling of control. This is, as many have pointed out (no doubt among them the Fathers) a form of idolatry, distinct from the vices Chrysostom identifies as arising from spending. For me, this has always been the chief benefit of money, not consumption. I have endless plans, backup plans to my backup plans, fallback plans to my backups to my backups, and most of these rely on money. God is rarely found in these plans, except vaguely, perhaps, and my lack of trust in God is pretty evident. It is not Scripture, after all, but Benjamin Franklin who said that "The Lord helps those who help themselves." This is a pretty significant failing on my part, though it is also true that a man has responsibilities to those who rely on him, and pure passivity is surely not God's command.

On the other hand, Zacchaeus, as it says in Luke 19, gave half of what he had to the poor, and Christ implicitly approved that distribution plan. Maybe I will give away half, and then I should be good to go! I guess I'll find out.