

26th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – September 29, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, Ala. – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 715 words

At the beginning of Mass, we confess our sins to God and to each other, including those that we committed in our thoughts and in our words, in what we have done and in *what we have failed to do*. Yes, we include a category of moral failure known as “sins of omission”. We all can examine the past through the lens of “woulda, coulda, shoulda” – but none of those things is sinful unless we willfully failed to do it. A sin of omission always involves an act of the will: we recognize that we should do this or that, but instead, we elect not to do it. This distinction is crucial and important as we consider the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

For indeed, the question does arise: For what sin or sins did the rich man end up in the netherworld, in torment – that is, in hell? Yes, we must frame the question in those terms, because we know that the punishment of hell is the consequence of unrepented serious sin, whether of commission or of omission. To be guilty of a serious or mortal sin there are three conditions: first of all, it has to be a serious matter; second, we must know that; third, we must freely choose to do it. Since this gospel is a moral parable, we should be able to identify exactly what led to the rich man’s condemnation – and so learn a lesson from it.

And the only reasonable conclusion we can draw is that the rich man was punished not because he was rich, but because he failed to care for Lazarus, who had been in abject need. He may have obtained his riches honestly and legitimately; he may well have entertained wonderfully and been very generous with his friends. Perhaps he even contributed lavishly to the temple treasury. But each day, as he came and went, there was this poor man lying at his door. Lazarus was not asking for riches; no, he simply wanted the basic necessities of life. He “would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table”.

Yes, the rich man must have seen Lazarus and willfully omitted to help him. That is the only way he could have been punished for it! He saw the need – indeed, that it was serious. He understood that. And he chose not to help him, all the same. That is why he was condemned! And that is how each one of us could be condemned also, were we to commit a serious sin of omission and never repent from it. But we might wonder how the rich man could live with himself? How could he sleep at night, knowing that Lazarus was there outside and that the solution was, in the end, relatively simple? Again – he would have eaten the mere scraps!

The answer, I believe, comes from our first reading. “Woe to the complacent in Zion!”, the prophet Amos cries out, “Lying upon beds of ivory, stretched comfortably on their couches.... They drink wine from bowls and anoint themselves with the best oils...”. While being rich may not in itself be sinful, yet it does bring with it certain pitfalls – the greatest of which may be the complacency that so easily results from it. You might not consider yourself all that wealthy, but there is no doubt that we are living in comfortable, even decadent times; we regularly enjoy surplus and luxury that our ancestors could scarcely imagine.

The complacency that often results from comfort is one of the great moral dangers we face today; it can even lead to serious sins of omission. Our best antidote is to examine our consciences, regularly taking stock of our own stewardship, so that we may be prepared for that account that we will render to our Lord Jesus Christ at the end of our lives. Wherever we may have failed, let us repent while we still may. For if we do not, we may well end up in torment, begging for the very thing we had refused to the those we could have and should have helped. Our good Lord is so generous to us; let us be generous to all whom he places in our path!