

Meditation for the First Vespers of Lent

'Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory.'

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I cannot recall in my life any parent who was ever thrilled to find that the man their daughter brought home was poor. There are many good reasons why the parent should not be so excited at the prospect of his or her daughter marrying a destitute man of no means, whether that be the fact that he cannot support her, or cannot give their children a good education and life, or cannot pay for medical expenses.

Yet ultimately, we do not really care for these things, at least not so much as we wish we would. At the end of the day, we care about money not because of the necessary things it can afford, but because of the unnecessary things it might afford.

Riches buy us a good house, to entertain our friends. It gives us good clothes, to impress our neighbors. It affords us entertainment, hobbies, date nights, good food, good drink, and many other things. In short, it affords us luxury. *To lie in ivory beds.*

Yet, it is usually not these things in and of themselves we care about. Yes, it is nice to own your own house, to own your own car, to own your own recreation room. But these are merely nice. But to lack them in our human society, as in all human societies, is not merely less nice, it is shameful. It is a sign of losing, a misguided career, a lack of ambition. Indeed, we view the lack of success, the lack of money, not as a mere financial failure, but a moral failure. For if we were 'good people,' we would have made more of our lives.

What riches, even modest riches, that which even the middle class of our society enjoys, buys is pride. It allows us to wake up, to look upon our house, our family,

our refinements, and boast that we have indeed done something important with our lives, that we really do, in fact, matter.

We take pride in our work, in our accomplishments, in our success. Yet it is written, *'pride commeth before the fall.'*

Today we hear our Lord bless the poor, the hungry, the weeping, the hated; and for a simple reason; the Lord Himself is poor, hungry, weeping, and hated. This seems plenty compassionate, and without much controversy.

Yet we cringe a little when we hear the Lord not merely bless the poor, but curse the rich, *those who are full now, those who laugh now, those who are well spoken of, for such is already your consolation.*

And it is not only in Christ's sermon that the socially secure are condemned, but even the mouth of the prophets spew wrath against them, against us. *'Woe to those who lie on beds of ivory, and stretch themselves out on their couches. Who sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, who drink wine in bowls.'*

Wicked are the wealthy, and wickedly to be condemned, for so our Lord has done, and so those who preach the word of the Lord after Him.

But why? Why is our God so quick to damn us who enjoy some degree of riches, stability, and status? Did not God create all things for our use and enjoyment? Did He not give to Adam all that was good in the Garden, and to humanity all that is good in the world? Did He rebuke King David for the tributes of his kingdom, or Solomon for the glory of his clothing, and the comfort of his palace? Was Job not rewarded after his temptation not with more poverty, but with a doubling of his wealth? How then can the same God who give riches, sustains riches, and rewards riches, also curse riches?

I tell you simply, it is not the riches He curses, but the rich; which is to say, He does not revile wealth, but what wealth does to us, and to our sinful minds.

And what does wealth do to us?

Well, it is as we spoke of before. It makes us proud.

Pride is the greatest of all evils, and the queen of sins. For it convinces us that we need not trust in God, at least not too much, for we are adequately protected by

our manifold possessions: our well educated minds, our well educated family, our well kept property, our safely kept neighborhood, our tax-endowed social safety net, our tax-funded government, our tax-funded military here, and beyond the seas, to the end of the earth, and if all these fail, if nothing else, our bank account.

Surrounded by such a great cloud of idols who vow to keep us safe, what room is left for God? Very little, perhaps enough room for a couple hours on Sunday. Perhaps enough room for a little prayer in the morning or evening. And then, after that, it is time for God to shut up, and for our lives of work, acquisition, ambition, and pride to speak.

But God does not shut up. Rather, He speaks words of wrath: *'I abhor the pride of Jacob, and hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up his city and all that is in it.'*

We affluent men and women, we who reign over the riches of the greatest civilization in history, we who shall be *delivered up*, what then shall we do?

Shall we be as the rich young ruler, and give all we have to the poor, and follow Jesus? Shall we be as Abraham and offer our only son, whom we love, to be slaughtered? Shall we be as Cain, and wander the wastelands of the world all the days of our lives?

Foolish Christians, does God desire your misery, or does He desire your salvation? He cares not about what things you have or do not have, nor does He care whether the pleasures in your life be many or few, great or small. He only cares that you turn from the idols, and recognize them not as gods that protect you, but as gifts that cheer you. He only cares that you turn from the idols, and trust in Him.

This we do not do, at least not in practice. We say we trust in the Lord, but we still trust more in the stock market. Repent, says the Lord, and believe the Gospel, for in the Gospel of Christ is every protection, for it is *the power of God unto salvation*.

It was once common for Christians, seeking humility and meekness, to fast during Lent, and many still do, giving up this or that for the season, whether something great like meat and oil, or something smaller, like chocolate. This is not done for no reason. It is done to break us from our reliance and dependance on created

things, that we may rely and depend on the Uncreated alone.

This Our Lord seeks to teach us, and for this reason:

'He lifted up his eyes on his disciples, and spoke.'

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Preached by Pastor Fields

Meditation Texts: Amos 6:1-10; Luke 6:20-26.