

# THE SIN OF DOING NOTHING

Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> September 2016

Luke 16:19-31



*“To be or not be: that is the question”*. This is, perhaps, one of, if not the most, famous quotes in dramatic history. It comes from William Shakespeare’s remarkable tragedy Hamlet. Here in Act Three the Prince of Denmark procrastinates - should he avenge his father’s murder or not?

Hamlet goes on: *“Whether ‘tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles....”* Hamlet is musing on the choice between the inevitable pain of life or the fear of death, especially since damnation lies on the other side.

Procrastination - we all procrastinate. One of my favourite British television comedies is Blackbooks. The series concerns the life of an eccentric, offbeat Irish secondhand book dealer called Bernard. In one particular episode Bernard has to do his tax return and he hates it. So he procrastinates. Bernard looks for any excuse to avoid this onerous task and this includes matching a huge pile of old assorted socks, calling his mum and even inviting in and entertaining some Jehovah Witnesses who knock on his door - anything to avoid the real task that is required!

Do you procrastinate? I know I do. And we do it at our peril. For as one commentator says, *“hard work is often easy work you do not do at the proper time.”* In other words, things undone actually make life harder. Here I identify with a fellow “dilly dallier” with these words: *“Procrastination is my sin, it brings me naught but sorrow. I know that I should stop it. In fact, I will.....tomorrow.”*

Indeed, we fool ourselves by suggesting we *“never do today what can be put off until tomorrow”*. Such an approach always comes back to bite us!

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I think John Lennon probably had this thought in mind when he penned the words *“living is easy with eyes closed”*. Here, in that famous song, Strawberry Fields Forever, Lennon suggests avoiding the issues makes for a perceived less challenging path through life. Moreover, ignoring the facts or simply choosing to be blissfully unaware of the often confronting truths we are surrounded with appears to offer a more comfortable, indeed, a much more appealing way forward.

Jesus was aware of this avoidance. And Jesus was keen to point out the pitfalls of such foolishness.

In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus Jesus tells the story of a person who had everything. He dresses in the regal colour of purple and his family feasts sumptuously every day. Life is good. Life is comfortable. The Rich Man enjoys the pleasures of prosperity. He is the definition of the successful person - the Rich Man embodies that which so many people aspire to - a bounteous share of the “good things” of life.

Jesus then introduces a second character into the story. Lazarus is a poor man. He is left abandoned at the entrance of the Rich Man’s house. Here Lazarus begs for a living. Lazarus yearns for a portion of the Rich Man’s prosperity. He pleads for just enough to simply meet his basic needs. But the Rich Man is unaware. The Rich Man doesn’t respond. The Rich Man neglects the poor beggar on his doorstep. For, he acts as though Lazarus doesn’t even exist.

It’s a pathetic, sorry scene as even the dogs upstage the Rich Man by approaching the poor beggar to lick this man’s weeping wounds.



Time goes on. Jesus then tells the story of what happens after both persons die. A startling, quite confronting picture is unveiled as the Rich Man suffers in the fires of Hades while Lazarus is carried away by the angels to be with his ancestor, Abraham.

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Now, this is a confronting scene designed to grab our attention. The Rich Man is distraught. And all of a sudden things become clear. The Rich Man acknowledges Lazarus but only in the context of seeking to save his own skin - as he pleads.....*“Father, Abraham have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames.”*

But it’s all too late. A chasm has been fixed. The Rich Man’s ignorance, the Rich Man’s unawareness, indeed, the Rich Man’s fixation on himself and his unwillingness or inability to respond to Lazarus’ need means there is no coming back. The consequences of not being aware, the ramifications of not being engaged are severe!

Friends, the Rich Man reels in this post death-state of agony, this well-off, privileged character falters in this hellish distress because he fails to see, he fails to hear, he fails to comprehend, and most importantly, he fails to act. Despite Lazarus’ presence at the gate every day, the Rich Man never really sees him. Lazarus is invisible to the Rich man. Lazarus is of no consequence to the busy, prosperous, well-off Rich Man.

And, sadly, when the Rich Man finally does see Lazarus he sees him not as a brother or as an equal, but as servant whose role is to submit to, and act on, his demands.

Often this story is viewed as a condemnation of wealth. In many circles this parable is interpreted as a denouncement of riches. But the real sin here, the actual wrongdoing in this narrative does concern prosperity per se. Rather, it concerns ignorance. It concerns the Rich Man’s inability, it refers to the Rich Man’s unwillingness to actually perceive and respond to the crying need - right there on his doorstep.

And, friends, this is what is called the “sin of omission”. This is what is referred to as the offence of doing nothing.

For, you see, the Rich Man’s misdemeanour was this - he was not aware of the situation around him. The Rich Man’s offence was this - he did not identify the very truth that was staring him right in the face. Rather, the Rich Man turned a blind eye, the Rich Man put his head in the sand, the Rich Man ignored the facts and he failed to engage with the reality in which he was living.



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**Ignorance, a lack of awareness, an inability to see, an unwillingness to act and a failure to share with those who need it – these are the real sins here.**

**Friends, this parable comes as a startling reminder. It comes as a reminder that says we cannot afford to ignore the truth. We must never turn our backs on the facts. Rather, we each have a responsibility to engage in the reality around us, no matter how confronting or unpleasant it may be.**

**Let me reiterate - facts cannot be ignored, truth should never be suppressed. What is real must never be quarantined.**

**Jesus is pretty clear here. Indeed, Jesus is very blunt. To closet ourselves from the reality that surrounds us, to put off or ignore responsibilities, to embargo pressing issues or simply accommodate ourselves to the alternative of doing nothing amounts to strategy far short of what God intends.**

**For, in community, in family or in one's individual life one can feel it's easier to closet the truth and suppress the facts. It's often feels less troubling, less confronting, to simply gloss over things and pretend those issues which cause concern, create hurt or warrant an immediate response are simply inconsequential or unimportant.**

**But the consequences of such an approach that comes from avoidance, the repercussions that stem out of ignorance or the fallout that arises from not being involved are, as Jesus points out in his parable, really quite serious.**

**So, whether it's that friend who oversteps the mark, those fellow church members who are keepers of the "gate" - and either choke creativity or push other people out; whether it's the person who offends, hurts or abuses, or the needy neighbour across the road or on the other side of the world; such things should not go unnoticed. Such things should never go unattended, such things should never go hidden, disguised or forgotten.**

**Indeed, there are so many hidden facts, there are numerous suppressed truths and there are far too many unattended issues in our community today.**

**The shocking occurrence of domestic violence where just under half a million Australian women reported they experienced physical or sexual violence or sexual assault in the past 12 months, is a case in point.**

**Here one third of women in Australia have experienced physical violence since the age of 15 and where, on average, at least one woman is killed by a partner or former partner in Australia every week. This is a reality that needs to be constantly exposed, this is a fact that needs to be openly talked about and effectively responded to!**

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Then there is the debate concerning the 60 million displaced people around the world – people fleeing violence and persecution. Here there is either a cloud of secrecy, as we witness in those Nauru and Manus Island detention centres, or there is a kind of rhetoric that disturbs, inflames and plays on peoples’ lack of awareness, on their fears and on their ignorance.

Dare I suggest the current call for the banning of Muslim migration to Australia is a case in point. Here I simply make an appeal. Spend some obtaining the facts, seek the truth and try to come to grips with what is real before you make up your mind. For the overwhelming number of Muslims are good people!

And there are many, many other issues both personal and communal. I could go on!

In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus Jesus nudges us. Jesus challenges each one of us.

So, be honest about yourself. Be open and transparent towards the issues around you. Engage frankly and with integrity - the changing and often threatening world in which we live.

And with this in mind, don’t go through life with a blindfold on. Don’t spend your time looking the other way. Don’t allow yourself to be silenced or cocooned.

For you see, Jesus tells us this - the consequences of doing so are serious, they can even be horrendous.

Friends, there is so much more to life than fear, avoidance, concealment, blindness and silence. There is so much more to living than ignorance and a failure to engage. For God wills each one of us to live life to the fullest . And this involves grace, mercy, justice and - most importantly - it involves truth!



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So, today, listen to words of Jesus. This parable is for you and it is for me. Its message that can be haunting, bothersome and perhaps even annoying. But it's God's Word - and it's God's Word for us today!

In Christ we can overcome the sin of doing nothing. In Christ we can begin to see, we can begin to talk and we can begin to "do".

For this takes place - this can indeed take place - not in our own strength but in the wisdom and in the power of Jesus our Lord.

Thanks be to God!

Amen.



John Barr