

Complacency

Amos 6:1a, 4-7
Psalm 146
1 Timothy 6:11-16
Luke 16:19-31

A French author once wrote, “It’s not a very big step from contentment to complacency.”¹ Most of us know that quote is very true. We’ve made that small step many times in our lives and apparently the Pharisees in Jesus’ time had, also. In our Gospel reading, Jesus used a parable to try to encourage the Pharisees to repent of their complacency.

In the parable, Jesus explains that sin can be more than just doing something malicious; it can also be avoiding doing something good—sins of omission. The shocking part of the parable is the fact that the rich man, whom tradition names, “Dives,”² did not abuse Lazarus. He did not have him removed from his gate. He did not kick him or mock him. He simply didn’t see him. Dives was too preoccupied and satisfied with his own life to notice others.

We are told in the parable that Dives had the best of everything. He wore extremely expensive clothes and ate very expensive foods. In fact, the scraps that fell from Dive’s dinner table testify to his wealth and extravagance. People in Israel in Jesus’ time did not use utensils; they ate with their hands. The very rich used bread as napkins and would throw the bread on the floor as they wiped their hands throughout the meal. Dives was surrounded in lavishness and Lazarus simply desired to eat the bread that Dives wiped his dirty hands on, but Dives never noticed him.

Dives’ sin, and the sin of the Pharisees, was complacency. **Complacency means being self-satisfied while unaware of actual dangers or deficiencies.** In our first reading today, God spoke through the prophet Amos and said, “Woe to the complacent in Zion!” (Amos 6:1a). This is what Jesus often said to the Pharisees, “Woe to you!” Jesus desired for them to repent and move out of their complacency. He described them as white-washed tombs, clean and beautiful on the outside, but full of every kind of evil on the inside.³ They were self-satisfied, yet unaware of their deficiencies.

The parable points out the fact that the severity of Dives’s punishment was based on the fact that he had been warned by Moses and the prophets not to be complacent, yet, he chose to ignore those warnings. Sacred Scripture continues to warn you and I, also. It also gives us insight into *how* to fight against complacency. There are primarily two interwoven things that help us fight complacency—awareness and love.

Overcoming complacency means becoming more aware—taking a long, loving look around. Take, for example, a warzone. Our soldiers who are serving in warzones are constantly reminded by their commanders not to become complacent. While an area that they are traveling through might *seem* to be peaceful, they must constantly keep watch, looking for potential danger. Becoming self-preoccupied and unaware of the surroundings in a warzone gets soldiers killed.

¹ Simone de Beauvoir

² Dives is Latin for “rich.”

³ Matthew 23:27

The same lack of awareness about what is going on around us in ordinary daily life can kill our spiritual lives. I remember a man stopping by the church office years ago, asking to speak with a priest. The secretary sent him back to my office. The man came in, plopped heavily into one of the office chairs and asked, “What is faith?” I immediately felt me ego engage—I was about to have an opportunity to show this man how much I knew about faith! Thankfully, God’s grace stopped me from launching into a lengthy monologue about faith. Instead, I said to the man, “You look depressed.” He informed me that he had just swallowed a bottle of pills and had come to my office to die. Thankfully, we were able to get him some help.

While I am frequently self-absorbed and unaware, thankfully I was not on that particular day and at that particular time. Eliminating complacency requires us to be aware of the mood or atmosphere of life and the people around us. Complacently ignores such things. Love requires it.

In addition to awareness, we must be people of love. Love is a broad idea and reality. When I say that love combats complacently, I mean that our desire to do what is best for others continually invites us to look at the needs of those around us. One great tool for combating complacency is for us to ask ourselves, at every moment, the question, “What does love require?” This question moves us instantly out of our self-preoccupation.

This week, let’s take some time to learn more about our own complacency. In what ways—materially, intellectually, spiritually, morally, and relationally—are we self-satisfied, ignoring our deficiencies and the dangers inherent in them?

SUGGESTED PRAYER EXERCISES:

- ✚ Read through the parable of Dives and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 several times slowly, paying attention to the details of the story. Then, set the Bible aside and simply imagine the story playing itself out in your mind. Let yourself be one of the characters in the story. Pay attention to what you say and do and what Jesus says and does. What does the meditation teach you?
- ✚ Make a list in your prayer journal of five particular areas in your life where you feel complacent—self-satisfied while unaware of actual dangers or deficiencies. Then, list five areas of your life where you feel the opposite of complacent, areas where you feel alive and zealous. What are the differences between the two lists?