

Ambrose of Milan, On Naboth

[On Naboth has been translated from the edition by Martin R.P. McGuire (ed.), *S. Ambrosii De Nabuthae*, pp. 46–103. The Latin text may also be found in PL 14.765–92 and CSEL 32.2.469–516. McGuire provides the sole English translation of the treatise.]

<p>1. The story of Naboth is an old one, but it is repeated every day. Who among the rich does not daily covet others' goods? Who among the wealthy does not make every effort to drive the poor person out from his little plot and turn the needy out from the boundaries of his ancestral fields? Who is satisfied with what is his? What rich person's thoughts are not preoccupied with his neighbor's possessions? It is not one Ahab who was born, therefore, but — what is worse — Ahab is born every day, and never does he die as far as this world is concerned. For each one who dies there are many others who rise up; there are more who steal property than who lose it. It is not one poor man, Naboth, who was slain; every day Naboth is struck down, every day the poor man is slain. Seized by this fear, the human race is now departing its lands. Carrying his little one, the poor man sets out with his children; his wife follows in tears, as if she were accompanying her husband to his grave. Yet she who mourns over the corpses of her family weeps less because she [at least] has her spouse's tomb even if she has lost his protection; even if she no longer has children, she at least does not weep over them as exiles; she does not lament what is worse than death — the empty stomachs of her tender offspring.</p>	
<p>2. How far, O rich, do you extend your mad greed? 'Shall you alone dwell upon the earth' (Isa. 5:8). Why do you cast out the companion whom nature has given you and claim for yourself nature's possession? The earth was established in common for all, rich and poor. Why do you alone, O rich, demand special treatment? Nature, which begets everyone poor, knows no wealthy, for we are not born with clothing or begotten with gold and silver. Naked it brings us into the light (cf. Job 1:21), wanting food, clothing and drink, and naked the earth receives us whom it brought forth, not knowing how to compass our possessions in the tomb. The narrow sod is equally spacious for poor and rich, and the earth, which did not contain the desires of the rich person when he was alive, now contains him entirely. Nature, then, knows no distinction when we are born, and it knows none when we die. It creates all alike, and all alike it encloses in the bowels of the tomb. What differences can be seen among the dead? Open up the earth and, if you are able, discern who is rich. Then clear away the rubbish and, if you recognize the poor person, show who he is apart, perhaps, from this one fact alone — that more things perish with the rich.</p>	
<p>3. The silk raiment and wrappings woven with gold in which the body of the rich person is clothed are losses to the living and of no help to the dead. You are anointed, O rich man, and you stink. You ruin the beauty that belongs to others and acquire none for yourself. You leave behind heirs who fight among themselves. To your heirs, who fear to diminish or violate what has been left them, you leave behind an inherited responsibility rather than an open-ended benefit. If your heirs are frugal, they maintain it; if they are spendthrifts, they use it up. And so you either condemn your good heirs to constant anxiety or leave behind bad ones; wherefore let them condemn your deeds.</p>	
<p>4. But why do you think that, as long as you are alive, you abound in all things? O rich man, you do not know how poor you are, how needy you seem to yourself — you who call yourself rich. The more you have the more you require, and whatever you get hold of, you are still in need. Avarice is inflamed by money, not extinguished. Greediness has, as it were, certain steps, and as a person mounts them he hastens on to heights whence grave ruin awaits his downfall. Such a person was</p>	

<p>better off when he had less. In view of his possessions his requirements were modest, but with an increase of income there came a growth in greed. He does not want to be small in his wishes or poor in his desires. And so two intolerable situations are joined together: he increases the ambitious longing characteristic of a rich person without laying aside an attitude of begging. Hence divine Scripture teaches us how wretchedly he is in need and how abjectly he begs.</p>	
<p>5. There was a king in Israel named Ahab and a poor man named Naboth. The former abounded in the wealth of a kingdom while the latter possessed a tiny plot of land. The poor man coveted none of the rich man's possessions, but the king seemed to himself to be lacking something because the poor man, who was his neighbor, had a vineyard. Who, then, seems to you to be the poor man? The one who is content with what is his or the one who covets another's property? Certainly the one seems to be poor in terms of goods, the other in terms of desire. A rich disposition knows not how to want, and abundant goods cannot satisfy an avaricious man's yearnings. Hence the rich man is covetous in his envy of [another's] property and complains of poverty.</p>	
<p>6. But let us now consider the words of Scripture: 'And this came about,' it says, 'after these words: There was a vineyard belonging to Naboth the Jezreelite in Jezreel next to the house of Ahab, king of Samaria. And Ahab spoke to Naboth and said: Give me your vineyard and I shall make it a herb garden, because it is near my house, and I shall give you another vineyard in its place. But, if you prefer, I shall give you money for the vineyard, and I shall make it a herb garden. And Naboth said to Ahab: God forbid that I should give you my ancestral property. And his spirit was troubled, and he slept on his bed, covered his face and ate no bread' (1 Kgs. 21:1-3).</p>	
<p>7. The divine Scripture had related beforehand that Elisha, although he was poor, left his oxen and ran after Elijah; he slew them, gave of them to the people, and clung to the prophet (cf. 1 Kgs. 19:19-21). The previous words, then, were intended as a condemnation of the rich man whose story is told in the person of the king. For, although he possessed good things from God, as did Ahab, to whom the Lord both gave a kingdom and at the prophet Elijah's prayer granted rain (cf. 1 Kgs. 17-18), he violated the divine commands.</p>	
<p>8. Let us pay attention, then, to what he says. 'Give me,' he says. What else does someone say who is in need? What else does someone say who is asking for public assistance than 'Give me'? In other words: 'Give me because I am in need. Give me because I have no bread to eat, no money for something to drink, nothing to pay for a meal, no material for clothing. Give me because the Lord has given you, and not me, the means with which you should be generous. Give me because, if you do not, I shall have nothing. Give me because Scripture says "Give alms" (Luke 11:41).' How abject, how vile is all of this! There is no sense of humility here, but rather the fire of covetousness. And in this very degradation what impudence! 'Give me,' he says, 'your vineyard.' He confesses that it is another's in order to ask for what is not rightfully his.</p>	
<p>9. 'And I shall give you,' he says, 'another vineyard in its place.' The rich person scorns what belongs to him as if it were vile, and he covets someone else's property as if it were the most precious of things.</p>	
<p>10. 'But, if you prefer, I shall give you money.' Quickly he corrects his error by offering money for the vineyard. For he who desires to occupy everything with his own possessions wishes the other person to possess nothing.</p>	

<p>11. ‘And I shall make it a herb garden.’ All this madness, all this uproar, then, was in order to find space for paltry herbs. It is not, therefore, that you desire to possess something useful for yourself so much as it is that you want to exclude others. Your concern is more to despoil the poor than to increase your own wealth. You consider it to your detriment if a poor person has anything that is thought worthy of a rich person’s possession. You believe that whatever belongs to anyone else is your loss. Why does harm done to nature give you pleasure? The world was created for all, but you few rich try to keep it for yourselves. For not merely landed property but the heavens themselves, the air, the sea are claimed for the use of a few wealthy persons. This air, which you include in your widespread possessions — how many people can it provide for! Do the angels have portions allotted in the heavens to correspond with the divisions that you make on earth?</p>	
<p>12. The prophet cries out: Woe to those who join house to house and field to field’ (Isa. 5:8), and he reproaches them for their sterile avarice. For they flee the companionship of human beings and therefore exclude their neighbors. But they cannot flee because, when they have excluded some, others in turn take their place, and when they have driven out these, still others inevitably take up residence nearby. They cannot live by themselves on the earth. Birds associate with birds, and accordingly the skies are often darkened with the flight of a vast multitude; cattle are joined to cattle and fish to fish; it leads not to loss but to lively interaction when they strive for a large company, and they seek a kind of protection through the solace of great numbers. You alone, O man, exclude your fellow. You enclose wild animals and construct dwellings for beasts, but you destroy those of human beings. You allow the sea onto your estates so that its creatures may not be wanting [to you], but you extend the boundaries of your property so that you will have no neighbors.</p>	
<p>13. We have heard the words of the rich man who sought what belonged to someone else. Now let us hear the words of the poor man who defended what belonged to him. ‘God forbid that I should give you my ancestral property.’ It is as if he thought that the rich man’s money would somehow contaminate him. It is as if he had said: “‘Let your money go with you to perdition” (Acts. 8:20), but I cannot sell my ancestral property.’ Here is something to emulate, O rich man, if you are wise: you should not sell your field for a night with a prostitute; you should not sell away your lawful rights to pay for revelry or to purchase luxuries; you should not put up your house for a wager at a game of dice, lest you lose the property acquired by your forebears.</p>	
<p>14. When he heard this, the avaricious king was troubled in spirit, ‘and he slept on his bed, covered his face and did not eat his bread.’ The rich are in mourning if they have been unable to seize others’ property. If a poor person has not been swayed by their wealth they cannot conceal the depths of their bitterness. They want to sleep, to cover their face, lest they see anything on earth that belongs to someone else, lest they notice anything in this world that is not theirs, lest they hear that a neighbor possesses something near them, lest they hear a poor person contradicting them. Such are the souls to whom the prophet says: ‘Rich women, arise!’ (Isa. 32:9).</p>	
<p>15. ‘And he did not eat his bread,’ it says, because he sought someone else’s. For the rich, who batten on plunder and meet their expenses with booty, prefer to eat someone else’s bread rather than their own. Or at the very least he did not eat his bread since he wished to punish himself with death because something was being denied him.</p>	

<p>16. Compare now the attitude of the poor person. He has nothing, and he cannot fast voluntarily except to God; he cannot fast except out of necessity. In fact you seize everything from the poor, you remove everything, you leave nothing; but it is you, O rich, who endure the suffering of the poor. They fast if they do not have — you, when you do have. You exact suffering from yourselves, therefore, before you inflict it on the poor. You undergo the distress of wretched poverty, therefore, as a result of your desire. The poor, to be sure, do not have what they could use, but you neither use it yourselves nor permit others to use it. You mine gold from the earth and conceal it again. How many lives do you bury in that gold!</p>	
<p>17. For whom are those things kept, when you read of the avaricious rich person: ‘He stores up treasures and knows not for whom he gathers them’ (Ps. 39:6)? The idle heir looks forward to your death, while the disdainful heir complains that you will die too late; he hates increasing his inheritance and is eager to spend it. What, therefore, could be more wretched than losing the gratitude of the one for whom you are toiling? On his account you endure bitter hunger every day and fear daily losses to your table; on his account you provide for daily fasts.</p>	
<p>18. I myself know of a rich man who, in setting out for the country, was in the habit of counting out the rather small loaves that he had brought from the city, so that from the number of loaves one could estimate how many days he was going to be in the country. He did not want to open his granary, which was sealed up, lest his stores be diminished. One loaf — hardly enough to feed the miser — was assigned for each day. I also found out from trustworthy evidence that, if an egg was added to this, he would complain that a chicken had been killed. I write this so that you may know that God’s justice, which avenges the tears of the poor by your fasting, is vindicatory.</p>	
<p>19. How religious your fasting would be if you assigned the costs of your banqueting to the poor! More acceptable was that rich man from whose table the poor man Lazarus, in his desire to fill himself, collected what had fallen (cf. Luke 16:21), but even his table was paid for by the blood of many poor people, and the cups that he drank dripped with the gore of the many whom he had driven to the gallows.</p>	
<p>20. How many die so that pleasures may be prepared for you! Deadly is your greed, deadly your luxury. One man tumbled from a rooftop when he was readying large storerooms for your grain. Another fell from the top of a tall tree while searching for the sorts of grapes to bring down for the proper wines to be served at your banqueting. Another drowned in the sea in his anxiety that a fish or an oyster might be lacking to your table. Another froze to death in the winter as he made an effort to look for rabbits or to set snares for birds. Another was beaten to death before your eyes if he happened to do something displeasing, and he spattered your banquet with the blood that he shed. It was a rich man, finally, who commanded the head of a poor prophet to be brought to him at table, since he could find no other way of rewarding a dancer except by ordering the death of a poor man (cf. Matt. 14:6–11).</p>	
<p>21. I myself have seen a poor man led away because he was obliged to pay what he could not, dragged to prison because there was no wine at the table of an influential man, bringing his sons to auction in order, if possible, to delay his punishment for a while; perhaps there would be someone who would help him in his hour of need. The poor man returned to his home with his sons and saw that everything was bare and that there was no food left for them. He wept over his sons’ hunger, grieving that he had not instead sold them to someone who could feed them. Returning to his purpose, he makes the decision to sell them. But the damage inflicted by</p>	

<p>poverty and the obligations of a father's love for his family were in conflict, with hunger demanding the sale and nature urging its duties. Ready to die with his sons rather than be separated from them, he would take one step forward and then another back. But need and not desire conquered, and family feeling itself gave way to need.</p>	
<p>22. Now let us consider the storms raging in the father's mind as to which of his sons he should give up first. Whom,' he says, 'should I sell first? For I know that the price of one is insufficient to feed the others.' (This alone would provide rich grounds for anxiety!) Whom should I offer? Whom will the grain auctioneer look upon with favor? I could offer my first-born. But he was the first to call me father. He occupies the first place among my sons, and him I rightly honor as the eldest. I shall give my youngest, then. But he is the one whom I love most tenderly. I am ashamed over the former and feel pity toward the latter; I groan over the former's position and over the latter's age. The one already senses anxiety, while the other knows nothing of it. The former's sorrow weighs me down, the latter's unawareness. I shall give thought to the others: one clings to me the more, another is more bashful; one is more like his father, another is more useful to him. In the one I would be selling my very image, in the other I would be betraying my hope. Woe is me! I have no idea what to do, no way of making a choice. Tragedy in all its shapes, a chorus of distress, surrounds me.</p>	
<p>23. 'It is the madness of wild beasts to choose whom you must give up. The very beasts, when they sense danger threatening their offspring or themselves, are accustomed to choose which ones they will free from it, not which ones they will offer up to it. How, then, shall I set aside the affections of nature, how shall I strip myself of a father's mind? How shall I arrange to auction off a son, with what words shall I fix a price, into whose hands shall I deliver that son into slavery, with what eyes shall I look upon him as a slave, with what embraces shall I say farewell to him when he departs, with what words shall I excuse what I have done? "My son, I sold you for my food"? More fatal, then, is the poor man's table than that of the rich man: he sells off others, I sell what is mine; he obliges, I act voluntarily. In order to make my situation the more excusable I shall add: "My son, you shall serve in place of your brothers, so that food may be obtained for them. Even Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers, and he fed both them and his father afterwards" (cf. Gen. 37:2-36; 42ff). He will respond: "But his father did not sell him but wept over his absence, and later even [Joseph] fell into the power of a rich man and could hardly be freed. Afterwards his posterity slaved many generations for the riches of Egypt. Sell me, then, father, on one condition—that the rich do not buy me."</p>	
<p>24. 'I am at a standstill, I confess. What shall I do? I will sell no one. But as I reflect on the one, I see all of them perishing of hunger. If I give up one, with what eyes shall I look upon the others, who will be perturbed by my lack of family feeling and fearful lest I sell them also? With what shame shall I return home, how shall I go in, with what emotions shall I live there — I who denied myself a son whom disease did not carry off nor death remove? With what thoughts shall I look at my table, which so many sons, like olive vines, graced round about?' (cf. Ps. 128:3).</p>	
<p>25. This is what the poor man laments in your presence, but in your avarice you stop up your ears, and your heart is not softened by the horror of the wretched situation. All the people groan, and you alone, O rich man, are unyielding. You do not heed the Scriptures, which say: 'Let your money go for the sake of a brother and a friend, and do not hide it under a stone to be lost' (Sir. 29:10). And, inasmuch as you pay no heed, Ecclesiastes exclaims in these words: 'There is an evil</p>	

<p>condition that I have seen under the sun — riches kept to the hurt of the one possessing them?’ (Eccles. 5:13).</p>	
<p>26. But perhaps you return home and talk with your wife, and she urges you to ransom the one who was sold. On the contrary — she will urge you to buy feminine baubles for her out of what, however small, you would have been able to set a poor man free. She will emphasize to you the expenditures that will be necessary if she is to drink from a precious goblet, sleep on a purple bed, recline on a silver couch and burden her hands with gold and her neck with necklaces.</p>	
<p>27. Women really enjoy fetters, so long as they are bound in gold. They do not think it burdensome, so long as they are precious; they do not consider them chains, so long as they are precious; they do not consider them chains, so long as a treasure glitters in them. They even enjoy wounds, so that gold may be inserted into their ears and pearls may hang down. Jewels are heavy too, and clothing is cold. They sweat in their jewels and freeze in their silks. Still, the costliness is gratifying, and what nature rejects avarice commends. With utter frenzy they are on the watch for emeralds and sapphires, beryl, agate, topaz, amethyst, jasper and carnelian. Even if half their inheritance is required they do not begrudge the expense, so long as they can indulge their covetousness. I do not deny that there is a certain pleasing luster to these stones, but they are still only stones. And they themselves, polished contrary to nature so that they may lose their rocky roughness, admonish us that it is, instead, the hardened soul that must be polished.</p>	
<p>28. What craftsman has ever been able to add a single day to a person’s life? Have riches ever ransomed anyone from hell? Whose sickness has money ever alleviated? ‘A person’s life,’ it says, ‘does not consist in abundance’ (Luke 12:15). And elsewhere: Treasures are of no value to the unrighteous, but righteousness frees from death’ (Prov. 10:2). Rightly does David cry out: ‘If riches abound, do not set your heart on them’ (Ps. 62:10). For of what value are they to me if they cannot free me from death? Of what value are they to me if they cannot be with me after death? Here they are acquired, and here they are left. We are speaking of a dream, then, and not of an inheritance. Hence the same prophet says well of the rich: ‘They have slept their sleep, and all the men of wealth have found nothing in their hands’ (Ps. 76:5). This means that the rich who have given nothing to the poor have found nothing in their own works. They have helped no one in need, they have been able to obtain nothing to contribute to their own well-being.</p>	
<p>29. Reflect on the word itself. The pagans refer to the rulers of hell and the judge of death as ‘Dis’. They call a rich person ‘dis’ as well because a rich person can produce nothing but death, and his kingdom should be among the dead and his headquarters should be hell. For what is a rich person but a kind of bottomless pit as far as wealth is concerned, an insatiable hunger or thirst for gold? The more he devours, the more he burns. ‘The one who loves silver,’ it says, ‘will not be satisfied with silver’ (Eccles. 5:10). And further along: ‘And this is indeed the greatest evil: just as he was, so has he gone, and his abundance labors for wind. And, indeed, all his days are in darkness and distress and much wrath and evil and anger’ (Eccles. 5:16–17)—so much so that the condition of slaves is more tolerable, for they serve human beings, but he serves sin. ‘For he who commits sin is the slave of sin’ (John 8:34); he is always trapped, always fettered, never free of chains, because he is always in his sins. What a wretched slavery it is to serve sins!</p>	
<p>30. Such a person cannot function according to nature, he cannot sleep when it is time to do so, nor does he enjoy the pleasures of food — even though none of this is foreign to a slave’s condition. ‘For sweet is the sleep of a slave, whether he eats a little or a lot, but for the one who is filled with riches there is no one who allows</p>	

<p>him to sleep' (Eccles. 5:12). Covetousness arouses him, a constant preoccupation with seizing others' property agitates him, envy torments him, delay vexes him, the unfruitful sterility of his crops disturbs him, abundance disquiets him. Recall the rich man whose possessions gave him a copious harvest and who reflected within himself in these words: What shall I do, since I do not have a place to store my crops?' And he said: 'I will do this: I will tear down my granaries and build larger ones, and there I will gather everything that I have grown, and I will say to my soul: My soul, you have many good things laid aside for many years; relax, eat, drink, feast.' To him God responded: 'You fool! This night they are taking your soul from you. Who then will own what you have laid up?' (Luke 12:16–20.) Not even God himself allows him to sleep: he interrupts him as he thinks, disturbs him as he sleeps.</p>	
<p>31. But neither does he permit himself to be at peace, since his abundance perturbs him and, in the midst of his copious harvest, he sounds like a beggar. 'What shall I do?' he asks. Is not this the voice of a poor man, of one who has no livelihood? In his need of everything he looks this way and that, searches through his home and finds nothing to eat. He considers nothing more wretched than to be consumed by hunger and to die from want of food. He seeks a quicker death and explores less tortuous ways of dying: he snatches a sword, suspends a noose, lights a fire, looks for poison. And, uncertain as to which of these he should choose, he asks: What shall I do?' Then the sweetness of this life makes him want to recall his decision, if only he could find the means to live. He sees everything bare and empty, and he asks: What shall I do? Where is there food and clothing for me? I want to live, if only I could find a way to sustain this life — but with what food, with what assistance? What shall I do,' he asks, 'since I do not have?'</p>	
<p>32. The rich man cries out that he does not have. This is the way poverty talks. With his abundant harvest he complains of want! 'I do not have,' he says, 'a place to store my crops.' You would think that he was saying: 'I have no crops that I can live off.' Is he blessed who is put at risk by his abundance? On the contrary, with all his plenty he is more wretched than a poor person who is threatened by want. The latter has a reason for his anxiety; he suffers an injustice and he is without fault. The former has no one to reproach but himself.</p>	
<p>33. And he says: 'I will do this: I will tear down my granaries.' You might think that he would say: 'I will open up my granaries. Let those come in who cannot endure hunger, let the needy come, let the poor enter, let them fill their satchels. I will tear down the walls that exclude the hungry. Why should I, whom God has provided abundantly with what I should give, hide anything away? Why should I shut up behind locked doors the grain with which God has filled the whole extent of my fields, and which grows and flourishes without anyone to oversee it?'</p>	
<p>34. The hope of the avaricious man is borne out: the old granaries are bursting with the recent harvest. 'I had little and stored it in vain; now more has grown. For whom do I gather it? If I wait for the prices to go up, then I will have squandered a possibility of doing good. How many lives of the poor could I have saved with last year's harvest? Prices that are counted up in grace and not in money were the ones that should have given me pleasure. I will imitate the holy Joseph with his humane proclamation (cf. Gen. 41:56), and I will cry out with a loud voice: "Come, O poor, and eat my bread" (Prov. 9:5), open your bosoms, take my grain. The rich man's plenty, the whole world's abundance, ought to be everyone's wealth.'</p>	
<p>35. But this is not what you say. Instead you say: 'I will tear down my granaries.' Rightly do you tear down what no poor person ever leaves carrying anything. These granaries are the storehouses of iniquity and not the reserves of charity.</p>	

<p>Rightly does he tear them down because he knows not how to build wisely. The rich person tears down his property because he is oblivious of eternal things, he tears down his granaries because he knows not how to dispense his grain but how to hoard it.</p>	
<p>36. ‘And I will build,’ he says, larger ones.’ Unhappy man, distribute to the poor what you spend on construction. In shunning the grace of generosity you are incurring the costs of construction.</p>	
<p>37. And he added: ‘I will gather everything that I have grown, and I will say to my soul: My soul, you have many good things.’ The avaricious person is always concerned over an abundant harvest, for he calculates that food will be cheap. For abundance is advantageous to everyone, but a poor yield is so only to the avaricious person: he is pleased more by high prices than by abundant crops, and he prefers to have what he can sell by himself rather than with everyone else. Observe him as he worries lest the pile of grain be overflowing, lest in its copiousness it spill out of his granaries and in the direction of the poor, and the opportunity for doing some good be offered him. The produce of the earth he claims for himself alone, although he does not want to use it himself but deny it to others.</p>	
<p>38. ‘You have,’ he says, ‘many good things.’ The avaricious person knows not how to enumerate anything except what is profitable. But I agree with him that what is pecuniary may be called good. Why then, do you make evil things from good, when you ought to make good things from evil? For it is written: ‘Make for yourselves friends from the mammon of iniquity’ (Luke 16:9). For the one who knows how to use them, then, they are good; for the one who knows not how to use them rightly they are bad. ‘He distributed, he gave to the poor; his righteousness endures forever’ (Ps. 112:9). What is better than this? They are good if you give them to the poor, and when you do this you make God your debtor by a kind of charitable usury. They are good if you open up the granaries of your righteousness, so that you may be the bread of the poor, the life of the needy, the eye of the blind, the father of orphaned infants.</p>	
<p>39. You have the means to do this. Why are you afraid? I confront you with your own words: ‘You have many good things laid aside for many years.’ You can have plenty both for yourself and for others; you can have an abundance for everyone. Why tear down your granaries?</p>	
<p>40. Let me show you a better place to store your grain, where you can keep it safe so that thieves will be unable to take it from you. Enclose it in the heart of the poor, where no worm will eat it, where it will not get stale with age. As storerooms you have the breasts of the needy, as storerooms you have the homes of widows, as storerooms you have the mouths of infants, so that it may be said of you: ‘Out of the mouth of infants and sucklings you have perfected praise’ (Ps. 8:1–2). Those are the storerooms that abide forever, those are the granaries that future abundance will not destroy. For what will you do a second time if you grow still more next year? If this happens a second time you will destroy what you are now building and build on a still larger scale. For God gives you abundance either to overcome or to condemn your avarice, so that you may not have any excuse. But you keep for yourself what he wished to grow for the many through you. More than that, you even deprive yourself of it, for you would save more for yourself if you distributed to others; the effects of good works revert to the very ones who have performed them, and the grace of generosity returns to its originator. Hence it is written: ‘Sow for yourselves unto righteousness’ (Hos. 10:12). Be a spiritual husbandman: sow what is profitable to you. Sowing is good in the hearts of widows. If the soil brings</p>	

<p>forth a richer yield than it received, how much more will be multiplied the recompense of the mercy that you have shown!</p>	
<p>41. Furthermore, O man, do you not know that the day of death overtakes the earth's begetting, but that mercy shuts out death's assault? Those who would demand your soul are already standing by, and do you still put off the fruits of your works, do you still calculate that you will live for a long time? 'You fool! This night they are taking your soul from you.' Rightly does he say 'night.' It is at night that the soul of the avaricious person is demanded. He starts off in darkness and abides in darkness. To the avaricious person it is always night, but to the righteous it is day, and to him it is said: 'Amen, amen I say to you: This day you will be with me in paradise' (Luke 23:43). 'But die fool is changed like the moon' (Sir. 27:43), 'whereas the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father' (Matt. 13:43). Rightly is that foolishness rebuked which sets its hope on eating and drinking. And therefore the time of death is pressed upon it, just as is said by those who pander to their gluttony: 'Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we shall die' (Isa. 22:13). Rightly is that person called a fool who caters to the bodily aspects of his soul, because he knows not for whom he is preserving the things that he stores up.</p>	
<p>42. Hence it is said to him: 'Who then will own what you have laid up?' To what purpose do you measure and count and seal every day? To what purpose do you weigh out gold and silver? How much better it is to be a generous distributor than an anxious custodian! How much it would profit you in terms of grace to be called the father of many orphans rather than to possess innumerable staters sealed up in a sack! For our money is left behind here, but grace is transferred with us to the Judge for our merit.</p>	
<p>43. But perhaps you will say what you are commonly in the habit of saying: 'We ought not to give to someone whom God has cursed by desiring him to be poor.' But the poor are not cursed, inasmuch as it is written 'Blessed are the poor, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven' (cf. Matt. 5:3 and Luke 6:20). It is not of the poor but of the rich that Scripture says: 'The one who controls the price of grain will be cursed' (Prov. 11:26). Furthermore, you should not look to what each person deserves. Mercy is not wont to judge on the basis of merit but to meet needs, not to examine as to uprightness but to help the poor. For it is written: 'Blessed is the one who is understanding concerning the needy and poor person' (Ps. 41:1). Who is it that understands? The one who is compassionate with him, who realizes that he is a companion given him by nature, who recognizes that the Lord made both the rich and the poor, who knows that he will hallow his income if he gives a small portion of it to the poor. Since you have the means to be gracious, then, do not delay and say: 'Tomorrow I will give' (Prov. 3:28), lest you lose the opportunity to give. Delay is dangerous when it touches upon another person's well-being; it could turn out that, while you hesitate, he will die. Better to make haste before death, lest perchance avarice hinder you tomorrow and your good intentions come to nothing.</p>	
<p>44. But why do I say that you should not delay your generosity? It is more a matter of not hastening to robbery, it is more a matter of not extorting what you desire, it is more a matter of not seeking someone else's property, of ignoring what has been denied you, of patiently accepting what has been excused, of not listening to that Jezebel, avarice, when she appeals as it were to the diarrhetic discharge of your vanity: "'I myself will get for you" (1 Kgs. 21:7) the property that you desire. You are sad because you wish to consider the measure of justice, so that you do not snatch away another's property: I have my rights, I have my laws. I shall be calumniated, so that I may despoil him; and the life shall be beaten out of him, so that I may seize the poor man's possession.'</p>	

<p>45. For what else is described in that narrative but the avarice of the rich, which is a vain and diarrhetic discharge that, like a river, carries everything away and brings to naught what might have been good?</p>	
<p>46. This Jezebel does not exist alone; she is many. Nor does she belong to one age but to a multitude of ages. She says to all, as she said to her husband Ahab: ‘Arise, eat bread and return to yourself. I myself will get for you the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite.’</p>	
<p>47. ‘And she wrote a letter in Ahab’s name, sealed it with his ring and sent the letter to the elders and those freemen who were staying with Naboth. In the letter it was written: Fast a fast, set up Naboth at the head of the people and set up two men, sons of iniquity, against him, to bear false witness against him and to say: He has cursed God and the king. Then lead him out and stone him.’ (1 Kgs. 21:7–10)</p>	
<p>48. How clearly is the behavior of the rich expressed! They are grieved if they do not seize others’ property; they refuse food, they fast — not to atone for a sin but to commit a crime. You may see them coming to church then, dutiful, humble, constant, in order to merit obtaining the successful outcome of their wickedness. But God says to them: ‘This is not the fast that I have chosen, not even if you should bend your neck like a circle and spread out ashes and sackcloth. Not thus will you call an acceptable fast. Such is not the fast that I have chosen, says the Lord. But undo every tie of injustice, loose the bonds of contracts made under duress, set free the broken and break every unjust obligation. Break your bread for the hungry and bring the needy and homeless into your house. If you see someone who is naked, clothe him, and do not despise your own kin. Then will your morning light arise to you, and timely will your health arise, and righteousness will go before you, and the majesty of God will encompass you. Then will you cry out, and God will hear you. Even as you speak he will say: Behold, I am here.’ (Isa. 58:5–9)</p>	
<p>49. Do you hear, O rich man, what the Lord God is saying? And you come to church — not to give something to the poor person but to take it away. You fast — not so that what you would pay for your banqueting might profit the needy but in order to despoil the needy. What do you want for yourself with book and paper and seal and contract and legal obligation? Did you not hear: ‘Undo every tie of injustice, loose the bonds of contracts made under duress, set free the broken and break every unjust obligation? You offer me account books, but I rehearse to you the law of God. You write with ink, but I repeat to you the oracles of the prophets written by the Spirit of God. You compose false testimonies, but I demand the testimony of your conscience, which is your judge and which you will be unable to escape from or turn away from; its testimony you will be unable to reject on the day when God will reveal the secrets of men. You say: ‘I will tear down my granaries,’ but the Lord says: ‘Allow instead whatever is in your granary to be assigned to the poor, allow these storerooms to benefit the needy.’ You say: ‘I will build larger ones, and there I will gather everything that I have grown,’ but the Lord says: ‘Break your bread for the hungry.’ You say: ‘I will take away the poor man’s house,’ but the Lord says that you should ‘bring the needy and homeless into your house.’ How, O rich man, can you wish for God to hear you when you think that God ought not to be heard? If the rich person’s will is not respected, a pretext is established: it is considered an insult to God if the rich person’s request is not granted.</p>	
<p>50. ‘He has cursed,’ it says, ‘God and the king.’ Obviously the persons are equal, and so the affront is equal! ‘He has cursed’ it says, ‘God and the king.’ Lest the term ‘curse’ be offensive to the rich man and he be hurt by the very sound of the</p>	

<p>word, 'bless' is used in place of 'curse'. Susanna was assailed by two witnesses (cf. Sus. 13:34), the Synagogue found two witnesses to hurl falsehoods at Christ (cf. Matt. 26:60–61), and the poor man is slain on account of two witnesses. 'And so they led Naboth out and stoned him' (1 Kgs. 21:13). Would that he would even have been permitted to die among his own! The rich man even begrudges the poor man his grave.</p>	
<p>51. 'And it happened,' it says, 'when Ahab had heard that Naboth was dead, that he rent his garments and covered himself with sackcloth. And after this it happened that Ahab arose and went down to the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite to take possession of it.' (1 Kgs. 21:16) The rich are enraged and bring false accusations in order to wreak harm if they do not get what they want. But when they have wrought harm with their false accusations they pretend to be downcast. Yet sad and grieving, as it were, not interiorly but exteriorly, they go out to the place where they have plundered property and make it their own by wicked means.</p>	
<p>52. The divine righteousness is stirred by this and with appropriate severity condemns the avaricious man in these words: 'You have slain, and you have taken possession of the inheritance. Therefore, in the place where dogs licked up the blood of Naboth, dogs shall lick up your blood, and prostitutes shall bathe in your blood.' (1 Kgs. 21:19) How righteous, how severe a sentence — that he would be prevented, by the horror of his own death, from being separated from the harsh death that he inflicted on another! God sees the poor man unburied and therefore decrees that the rich man shall lie unentombed, so that, when dead, he may wash away the disgrace of his iniquity, although he thought that even the dead should not be spared. And so his corpse, moistened with the gore of his wound, manifested the cruelty of his life in the way that he died. When the poor man endured these things, the rich man was reproved; when the rich man followed after him, the poor man was vindicated.</p>	
<p>53. But what does it mean that prostitutes bathed in his blood except perhaps that there appeared to be a certain meretricious wickedness or bloody excess in the king's savageness, since he was so given to excess that he longed for herbs, so bloody that he would kill a man for herbs? A fitting punishment, fitting for his avarice, destroyed the avaricious man. And finally the dogs and the birds of the sky ate up Jezebel herself, in order to show that the plunder of the rich becomes the burial place of spiritual wickedness.</p>	
<p>54. Flee, then, O rich man, a death of this kind. But you will flee a death of that kind if you flee a crime of that kind. Do not be an Ahab, in that you desire your neighbor's property. Do not let that savage Jezebel, avarice, live in you. It is she who urges you on to bloody deeds, who does not restrain your desires but encourages them, who makes you sad even when you possess what you have desired, who strips you naked when you are rich.</p>	
<p>55. For everyone who has an abundance considers himself the poorer when he thinks that he is lacking whatever others possess. The one whose desires the world does not contain is in need of the whole world, 'but the whole world of riches belongs to him who is faithful' (Prov. 17:6*). He flees from the whole world who, in consideration of his conscience, fears to be discovered. And therefore, although according to its symbolic value it is a rich person talking to a poor person, according to the narrative it is Ahab saying to Elijah: 'You have found me out, my enemy' (1 Kgs. 21:20). How wretched the conscience that was saddened when it was made manifest!</p>	

<p>56. And Elijah said to him: ‘I have found you out, for you did evil in the sight of the Lord’ (1 Kgs. 21:20). Ahab was the very king of Samaria and Elijah was poor and in need of bread; he would have lacked sustenance if ravens had not provided him with food (cf. 1 Kgs. 17:6). So downcast was the sinner’s conscience that he was not uplifted even by his haughty royal power, and it is as if he were common and base when he says: “‘You have found me out, my enemy,” and have discovered in me what I believed was hidden. Nothing that is hidden in my mind is closed to you. “You have found me out,” my wounds are clear to you, my captive condition is evident.’ A sinner is found out when his wickedness is made manifest, but the righteous person says: ‘You have tried me with fire, and no wickedness has been found in me’ (Ps. 17:3). When Adam hid he was found out (cf. Gen. 3:8–9), but Moses’ grave was never found (cf. Deut. 34:6). Ahab was found, Elijah has not been found (cf. 2 Kgs. 2:11?), and the wisdom of God has said: ‘The wicked seek me and shall not find me’ (Prov. 1:28). And so in the gospel, too, Jesus was sought and was not found (cf. John 6:15, 8:21). Crime, therefore, makes manifest its author. Hence the Tishbite also says: ‘I have found you out, for you did evil in the sight of the Lord,’ because the Lord hands over those who are guilty of crime, but the innocent he does not hand over to the power of their enemies. Finally, Saul sought the holy David and was unable to find him (cf. 1 Sam. 23:15, 24:4, 26:4), but the holy David found King Saul, for whom he was not searching, because the Lord handed him over to his power (cf. 1 Sam. 24:5). Wealth, then, is captive, but poverty is free.</p>	
<p>57. O rich, you serve in a wretched slavery indeed when you serve error, when you serve covetousness, when you serve an avarice that cannot be satisfied. An insatiable whirlpool is the more violent when it swallows up things that have been thrown into it, and, like an overflowing well, it is polluted with mud and wastes away the ground, which will produce nothing. This very example is an appropriate warning for you. For if you draw nothing from a well, it is easily ruined by stagnant inactivity and base neglect, but movement clarifies its appearance and makes it sweet to drink. Likewise, a heap of riches that lies in a gritty pile is bright when it is used, but inactivity makes it useless. Draw something out from this well, then. ‘Water puts out a burning fire, and alms will resist sins’ (Sir. 3:30), but standing water quickly produces worms. Do not let your treasure stand and do not let your fire stand. It will stand in you unless you resist such a thing with your works of mercy. Consider, O rich man, how many blazes you are in. Yours is the voice of the one who says: ‘Father Abraham, tell Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue’ (Luke 16:24).</p>	
<p>58. Whatever you have contributed to the poor, therefore, is profitable to you; whatever you have diminished it by is gain to you. You feed yourself with the food that you have given to the poor, for the one who is merciful to the poor is fed himself, and there is fruit already in these things. Mercy is sown on the earth and germinates in heaven; it is planted in the poor and sprouts forth in God’s presence. ‘Do not say,’ God declares, ‘tomorrow I will give.’ How does he who does not allow you to say: ‘Tomorrow I will give’ allow you to say: ‘I will not give’? It is not anything of yours that you are bestowing on the poor; rather, you are giving back something of his. For you alone are usurping what was given in common for the use of all. The earth belongs to everyone, not to the rich, but there are fewer who do not use what is theirs than who do use it. You are giving back something that is owed, then, and not bestowing something that is not owed. Hence Scripture says to you: Incline your soul to the poor, give back what is owed, and answer him with peaceable words in gentleness’ (Sir. 4:8).</p>	
<p>59. Why are you proud, O rich man? Why do you say to the poor man: ‘Do not touch me’? Were you not conceived in the womb and born from the womb just as</p>	

<p>the poor man was born? Why do you boast of your noble heritage? You are accustomed to reckoning the pedigree of your hounds as if they were wealthy men, you are accustomed to talking up the nobility of your horses as if they were consuls: this one came from that sire and was born of that mare; this one boasts such and such a grandsire, that one is distinguished by reason of such and such great-grandsires. But none of that helps him to race; the prize is given not for nobility but for racing. Once defeated he is the more disgraceful, and his nobility is jeopardized as well. Beware, then, O rich man, lest the merits of your forebears be called into question on your account, lest perchance it also be said to them: Why did you designate such a person as your heir? Why did you choose him?’ The standing of an heir has nothing to do with gold-fretted ceilings or porphyry decorations. The praiseworthy element there has to do not with men but with metal, for which men are punished. Gold is sought for by the needy and denied to the needy. They toil in search of it, they toil to find what they cannot possess.</p>	
<p>60. Yet I marvel, O rich men, why you consider yourselves praiseworthy on its account, when gold is more a stumbling block than a mark of esteem, for ‘gold is also a stumbling block, and woe to those who pursue it’ (Sir. 31:7). Blessed, therefore, is the rich person ‘who has been found without blemish, who has not gone after gold and has not placed his hope in treasuries of money’ (Sir. 31:8). But, as if he could not be known, he desires that such a person be shown him. Who is he?’ he says, ‘and we shall praise him’ (Sir. 31:9). For he did something that we should admire as new rather than recognize as commonplace. And so he who can be approved with regard to riches—he it is who is truly perfect and worthy of glory, ‘he who,’ it says, could have transgressed and did not transgress, could have done evil and did not do it’ (Sir. 31:10). Therefore he commends gold to you, in which there is so much inducement to sin, not as a thing favorable to human beings but as a punishment for them.</p>	
<p>61. Or are you uplifted by spacious halls? They should instead arouse compunction because, although they might hold a crowd, they exclude the voice of the poor (although there is no point in hearing what has no effect once it has been heard). Furthermore, your palace itself does not serve to embarrass you, since in building it your aim is to overtop your wealth, and yet you do not overcome it. You clothe your walls and you strip human beings. A naked man cries out in front of your house and you ignore him; a naked man cries out and you are worried about what marbles you should use for your floor. A poor man looks for money and has none. A man begs for bread, and your horse champs on the gold [bit] under his teeth. Precious ornaments delight you, while others have no grain. What a judgement, O rich man, you are bringing on yourself! The people are starving, and you close up your granaries. The people are wailing, and you twist your jeweled ring. Unhappy man, in whose power it lies to save the lives of so many from death, and there is no will to do so! The stone in your ring could save the life of an entire people.</p>	
<p>62. Listen closely to what kind of praise befits a rich person: ‘I have freed,’ it says, ‘the poor from the hand of the mighty, and I have helped the orphan, who had no one to help him. The blessing of the one who was about to perish came upon me, the mouth of the widow blessed me. I was clothed in righteousness, I was the eye of the blind, the foot of the lame; I was the father of the weak.’ (Job 29:12–16) And further: ‘Outside my gates no stranger has dwelled, but my door has been open to everyone who came. But even if I sinned by imprudence, I did not hide my fault; nor did I fear the multitude of the people, such that I would not tell of it in their presence if I had allowed a weak person to go out my door with empty bosom.’ (Job 31:32–34) He also mentioned that he ripped up the debtor’s pledge when [the debtor] returned it, without recovering what was owed him (cf. Job 31:35–37). But why should I repeat these things too — that he says that he wept over everyone</p>	

<p>who was sick and groaned when he saw a man in need while he was well off, and that they were evil days for him when he observed what he had and others lacked (cf. Job 30:25–26)?</p>	
<p>63. If he says this — he who never made a widow weep; who never ate his bread and did not give some to the orphan, whom from his youth up he fostered, fed and raised with the love of a parent; who never despised the naked; who covered the dead; who with the fleece of his sheep warmed the shoulders of the weak, did not oppress the orphan (cf. Job 31:16–21), never delighted in riches, never gloated over the downfall of his enemies (cf. Job 31:29); if he who did these things began, from the height of wealth, to be in need; if he kept nothing of his vast possessions but the fruit of mercy alone — then what shall become of you, who know not how to use your possessions, who at the pinnacle of wealth go through days of impoverishment because you give nothing to anyone and come to no one’s help?</p>	
<p>64. You are, then, the custodian of your riches and not their master. You who bury gold in the ground are, indeed, its servant and not its lord. ‘Where your treasure is, there also is your heart’ (Matt. 6:21). Hence in that gold you have buried your heart in the ground. Sell your gold, rather, and purchase salvation; sell your precious stone and purchase the kingdom of God; sell your field and buy back for yourself eternal life. What I say is true because I am adducing words of truth: ‘If you wish to be perfect,’ it says, ‘sell all that you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven’ (Matt. 19:21). And do not be saddened when you hear this, lest it also be said to you: ‘How difficult it is for those who have money to enter into the kingdom of God’ (Mark 10:23). Rather, when you read this, reflect that death can snatch these things from you or one more powerful than you can take them away. Why then do you want little things instead of great things, empty things instead of eternal things, treasures of money instead of treasures of grace? The former are corruptible, the latter endure.</p>	
<p>65. Reflect that you do not possess these things by yourself. The moth possesses them with you; rust, which consumes money, possesses them. Avarice has given these partners to you. But see whom grace would place in your debt: ‘The lips of the righteous shall bless the one who is prodigal with his bread, and there shall be a testimony of his goodness’ (Sir. 31:23). It makes your debtor God the Father, who, like one in debt to a good creditor, pays the interest on the loan with which the poor person was helped. It makes your debtor the Son, who says: ‘I was hungry and you gave me to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me to drink, and I was a stranger and you took me in, naked and you clothed me’ (Matt. 25:35–36). For he says that whatever was given to any of the least ones was given to him (cf. Matt. 25:40).</p>	
<p>66. You know not, O man, how to pile up wealth. If you wish to be rich, be poor to this world so that you might be rich to God. The one who is rich in faith is rich to God; the one who is rich in mercy is rich to God; the one who is rich in simplicity is rich to God; the one who is rich in wisdom, the one who is rich in knowledge — they are rich to God. There are those who possess an abundance in poverty and who are in need as far as wealth is concerned. The poor abound whose ‘deep poverty has abounded in the riches of their simplicity’ (2. Cor. 8:2), and ‘the rich have been in need and have gone hungry’ (Ps. 34:10). For not in vain does Scripture say: ‘The poor shall be put over the rich, and their own slaves shall lend to their masters’ (Prov. 22:7), because the rich and those who are masters sow what is useless and evil, from which they do not gather fruit but pluck off thorns. And therefore the rich shall be subject to the poor, and slaves shall lend spiritual things to their masters, just as the rich man asked that the poor Lazarus would lend him a drop of water. You also, O rich man, can fulfill these words: ‘Give to the poor and you have lent to God.’ For ‘he who gives to the poor lends to God’ (Prov. 19:17).</p>	

<p>67. Here now is the holy David in the seventy-fifth Psalm, beautifully singing a hymn to God that addresses the Assyrian — that is to say, which is against the Assyrian of spiritual wickedness (cf. Eph. 6:12), the vain and foolish prince of this world (cf. John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11). It begins in this way: ‘God is known in Judah’ (Ps. 76:1) — that is to say, God is known not among the wealthy, nor among the noble and the powerful, but in the believing soul. ‘And in Israel,’ it says, ‘his name is great’ (Ps. 76:1), not among princes and consuls, but in the one who sees God, for Israel is the one in whom a deep faith has been able to attain to the knowledge of God.</p>	
<p>68. ‘And his place,’ it says, ‘was established in peace’ (Ps. 76:2), where a tranquil disposition is not agitated by the surges of the different desires, not disturbed by the tempests of avarice, not set ablaze by the fire of longing for riches. He it is who catches sight of eternal things and dwells in Zion (cf. Ps. 76:2), breaking all the instruments of spiritual warfare and destroying the bows (cf. Ps. 76:3) with which the devil is wont to aim fiery arrows (cf. Eph. 6:16) that burn grievous passions in the breasts of human beings. But those arrows can do no harm to the righteous person, whose light is God. So far removed is he from the horrible and gloomy darkness that the adversary can have no place in him, although he has been accustomed to find his way even into princes, as he found his way even into the traitor Judas (cf. Luke 22:3), cutting down the gates of his faith like trees in a forest (cf. Ps. 74:6) so that he would have access to his heart and lay hold of the tabernacle of the eternal name (cf. Ps. 74:7), consecrated by the office of apostle that had been conferred on him. Therefore he cut down the gates like a lawless usurper, so that he might enter in violence, but the Lord in his loving way casts light on his servants and illumines the darkness of this world with their shining merits and the brightness of their virtues. The peaceful and mild, who are settled in sober tranquility of mind, possess this grace before God, but those with foolish hearts are disturbed, and they themselves are responsible for their own agitation because they are tumbled about by their billowing desires and rise and fall as if they were on the open sea.</p>	
<p>69. Who these might be he clearly said: ‘All the men of wealth’ (Ps. 76:5). He said ‘all’ and excluded no one. And well did he say ‘the men of wealth,’ not ‘the wealth of men,’ in order to show that they are not the possessors of their wealth but are possessed by their wealth, for the possession must belong to the possessor, not the possessor to the possession. Whoever, then, does not use his property as a possession and knows not how to give and dispense to the poor is the slave and not the master of his goods, for he watches over what belongs to others like a servant and does not use what is his like a master. When it comes to a disposition of this kind, then, we say that the man belongs to the wealth and not the wealth to the man. ‘For there is a good understanding in those who use it’ (Ps. 111:10), but the one who does not understand cannot claim for himself the grace of understanding and hence is lulled into a woozy torpor and falls asleep. Men of this sort, therefore, sleep their sleep (cf. Ps. 76:5) — that is, they sleep their own sleep, not Christ’s. And those who do not sleep the sleep of Christ do not have the repose of Christ or rise in the resurrection of Christ, who says: ‘I slept and rested and arose, because the Lord will support me’ (Ps. 3:5).</p>	
<p>70. In this world there also sleep those who are considered deserving of a rebuke from heaven (cf. Ps. 76:6), who have mounted horses that they were unable to rein in. We read elsewhere that either the Church or the soul says: ‘He made me the chariots of Aminadab’ (S. of S. 6:12). If, then, the soul is a chariot, see if the flesh is not a horse, whereas the strength of the mind is the driver, which rules over the flesh and restrains its urges with the reins of prudence as if they were some sort of</p>	

<p>horses.⁶² They have fallen asleep, then, who have mounted the pleasures of the body but exercise no governance over them. For that reason they are called by preference riders rather than horses or drivers. For a driver uses his authority to drive his horses with discipline and skill, so that he may urge on the swift, restrain the unruly, recall the weary and transform the hesitant in accordance with his own desire. Hence, when Elijah was taken up and carried by chariot as if to heaven, Elisha cried out to him: ‘Father, father, the driver of Israel and its horseman!’ (2 Kgs. 2:12). This means: ‘You who ruled over the Lord’s people with good leadership have, thanks to your steadfastness, received these chariots and these horses racing toward the divine, because the Lord has approved you as a director of human minds, and therefore, like a good charioteer, you are crowned victor in the race with an eternal reward.’ We also read in the prophet Habakkuk what was said to the Lord himself: ‘You shall mount upon your horses, and your riding is salvation’ (Hab. 3:8). For he drove his apostles, whom he directed to different places so that they might preach the gospel everywhere in the world. ‘You shall mount’: it says this as if to a driver rather than to a rider. For a horseman mounts, to be sure, but in order to control and not merely to sit down because he is lazy and sluggish in his weary mind and cannot keep up his pace.</p>	
<p>71. Of the horseman one may read: ‘And the horseman will fall backward, awaiting the salvation of the Lord’ (Gen. 49:17–18). For, since no one is without fault, even if a horseman were to fall and be perverted by earthly vices, if he did not despair of rising again and were confident of the divine mercy, he would still attain to salvation. But, with regard to the rider, there is a clear indication that he is considered reprehensible when Moses himself says in the Canticle of Exodus: ‘Horse and rider he has hurled into the sea’ (Exod. 15:21). And in Zechariah the Lord spoke and said: ‘I shall strike every horse with madness and its rider with foolishness’ (Zech. 12:4). He did not speak of the horse alone but of the rider as well, just as you have it in Exodus too: ‘Horse and rider.’ For when there is a rider who cannot control his own horse, the horse itself rushes headlong and its fury carries it off to steep and dangerous places. Why then, O rich, do you trust in horses? ‘Vain is the horse for safety?’ (Ps. 33:17). Why do you applaud yourselves in chariots? ‘These are in chariots and these are on horses, but we are exalted in the name of the Lord. They have been bound and have fallen, but we have arisen and been set upright’ (Ps. 20:7–8). Do not love those that neigh after pleasure; do not, O rich, be aroused by the snorting of voluptuousness. Terrible is the Lord and no one, however powerful and rich, can resist him; from heaven he hurls his judgement.</p>	
<p>72. It is good that you should be still, cease from your misdeeds and stand in awe of God’s power. Therefore it was said to the parricide Cain: ‘You have sinned, be still’ (Gen. 4:7), so that he might put an end to his sinning. Let your thoughts be confessed to the Lord. Do not say: ‘We have not sinned.’ Paul said: ‘Although I am conscious of nothing in myself,’ yet he added: ‘still I am not justified because of this’ (1 Cor. 4:4). You too, although you are conscious of nothing, still confess to the Lord, lest there be anything that escapes you. For the one who confesses to the Lord and brings to confession his fragmentary thoughts ‘will celebrate the festal day’ in the sanctuary of his mind ‘and will feast not with the leaven of malice and wickedness but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth’ (1 Cor. 5:8).</p>	
<p>73. And so in conclusion the prophet says, addressing you: ‘Pray and make a return to the Lord your God’ (Ps. 76:11). This means: Do not dissemble, O rich; the day is pressing on. Pray for your sins, return gifts for the good things that you have. You have received from [God] what you may offer; what you pay back to him is his. ‘The gifts that I give,’ he says, ‘and the gifts that have been given to me — the gifts, in other words, that you offer me — are my gifts; I myself gave them to you</p>	

<p>and bestowed them upon you.’ Hence the prophet says: ‘You do not stand in want of my good things’ (Ps. 16:2), and therefore I offer you what is yours, since I have nothing that you have not given me.</p>	
<p>74. It is faith that makes gifts acceptable, and it is humility that commends offerings. “Because of his faith Abel offered a greater sacrifice to God’ (Heb. 11:4). The oblation of Abel was more pleasing than the oblations of his brother Cain (cf. Gen.4:3–5) because his faith was greater. How is it that the sacrifices of a poor man are more pleasing than those of a rich man? The poor man is richer in faith, wealthier in moderation. And although he is poor, he is of those of whom it is said: ‘Kings shall offer you gifts’ (Ps. 68:29). For the Lord Jesus takes delight not in those who make offerings, all clad in purple, but in those who rule over their own dispositions, who by the authority of their mind exercise dominion over bodily wantonness.</p>	
<p>75. Pray, then, O rich! There is nothing that is pleasing in your works. Pray for your sins and misdeeds and return gifts to the Lord your God. Make a return in the poor person, pay back in the needy person, lend in that destitute person to whom, on account of your misdeeds, you cannot otherwise be reconciled. Make him your debtor whom you fear as an avenger. ‘I shall not accept,’ he says, ‘calves from your home or goats from your flocks, for mine are all the beasts of the forest’ (Ps. 50:9–10). ‘Whatever you offer,’ he says, ‘is mine, because the whole world is mine. I do not demand what is mine, but from what is yours you can offer the zeal of your devotion and faith. I take no delight in the flattery of sacrifices; only, O man, “offer to God a sacrifice of praise and pay your vows to the Most High”’ (Ps. 50:14).</p>	
<p>76. Or at least it will be acceptable if we understand it in this way — that he said that the rich have slept their sleep, that he sent out in advance the Lord’s rebukes against them, that he concocted something dreadful and that he proclaimed a power that the rich could not withstand. Turning to all, he says: ‘Let the rich sleep, let the rich be rebuked. “You pray and make return to the Lord your God. All who are round about him offer gifts”’ (Ps. 76:11)—that is, give thanks, O poor — “because God is not a respecter of persons”’ (Acts. 10:34). Let them build up their wealth, let them hoard their money, let them heap up treasures of gold and silver. You pray, you who have nothing else; you pray, you who have this alone, which is more precious than gold and silver. You return gifts, you who are not far from the Lord, ‘who are round about him,’ for ‘you who were distant have been brought close’ (Eph. 2:13). But those who seem to themselves to be close on account of their riches and power have become distant because of their avarice. For no one is outside except the one whom wrongdoing has shut out, just as it cast out Adam from paradise and shut out Eve (cf. Gen. 3:23–24). No one is distant except the one whom his own misdeeds have banished.</p>	
<p>77. Therefore you pray, you who are nearby, and return gifts ‘to the one who is terrible, to him who cuts off the breath of princes, to him who is terrible among the kings of the earth’ (Ps. 76:11–12), because by no rich man’s recompense will he be bought off, by no arrogance on the part of the powerful will he be moved, he who apportions the penalties for wrongdoing, who demands more from the one to whom he has given more (cf. Luke 12:48), who conferred a kingdom on Saul when he was a private citizen (cf. 1 Sam. 9–11), although he took away his kingdom and his life because he did not keep his commandment (cf. 1 Sam. 31), who on account of their faithlessness made many kings the captives of the Gentiles and took them from the people of their fathers (cf. 2 Kgs. 17:23–25) and, with reference now to the narrative at hand, who ordered that King Ahab, ungrateful for the good things that he had received from heaven, be slain in such a way that his wounds would be licked by dogs. For, because he who could not be sated by all the wealth of a</p>	

<p>kingdom had desired a poor man's vineyard, he was brought lower than utter destitution by the Lord. No one was found to wash his wounds, no one to cover his body. Human kindness failed in his regard, and canine savagery took its place. Clearly the avaricious man found worthy ministers for his obsequies.</p>	
<p>78. At this point the question arises as to how to read what the Lord said to Elijah: 'Have you seen how Ahab has been shaken at my presence? I will not bring evils in his days, but I will bring evils in the days of his son' (1 Kgs. 21:29), or how to say that penance is efficacious before the Lord. 'Behold, the king was moved before the face of the Lord, he went away weeping, rent his garments, covered himself in haircloth and was clothed in sackcloth from the day when he killed Naboth the Jezreelite' (1 Kgs. 21:27). The result was that mercy moved God and changed his sentence. Therefore either his penance was inefficacious and did not bend a merciful Lord or the oracle was false, for Ahab was overcome and slain (cf. 1 Kgs. 22:34-37).</p>	
<p>79. But consider that he had Jezebel for his wife, under whose influence he was inflamed, who turned his heart and made him accursed on account of his horrible sacrileges. She, then, recalled him from his penitential disposition. The Lord, however, cannot be considered fickle if he did not think that the promise which he had made when [Ahab] confessed [his guilt] should be kept when he was unmindful of his confession.</p>	
<p>80. Listen to something else that is still truer. The Lord kept the terms of his sentence even though [Ahab] was unworthy, but [Ahab] was heedless of the divine benefits in his regard. The king of Syria had started a war. He was conquered and kept for pardon. Although a captive, he was set free and sent back to his kingdom (cf. 1 Kgs. 20:1, 29-34). In keeping with the divine sentence Ahab not only escaped but even triumphed, but through his own foolishness he armed against himself the enemy by whom he would be conquered. He had, to be sure, been warned by the prophet, who said: 'Give thought and see what you should do' (1 Kgs. 20:22). He had been warned, I say, because the help of heavenly grace was due in respect to the servants of the king of Syria, since he had said: The God of the mountains is the God of Israel and not the god Baal. Therefore, they have gotten the better of us.</p>	
<p>81. Hence, if we do not completely get the better of them, they will set up satraps in place of the king of Syria.' (1 Kgs. 20:23-24) In this way he would eliminate their strength and the king's power. And so in the first encounter he conquered, so that he put the enemy to flight (cf. 1 Kgs. 20:20); in the second he conquered, whereupon he sent his captive back to his own kingdom (cf. 1 Kgs. 20:29). It was on this account that there sprang up a clear oracle concerning his defeat, when one of the sons of the prophets said to his neighbor: "'Slay me.'" But the man refused to slay him. And he said: "Because you did not obey the word of the Lord, behold, when you leave me a lion will kill you." And he left him, and a lion found him and killed him.' (1 Kgs. 20:35-37) And after this another prophet stood before the king of Israel and said to him: 'The Lord says this: Since you let go from your own hand the man of destruction, behold, your life shall be in place of his life, and your people in place of his people' (1 Kgs. 20:42). 17.73. It is obvious from these oracles, then, that the Lord keeps his promises even with regard to the unworthy, but that the wicked are either overcome by their own stupidity or condemned for a second transgression even if they have escaped the snares of the first transgression. But it behooves us to act in such a way that we may be worthy by reason of our good works and may merit to receive what has been promised by the almighty God.</p>	

Outline by Scripture

Coveting: An Introduction (1 – 4)
Scripture: Ahab and Naboth in 1 Kings 21 (5 – 32)
Scripture: The Rich Fool in Luke 12:13 – 34 (33 – 44)
Scripture: Jezebel and Ahab in 1 Kings 21 (45 – 61)
Scripture: Job (62 – 63)
Scripture: Matthew 6 (64 – 66)
Scripture: Psalm 76 (67 – 77)
Scripture: Ahab and His Son and Fate (78 – 81)

Notable mentions:

- Genesis 1 (creation belongs to all, everyone) in 2, 11, 34, 37, 58

Outline by Topic

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How the Rich Rob the Poor: Ahab robbed Naboth, 1 Kings 21: 5 – 15
Contemporary Examples: 16 – 19
Contemporary Example: Poor Father: 20 – 25
Contemporary Example: Greedy Wives and Women: 26 - 27
Can Riches Ransom Lives? No: 28 - 29
Being Enslaved to Sin: Though Wealthy, You Beg: 30 - 32
The Rich Fool Builds Bigger Granaries; Scripture: Luke 12:13 - 34: 33 - 38
The Better Granaries: The Poor: 40 – 44
Jezebel is Avarice: 45 - 54
Ahab Was Found Out; Heart Revealed: 55 - 61
Good Example: The Generous Person from Job 62 - 63
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Ahab and His Son and Fate: 78 – 81

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