

The Chasm

You've seen people like him on TV and in magazines. He keeps a full staff of servants at his beck and call. He sleeps on the finest linens, gorges himself with delicacies prepared by his personal chef, and wears silk suits custom-made by top designers. Each day, his private masseuse anoints his skin with costly oils. In the priciest vehicle money can buy, his chauffeur drives him wherever he wishes to go. He enjoys every imaginable luxury. This incredibly rich man lives in an elegant mansion on a huge estate. It's walled and gated, in order to keep out "undesirables."

But just outside the gate of this great house lives another man. If you can call his existence "living." He's there in the futile hope that when the garbage truck driver stops on his way out from the mansion to shoot the breeze with the security guard at the gate, he can dig through the rich guy's trash and—without being detected—find some meager scraps of food.

He's homeless. He doesn't have even a tent to shelter him from the rain and wind and freezing elements. He's been all over

town looking for a job. But because he has a disfiguring skin condition, and because he has no place to bathe, no one will hire him, even at minimum wage. He has no health insurance, and so is unable to receive the care he desperately needs. He's trapped in a vicious cycle of abject poverty. The contrast between these two twenty-first century men and the way they live couldn't possibly be greater.

Such striking contrast is one of the first things we notice in this Sunday's gospel text. According to Luke, as Jesus journeys toward Jerusalem, he's been teaching on the subject of wealth and possessions. Today we hear these teachings culminate in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus.

Jesus tells of a first-century man clad in purple garments that identify him as a member of the ruling class. The upper class. He lives a life of ostentatious opulence, with every indulgence his vast wealth can buy. Each day, after feasting, he uses hunks of bread to wipe the grease from his mouth and hands, then throws the bread away. But at the rich man's gate lies lame Lazarus, who's been *dumped* there. He is given nothing, not even the crusts that the rich man discards. Each night he falls asleep even hungrier and colder than he was the

night before, his emaciated body covered with open wounds. His suffering reminds us of the suffering of Job. And we witness this suffering over against the conspicuous consumption and self-gratification of the rich man.

In their diametrically different existences, these two have nothing to do with one another. There's no interaction between them whatsoever. The rich man never says one word to Lazarus. Although physically they're only a few feet apart, they're separated, in every way that matters, by a great distance.

The economic system of Jesus' time creates two classes of persons: those with far more material possessions than they'll ever need, and those with very little or nothing. In two thousand years, how much has the world actually changed? Twenty centuries later, many contemporary societies operate under economic systems that eventually cause the rich to get richer and the poor to become even *more* poor.

This widening gap between rich and poor is becoming increasingly apparent in our country—and in its largest city, New York. According to news reports, more billionaires—that's billion with a "B"—live in New York City than anywhere else.

Yet on its streets and in its back alleys are this nation's largest number of homeless persons. *Sixty thousand* homeless persons.

Real men and women—and children—with real stories. Real brokenness and real heartbreak. They have faces. They have names. Jesus wants us to know that the poor have names. Lazarus has a name. In all of Jesus' parables, Lazarus is the only person given a name. His name means *God helps*.

God helps those who need it most. And God's people are to be the instruments of that help. But sometimes those who most need that help get disparaged with bootstrap rhetoric. You've heard it. You know how it goes: "*If those folks down in the projects would just get off their lazy behinds and pull themselves up by their bootstraps, I wouldn't have to support them with my tax dollars.*" Those who think this way may be more concerned about assistance going to a few who don't really need it than they are about the many who truly do.

Such a mindset tends to isolate and insulate people like Jesus' rich man from the suffering of those in genuine need. If they don't have to see it, if they don't have to be exposed to it, they can remain apathetic to it. Remain indifferent. We're called

to love the neighbor. But the opposite of love isn't hate. It's indifference.

It's sometimes through indifference and apathy that persons separate themselves from God and place themselves outside the reach of God's mercy.

And according to the apostle Paul, that can happen through the love of money. Writing to Timothy, Paul insists that "the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil." Not money itself. The *love* of money. If I love money, if that's what I focus on and care about, I may decide I can't be *bothered* caring about people who are hurting and in need. And so injustice increases, as the chasm created by indifference and apathy grows wider and deeper.

But Pastor, you may be wondering, does all this really apply to us? Our lifestyle's nothing like the lifestyle of the first-century or twenty-first century rich person. Yet when we compare our living conditions to those of people in other parts of the world, we find that we are, indeed, very well off.

At a meeting not too long ago, a district superintendent spoke of his experience on a mission trip to Honduras. He told pastors that the people of that country—and many others—endure a kind of poverty that we Americans just can't imagine.

A deep disparity exists between our relative affluence and the great need of others. Just as a deep disparity exists between the lifestyles of the rich man and Lazarus.

Which Jesus portrays for us in telling detail, before reporting the deaths of both men. We don't know what ended their lives, but we dare to speculate that Lazarus dies of disease, exposure, or starvation. While the rich man, who *feasted sumptuously every day*, may have died from the results of overeating. Ironically, as Alan Culpeper suggests, the rich man's death may have been hastened by consuming an excess of food he could have given Lazarus, but chose not to.

But after death, each man's situation is dramatically altered. Just as the psalmist sings, God gives God's angels charge over Lazarus, angels who bear him up to be with Abraham—in Jewish tradition, a place of unimaginable bliss. In contrast, the rich man ends up in Hades.

Now whether you believe in a physical hell of fire or believe that in passages such as this one, Jesus uses vivid figures of speech, one thing remains certain. Jesus makes this point clear. This rich man, who never repented for all that he could

have done for his neighbor but failed to do, must endure the unending pain of having turned away from God.

My brothers and sisters, you'll notice that the rich man's attitude hasn't changed one little bit. Accustomed as he was in life to barking orders and being waited on hand and foot, he still expects others to do his bidding: *Oh, Father Abraham, send my water boy Lazarus down here to me.*" Clarence Jordan paraphrases Abraham's response in language familiar to us in the South: *Lazarus ain't gonna run no mo' yo' errands, rich man!*

When the rich man hears Abraham's answer, he tries a different tack: *Send my boy Lazarus to warn my five brothers so they can be saved.*

But Abraham replies: *You know, they've got Moses and the prophets. And if they don't listen to Moses and the prophets, they're not going to be persuaded even by someone who rises from the dead.* Sorry, rich man.

In life, he wouldn't walk even a short distance to Lazarus who lay just outside his gate, to Lazarus of whom he was not unaware, to Lazarus whose name he knew. He did not offer Lazarus life-saving food, nor medicine, nor comfort. Now, after

death, an enormous gulf divides the two. Between them lies an immense chasm. But there's been a radical transformation, revealed in Abraham's words to the rich man: *remember that in your lifetime you got the good things and Lazarus the bad things. It's not like that here. Here he's consoled and you're tormented.*

In the positions of the rich man and Lazarus, a great reversal has taken place. Luke has already told us about Mary singing that God *brings down the powerful...and lifts up the lowly*. And in this parable of Mary's son Jesus, we see her prophecy fulfilled. Jesus wants to be sure we understand that in God's reign, the old unjust order gets overturned. This upside-down world gets turned right-side up.

But where do *we* fit in? In this coming inversion, where do you see yourself? With Lazarus? Or with the rich man? Or do you perhaps see yourself among the rich man's five brothers, the ones on whom the jury is still out? Could it be that they represent you and me, the hearers of Jesus' parable? These five brothers have Moses and the prophets—the writings of the Hebrew Scriptures—as a call to repentance. Will they get the

message—before it's too late? And if they do get the message, what will they do about it?

We don't know. Jesus doesn't give us an ending to this story of the rich man and Lazarus. He leaves it open-ended. Like the five siblings, you and I are the conclusion to this parable. We write its ending with our lives.

Just like the rich man's five brothers, we have the law and the prophets of the First Testament. God's tender love for the poor resonates in the Law of Moses. God's compassionate concern for the poor echoes in the scathing words of the prophets who speak truth to power, to the powerful who neglect and exploit those whose need is great.

And we have the compelling witness of the New Covenant of Jesus Christ, as well. We've gotten the whole message. Old Testament and New. The whole biblical narrative of God's unfailing grace. The sufficient rule both of faith and of practice. The holy Word of this God who is grieved by the existence of poverty.

This God who is perfectly revealed in Jesus the Christ. Throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus himself teaches—not just once but again and again—that the poor have a special place in God's

heart of love. And through this parable, Jesus informs you and me that our ultimate destiny will be determined by whether we too love and put that love into action. We have his Word.

And today he asks: *What will you do with the knowledge you've received from this Word?* The Word of this One who has come to be a bridge across the great yawning chasm between eternal separation from God and everlasting life in God.

Christ Jesus has come to be a bridge across that chasm. Christ Jesus bridges that chasm for us. Christ Jesus alone gives you and me the hope of being able to cross that chasm. And Christ Jesus calls you to care. To feed and to clothe and to heal the Lazaruses of today's world.

Are you listening? Will you answer his urgent call? Will *you* be convinced by this One who has risen from the dead?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.