

**Dave Johnson**

**Sermon: “The Great Chasm” (Luke 16:19-31)**

**September 26, 2010**

Today I’m preaching from a parable that is only found in Luke’s account of the gospel: Jesus’ parable about the rich man and Lazarus.

There are several ways to read this parable, from the need to care for the poor to the realities of heaven and hell to the sobering fact that even when facing the truth of the resurrection some people still refuse to put their trust in God, but today I’m going to focus on the “great chasm” between Lazarus and the rich man. At times all of us are like the rich man, preoccupied with our own comforts and pleasures and oblivious to the needs of those around us, and at other times all of us are also like Lazarus, utterly poor and helpless. There are “great chasms” in all of our lives, between us and others, and between us and God, great chasms that can only be bridged by the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Jesus directs this parable at the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders who were constantly antagonistic toward Jesus, who taught justification through works, who were themselves as wealthy and privileged as the rich man in this parable.

The two main characters in this parable have completely contrasting lives. The rich man, who dressed in the finest clothes of his time, “purple and fine linen,” and “feasted sumptuously every day” is contrasted with a crippled man named Lazarus who lies at the gate to his mansion every day, a man who is sick, covered with sores, a man who has been completely disregarded and marginalized, a man who has literally been thrown out and thrown down at the rich man’s gate. The rich man feasts everyday with his friends, each of whom walks by Lazarus at the rich man’s gate on their way inside. Lazarus eats scraps alone, except for the dogs which are also licking his sores.

But this does not last forever: one day life ends for both the rich man and Lazarus.

*Rolling Stone* recently issued a special collector’s edition: *The Beatles 100 Greatest Songs*. Imagine being in a band so talented that writers could actually compile a list of not just five or ten, but a hundred of your *greatest* songs—not exactly the case with the Starland Vocal Band or Lady Gaga ☺. The number one Beatles song according to *Rolling Stone* is *A Day in the Life*, the mind-blowing final song off of *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band*, which ends with an E-major chord played simultaneously on five different pianos that lasts for 53 seconds. One of the pianos was played by a roadie named Mal Evans (how cool is that?). The first verse of *A Day in the Life* is about a rich man, a “lucky man who made the grade” who in spite of his fame and wealth “blew his mind out in a car.” All of us are given a finite number of days by God, and each “day in the life” may be the last. This was the case with both men in today’s passage, for one day both the rich man and Lazarus died on their final “day in the life.” One day the partying

and luxury of the rich man, the “lucky man who made the grade,” ended. One day the suffering and despair of Lazarus ended as well.

No doubt there was an elaborate funeral for the rich man, attended by all the movers and shakers in the community, replete with mourning, eulogy, and followed by sumptuous feasting. There was probably nothing done when Lazarus died—he may have simply been taken to a common grave outside of town—but Jesus tells us Lazarus “was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham.”

Both the rich man and Lazarus find themselves in the afterlife, with Lazarus in absolute comfort and security and the rich man in abject misery. There has been a complete reversal of fortune: the rich man tormented by thirst while Lazarus is in the place the Pharisees would have considered the ultimate place of security and comfort, Father Abraham’s bosom.

It is interesting that Jesus names Lazarus in this parable—the only one of Jesus’ parables in which a proper name is used—while leaving the rich man nameless. The name “Lazarus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name “Eleazar,” which means “the one God has helped,” and we see here that God indeed helped Lazarus.

In Hades the tormented rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to him with some water, to which Abraham responds, “Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony”—and then continues, “Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us.”

All of us at times are like the rich man. When I lived in Wyoming back in the mid-nineties I had a friend who lived in Colorado Springs. He was well-connected and managed to score two tickets for a Monday night football game between the Denver Broncos and Oakland Raiders in Mile High Stadium in Denver. On the way there my family and I stopped for lunch in Cheyenne. Afterwards Steph and I were loading our two young children in our Honda Accord and as I turned around I was startled by a homeless man who asked for some money for lunch. Our kids were crying and I was annoyed, and I blew him off and drove away. On our way back to I-25 I was overcome with guilt and drove back around town, looking for him, but never found him. In that episode of my life I was completely like the rich man in this parable, absorbed with my own desires, utterly indifferent to the needs of the homeless man. All of us at times are like the rich man.

And all of us at times are like Lazarus. In my office or at restaurants and coffee shops I have listened many times to people pour out their hearts about seasons in their lives in which they, like Lazarus, have been in way or another discarded, sick, helpless, thrown out—who feel utterly alone in their pain. Perhaps you are in a season like that in your life right now.

And not only can we relate in one way or another with the rich man and Lazarus in their lives, but also with their experience with the “great chasm” that was fixed between them in the afterlife. In our lives there is often “a great chasm” between us and the ones with whom we long to be close.

This summer there was an article in the *New York Times Magazine* about Dale Earnhardt, Jr. a popular Nascar driver. He is the son of the legendary Dale Earnhardt, Sr., the great car racer, who died in 2001 after crashing at the Daytona 500. In this article he shared about the chasm he experienced in his relationship with his father: “My daddy... never really did anything with me. He never told me things. We were raised by six or seven nannies. I always thought he felt I wasn’t much like him.” This chasm in the relationship with his father still impacts him. He’s 35 and says, “I don’t want to get married and divorced like my dad.” In fact, “He lives alone... (and) plays video games by himself eight hours at a clip. He’s a multimillionaire, yet he lived alone for months in a 20-by-20 garage loft.” (*New York Times Magazine*, August 8, 2010).

This kind of relational “great chasm” is not only perceived from kids with their parents, but vice versa as well. Last week I finished Jonathan Franzen’s current number one bestseller, *Freedom*. Franzen was on the cover of Time magazine a couple weeks ago, and he is sort of the LeBron James, the “chosen one,” of modern American fiction. In *Freedom* he is quite graphic in many places, but presents a poignant picture of family dysfunction, of the chasm that exists between family members. In one scene a mom named Patty is visiting her daughter, Jessica, at her Ivy League school during a Parents Weekend. Listen to how Franzen describes the relational chasm between Patty and Jessica:

“Everyone looked radiantly better-adjusted than (Patty) was feeling. The students all seemed cheerfully competent at everything, no doubt including sitting comfortably in a bar chair, and all the other parents seemed so proud of them, so thrilled to be their friends, and the college itself seemed immensely proud of its wealth and its altruistic mission. Patty really had been a good parent; she’d succeeded in preparing her daughter for a happier and easier life than her own; but it was clear from the other families’ very body language that she hadn’t been a great mom in the ways that counted most. While the other mothers and daughters walked shoulder to shoulder on the paved pathways, laughing or comparing cell phones, Jessica walked on the grass one or two steps ahead of Patty. The only role (Jessica) offered Patty that weekend was to be impressed with her fabulous school” (p. 183).

Moreover, this “great chasm” is something we experience with those we love who have died. We may long to see them, tell them we love them, give them a hug, apologize, or simply be with them, but we can’t, because the chasm between the living and the dead is like the chasm between the rich man and Lazarus, fixed, unbridgeable, with no way to pass from one side to the other.

I spent ten years doing youth ministry before I was ordained, and in the spring of 2001 I did one of the hardest things I had to do in those ten years: watching a seventeen year old named Devin as he slowly died of cancer. Devin was a great kid, funny, bright, a good athlete, had lots of friends, and he loved the Lord, and yet in the face of cancer, he was like Lazarus, utterly helpless. We spent a lot of time together and became good friends. I preached at his funeral in a packed out church, and later that same day did a confirmation dinner with thirty-something 8<sup>th</sup> graders and their families. It was a manically busy season and I didn't take any time to grieve. A couple months later I was at a seminary in Wisconsin, up late one night studying and out of nowhere came the grief, like a flood. I was listening to a beautiful song by Bruce Springsteen, *Across the Border*, and as he sang the following verse the tears finally came:

For what are we without hope in our hearts  
That someday we'll drink from God's blessed waters  
And eat the fruit from the vine  
I know love and fortune will be mine  
Somewhere across the border

I longed to cut up with Devin again, to go “across the border” and spend time with him, but could not, because of the “great chasm” fixed between the living and the dead. No doubt it is the same with you. No doubt there are people you love who have died, with whom you would love to reconnect, but you can't—they are “across the border,” there is a great chasm fixed between you.

And not only that but scripture tells us that in the same way there was a “great chasm” fixed between the rich man and Lazarus, there is a “great chasm” between God and us, between our holy creator and fallen creation—a chasm infinitely greater than the one between the rich man feasting with his friends and Lazarus lying at his gate, infinitely greater than the chasm between Dale Earnhardt Jr. and his dad, infinitely greater than the chasm between Patty and Jessica, between me and Devin, between all of us and those we love who have died.

Emily Dickinson, the famous nineteenth century American poet from Amherst, Massachusetts, possessed a keen discernment of the yearning for the grace of God that we all have, as well as the utter sense of desolation we feel when the chasm between God and us appears impossible to cross. Dickinson wrote in one poem:

Except the heaven had come so near,  
So seemed to choose my door,  
The distance would not haunt me so;  
I had not hoped before.

But just to hear the grace depart  
I never thought to see,

Afflicts me with a double loss;  
'Tis lost, and lost to me.

The good news of the gospel is that Jesus Christ, the son of God, crossed that great chasm between a holy God and sinful people. Jesus Christ took on flesh, was born in a barn, and reached out to all kinds of sinners, self-absorbed indifferent rich men like the rich man in the parable and helpless crippled beggars like Lazarus. Jesus was jeered, beaten, spit on, and then clothed with a purple robe, just like the one the rich man in the parable wore. And later that same day Jesus, like Lazarus who had been thrown out at the gate of the rich man, was literally thrown down outside a gate of Jerusalem and nailed to a cross.

Jesus died on the cross to reconcile us to God, to bridge the great chasm between sinful people and a holy God, and to give us the hope that someday the great chasm that divides us from those we long to connect with or be close to will also be eliminated. For Jesus Good Friday was the worst day of his life, “a day in the life,” on which he gave his life for us, to bridge the chasm between us and God, to give us forgiveness and the hope of eternal life. Jesus died for rich men like the one in today’s parable and for the sick and helpless like Lazarus. Jesus died for you and for me. Jesus has gone across the border to us and for us. Heaven has come near. Jesus has come to our door. Like Lazarus, God knows our name and God has helped us.

So today, whether you are like the rich man, self-absorbed and indifferent to the needs of others, or like Lazarus, feeling alone and helpless in your suffering, the good news is that God has bridged the “great chasm” with love and grace in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The great chasm between us and God is no more. And one day not only will we find the great chasm between us and the ones we love bridged, we will also find ourselves in a place of even greater comfort and security than the bosom of Father Abraham—we will find ourselves in the bosom of our Heavenly Father.

Amen.