

## Luke 16:19-31 The Great Chasm

Human beings like to divide themselves into groups. Sometimes these divisions are superficial and reflect a matter of taste more than anything else and are thus benign. There are animal lovers and those who are not inclined to be around animals if they can avoid it. But even that is too broad so the animal lovers divide themselves even further. There are cat people and there are dog people. I am sort of neutral on this one but if I had to choose, I would be a dog person.

One of the other superficial divisions is between coffee drinkers and non-coffee drinkers. This one is noticeable to me because for whatever reason I am not a coffee drinker. People will say, "Let's get a cup of coffee sometime." And if they mean they want to go to a coffee shop then it can get a little awkward because most coffee shops don't have anything I like. My caffeine source is Pepsi, which I know isn't good for me. I don't go to coffee shops nor do I make coffee. It can be a hinderance socially.

Some people like to read and others don't read anything if they can avoid it. Some like the outdoors and others not so much. Some divisions overlap. One can be a dog lover who drinks coffee and find something in common with a cat lover who also drinks coffee. Some people like sports and are obsessed with

football while others would be happy if there were no such things.

There are other divisions that also seem to be a matter of choice but which have higher stakes and are not always benign. One has often heard the old saying that at social gatherings one should not discuss religion or politics. In religious life we have Catholics and Protestants, Baptists, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Methodists, Pentecostals and all the rest, not to mention the larger world religions along with Christianity; Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, Judaism, and Secular Humanism. I have always been aware that even in my own tradition, when I am among others of my own faith, it is still not a good idea to discuss religion.

And in politics we have Republicans, Democrats, and Independents, Libertarians and Greens and an assortment of others. While in the past there was enough respect to at least tolerate one another, the divisions have become more sharp and less cordial. I could go on for quite some time about these divisions caused by these disagreements, but I am willing to bet you already know what I am talking about. Ordinarily we agree to disagree about such things and our lives are filled to the brim with examples of how people can get along despite their differences of opinion. Sometimes people even marry across ideological lines.

When looking at international relationships there are even sharper divisions still. For decades the United States and the Soviet Union were locked into a disagreement that threatened our very existence. There might have been severe consequences had things gone badly and at any time there might be yet. And of course, I don't need to speak about racial divisions or the Shia-Sunni conflict.

### The Rich and the Poor

Perhaps there is no longer-standing and persistent divide between people that the divide between the rich and the poor. While most of us see ourselves as being somewhere in-between, that fact is that most are closer to being rich than we are to destitution. Perhaps you have heard the famous statistics from Ron Sider, quoted from his book, Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger, that half of the world's population lives on less than \$2 per day. That is \$710 per year. Even when the differences in cost of living are accounted for, one still gets the point. More recent statistics claim that the average salary in the world is \$10,000 per year and that to be in the upper 1% one needs only to make \$34,000. Either way, the story Jesus tells in Luke 16 presents all of us with a great challenge.

### Abraham's Bosom

Lazarus was a poor beggar who spent his life pleading for food outside the gates of a wealthy man's home. Inside the man and his family feasted everyday and ignored his pleas. Finally, Lazarus died and went to heaven where he was comforted by Abraham himself. The rich man died and went to hell where he was in perpetual torment.

The Gospel of Luke, of the four gospels, offers the theme of God's love and preference for the poor. This story clearly fits with this theme. The question of the larger gospel is not really how the poor get saved. It has more to do with how the rich get saved. More particularly, the question is how the relatively good ones but who are yet sinners because they have known comfort in this life but would kill and steal if they had to, get saved. The story paints a picture of a large division, a Great Chasm, not only in this life, but mainly in the next, and states emphatically that there is no way across that chasm.

In the story, the rich man can speak to Abraham but his pleas are not answered like those of Lazarus during his earthy life. So he asks on behalf of his relatives still living but is told they wouldn't believe even if someone rose from the dead, which is of course, an ironic statement. One might conclude that, if this was the only story in the bible, the rich couldn't be saved at all,

but we don't believe that. When Jesus encounters the rich young man he said, "it is harder for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven than it is for a camel to get through the eye of a needle," but then added, "though for humans this is impossible, for God all things are possible." So I am sure that is not the conclusion we are meant to reach. But then what conclusion are we meant to reach?

### Spiritual Problem

The conclusion we are meant to draw is that the divide between the rich and the poor is at the heart a spiritual problem. Before it is a problem of inadequate economic or political systems, it is a problem of human relationships, and, if I may add, of the divine/human relationship. No political or economic system, no program of religion or education ever invented has ever come close to solving this chasm and, quite frankly, I don't see any workable options. I believe that some democratic form of government combined with a modified or regulated market economy is the best yet conceived, but I am forced to admit that it hasn't solved the problem. In an industrialized world with over 7 billion people, the implications of this failure are staggering.

There is no reorganization of society that will solve this problem because essentially it is a matter of the heart.

We are forced to admit that like the rich man in the story, we are not as deeply grieved at the suffering of the poor as we might be. I believe we are saddened by it; and willing to help. That is why we support the local food pantry and donate to the Crop Walk, and pick up the bread from Panera's. But the kind of relationship with the poor of the world that is needed is lacking. The problem is persistent. The problem is relational. The problem is spiritual.

If I had the solution, some idea for a new program or set of laws, that I knew for sure would solve it, I would offer it, but I have no such solution and there is nothing offered here in this text.

We are meant to value the possibility of a relationship more than we value our things, more than we value our comfort, our safety, our self-esteem, our status. The great chasm is the chasm of our unconcern. If we don't somehow at least begin to care in this life, what hope could there possibility be for us in the next?

Yet the gospel message is that there is no chasm beyond the power of God's grace to reach across. God reaches across it for us but in such a way that brings us along voluntarily to the other side so that in the end we see the person behind the facade of wealth or poverty, and setting aside our indifference, fall in love.

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