

Crossing the Chasm
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1 Timothy 6:6-19 and Luke 16:19-31
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I would like to introduce you to a man born one hundred twenty-nine years ago¹ on the German-French border. He was one of the most promising professors at the University of Strassburg. He was a prolific author of theological works about the life and teachings of Jesus. He was a popular minister. On top of that, he was one of the greatest European masters of the organ. He campaigned to save many old hand-crafted organs which were about to be replaced by factory-made ones. He was one of the foremost interpreters of J. S. Bach. And all this was before he was thirty years old! One day he decided to take up a new study to be a medical doctor, but he did not want to engage in a lucrative medical practice in Europe. Rather, he intended to go to Africa and practice as a missionary. His name? It was Albert Schweitzer.

What brought about this change? It was the parable Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus. Schweitzer left his comfortable home at the University of Strasbourg, faced the derision and joking of people who knew him, and founded a hospital in Lambarene in Gabon, near Zaire.

He took to heart what was meant in the parable, thinking that Europe was the rich man with all the food and fine clothes, while Lazarus was all the people of Africa at Europe's door feeding on the scraps left for them.

The parable is one of the most colorful parables Jesus told, and it has all the impact of a three-hundred pound center on the football team. The rich man was so rich he had linen underwear and purple outer garments. These kinds of clothes were uncommon in Jesus' day; they were reserved only for the richest. The man feasted sumptuously every day.

Outside of the rich man's house lay a poor man by the name of Lazarus. He was so poor, he was glad to get even the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. He was so undernourished that sores broke out on his skin. To make matters worse, he had to put up with the neighborhood dogs who would come to lick his sores, and he was too weak to ward them off.

Lazarus died. (This is not the Lazarus of the book of John who was raised from the dead by Jesus.) This Lazarus was so poor he was not even buried when he died, which was a disgrace.

Lazarus went to Hades and lived with Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people. During the time Jesus told this parable, the concept was that Hades was below the earth and it was a place where both good and bad people went after death. To live with Abraham was a high honor.

The rich man also died, but he had plenty of money, so he was given a fine burial. But all of his wealth and his burial did not help him in the afterlife. He, too, went to Hades, but was in torment. He was thirsty but could get nothing to drink. He could see Abraham over there with Lazarus on his chest. The rich man was in so much agony that just a wet finger would have given him relief.

Abraham gave no comfort to the "poor" rich man. The explanation was that he had received all good things during his earthly life, whereas Lazarus received all the evil. Now, the tables were turned. The circumstances were the opposite in the afterlife. The rich man now saw that he had lived a life of oblivious self interest. This was his sin. He was blind to the misery of Lazarus while he was alive and now he was destined to live the rest of eternity in agony.

At least he wanted to save his five brothers so they would not have to come to this place of torment. He said, "Send Lazarus to their house to warn them of the results of their living."

Abraham said they had all the warning they needed. They had the law of Moses and the teachings of the Prophets. Even if someone rose from the dead, they would not be convinced.

There are great chasms between humans. The rich man and Lazarus had a chasm between them before death. It was created by the rich man who had the power to cross the chasm and share his wealth with Lazarus. After their deaths, the rich man was on the wrong side of the chasm, but now it was too late. He

¹ Jan. 14, 1875

no longer had any power to cross it.

Chasms exist today among people who refuse to listen to the message Jesus Christ brought us, a message fulfilling the Law of Moses and the teachings of the prophets. We are the wealthy man even though we may not know it. Barbara Ehrenreich, author of *Nickel and Dimed*,² states that America's poor encompasses more than twelve percent and is growing.

The rich man of the parable may not consciously have created the chasm that existed between him and Lazarus, nor have we consciously created present-day chasms. We have homes and jobs and most of us have our health and far more in the way of riches. There are the poor of this world without food, and they are willing to feed off the crumbs of our tables.

Just outside our doorstep are people with sores that go unhealed. Knocking at door of the United States are citizens of Latin American countries. We call on them to do our bidding and they give us the ability to wear fine linen and purple outer garments. Lazarus is Mexicans flocking north to the border and providing cheap labor for textile, oil, construction, and tobacco industries. Lazarus is the street people, residents who wander into Loaves and Fishes. Lazarus is abused children, some possibly living in our own homes.

The chasm obviously needs to be bridged. People need to be warned of its existence and of what price will have to be paid as a result of our not recognizing it. We may be able to justify our wealth, positions, comfort, and our faith, but we must face the fact that this may be all we receive. Eternity may hold the opposite prospect for us: torment where we will be sorry we did not try to bridge the chasm while we were able to.

The Law of Moses, the teachings of the prophets, and the rising from the dead of Jesus are all warnings to human beings of the dangers present when our society cavalierly tosses off the needs of the hungry and the poor. The price is greater than we ever dreamed. We have all kinds of opportunities to listen to what God wants us to do to bridge the chasm between rich and poor and between well-fed and hungry. When it comes to the time our deaths, the judgment will be final. We will have no more opportunities to cross from one side to the other. We are faced with that decision now.

Wealth and comfort are not necessarily evil, and poverty is not necessarily a virtue. But Jesus did say it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Wealth has a way of blinding us to the needs of others, which we are called by God through the law, the prophets, and Jesus to try to minister to.

We may not think we are rich, but by the world's standards we are, believe me. While we worry about the price of gasoline, others worry about not having shelter over their heads.

Maybe you don't believe in an afterlife. "So," you'll say, "why should I pay attention to what I do now? It won't make any difference if there's no afterlife." Even in this life chasms will reverse what we think is the comfortable order of things. The Lazaruses of this world, if not fed more than crumbs, could be a terrible force to try to overcome when they attempt get their hands on some of the wealth thrown away by the rich. Is that not what is behind most of the turmoil in the world? How many terrorists have been fed and nurtured by hunger, poverty, and joblessness?

We don't really know about an afterlife, do we? Even if someone comes back from the dead like Jesus did, would we believe him or her? We must ask ourselves, "What if there is an afterlife?" "What if the story Jesus told about the rich man and Lazarus really is representative of what happens after death? Albert Schweitzer lived his life as if were true. I'll live my life as if it is true, and warn everyone I meet about a large chasm that can be crossed now but can not be crossed later. I'll tell of a God who wills that there be no chasms among God's children.

²*Nickel and dimed: on (not) getting by in America* by Barbara Ehrenreich © 2001 by Barbara Ehrenreich, New York: Henry Holt and Company