Bridging the Gap
Scripture Text: Luke 16:19-31

Introduction

This passage is about gaps. A gap is a break or difference between two things. In many respects, this describes the difference between certain people in society, but in reality, it may be better to describe it as a great divide. There are very wide gaps between certain people in society, such as the rich and the poor. It is not hard to know this. A drive through most cities in this nation show a number of homeless and desperate people. This passage illustrates the great divide that exists between people, between those who have and those who do not have. It also illustrates the even greater divide that exists between all people and God. No matter who you are or what your situation is in life, without God’s grace, you stand very apart from Him. This parable is also one of contrasts. It describes two very different men, two very different conditions of earthly life, and two very different destinies after death. In many respects, this story describes a poor rich man and a rich poor man. One was rich in material possessions but was poor in spiritual matters. The other man was poor in material possession but rich in spiritual matters. Let’s look at two ways this parable speaks of bridging the gap.

Bridging the Gap with People

Jesus spoke a lot about money and wealth. Last week we read a parable about a rich fool who trusted too much in his riches. This parable is also about a rich fool, although it does not call him as such. It describes what amounts to a foolish life wasted on the wrong things. This parable does not say that riches are a bad thing or that poverty is a good thing. It merely describes the earthly conditions of these two men.

Luke 16:19-21 There was a rich man who was clothed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate was laid a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table. Moreover, even the dogs came and licked his sores.

No doubt, the rich condition of the one man worked to his hurt and the poor condition of Lazarus worked to his favor. We have read that “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” can choke the faith that we have. In this parable, their earthly condition was a description of the way things were and it is a description of the way things are today. Some people are wealthy and some people are not. Some rich people will go to heaven and some will go to hell, just as some poor people will go to heaven and some will go to hell. This parable does not say that our wealth or lack of it indicate our spiritual destiny. Our economic status in this life does not indicate where we will be in the life after. However, our use of wealth can indicate our current spiritual condition. It can show what is most important to us. Just look at your bank account and you will see this. We tend to spend or save for what matters most to us.
This parable is similar to the one about the greedy, rich man of last week. That man stored up all of his possessions, thought of only himself, and did not honor God with his wealth. Similarly, the parable of this rich man and Lazarus shows us a picture of utter disregard for the poverty-stricken person living in the shadow of the rich man’s own lavish self-indulgence. In the life after death, the rich man recognized Lazarus. He asked Abraham to send Lazarus to cool his tongue, to bring him some relief. This may indicate that the rich man knew Lazarus and knew his plight. If he did, he had ignored Lazarus and his need during his earthly life. This is a real failure of the rich man and a warning for us. Do we see people in need and ignore them? Are there people in your neighborhood, where you work, in this church that have some great need and you just turn a blind eye to them? If you do, then you are acting like the rich man in this parable.

Know this, wealth is not evil, but it can be a distraction. I am not saying that it always is, but it can be. Certainly, in the case of this rich man in this parable, he ignored the basic needs of someone “who desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table.” What this parable and the one about the rich fool reveal to us is the truth of the dangerous attraction that riches can have on us. It is like what Jesus mentioned in the Parable of the Soils. The seed, which is the Word of God, that was scattered among the thorns was choked by the thorns and became unfruitful. That is the danger of focusing on wealth too much. It makes our faith unfruitful and makes us worthless to God.

Bridging the Gap with God

The passage tells us that the rich man was buried, probably with a great ceremony and maybe with some of his riches carried to the tomb with him. The text does not mention that Lazarus was buried, though he probably was, although it would have been unceremonious. This is just another indication of their earthly condition. But as we read they both shared the same earthly fate - they died. Death is called the great equalizer. All men, no matter what their earthly treasures and comforts are, will die one day and face an eternal spiritual condition. This does not mean that those who were poor in this life will automatically be rich in the next life, nor does it mean that those who are rich in this life will automatically be poor in the next life. No matter the earthly condition, rich or poor, we all have the same earthly fate and the same requirement for this life. There are some things that Jesus mentioned in this story about the spiritual destiny of all men:

- Eternal life and eternal punishment are real
- Repentance is necessary to escape eternal torment
- Faith in Christ is required to enter eternal life

**Eternal life and eternal punishment are real**

The real difference between Lazarus and the rich man was their spiritual condition. Lazarus became richer to God, richer in the things that really matter, than the rich man in the parable. The rich man in the parable was poor towards God and in the final estimation, was really the poor man. As we saw last week in the Parable of the Rich Fool, the one who is rich in earthly treasure but does not know God is very poor, but the
one who is poor in earthly treasure but knows God has everything. The true riches of Lazarus were increased and true poverty of the rich man was intensified. The rich poor man grew richer and the poor rich man grew poorer. The rich man in the story lived without God, he died without God, and he remained without God for eternity.

In hell, the rich man prayed, maybe for the first time in his life. This was a heartfelt prayer. He meant it, but it was of no use. First, he prayed to the wrong person (Abraham) and second, it was too late for his prayers to make any difference (He was dead). This would have intensified his suffering. In hell, he earnestly prayed for relief and none was available. Sometimes, situations in this life seem helpless. We may earnestly pray for something and never receive the answer we seek, but at least we have the hope that God hears our prayers and our prayers may be answered. In hell, there is no such hope.

The conversation between the rich man and Abraham may be one of those details of the parable that should not be pressed too much. Nowhere else in Scripture is there any indication that there will be personal communication between those in heaven and those in hell. The important thing to understand, the thing I believe this parable does illustrate, along with other Scripture, is that there is a real heaven and a real hell. These are real places that all men, rich and poor alike, will spend eternity. The question on many people’s minds is what do they need to do to avoid hell and the suffering described in this passage. To put it a different way, what do we need to do to enter Heaven.

**Repentance is necessary for both rich and poor**

The rich man was in torment in hell. In what was probably a genuine concern for his five brothers, the rich man begged Abraham to send Lazarus to his family to warn them about this place of torment. Surely anyone would want to avoid such a place if they had a chance to do so. The rich man believed that if Lazarus returned from the dead his brothers would believe and make the right decision. Notice the means by which the brothers could avoid such a destiny: repentance. Repentance is necessary to change one’s destiny. We have to turn from a life of self dependence and sin and turn to the only living God.

In context of this parable, we can assume that such repentance would include a change of heart and a change in behavior. Such repentance would involve a change in the way the brothers used their wealth and possessions. It would include caring for those who are destitute and impoverished like Lazarus, something the rich man had not done in his life. While all of this is true, it is not the main point of the parable, nor is it the primary change that one must make. We can give away all our riches and care for the poorest in society and still be as lost as the next unbeliever. And the same can be said for the poorest of society. One can be as poor as Lazarus and be as lost as the richest unbeliever in the world. We must turn from our sin and self reliance, reject the belief that we are good enough and can make it to heaven on our own, and turn to Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.
This is difficult for a hard-hearted person to do. A person who is bent on living a life without God, who is determined to do it their way, who does not care for the things of God, will not easily repent, even if one returns from the dead. This is pretty much what Abraham said to the rich man in hell. If one will not believe the very Word of God and turn from his sin, then he is likely not going to repent if he sees someone rise from the dead. There were those who knew of Jesus’ miracles, but did not believe in Him. There were those who knew that Jesus raised the real Lazarus from the dead. Some believed and some of the Chief priests sought to put Lazarus to death...again. If a person’s heart is hard toward God, then seeing miracles, even a resurrection will not break it. They must turn from that hard-heartedness and turn to Christ.

Faith in Christ is required to enter eternal life

The rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus to him to give relief. The rich man was in torment. The conversation between the rich man and Abraham may be one of those details of the parable that we should not emphasize to much. Nowhere else in Scripture is there any indication that there will be personal communication between those in heaven and those in hell. This may be an illustration of the terrible truth of hell but not the actual situation people will face. That the rich man saw Abraham far off indicates the unbridgeable gulf between heaven and hell. The Grand Canyon is an impressive natural wonder that is 18 miles wide at its widest place. Even though it is so wide, it is possible to pass that great divide. The same is not true for the spiritual divide mentioned in this parable. In the parable, Abraham said the following:

\textit{Luke 16:26 Between us and you a great chasm has been fixed, in order that those who would pass from here to you may not be able, and none may cross from there to us.}

There is a great chasm between heaven and hell that is irreversible just as there is a great chasm between God and man that is impassible, except for one thing. There is only one thing that can bridge the great gulf between God and man, and that is Jesus Christ. Though the rich man was physically a “child of Abraham,” he was not one of Abraham’s true offspring. A true offspring of Abraham will have Abraham’s faith. Paul mentioned this in his letter to the Galatians in a passage that is often misunderstood:

\textit{Galatians 3:28-29 There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.}

This passage states that those who have placed their trust in Jesus Christ, no matter what race they are, no matter their socio-economic status, such as being rich or poor, and no matter whether they are male or female, they are all one in Christ and Abraham’s offspring. The condition is that one must have genuine faith in Jesus Christ. We often want to see and then act. God tells us to act and then we will see. God tells us to believe in His Son, whom He gave to the world so that no one will perish, so that we will have eternal life. Believe and be saved. One final note about believing in Jesus: We do not need Jesus to come into our hearts. We need him to remove our hearts of stone
and replace them with hearts of flesh. We need a heart transplant, just as this rich man needed one but failed to act during his lifetime. We need to trust in Jesus and ask Him to remove our hard hearts and replace them with hearts that desire Him and love Him above all else. Repent and believe, and you will have eternal life.

Conclusion

In closing, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus illustrates for us the desperate need some people have in this world. We ought to care for them just as Jesus cared for them. We ought to use the resources God entrusts to us to serve those who are less fortunate. This parable also illustrates for us the desperate need we all have to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Just as there is a real Heaven, there is also a real Hell. Repentance and faith in Christ as necessary to escape eternal torment and enter into eternal life with God. Missed opportunities are terrible. The missed opportunity of knowing Jesus Christ and spending eternity with Him is tragic. The good news is that we have the opportunity to turn to Jesus Christ. While we are alive, we each have time to repent and place our trust in Jesus Christ. Once death comes, though, we have no other opportunity. Trust in Him while you have time. And tell other about Him while they have time. It is good news if one hears about it in time. Amen!