

A few weeks ago I met up with my old work colleagues that I spent many years with. We were going out for a meal and as we walked to the restaurant, I saw a beggar on the street. I reached into my pocket and gave him a coin. However at the same time a guy on a bike was cycling past me and shouted at me that I was a fool for giving the guy anything. His view was that everyone is able to get a job, and all I was doing was feeding his need to stay on the streets. The guy has his opinion and I have mine.

The danger as we look at this morning's parable, is to come up with all kinds of assumptions, including that the poor go to heaven and the rich go to hell, or other such things. So I hope this morning we can give some brief explanation as to what might be going on with the story. What is it saying to us and what is it not saying to us?

First, God is concerned about the poor and expects us to also be concerned. That is a message that resonates throughout the bible, and really is the basis for why our compassion ministries are so important. However it doesn't mean that the poor are our ticket into heaven. We do not buy our way to heaven. From our love of God, we reach out to everyone in the way that God teaches us about who our neighbour. We help the poor, feed the hungry, we care for the sick, we work closely with the council to ensure there is justice for the marginalised. The question isn't what's in it for me but what's in it for them. What does our Christianity, our faith, our experience of Jesus Christ offer them? Ultimately we want them to see the true image of Jesus in and through our service to them.

Second, there is a relationship between this life and the next. The choices we make, the words we speak, and the actions we take in this life have consequences in the next life. But the parable is not a story of judgment that rich people go to hell and poor people go to heaven. This story isn't so much about our future but about our present lives. It's about how we live here and now. It's a reminder that our lives are connected and intertwined in this world and in the next world. If we have been transformed through the saving work of the cross and the resurrection, then we are Kingdom people here. We can't wait to be transformed in heaven; our transformation begins now.

Finally, I don't think this parable is asking us to make judgments about who is the rich man and who is Lazarus in our daily lives. Instead, it is asking us to acknowledge and deal with the gates and chasms that separate us from each other. In a society where there are so many gaps in class, especially in a financially difficult climate, we as Christians need to be in the business of making the chasm or the gap narrower.

So what is common in the parable? Well throughout there are gaps or divisions. Remember the gate at the beginning in verse 20? Lazarus lies at the gate. On the other side is the rich man. One is deeply hungry and the other has a table full of food. But remember the gap at the end of the parable? On one side Lazarus sits comforted in the bosom of Abraham. On the other side the rich man stands tormented in the flames of hell.

So what do we learn?

Well I think it means we must each examine our own heart to find the gaps that separate us from ourselves, our neighbours, our enemies, those we love, and ultimately God. What are those gaps for you and me? Gaps destroy relationships. They unmake God's creation.

So here's the challenge for this week. Every time we love our neighbour as ourselves, every time we love our enemies, every time we see and treat one another as created in the image and likeness of God, gaps and chasms are narrowed. It can happen in our marriages and families, at work and school, anywhere. It can happen in the most intimate of relationships, or with strangers, and even with our enemies. It is not easy work but it possible. Jesus demonstrated all of this in his life, death, and resurrection. Gates were opened and chasms were filled. None of this is easy folks, we can't do this in our own strength. Christ can break down barriers. Christ's love, mercy, grace, and presence make it possible.