

Part 23 – “A Great Gulf Fixed”

In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, Christ shows that in this life men decide their eternal destiny. During probationary time the grace of God is offered to every soul. But if men waste their opportunities in self-pleasing, they cut themselves off from everlasting life. No afterprobation will be granted them. By their own choice they have fixed an impassable gulf between them and their God.

This parable draws a contrast between the rich who have not made God their dependence, and the poor who have made God their dependence. Christ shows that the time is coming when the position of the two classes will be reversed. Those who are poor in this world's goods, yet who trust in God and are patient in suffering, will one day be exalted above those who now hold the highest positions the world can give but who have not surrendered their life to God.

“There was a certain rich man,” Christ said, “which was clothed in purple and fine linen, and fared sumptuously every day. And there was a certain beggar named Lazarus, which was laid at his gate, full of sores, and desiring to be fed with the crumbs which fell from the rich man's table.” Luke 16:19-21.

The rich man did not belong to the class represented by the unjust judge, who openly declared his disregard for God and man. He claimed to be a son of Abraham. He did not treat the beggar with violence or require him to go away because the sight of him was disagreeable. If the poor, loathsome specimen of humanity could be comforted by beholding him as he entered his gates, the rich man was willing that he should remain. But he was selfishly indifferent to the needs of his suffering brother.

There were then no hospitals in which the sick might be cared for. The suffering and needy were brought to the notice of those to whom the LORD had entrusted wealth, that they might receive help and sympathy. Thus it was with the beggar and the rich man. Lazarus was in great need of help; for he was without friends, home, money, or food. Yet he was allowed to remain in this condition day after day, while the wealthy nobleman had every want supplied. The one who was abundantly able to relieve the sufferings of his fellow creature, lived to himself, as many live today.

There are today close beside us many who are hungry, naked, and homeless. A neglect to impart of our means to these needy, suffering ones places upon

us a burden of guilt which we shall one day fear to meet. All covetousness is condemned as idolatry. All selfish indulgence is an offense in God's sight.

God had made the rich man a steward of His means, and it was his duty to attend to just such cases as that of the beggar. The command had been given, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deuteronomy 6:5); and "you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18). The rich man was a Jew, and he was acquainted with the command of God. But he forgot that he was accountable for the use of his entrusted means and capabilities. The LORD's blessings rested upon him abundantly, but he employed them selfishly, to honour himself, not his Maker.

In proportion to his abundance was his obligation to use his gifts for the uplifting of humanity. This was the LORD's command, but the rich man had no thought of his obligation to God. He lent money, and took interest for what he loaned; but he returned no interest for what God had lent him. He had knowledge and talents, but did not improve them. Forgetful of his accountability to God, he devoted all his powers to pleasure. Everything with which he was surrounded, his round of amusements, the praise and flattery of his friends, ministered to his selfish enjoyment. So engrossed was he in the society of his friends that he lost all sense of his responsibility to co-operate with God in His ministry of mercy. He had opportunity to understand the word of God, and to practice its teachings; but the pleasure-loving society he chose so occupied his time that he forgot the God of eternity.

The time came when a change took place in the condition of the two men. The poor man had suffered day by day, but he had patiently and quietly endured. In the course of time he died and was buried. There was no one to mourn for him; but by his patience in suffering he had witnessed for Christ, he had endured the test of his faith, and at his death he is represented as being carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom.

Lazarus represents the suffering poor who believe in Christ. When the trumpet sounds and all that are in the graves hear Christ's voice and come forth, they will receive their reward; for their faith in God was not a mere theory, but a reality.

"The rich man also died, and was buried; and in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame."

In this parable Christ was meeting the people on their own ground. The doctrine of a conscious state of existence between death and the resurrection was held by many of those who were listening to Christ's words. The Saviour knew of their ideas, and He framed His parable so as to inculcate important truths through these preconceived opinions. He held up before His hearers a mirror wherein they might see themselves in their true relation to God. He used the prevailing opinion to convey the idea He wished to make prominent to all – that no man is valued for his possessions; for all he has belongs to him only as lent by the LORD. A misuse of these gifts will place him below the poorest and most afflicted man who loves God and trusts in Him.

Christ desires His hearers to understand that it is impossible for men to secure the salvation of the soul after death. “Son,” Abraham is represented as answering, “remember that you in your lifetime receivedst your good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and you are tormented. And beside all this, between us and you there is a great gulf fixed; so that they which would pass from hence to you can not; neither can they pass to us, that would come from there.” Thus Christ represented the hopelessness of looking for a second probation. This life is the only time given to man in which to prepare for eternity.

The rich man had not abandoned the idea that he was a child of Abraham, and in his distress he is represented as calling upon him for aid. “Father Abraham,” he prayed, “have mercy on me.” He did not pray to God, but to Abraham. Thus he showed that he placed Abraham above God, and that he relied on his relationship to Abraham for salvation. The thief on the cross offered his prayer to Christ. “Remember me when You come into Your kingdom,” he said. (Luke 23:42.) And at once the response came, Verily I say to you today (as I hang on the cross in humiliation and suffering), you shall be with Me in Paradise. But the rich man prayed to Abraham, and his petition was not granted. Christ alone is exalted to be “a Prince and a Saviour, for to give repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins.” Acts 5:31. “Neither is there salvation in any other.” Acts 4:12.

The rich man had spent his life in self-pleasing, and too late he saw that he had made no provision for eternity. He realised his folly, and thought of his brothers, who would go on as he had gone, living to please themselves. Then he made the request, “I pray you therefore, father, that you would send him [Lazarus] to my father's house; for I have five brethren; that he may testify to them, lest they also come into this place of torment.” But “Abraham says to him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them. And he said, Nay, father Abraham; but if one went to them from the dead, they will repent.

And he said to him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead.”

When the rich man solicited additional evidence for his brothers, he was plainly told that should this evidence be given, they would not be persuaded. His request cast a reflection on God. It was as if the rich man had said, If you had more thoroughly warned me, I should not now be here. Abraham in his answer to this request is represented as saying, Your brothers have been sufficiently warned. Light has been given them, but they would not see; truth has been presented to them, but they would not hear.

“If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.” These words were proved true in the history of the Jewish nation. Christ's last and crowning miracle was the raising of Lazarus of Bethany, after he had been dead four days. The Jews were given this wonderful evidence of the Saviour's divinity, but they rejected it. Lazarus rose from the dead and bore his testimony before them, but they hardened their hearts against all evidence, and even sought to take his life. (John 12:9-11.)

The law and the prophets are God's appointed agencies for the salvation of men. Christ said, Let them give heed to these evidences. If they do not listen to the voice of God in His word, the testimony of a witness raised from the dead would not be heeded.

Those who heed Moses and the prophets will require no greater light than God has given; but if men reject the light, and fail to appreciate the opportunities granted them, they would not hear if one from the dead should come to them with a message. They would not be convinced even by this evidence; for those who reject the law and the prophets so harden their hearts that they will reject all light.

The conversation between Abraham and the once-rich man is figurative. The lesson to be gathered from it is that every man is given sufficient light for the discharge of the duties required of him. Man's responsibilities are proportionate to his opportunities and privileges. God gives to every one sufficient light and grace to do the work He has given him to do. If man fails to do that which a little light shows to be his duty, greater light would only reveal unfaithfulness, neglect to improve the blessings given. “He that is faithful in that which is least is faithful also in much; and he that is unjust in the least is unjust also in much.” Luke 16:10. Those who refuse to be enlightened by Moses and the prophets and ask for some wonderful miracle to be performed would not be convinced if their wish were granted.

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus shows how the two classes represented by these men are estimated in the unseen world. There is no sin in being rich if riches are not acquired by injustice. A rich man is not condemned for having riches, but condemnation rests upon him if the means entrusted to him is spent in selfishness. Far better might he lay up his money beside the throne of God, by using it to do good. Death cannot make any man poor who thus devotes himself to seeking eternal riches. But the man who hoards his treasure for self can not take any of it to heaven. He has proved himself to be an unfaithful steward. During his lifetime he had his good things, but he was forgetful of his obligation to God. He failed of securing the heavenly treasure.

The rich man who had so many privileges is represented to us as one who should have cultivated his gifts, so that his works should reach to the great beyond, carrying with them improved spiritual advantages. It is the purpose of redemption, not only to blot out sin, but to give back to man those spiritual gifts lost because of sin's dwarfing power. Money cannot be carried into the next life; it is not needed there; but the good deeds done in winning souls to Christ are carried to the heavenly courts. But those who selfishly spend the LORD's gifts on themselves, leaving their needy fellow creatures without aid and doing nothing to advance God's work in the world, dishonour their Maker. Robbery of God is written opposite their names in the books of heaven.

The rich man had all that money could procure, but he did not possess the riches that would have kept his account right with God. He had lived as if all that he possessed were his own. He had neglected the call of God and the claims of the suffering poor. But at length there comes a call which he cannot neglect. By a power which he cannot question or resist he is commanded to quit the premises of which he is no longer steward. The once-rich man is reduced to hopeless poverty. The robe of Christ's righteousness, woven in the loom of heaven, can never cover him. He who once wore the richest purple, the finest linen, is reduced to nakedness. His probation is ended. He brought nothing into the world, and he can take nothing out of it.

Christ lifted the curtain and presented this picture before priests and rulers, scribes and Pharisees. Look at it, you who are rich in this world's goods and are not rich toward God. Will you not contemplate this scene? That which is highly esteemed among men is abhorrent in the sight of God. Christ asks, "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?" Mark 8:36, 37.

Application to the Jewish Nation

When Christ gave the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, there were many in the Jewish nation in the pitiable condition of the rich man, using the LORD's goods for selfish gratification, preparing themselves to hear the sentence, "You are weighed in the balances, and are found wanting." Daniel 5:27. The rich man was favored with every temporal and spiritual blessing, but he refused to cooperate with God in the use of these blessings. Thus it was with the Jewish nation. The LORD had made the Jews the depositaries of sacred truth. He had appointed them stewards of His grace. He had given them every spiritual and temporal advantage, and He called upon them to impart these blessings. Special instruction had been given them in regard to their treatment of their brethren who had fallen into decay, of the stranger within their gates, and of the poor among them. They were not to seek to gain everything for their own advantage, but were to remember those in need and share with them. And God promised to bless them in accordance with their deeds of love and mercy. But like the rich man, they put forth no helping hand to relieve the temporal or spiritual necessities of suffering humanity. Filled with pride, they regarded themselves as the chosen and favored people of God; yet they did not serve or worship God. They put their dependence in the fact that they were children of Abraham. "We be Abraham's seed," they said proudly. (John 8:33.) When the crisis came, it was revealed that they had divorced themselves from God, and had placed their trust in Abraham, as if he were God.

Christ longed to let light shine into the darkened minds of the Jewish people. He said to them, "If you were Abraham's children, you would do the works of Abraham. But now you seek to kill Me, a man that has told you the truth, which I have heard of God. This did not Abraham." John 8:39, 40.

Christ recognized no virtue in lineage. He taught that spiritual connection supersedes all natural connection. The Jews claimed to have descended from Abraham; but by failing to do the works of Abraham, they proved that they were not his true children. Only those who prove themselves to be spiritually in harmony with Abraham by obeying the voice of God, are reckoned as of true descent. Although the beggar belonged to the class looked upon by men as inferior, Christ recognized him as one whom Abraham would take into the very closest friendship.

The rich man though surrounded with all the luxuries of life was so ignorant that he put Abraham where God should have been. If he had appreciated his exalted privileges and had allowed God's Spirit to mold his mind and heart, he would have had an altogether different position. So with the nation he

represented. If they had responded to the divine call, their future would have been wholly different. They would have shown true spiritual discernment. They had means which God would have increased, making it sufficient to bless and enlighten the whole world. But they had so far separated from the LORD's arrangement that their whole life was perverted. They failed to use their gifts as God's stewards in accordance with truth and righteousness. Eternity was not brought into their reckoning, and the result of their unfaithfulness was ruin to the whole nation.

Christ knew that at the destruction of Jerusalem the Jews would remember His warning. And it was so. When calamity came upon Jerusalem, when starvation and suffering of every kind came upon the people, they remembered these words of Christ and understood the parable. They had brought their suffering upon themselves by their neglect to let their God-given light shine forth to the world.

In the Last Days

The closing scenes of this earth's history are portrayed in the closing of the rich man's history. The rich man claimed to be a son of Abraham, but he was separated from Abraham by an impassable gulf – a character wrongly developed. Abraham served God, following His word in faith and obedience. But the rich man was unmindful of God and of the needs of suffering humanity. The great gulf fixed between him and Abraham was the gulf of disobedience. There are many today who are following the same course. Though church members, they are unconverted. They may take part in the church service, they may chant the psalm, “As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after You, O God” (Psalm 42:1); but they testify to a falsehood. They are no more righteous in God's sight than is the veriest sinner. The soul that longs after the excitement of worldly pleasure, the mind that is full of love for display, cannot serve God. Like the rich man in the parable, such a one has no inclination to war against the lust of the flesh. He longs to indulge appetite. He chooses the atmosphere of sin. He is suddenly snatched away by death, and he goes down to the grave with the character formed during his lifetime in copartnership with Satanic agencies. In the grave he has no power to choose anything, be it good or evil; for in the day when a man dies, his thoughts perish. (Psalm 146:4; Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6.)

When the voice of God awakes the dead, he will come from the grave with the same appetites and passions, the same likes and dislikes, that he cherished when living. God works no miracle to re-create a man who would not be re-created when he was granted every opportunity and provided with every facility. During his lifetime he took no delight in God, nor found pleasure in

His service. His character is not in harmony with God, and he could not be happy in the heavenly family.

Today there is a class in our world who are self-righteous. They are not gluttons, they are not drunkards, they are not infidels; but they desire to live for themselves, not for God. He is not in their thoughts; therefore they are classed with unbelievers. Were it possible for them to enter the gates of the city of God, they could have no right to the tree of life, for when God's commandments were laid before them with all their binding claims they said, No. They have not served God here; therefore they would not serve Him hereafter. They could not live in His presence, and they would feel that any place was preferable to heaven.

To learn of Christ means to receive His grace, which is His character. But those who do not appreciate and utilize the precious opportunities and sacred influences granted them on earth, are not fitted to take part in the pure devotion of heaven. Their characters are not moulded according to the divine similitude. By their own neglect they have formed a chasm which nothing can bridge. Between them and the righteous there is a great gulf fixed.

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