

We have been going through the "middle chapters" of Luke's gospel (13-16), appreciating his narrative of Jesus' teaching. Everything Jesus says or does, has teaching embedded in it. How else will He correct our wrongful understanding of God and His kingdom.

Luke gives us a diary account of Jesus' time. In Chapter 13 he states, "*One Sabbath day as Jesus was teaching in a synagogue...*" Chapter 14 begins with, "*One Sabbath day Jesus went to eat dinner in the home of a leader of the Pharisees...*" and chapter 17 begins with "*One day Jesus said to His Disciples...*"

Jesus' discourse in chs 14 -16 takes place during *dinner in the home of a leader of the Pharisees*. Today we hear Jesus' closing words during His time at dinner. One wonders if He had time to eat the sumptuous Shabbat meal!

There are those who think, this session of Jesus' teaching is about power, politics, money and sex (**power** of who heals, when and where, and who sits where at the banquet table; **politics** of the sinner, the taxpayer mingling with Jesus in the home of a rich Pharisee; **money**, the widow's lost coin, the rich Father and his two sons who misunderstood the wealth of their Father, and the corrupt estate manager; and **sex** (16:18), Jesus reminding His listeners, the ideal, God intended marriage, in the face of its abuse using divorce.

In reality, Jesus teaching is really about how we live our lives in God's Kingdom. We pray as Jesus instructed, *Your Kingdom come on earth, as it is in Heaven*. It's a heart-cry of longing that this earth be restored to God's Heaven, and a mournful cry asking God to teach us to live like citizens of Heaven during our life-time on earth.

Jesus' opening words set the scene, "*There was a certain rich man who was splendidly clothed in purple and fine linen and who lived each day in luxury. At his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus who was covered with sores*".

In no other parable did Jesus name an individual. We have, therefore, every reason to believe that Jesus narrated an actual case history, someone He knew from His eternal perspective, someone in the past whose name does not matter, but whose life-values would connect with His audience, the Pharisees.

This real-life narrative speaks to the hearts of each of us. Jesus uses very **powerful** contrasts to drive home His message.

The rich man is dressed in the best and finest fabrics and ate the best and finest food. In such wealthy homes, food was eaten with fingers and cleaned by wiping them on hunks of bread, which were then thrown away. This is the "*scraps from his table*" for which Lazarus waited.

Every time the rich man entered or exited his home, he would have passed Lazarus at his gate, but he looked past Lazarus to the world he could easily relate, in which, and among whom he was comfortable.

Lazarus "lies" at the gate, a word which describes him "dumped" there. Perhaps his family could not look after him, and left him where he would be assured of a few scraps of food from the rich man's table.

Wealth and poverty provide powerful contrasts and Jesus uses these to tie-in his message. Make no mistake, Jesus is not teaching a theology of the badness of wealth and the goodness of poverty.

He offers powerful contrasts: Lazarus lying at the gate of what would have seemed heaven beyond the gate, and the rich man not relishing the prospect of leaving his heaven beyond his gate.

The powerful contrast lies in Lazarus' "*longing for scraps from the rich man's table*", not the rich man's life and the comfort of his life-style; Lazarus was

not bitter about his condition in life, nor was he envious of the rich man's life. His was an existential angst.

To the rich man, Lazarus was a social embarrassment. He made no conscious attempt to find our more about Lazarus, believing the scraps from his table was sufficient for this unfortunate soul.

God has given us the ability to either, build bridges and connect with people, or to dig trenches and create a gulf to separate us from people. How we exercise this choice affects our attitude towards people.

If we are afraid "**they**" will contaminate us, our families and our culture, we build trenches; the greater our fear, the deeper and wider we dig the trench to protect us from "**them**". We stereotype ourselves and "**them**". We role-play our lives and theirs and believe these roles are God-given.

We forget the big banquet in chapter 14, where the Host's friends made excuses not to attend, because life's incessant demands should not be ignored, but the Host, being **THE HOST**, invites all and sundry, from all walks of life, to join Him at His Table!

The gulf, the deep and wide trench the rich man made to separate himself from Lazarus by ignoring him, also separated him in eternity!

Lazarus dies and cannot afford a "decent burial", but the angels personally carried him, from the gate of the heaven he could only see from the outside, to deep inside Heaven itself, to sit beside the father of the nation, Abraham himself, at the Heavenly Banquet!

What did Jesus say to those who jockeyed for position at the table earlier that evening? *Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

To be invited to the Master's banquet has nothing to do with who we are in this life. The relationships with people we develop in our lifetime, determines and shapes our attitudes towards them. The frightening thing is this, our attitude towards people determines, not where we are seated at the Banquet; our attitude towards people determines whether we are **invited** to the Banquet!

The rich man's attitude towards Lazarus did not change after death! *Father Abraham! **Send** Lazarus over here to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue. I am in anguish in these flames.' ... Father Abraham, **Send** Lazarus to my father's home to warn my five brothers so they don't end up in this place of torment!*

To the rich man, Lazarus was still a dispensable lackey who could be sent on his errands, exactly how he treated people during his lifetime!

A Bible teacher and songwriter, John Fischer wrote a song, "*Nobody Wants to Die*"<sup>1</sup>, which expresses the rich man's dilemma:

*You want to be a winner, without takin' a loss,  
You want to be a disciple, without countin' the cost,  
You want to follow Jesus, but you don't want to go to the cross.  
**Everyone wants to get to heaven, but nobody wants to die.***

The narrative of Lazarus and the rich man exposed this sentiment of the Pharisee, *Everyone wants to get to heaven, but nobody wants to die*, as it does our own hearts:

- are we prepared to put to death our attitudes which separate us from people?

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<sup>1</sup> John Fischer, "Nobody Wants to Die," copyright 1982 Word Music, LLC (admin. by WB Music Corp.)  
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- are we prepared to build bridges that connect us with others, especially those who are socially, economically, politically, racially and culturally different from us?

Jesus' closing words, *If they won't listen to Moses and the prophets, they won't be persuaded even if someone rises from the dead*, rings true for us today - *If we won't read and heed God's word and learn to live by it, we won't be persuaded Jesus' resurrection from, and victory over death has any value to us.*

The rich man wasn't lost to Heaven because he was rich. He was lost because he did not listen to the law and the prophets. Many are lost to the Kingdom of God, for the same reason.

Jesus also illustrates the weakness in the argument of trusting in signs to bring people to faith. It is easy for people to think, if they saw a sign that was spectacular enough, they would be compelled to believe. Faith leading to salvation comes from hearing the Word of God<sup>2</sup> and believing it. God, working through His Word, has power to save us to Heaven when this earth is destroyed and replaced by a new heaven and earth.

The rich man of Jesus' story speaks to the Pharisees in the audience: they cared nothing for the needy around them, despised and neglected them. That's why they were so offended when Jesus taught and cared for tax collectors and sinners.<sup>3</sup>

No amount of programmes to alleviate poverty, feed the hungry, provide work for the unemployed will have sustainable and lasting effects, unless we let The Holy Spirit to break through our wrong attitudes and our points of resistance, and love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul

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<sup>2</sup> Romans 10:17

<sup>3</sup> Luke 15:1-2

and mind, **AND** love our neighbour, anyone who is different to us, socially, culturally, politically, racially and culturally, as ourselves! This love is **ONLY** is expressed when we share all we have received from God, so that everyone around us, experiences the Kingdom of God and enjoys a taste of Heaven! When we hoard God's blessings to ourselves, we deny others from tasting and experiencing the joys of Heaven.

This real-life story calls us to confront ourselves and our communities with our own attitudes, and how we live life, in the light of the Word of God we already know, being continually revealed every day.

This real-life story is an invitation to set right all that is wrong **in our lives** before the great chasm finally separates us.

**AMEN.**