

Russell Kelfer

A Great Gulf Fixed

#1364-A

Series: The Parables of Scripture



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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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The Living God had come to earth to bring to earth the promise of heaven. He had come in human form, tasting all of the temptations of this life and suffering all the indignities of this life in order to identify with us and to communicate to us what the spirit life was all about.

It was all about a different kingdom. It was all about something called *eternal life*. It was all about something that began within a man or woman's heart and ended in the presence of the God who created them.

It was all about who God is, and what God was willing to do to reconcile man to Himself. It was all about Jesus. And it was all about a two-kingdom world, and two kinds of eternity. One would be an eternity of bliss in the presence of the God who made us; the other would be an eternity in a literal living hell "where the fire is never quenched and the worm never dies".

We don't like to talk about that place called hell, and so, for the most part, nobody does anymore, except to use it as a slang curse word to indicate someone you have a grudge against belongs there. Not many people, however, really think there is such a place or that anyone other than Hitler or Stalin will be there, should such a place exist.

The fact that your nice neighbor, who always waters his lawn on Saturdays, takes his kids on vacations to Disneyland, and is the nicest guy on the block has rejected the gospel, doesn't qualify him for hell, you conclude. (If there were such a place, of course.)

Jesus must have known that the pages of history would dim the spotlight of truth and that one of the first things to evaporate would be God's portrait of hell. So He told a parable. As an amazingly diverse entourage of listeners gathered 'round, He told them a story. It was a little more graphic than most of His stories; and I believe *those who had ears to hear*, never forgot it. I pray that we won't as well.

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It is found in the sixteenth chapter of the book of Luke, just where we left off in our last study. It is preceded by an unusual parenthesis in which Jesus validated the Jewish law, saying, "It is easier for heaven and earth to pass, than one tiny portion of the law to fail." He followed that by one astounding sentence. He said,

Whosoever putteth away his wife, and marrieth another, committeth adultery: and whosoever marrieth her that is put away from *her* husband committeth adultery.

(Luke 16:18)

We won't dive into that passage in this lesson, because our purpose is to look at the parable which follows. It does, however, do two things:

1- It serves as a reminder that the law of God and the heart of God where marriage is concerned will never change, and

2- It serves as a bridge between Jesus' remarks about eternal life and His concept of marriage, the portrait of eternity He etched on the canvas of human experience to depict the eternal nature of His relationship with redeemed man.

That bridge immediately stretches beyond the scope of this kingdom into the next, and Jesus begins to tell a most unusual story. Listen carefully. Woven into its context are some of the most crucial absolutes in Scripture. He follows His brief statement about marriage with this:

There was a certain rich man, 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: moreover the dogs came and licked his sores.

And it came to pass, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: 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.

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But Abraham said, Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art 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 cannot; neither can they pass to us, that *would come* from thence.

Then he said, I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father's house:

For I have five brethren; that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torment.

Abraham saith unto him, They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.

And he said, Nay, father Abraham: but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.

And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead. (Luke 16:19-31)

Once again, let's approach this parable the way Jesus approached the parables He explained to the disciples. Let's look for the cast of characters, and let's look for an underlying principle that describes and defines its purpose. While some commentators cast questions about whether or not this is a parable, simply because some people are given names, it seems to fit the parable pattern in every other way. By the way, if it were not a parable, but a true story, *it would be even more powerful*, so it is a moot point.

THE CAST OF CHARACTERS

There are basically three main characters.

1- The rich man. He was a man of affluence and influence. In this world, he had it all. His name represented power and wealth. Whatever he wanted, he got. He was clothed in purple and fine linen. He didn't order his clothes from the Sears catalog. They were hand-made, of the most expensive cloths. He wore the attire of royalty, and reveled in it. If double-breasted robes were out this year, he got a new wardrobe. He had the finest linen flown in from the cloth capitals of the world for his tailor to use. It means cost was not a factor, if it affected how he looked. He may have been on his tenth facelift. We don't know. We do know that he was so rich and so powerful, that he could have anything

he wanted, and he wanted the best.

2- The beggar. He is given the name Lazarus, a name very dear to Jesus. He was the antithesis of the rich man. In this world, he had less than nothing. He had to beg for his food. He was not only poor, he was pitiful. His health was so bad, he was infected with sores, and the penicillin of his day did no good at all. All he could do was lie helplessly by the gate, begging for someone to so much as give him a crumb of bread to eat. So sick was he that the dogs would come and lick his sores, and he was unable to stop them. He was a miserable creature. While the rich man was dining on exotic foods shipped in from other parts of the world, this poor shell of a man would have screamed for joy had he but a few of the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table. In other words, *if he had the strength*, he would have gladly eaten out of the garbage the rich man threw away.

3- Father Abraham. Abraham's bosom represents paradise, and Abraham represents God. To be in someone's bosom meant to be near them or next to them.

THE UNDERLYING PRINCIPLES

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to gather the basic truths:

1- There is a heaven and there is a hell.

2- Positions and power held on earth mean nothing in eternity.

3- There is a great gulf fixed between the two, and no one will ever pass from one to the other. The determinations are made on earth and are binding in eternity.

4- God isn't going to send anyone back to earth to beg us to repent and be saved. Someone has already risen from the dead, and we have the Word of God. That's all we need.

Those, beloved, are the obvious truths. The basic key is that this is a graphic picture of two people whose eternal fate was the opposite of their lot on earth. The whole story is designed to make it painfully obvious that it isn't what we have on this earth that matters, it is our eternal destiny and the treasures we will have there that will make all the difference. And you can underline the word *all*. The rich man would gladly have traded everything he owned, including his handmade, imported linen robes, *just for a drop of water*. What had seemed to be everything

on earth amounted to less than nothing in eternity. Let's look, then, at some of the principles that emerge:

There is a class system on planet earth

There have been many abuses of the use of the passage, "The poor you shall always have with you". It isn't a justification for poverty, but an explanation of the obvious. The church's role in meeting the needs of the impoverished is clearly written in the fabric of the New Testament.

Poverty, however, will not be eradicated in this life. There is no equality on earth because the heart of man is deceitful and desperately wicked, and because man's lot in life is affected by his parentage, the place of his birth, the opportunities in his life, the rain that falls on the just and the unjust, and because abilities and intellects are not the same. We are not created equal, and though we strive for "equal opportunities" in this life, some have greater obstacles to overcome.

When the church enters the political arena and determines that its objective is to change society at the temporal level, it misses the reason for its existence. Our primary reason for existence is to see that men and women turn from darkness to light, from being lost to being saved. One of the great enemies of that objective happens to be affluence and success. The gospel has always had its greatest impact in nations and in seasons where oppression and difficulty made man aware of a need for God. The times and places in history marked by extreme affluence have always been the least ripe for spiritual transformation. The reason is simple. When our needs seem to be met in this world, we have few thoughts about the world to come. Preaching that promises temporal success as a result of faith needs to be scrutinized carefully.

Jesus used the extremes of poverty and wealth in this parable to be sure we understood that in heaven and in hell, what we did or didn't have on this earth will not be a factor. We can't take it with us, and, in heaven, we wouldn't want it if we had it. The best man can accumulate on this earth will be as garbage compared to the riches of the life to come.

There were no similarities in the lives these two lived on planet earth. One was almost a god, the other the scum of the earth. What they were on earth, however, meant less than nothing in

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eternity. Mark it. If you are so impressed with those who have this world's goods, *even if they lack godliness in their character*, that you seek them out as friends, you have no vision of eternity. Seek out godly companions from which to learn and grow. If need be, make your friendships with some of those who, from man's perspective, are in a lower strata of life. You will learn lessons of humility and servitude from them that you cannot learn from the affluent you are striving to befriend out of envy. Jesus confirmed the earth's class system, and warned us of its dangers in this story.

It is appointed unto man once to die

Death, as described in this parable, is not the great exterminator, but the great equalizer. Everybody dies, and everybody's life starts over after death. This rich man lived under the delusion that his importance on this earth would carry over into the life to come. If you listen to the eulogies at the funerals of life's great politicians or performers or athletes, you would assume the same. It doesn't work that way, beloved. This rich man, so sumptuously fed and clothed, so comfortable in his air-cooled palace with his entourage of servants, woke up the other side of death encompassed with nothing but suffering and indescribable heat. He was in torment, and the torment was literal, not imagined.

This gross-looking beggar, on the other hand, who lived life in the gutter, despicable to look at, considered to be one of life's "welfare cases", was rejoicing in paradise, near to the heart of God. What he did or didn't have on earth made no difference now. He had been transported into the realm of eternal bliss. His body was whole and he was wholly God's. No dogs gathered at his feet to lick the sores on his once-miserable body. The inferno that overcame the rich man in hell was not a reality to Lazarus. Where he was, there was no need to adjust the thermostat. It was set to eternal perfection.

Why do we forget so easily, and why does man's quest for success on this earth become so enticing to us that we tend to overlook the realities of heaven and hell? It is appointed unto man once to die. What happens after that is not left to the imagination. It is clear, and it is clearly a matter of life and death.

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The angels have a job to do

The Master made a point of delineating the role of the angelic host in the death of the saints. It says,

The beggar died and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom. The rich man also died, and was buried.

I hope you get the impact of those two statements.

Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints.
(Psalm 116:15)

To God, the home-going of His children is a moment of triumph. You can all but hear the trumpet of joy in the background. You can all but hear the chorus of heaven rehearse a new anthem of victory. A child of God is home from the wars. The battles are over. The pain is gone. The suffering is not only gone, but forgotten. That body of flesh, with its diseases and weaknesses has been tossed into the incinerators of eternity as a new body awaits, one that is free forever of pain, suffering, disease, and death.

God has once again defeated the enemy. "Oh, death, where is thy sting" has become a reality. The love God has for that moment is characterized in this passage. "The rich man died and was buried". A concise statement of fact. Dead, buried. "The beggar died, *and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom.*" Carried on angel's wings. What a moment of precious joy. Will we know it? I think so. I think we will be swept into the waiting wings of an angel God has assigned the task; and unlike the portrayal of angels we see on television, these precious winged creatures will be dispatched by God to lift us into the heavenlies and place us at the feet of Jesus, *in the bosom of the Father*, where we will spend eternity. Oh, death where is thy sting, indeed.

He lifted up his eyes

Here is a part of the story that generates a lot of questions, and we don't have exact answers, but we can, from this parable, draw some probable conclusions. When we get to heaven, we'll find out for sure.

In the story, the rich man is suffering in hell. That much is certain. He is sitting on the toaster oven, and it's set to "broil". The heat waves we endure are like arctic cool fronts compared to hell. And God has told us that in hell "the fire is never quenched". That means the flame never goes out and the heat just builds

and builds. “He was in torment”, says the Scripture. That word “torment” literally means the act of or an instrument of torture. It is something designed to produce intense, continual pain.

The interesting part, though, comes when we read that this once mighty man of the world, now suffering intensely in the bowels of hell was able to look up in the spirit realm and physically see Lazarus, this once seemingly-worthless beggar, sitting by Father Abraham, having fellowship in the wonder of heaven. It says, “He saw him afar off”. Way off in the distance, he could see Lazarus, boil-free, whole and healthy, enjoying the courts of heaven.

Not only that, but he cried out to Abraham, *who heard him*. There is no evidence that Lazarus heard him, but Abraham did. What was he asking Abe to do? He was asking him to send this once dirty, rejected, boil-infested beggar with at least one tiny drop of water and simply touch his tongue, for a momentary relief from the awesome heat. Remember, the fire would never diminish, but he would never die. That’s what *eternal damnation* means. If this does not increase your burden for anyone you know or anyone you love who is not or may not be a believer, beloved, your heart is made of stone.

Son, remember in thy lifetime

Abraham responded kindly, but without retracting the absolutes of God. He said,

Son, remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things; but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented.

He wasn’t saying that heaven and hell were a place to right the wrongs done on earth. He was saying that *there is no relationship between the two*. Lazarus suffered long and hard on earth. Not every believer did. But once the veil was lifted; once the angel of God lifted him into the glories of heaven, the first life and its terrors were history, *and what he was on earth bore no resemblance to what he would be in heaven*. Likewise, on earth, all this rich man had to do was snap his fingers and he would have servants at his beck and call; all he had to do was speak a word, and he had food, clothes, entertainment, transportation at his disposal. He was a man of great power and great influence.

In eternity, however, none of that mattered. It all began again,

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and the only thing that mattered was not who he was on earth, but what foundation he built his life on. If he never gave his heart to God, his power and influence only became an artificial platform upon which to build his ultimate demise. When the floods of death came, the house he built would crumble into dust. Had he been a believer, he would have been saved; but his status in heaven would not have been measured by the power he had on earth, but by the power of God he allowed to flow through his life while he lived on earth.

A great gulf fixed

“And beside all this,” Abraham explained,

between us and you is a great gulf fixed; so that they which would pass from hence to you cannot; neither can they pass to us, that would come from thence.

A great gulf fixed. There is the diamond of truth we have been waiting to see surface from the mine of Scriptural glory that lies buried in this precious parable. Imagine looking for a street in your neighborhood, finally finding it, and then realizing the sign overhead says *Dead End*. You can see the houses on the other side of the railroad tracks, but the street doesn't go through. It's almost like a mirage. There it is, but you can't get there from here.

This once powerful man was grieving in hell, and he could see heaven. Doesn't that give a whole new meaning to his suffering? Had he assumed this was what death entailed, and there was no other option, it would not have affected him in the same way as looking up into heaven *and actually seeing its glories*. Now, he knew what he was missing. Now, he knew not everyone was suffering as he was. Now, he knew that this seemingly useless beggar was enjoying a better life than he enjoyed when he lived like a king on planet earth. His torment was multiplied by the fact that there was a fork in the road somewhere in his life where he took a wrong turn. It led to great influence in the short run, and an eternity in hell in the long run. Bad trade. He wasn't asking at this stage for Abraham to transport him to heaven to sit beside Lazarus. He would have been satisfied with a messenger sent from above with a single drop of water. He wasn't asking for pizza delivery. It was too hot for pizza. He just wanted the Culligan man to come with a single drop of H₂O.

His request, however, had to be denied. There was no road from

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heaven to hell or from hell to heaven. There was no connecting freeway, and no out-of-the-way side roads, either. “You can’t get there from here”, said Abe. “The only road to heaven is found on earth and it is at the foot of a Cross. There is no other way.” Thus the inevitability of death is sealed with a reminder of the finality of death. You can’t make choices *after the fact*. That loved one who has never received Christ cannot linger at the gates of heaven and hell and make a decision. That decision is made long before that, and once it is made, the fork in the road becomes a straight-through pathway to either one or the other. A great gulf fixed. Memorize that verse. It will tend to send chills down your spine when you have an opportunity to share your faith and choose not to.

Send him to my father’s house

It is interesting to me that this man, as he suffered in hell, still had powers of reason and even to some degree, a conscience. He now determined that if nothing could be done to cool his tongue, *at least maybe someone could go back to his family and tell them about heaven and hell.*

He wasn’t thinking of sending them a card from the Down Under Hallmark store that wished them well and assumed everyone would end up in heaven if they just didn’t kill or steal too much. He had been there. Done that. No, he wanted someone to go back and preach one of those hellfire sermons nobody preaches any more. He wanted someone to describe what he was facing for all eternity and compare it with what Lazarus was experiencing, so they could make an intelligent choice.

Strangely enough, he was asking them to send Lazarus. He said,

I pray thee therefore, father, that thou wouldest send him to my father’s house.

Send that once despicable-looking beggar, who is now whole and wholly God’s, and let him tell them about heaven and about hell. If you can’t help me, *at least give my loved ones a choice.*

They have Moses and the prophets

To the natural man, this sounds like a reasonable request, doesn’t it? But it wasn’t. Abraham answered,

“They have Moses and the prophets; let them hear them.”

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He said, “They have the Word of God”. That’s all anyone needs. What an incredible vote of confidence this is in Scripture. Because the word is the literal, actual voice of God written without error to the heart of man, and because He has sent His Spirit to interpret it and communicate it, *we don’t need a preacher from heaven; what we have is better. We have the God of heaven speaking directly to us.*

Don’t ever short-change the Word of God. It says of itself:

For the Word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.

(Hebrews 4:12)

It says of itself as well:

All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works. (II Timothy 3:16,17)

The Word of God is all God needs to communicate the difference between heaven and hell, between life and death. You and I have that word. If we fail to use it, we are no different than a doctor who possesses the perfect cure for a dreaded disease that is sweeping the country, killing millions, but who keeps it under wraps, lest someone might misunderstand or might think less highly of him for suggesting he use it.

Beloved, if he has something that is certain to take the sentence of death and turn it into life, *he must use it every time he has the opportunity.* Otherwise, the blood of those who die will be on his hands. He who possesses the cure becomes, in effect, a murderer rather than a deliverer, if he refuses to use the cure he possesses.

And you and I possess the Word of God. All of it. We may not be great preachers or teachers or communicators. That’s not what God is after. He is after men and women who believe that what He said is true, who are simply willing to share what He said with dying men and women. And all men and women will die, just like the rich man in the story, and will spend eternity just like the rich man in the story, *if we don’t share the Word of God with them.*

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No, we cannot guarantee their response. We can, however, be guaranteed that if they have heard the word, the decision is theirs. I don't mean someone's interpretation of the word. I mean the word itself.

Your thoughts about eternity are interesting, and may cause someone to think further about eternity, but it is the Word of God itself that *is alive and powerful and sharper than a two-edged sword*. Your words may be pointed and clear, but it is the Word of God that *divides asunder even the joints from the marrow, and can actually dissect the thoughts and the intents of your heart*.

Your messages may stir the masses to emotional fervor, but *it is the Word of God that is God-breathed and profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction in righteousness*. Don't ever confuse your thoughts about the word with the word itself. Share Scripture wisely, but share it. Let the word itself be the sword with which you reach into the heart of those you love. It will speak for itself, by itself, all by itself. You need nothing less and you need nothing more. This man wanted a preacher from heaven to go back to his home and tell them about heaven and hell. Abe said, "No, they have God's word. That's all anyone will ever need."

Though one rose from the dead

This man may have been an attorney. I don't know. He certainly was full of convincing arguments. His last one was,

Nay, but if one went unto them from the dead, they will repent.
(Luke 16:30)

I'd say he was thinking pretty clearly, considering the temperature. But listen to Abraham's response:

And he said unto him, If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded, though one rose from the dead.
(Luke 16:31)

End of argument. The Master's audience, who by now must have been seated on the edge of their seats, didn't know it yet, but someone was about to be raised from the dead. He was. Even that would not be enough for much of mankind. The world would be flooded with life. Light would enter where darkness abounded. Death would be swallowed up in victory. An empty grave would stand forever as the final signature of a loving God and the final invitation to a lost and dying world.

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Yet many, yea most, would still say no. Though one rise from the dead, they will not believe. How those haunting words must have re-echoed in the ears of the disciples after the resurrection.

The moral to the story seems ominous at first. But it's not. The real moral is that some will believe, and those who will, regardless of their acceptance or lack of acceptance in this life, will be carried on angel's wings one day into the very presence of God Himself, never to ever taste of sin or sorrow again.

As believers, that simply means that every encounter we have with an unbeliever is a call to deal honestly with truth, to lovingly be alert to the fact that heaven is real and so is hell, and that there *is indeed a great gulf fixed between*. Once someone makes a choice to receive or to ignore Jesus Christ, that person is on a one-way ticket to one or the other.

That someone could be you. You may simply have been postponing making a decision. I beg you, this day, listen to the words of Jesus. Heaven is real, and so is hell. One promises eternal joy; the other, eternal damnation and suffering. And only one thing separates the two: not your religion, your good works, or your status in this world. One thing only: have you ever said "yes" to Jesus Christ, confessed your sins and received Him as your Savior? Beloved, today is the day of decision. Not tomorrow. Today. If you will but invite Him into your heart, a loving, gracious God will guarantee you a place alongside Lazarus in the bosom of the Father.

What a wonderfully-simple story.

What a wonderfully-simple choice.

What a wonderfully-gracious God.

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A Challenge to Further Study

1- What do you think Jesus was saying in Luke 16:18? Compare that passage with the rest of Scripture. What conclusions do you come to?

2- Reread Luke 16:19-31. Find three truths in that passage that seem to be new to you. What do you think Jesus was saying to the disciples that day? What do you think He is saying to you, personally?

3- Cross-reference and find everything you can about hell in the Bible. The rich man in hell wanted someone to go back and preach about it. Why do so few preach about it today?

A Challenge to Further Application

1- How can you balance the church's calling to "have all things in common" with the truth that "the poor ye shall always have with you"? Who are we to care for? Is our goal to alleviate all poverty? Why do you think God allows both rich and poor? What does it mean to be "poor in spirit"?

2- Do you really believe that death is the great leveler of mankind? How does this parable help you understand that?

3- Do you think those in hell will be able to see heaven? How would that affect the pain of hell?

4- Why is there a "great gulf fixed"?

5- Can you explain in your own words why sending someone from heaven to preach wouldn't help?

6- Do you use the Word of God wisely in your witnessing? Ask God for wisdom in that area.

A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize Luke 16:24-26

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