

Churches are supposed to be places of grace and it is a deeply jarring experience when a congregation takes a hard turn away from grace toward judgmentalism. I had a conversation with a friend of mine recently about this very thing. My friend had drifted away from church. It's a very typical pattern, it often happens in college, during the years when staying up late on Saturday nights doesn't yet involve paying for it four days afterward. And she said she never really felt drawn back to church until the moment she realized her darling infant has become a screaming toddler who is careening down a scary path and it seemed like a good time to find some religion. Or at least some similarly challenged company. So she started attending a little church down the street from her home and joined. A few years later I was catching up with her again and asked her how her church was. She looked me dead in the eye and said, "I don't think I'll mess with that anymore. I mean, I'm trying to teach my children how to be kind and decent to people and every time I turned around, there was another sermon about who wasn't suitable in God's house. I think my children can just do without that."

My own family experienced something rather jarring in much the same way when the church in which my father grew up took a hard turn toward extreme pietism. Piety, or the living of faith practices to enrich faith is a good thing. But piety when it is lived for other reasons can veer off the path of faith onto the path of self-righteousness, and from there it is a slippery slope to judgmentalism. As my father grew more and more restless with what he was hearing and ultimately joined my mother's Presbyterian church, I was largely, happily oblivious. It wasn't until years later that I realized how profound the

effect of drifting from grace to judgmentalism could be for someone in formative years. I realized it when my brother, who is ten years older than I am, said to me one day, “I heard enough about weeping and gnashing of teeth when I was a child to last me the rest of my life. If I ever hear the words come out of your mouth, ‘verily, verily I say unto thee,’ I’m headed for the door. I’ve had enough of that.”

The church is about grace, and it is jarring when we encounter anything else.

And yet, the transition from the 15th chapter of Luke to the 16th gives virtual theological whiplash as the reader, flush with the grace of the finding of the lost sheep and lost coin and finally, the return of the prodigal – the finding of a lost son, full of grace, rushes headlong into the stony slab of the 16th chapter, full of love of money and rich men suffering in Hades. It is a harsh transition, seemingly a schizophrenic God vacillating between mercy and torment.

At a glance, this parable seems bereft of grace. This parable appears to contain judgment. And perhaps it does. But, the gospel is about grace, and so we need to struggle with this text a bit more, without running from it, and consider what word it might in fact offer us. We may be perfectly comfortable with this text. I, for one, don’t think of myself as a rich man. I have absolutely no complaints, but this preacher just doesn’t count himself as being among the rich. Indeed, as my friend Tom Long preached on this text a number of years ago, it can be deeply satisfying in reading this parable to see a rich man get what he has coming to him. It can be extremely gratifying in a world in which we see pampered stars and ballplayers behaving extremely badly using large sums of money to do so, or when our economy looks like an episode of “billionaires gone bad,” to think to ourselves, “Yeah. This is right. This is just. The rich got it for a change.” There’s just one

problem with this line of thinking. It doesn't really matter whether or not I count myself among the rich, according to the measures of the world, I am. And so are you.

There is a website called "the global rich list" and it takes a measurement of one's relative wealth against the rest of the world. You can do it by income or wealth. I chose income. It's simplistic to be sure and it doesn't factor cost of living or anything like that, but if subsistence can be measured by what takes to get by, surely wealth can be measured by what one has in excess of what it takes the least wealthy to get by. So, having been challenged by a minister friend of mine to see where I stood, I anted up and entered a figure roughly my annual salary into the little conversion machine. I was astonished, astonished to learn that I am approximately the 3.7 millionth richest person in the world. Sure, by their metric, approximately 3.7 million people in the world make more than I do. But over six billion have less. I'm in the top 6/00 of a percent. Just for fun, I tried wealth. I still couldn't break below the top five percent. I'm not richer or poorer than this congregation. No matter where we fall in the economic spectrum today, no matter what pressures we feel, compared with huge swathes of the globe, we have it pretty good. So, Tom said, "Whatever this parable has to say to the rich, it has to say to us."¹

So we can't take comfort in seeing the rich get their due. And as such, perhaps we need to think more about this parable.

Now, nowhere do I find in the pages of scripture a condemnation of the rich simply for being rich. Shockingly, as much as Jesus had to say about money, it was generally about

¹ Long, Thomas. *A Great Chasm*. Gilchrist Sermon, preached at Trinity Presbyterian Church, Charlotte, NC.

what we do with it, not about the condition of having it. Money in the gospel is pretty value neutral. It is what is done with it about which Jesus concerns himself.

Now what I think is pretty clearly not the case in this story based on its context is the blanket, eternal condemnation of folks based on economics. A facile glance at the parable might offer that assessment, but that would be wrong. First, paying attention to the context, it is clear that this chapter is sandwiched amidst stories of inclusion, mercy, kindness and forgiveness. In the stories of grace of chapter 15, no one, not even the rich, is left out. Second, there's a clue embedded in the text that I have often missed.

Tom once told me of an ancient practice of storytelling employed by the rabbis. They would periodically tell what were called, "Eleazar of Damascus" stories. They weren't necessarily biblical, but they made their point. Who, you may ask, is Eleazar of Damascus? He is Abraham's heir in Genesis, before the covenant is fulfilled yielding offspring. A biblical character hardly worth noting. But when the rabbis would tell the Eleazar stories, they were stories about Eleazar being sent to earth on an errand to point to the kingdom of God. The stories always featured Eleazar coming, incognito, disguised as a shepherd or a beggar, to point to the kingdom of God. So these rabbis would tell the stories of the kingdom of God being right in front someone, right there, so close it could be tasted, with Eleazar pointing the way, and do you know how Eleazar translates from Hebrew to Greek? Lazarus.²

Lazarus has something to say to us.

We in the church are not generally accustomed to hearing a voice of judgment.

Hopefully we are not ourselves judgmental, but generally, I know we try to be good

² Ibid.

people, and by and large, I think we are, so the idea of a parable offering us judgment rather than grace is more than a little disconcerting, particularly when the language of the parable is strong language, perhaps scary language. But judgment isn't about punishment or imputing guilt. Judgment, in the biblical tradition, is about making something right. In that sense, we must understand that God's judgment is full of grace. And certainly if we look at the stories before and after this parable, we see stories full of grace. But right here in the middle we have this reminder... and it is a reminder of being watchful for the kingdom of God. And where is the kingdom of God? It is where generosity, kindness and mercy abound.

You see, what I think Luke wants us to avoid is cheap grace. We know cheap grace when we see it. Its grace that is misunderstood. When God gives us grace you see, it is to transform us, our situations, our relationships and our lives from a broken state where we don't live as though we were created in God's image, made for community, fellowship and love, to a redeemed state where, even when we miss the mark, we are still striving for the kingdom to which Eleazar is pointing, that place of generosity, kindness and mercy. Cheap grace is grace that has missed the point.

The rich man, suffering in torment, cries out to father Abraham, "Have mercy on me and send Lazarus down here to cool my throat." It's as if he's learned nothing.

"Child," says Abraham, "there is a great chasm between us."

"Well, then, send him to warn my brothers that they may avoid this torment."

I have struggled to determine just what that chasm is that cannot be bridged. I may be way out on a limb; I could be missing the mark, but I think perhaps the chasm that cannot be bridged is that of cheap grace. The rich man's concern remains himself. Failing to

secure relief for himself, he tries to turn Lazarus into an errand boy to enable his brothers to avoid torment themselves. Nothing has changed.

Grace as a failsafe against perceived future torment is cheap because it misses the point.

It's not grace; it's cosmic hell insurance. It misses the point.

There is a chasm of cheap grace fixed between just covering one's own eternity and looking for the kingdom of God.

"Child," says Abraham, "there is a chasm between us." That is not the language of judgmentalism, it is the language of lament. It is the lament that all around, God is offering grace and when it is turned into something other than what it is meant to be, there may as well be a canyon between where we are and the kingdom of God.

In grace, God is offering us judgment, a chance to see one of those glimpses of the kingdom, as a situation is made right, fixed, redeemed. In cheap grace, all we may find is judgmentalism.

You can't bridge the gap between cheap grace and the mercy of God. They are too different. They are too far apart.

There is a lot of cheap grace around. There always has been. Indeed that has often been my critique of revivalist preaching. I sometimes come down hard on fundamentalist preachers, and I don't want to critique the sincerity of the preachers or the worshippers, but if the primary and only concern is saving one's skin, or one's soul, or avoiding future torment, I'm not sure that grace has really happened. And my question for us is whether our worship, but more, our lives, is full of grace for each other?

You see, I don't believe the point of this parable is that if you've been materially wealthy in this life you're going to suffer in the next. I don't believe that's Luke's point because

it would be inconsistent with the message of the Gospel that grace transforms us. But maybe this parable is poised there for the Pharisees who are full of *phylargoria* – love of money... they were stunted with the love of money. And here's this story saying, "Look, look, there's the kingdom of God... come on in! Don't miss it."

These Pharisees are quoting scripture to justify themselves... they were looking back to the Hebrew Scriptures and there finding a deuteronomic proof-text to justify the idea that if they're wealthy, it means God is blessing them, and if someone is poor, well then, God must be punishing them and it is best not to interfere with the work of God. So, pardon me, while I step over you famished beggar and go to my abundance, because my prosperity is clearly God's doing. Now that sounds silly, but we can find that attitude today. I think it was called *The Prayer of Jabez* a few years ago, and I remember some green prosperity handkerchiefs being shilled a few years earlier on late night cable.

There's a great chasm.

Parables are stories. They're wisdom shared in a way we might overhear the gospel and not miss the kingdom.

But grace is not cheap, and the calling of the church is not to miss grace because we got caught up in something else.

Even with grace abounding, it's so easy to get caught up in something else... I've done it; you've done it. The kingdom was right there... right there and we were too busy with something else.

But the kingdom is all around us, and sometimes, sometimes we see it. Many years ago I led a mission trip of the church I served at the time with my brother and one of our dearest friends. It was in an urban area, and we had taken the youth for ice cream. That's

a staple of youth ministry, it's a bribe the advisors give to the youth for working hard and being good and being in an urban area, we were naturally near areas where significant poverty was evident, but also where the businesspeople during the day would come for lunch. As it happened, the ice-cream shop happened to be next to a Chinese restaurant and an abundance of impoverished people, probably without homes. Now in these urban immersion mission experiences, we are all repeatedly admonished not to give out cash. Buy a meal if you wish, donate to the agencies who are equipped to help, but DO NOT GIVE OUT CASH! Of course we were asked for food right in front of the kids.

Realizing that the hypocrisy of brushing past the homeless on a mission trip to get to the ice-cream parlor would send the wrong message to our youth, the two advisors decided to teach an object lesson. We huddled, and it was decided that I would take the youth for ice cream and they go into the restaurant and buy his dinner and take it to him since he wasn't allowed in. When about twenty minutes passed, I began to become concerned. After another twenty minutes, when the shop was closing, the other advisors appeared. Having spent 45 minutes herding the band of cats known as adolescent youth by myself, I wanted an explanation. Sheepishly, the two advisors said, well, We went in to buy him dinner and every time we came out with a meal, there was someone else waiting asking us to help and you all were only forty away and invariably, one of the kids was watching. That object lesson just cost us just shy of two hundred dollars! It only ended because the restaurant closed. And you know, we laughed about it all the way back to the church. And it was only later, much later; that I realized that it was the kingdom of God.

Don't miss it. Don't miss it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.