
Amazing Grace Crosses the Chasm

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Proper 21 – Year C

"The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, in Hades where he was being tormented. ...Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed..." —Luke 16:19-31

You all remember Johnny Cash, the tough and beautiful country singer, the Man in Black, the one who sang about shooting a man in Reno, just to watch him die, the man who was addicted to so many things. Someone once asked Johnny Cash if he believed in a literal hell. "Believe in it?" he answered, "I've *been* there."

I don't know the details of his experience; but I know what he meant. Hell is not a place to be scared of when we die. It's a place of torment and agony that we risk living in right now, today, in this life.

It's why African slaves, living in Hell, used to sing about resting in the bosom of Abraham:

Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham.

Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham.

Rocka my soul in the bosom of Abraham. O Rocka my soul.

So high, you can't get over it.

So low, you can't get under it.

So wide, you can't get around it. O Rocka my soul.

Today, some people use this gospel parable of Lazarus and the rich man to argue for the existence of a literal hell where some of us might go when we die. Then they claim that the chasm is fixed, that hell is eternal, and that you can't ever get back out.

I don't think so. I don't think this parable proves an eternal hell where we go if we don't behave properly. Instead, I think the parable is describing today. "What is hell?" we might ask during our late night religious discussions, or during our community Bible Studies. What is hell? I have usually quoted the definition that "Hell is separation from God." Any kind of separation.

But the parable of the rich man and Lazarus provides us another definition. "Hell" can also be defined as unsatisfied craving. Unquenched thirst. It is addiction. Addiction with no means of relief.

I want to talk about addiction this morning. Not because I am any expert in defeating it, but because it needs attention. Our world, our human condition, is addicted to things. In our American culture, the most common addiction we speak of is addiction to alcohol, or to drugs. It is a good thing that we can talk these days, rather directly, about alcohol addiction. I salute those who participate in twelve step programs, Alcoholics Anonymous, and others. Those programs work. In my experience, twelve step programs are still the best therapy for alcohol addiction, because they use two principles; reliance on a higher power, and reliance on a loyal and faithful community.

But there are other addictions in our lives. Paul's First Letter to Timothy (today's epistle lesson) speaks about money and riches. This is actually one of the superb biblical passages on the responsible use of money. But it is also about those who are addicted to money. "The *love* of money is the root of all evil," Paul tells Timothy. The attachment, the craving, for money.

Money can be useful; in fact, it is a necessary component of our community. But *addiction* to money, the *love of money* that can possess us like a demon, the obsession with money, the sly way that money can seduce us without our realizing it – all that, is hell. It is addiction.

And there are other addictions still! People have claimed that our western world is addicted to too much food. We are obese. It may not be about the actual things we eat. We simply eat too much, of everything. Some say we are addicted to screens and computers. Some claim our society is addicted to sex. Some say we are addicted to oil. How do we realize what our addictions are?

The first thing to realize is that an object becomes an addiction when it begins to take control of us. We heard in last week's gospel about the Canaanite god named "Mammon." Money becomes a god when it begins to control us, when we begin to serve money, instead of using it to serve a higher good. When something becomes a god over us, changing our behavior, that god is also an addiction. An idol is an addiction.

Addictions are often fixed on objects which we have too much of. (After all, the word "addiction" means to be "attached" to something, to be "fixed" on it.) When we are over-saturated, we become addicted. It was those too many evenings of drinking. Too much food. Maybe we simply experience too much fascination with money and what it buys.

But addiction occurs when the satisfaction we once felt with those objects now seems out of reach. The more we strive and crave, the less satisfied we feel. The parable of the rich man and Lazarus indicates that the rich man always had more than enough. He was over-saturated. Luke 16:19 says that he "feasted sumptuously every day."

Later, the parable does not use the word "addiction;" but it sure uses the word "agony" when it describes the rich man in Hell. He cannot be satisfied. He had so much, so much, that he could no longer be satisfied. Some law of spiritual karma dictated that, after so much over-satisfaction, he would experience the agony of deprivation.

This is also why Paul's word to Timothy in First Timothy, chapter six, is such a fine lesson about addiction. Notice how many times Paul mentions craving, striving, desire.

"Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are *trapped* by many senseless and harmful *desires* that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the *love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil, and in their *eagerness* to be rich some have wandered away from the faith and *pierced* themselves with many *pains*." (1 Timothy 6:9-10).

Money is the object being discussed in this passage. But it does not have to be money. Anything less than God can be an addiction. Even the good things in life can become addictions when we depend upon them to satisfy a craving that they are unable to satisfy.

I remind you of one of the most magnificent books ever written about addiction, titled *Addiction and Grace* (1988), written by Gerald May. Quoting Saint Augustine, May says that "God is always trying to give good things to us, but our hands are too full to receive them." (Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, page 17).

In fact, Gerald May claims that we are all addicted to things, even good things. He reminds us that "it is not the objects of our addictions that are to blame for filling up our hands and hearts; it is our clinging to these objects, grasping for them, becoming obsessed with them." (Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, pp. 17-18).

So, is there a healing for addictive behavior?

Yes, the answer to addiction is the same now as it was in biblical times. I believe that Jesus told this parable of the deep chasm as an unanswerable koan, a sort of riddle. He speaks of a chasm that could not be crossed, because only he—Jesus—is the way over the chasm.

Jesus is the answer, the way. I do not mean some magical superstitious incantation. Jesus is the answer, because Jesus is

grace. The only remedy to addiction is grace. “Our hearts are restless until they rest in God,” Saint Augustine said.

The remedy to addiction is grace, a grace that really does have the power to cross chasms! Grace crosses the chasm of addiction and craving. Grace has the power to defeat karma! And good grace arrives from two places at once. Just like the twelve step programs say, the gift of grace arrives from two places at once. Grace appears from God and from your neighbor. Grace appears from above and from alongside. From the transcendent and the nearby.

If you are struggling with addictions, with any addictions – and all of us have some sort of addiction! – our only remedy is grace from our God and grace from our neighbor.

Amazingly, people do change their lives, and it is grace that changes people. None of us is irredeemable. Grace prompts people to exclaim that “I once was lost, but now I’m found.” It is grace, amazing grace, that is so unfathomable and so wide.

So high, you can’t get over it.

So low, you can’t get under it.

So wide, you can’t get around it. O Rocka my soul.

That is not a description of the chasm between heaven and hell. That is a description of grace!

Maybe the chasm that the rich man saw between heaven and hell *seems* fixed, just as an addiction is a fixation for us. But that chasm is fixed only to us. God is able to cross it. Amazing grace, miraculous grace, can cross it! The chasm between death and life, the chasm between evil and the good, the chasm between agony and peace is crossed by one miracle. Watch for it! Grace comes from two places, from God and from your neighbor, the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

AMEN.

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