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“The Impassable Gulf
(The Parable of Dives and Lazarus),”
Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church

2 October 1955
[Montgomery, Ala.]

King uses Jesus' parable to convince his listeners that the disparity between fortune and misfortune is unjust and that they should work to bridge that gap. He charges that "Dives is the white man who refuses to cross the gulf of segregation and lift his Negro brother to the position of first class citizenship, because he thinks segregation is a part of the fixed structure of the universe." In this sermon, King echoes George Buttrick's lecture on the parable.¹

Luke 16:19–31

This dramatic parable, told in first century Palestine, has long been stenciled on the mental sheets of succeeding generations. It was this parable which served as the spark setting off the humanitarian flame in the life of Albert Schweitzer. He concluded that Africa, so long exploited and crushed by Western civilization, was a beggar lying at Europe's doorstep, so he willingly relinquished the charming melodies of Bach on the organ and the prestige that comes from an attractive professorship in one of Europe's greatest universities, to establish a hospital in Africa. This parable has that kind of power.

We must not take this story as a theology of the after life. It is not a Baedeker's guide to the next world.² Its symbols are symbols and not literal fact. Jesus accepted the Hereafter as a reality, but never sought to describe it.³ There is always the danger that we will transform mythology into theology. We must remember that there is always a penumbra of mystery which hovers around every meaningful assertion about God and the after life. He who seeks to describe the furniture of heaven and the temperature of hell is taking the mystery out of religion and incarcerating it in the walls of an illogical logic.⁴ Jesus had no such intentions. He was merely telling a parable to get over a basic truth about this life. He who takes this parable as a description of the history and geography of the after life "is transplanting it violently from its native soil to a barren literalism where it cannot live.

¹ Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, pp. 137–146. Someone other than King wrote "Preached at Dexter Oct. 2, 1955" above the sermon's title.

² German publisher Karl Baedeker began producing a series of travel handbooks in the mid-nineteenth century.

³ Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 139. "Let it be remembered that the story is a parable. Its symbols are symbols, not literal facts. Jesus took for granted a Hereafter, but did not describe it."

⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), 2:294. "It is unwise for Christians to claim any knowledge of either the furniture of heaven or the temperature of hell, or to be too certain about any details of the Kingdom of God in which history is consummated."

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First of all, let us get the picture vividly in our minds. There are two main characters in this drama: Dives, the Rich man and Lazarus, the beggar at his gates. Dives dresses in the finest clothes. He is richly housed in a palatial home, and richly fed with the best of foods. Then Lazarus enters in ghastly contrast. He lies outside the rich man's gate, and is not only very poor, but is very ill, covered with sores, and is so weak that he cannot even push the unclean dogs away when they come and lick his sores. His circumstances are so tragic that he counts it good fortune to be fed with crumbs from the rich man's table.⁵

The second scene of the drama is cast in the next world. Lazarus is now in Abraham's bosom, and Dives is in torment. Dives requests that Lazarus may come and ease his torment, by bringing one drop of water. But Father Abraham answers, "No, you had your good things in the earth life which Lazarus had only evil things, and now the situation is reversed. Besides all this," says Abraham, "there is now a gulf between us and you which is fixed."⁶

So we can see that it is Dives who ends up being condemned in this parable. We are naturally forced to raise the question, Why?

There is no hint that Dives was condemned because he gained his wealth by dishonest means.⁷ From all indications he gained his wealth from the discipline of an industrious life. He probably had the genius for wise investment. His wealth did not come through some corrupt racket or vicious exploitation.

Moreover, Dives was not a bad man by the world's accepted standards.⁸ He was probably well respected in his community. He possessed at least a modicum of humaneness. He probably dispensed the customary charities. The fact that the beggar was brought to his gate daily implies that he had been fed.⁹

There is no implication in that parable that being rich was Dives' crime. We must remember that Dives in hell was talking to Abraham in heaven, and Abraham was considered the richest man of his day. Dives' riches would have hardly been more than the interest which Abraham received from his boundless extension of his wealth. So this is not a parable condemning wealth. Jesus never concerns wealth *per se*. It is the inordinate worship of wealth that he condemns. Jesus always warned men that wealth is highly dangerous. But if the possessor of wealth does not allow it to suggest a false security and regards himself as a steward, then wealth can be a rich opportunity.¹⁰

5 Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, pp. 137-138. "There are two main characters—the unnamed Rich Man and Lazarus, the beggar at his gates. We see the Rich Man richly clothed—his outer garment was dyed in the costly purple of the murex, his inner garment was woven from Egyptian flax. We see him richly housed—'gates' betokens the portico of a palatial home. We see him richly fed and living merrily. Then Lazarus enters in ghastly contrast. He is daily carried to the Rich Man's porch. His rags do not cover his ulcerated body. Unclean dogs which infest the street come to lick his sores, and he has no strength to drive them off. He counts it good fortune to be fed with scraps from the Rich Man's table."

6 Luke 16:25-26

7 Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 138. "Dives was not unscrupulous, the story gives no hint that he came by his wealth dishonestly."

8 Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 138. "He was not cruel in the word's accepted meaning."

9 Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 138. "The fact that a beggar was brought there daily implies that he had been fed. Dives dispensed the customary charities."

10 In a handwritten version of this sermon that King filed in the same folder, he crossed out the fol-

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There is nothing inherently vicious about wealth, and there is nothing inherently virtuous about poverty. If there is a hell there will be plenty poor folks in it.

What, then, were the sins that lead to Dives' damnation?

First, Dives' over-absorption in self prevented him from seeing others. He was victimized with the tragic disease of egocentrism. He passed Lazarus every day, but he never really saw him.¹¹ He was too much absorbed in himself to be able to see. He was a man of large affairs, and he had to think of his stacks and banks, his house and estate. Soon Dives was so close to himself that he couldn't see Lazarus, although the beggar was as near him as the doorstep. Dives became locked up in Dives. He became so involved in his possessions that he became over-absorbed in the possessor. Dives' crime was not his wealth but inordinate self-love.¹²

Secondly, Dives was condemned because his selfishness caused him to lose the capacity to sympathize. There is nothing more tragic than to find a person who can look at the anguishing and deplorable circumstances of fellow human beings and not be moved. Dives' wealth had made him cold and calculating, it had blotted out the warmth of compassion. Dives could look at men crushed by the battering rams of circumstance and not be moved. Dives could watch hungry fellowmen smothering in the air-tight cage of poverty and not be moved. Dives could watch his brothers being blown assunder by the chilly winds of adversity and not be moved. He saw men hungry and fed them not, he saw men sick and visited them not, he saw men naked and clothed them not. And so he was not fit for the Kingdom of God. He was only fit for a place of torment.¹³

Finally, Dives' greatest sin was that he accepted the inequalities of circumstance as being the proper conditions of life. There is a gulf that originates in the accident of circumstance. Circumstances make it possible for some people to get an education, while other people are denied the opportunity. Circumstances make some people rich, social prestige, while others are left gnawing on the crumbs of obscurity. There are certain gulfs in life which originate in the accident of circumstance. So in the parable Lazarus was poor, not because he wanted to be, but because tragic circumstances had made him so. On the other hand, Dives was rich because fortunate circumstances had made him so. There is a circumstantial gulf between Lazarus and Dives. Now Dives' sin was not that he made this gulf between him and Lazarus, this gulf had come into being through the accidents of circumstance. The sin of Dives was that he felt that the gulf which existed between him and Lazarus was a proper condition of life. Dives felt that this was the way things were to be. He took the "isness" of circumstantial accidents and transformed them

lowering words in this sentence: "But if the possessor of wealth does not allow it to ~~bind him to himself~~ suggest a false security." (King, "The Impassable Gulf [The Parable of Dives and Lazarus]," 2 October 1955)

¹¹ Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 138. "He passed Lazarus several times a day, but he never really *saw* him."

¹² Buttrick, *The Parables of Jesus*, p. 138. "Being rich was not his crime, being rich, the story hints, was his opportunity. His crime was worldly self-love."

¹³ Cf. Matthew 25:41-46.

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into the "oughtness" of a universal structure.¹⁴ He adjusted himself to the patent inequalities of circumstance.

Dives is the white man who refuses to cross the gulf of segregation and lift his Negro brother to the position of first class citizenship, because he thinks segregation is a part of the fixed structure of the universe. Dives is the India Brahman who refuses to bridge the gulf between himself and his brother, because he feels that the gulf which is set forth by the caste system is a final principle of the universe. Dives is the American capitalist who never seeks to bridge the economic gulf between himself and the laborer, because he feels that it is the natural for some to live in inordinate luxury while others live in abject poverty

Dives sin was not that he was cruel to Lazarus, but that he refused to bridge the gap of misfortune that existed between them. Dives sin was not his wealth; his wealth was his opportunity. His sin was his refusal to use his wealth to bridge the gulf between the extremes of superfluous, inordinate wealth and abject, deadning poverty

So when Dives cries to Abraham to send him one drop of water at Lazarus' hands, Abraham replies "There is a fixed gulf between you now." There was a time that Dives could have bridged the gulf. He could have used the engineering power of love to build a bridge of compassion between him and Lazarus. But he refused. Now the gulf is fixed. The gulf is now an impassable gulf. Time has run out. The tragic words, too late, must now be, marked across the history of Dives' life.

The Bible talks about another gulf. This time it is a gulf between God and man. This gulf originated in the circumstance of sin. In this situation God is the Dives, He is the rich man, rich in grace, rich in love, rich in power. Man is the Lazarus, poor in power, covered with the sores of sin, lying at the gates of God's throne, begging for the crumbs of God's grace. Man, like Lazarus, was too weak to bridge the gap. He was not totally helpless. He had enough power left to at least struggle up to the gate and desire the bread of grace. But he could not bridge the gulf, only God could do this. The beauty of the Christian gospel is that God, the divine omnipotent Dives is not like the Dives of the parable. He is always seeking to bridge the gulf. He is not so concerned with himself that He overlooks others. The Christian God is not the God of Aristotle that merely contemplates upon himself, he is not only a self-knowing God, but he is an ever loving God. He does not think that the gulf that exists between *him* and *man* is a proper condition of life. He knows that the gulf should not exist. So at the climax of the Christian gospel we find God in Christ seeking to bridge the gulf. This is the meaning of that dramatic scene that took place on Calvary. The cross is the boundless bridge of God's love connecting time and eternity, man and God.

Whenever we find God, He is seeking to bridge the gulf. Said Paul, "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself"¹⁵ Said the writer of the fourth gospel, "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son . . ."¹⁶ said John

14 Cf Niebuhr, *Beyond Tragedy*, pp 137-138

15 2 Corinthians 5:19

16 John 3:16

the Revelator, "Behold I stand at the door and knock" ¹⁷ God is life's supreme Dives that seeks to bridge that gap between himself and every Lazarus

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The story doesn't end here. It ends only as it is reproduced in the life of man. "As I loved you, so love the bretheren" ¹⁸ In other words, God is saying, "As I have bridged the gulf between man and God, so bridge you the gulf between man and man. Each of us is a potential Dives, maybe not rich in material goods, but rich in education, rich in social prestige, rich in influence, rich in charm. At our gate stands some poor Lazarus who has been deprived of all of these. There is a gulf. But the gulf can be bridged by a little love and compassion. Bridge the gulf before it becomes too late. It is now passable. But it can become impassable.

THD CSKC Sermon file, folder 56, "The Impassable Gulf"

¹⁷ Revelation 3:20

¹⁸ Cf. John 13:34