

Have you heard the one about the 90-year-old husband and wife, who both died at the same time? When they got to heaven, they were astounded by the overwhelming beauty that they saw! Lush, rolling lawns, bright technicolor flowers, brilliant sunshine, gentle breezes, and the crowning touch—as far as the man was concerned—the most incredible golf course he had ever seen. It was spectacular! **Disgusted, he looked at his wife and said to her with disdain, “You! If it wasn’t for you and all those bran muffins and leafy greens, we could have been here 20 years ago!”**

Do you wonder what heaven is going to be like? For those of us who call ourselves Christians and stake our lives on the reality of heaven, we try to imagine what heaven will be like. Will we have bodies there, or will we just be spirits? Will we recognize the people we love on earth, or will we love everyone? Will there truly be no crying and pain in heaven—only love and joy?

Most of us think there are very few descriptions of heaven in Scripture, so we wonder about these things. The amazing truth is that Jesus often revealed heaven to us in his teaching. Many times, when he tells a parable, he does so by setting up the story in this fashion: *The Kingdom of heaven is like...* The Kingdom of heaven is like the man who had two sons, and the younger of the sons came and asked for his share of the inheritance. The Kingdom of heaven is like the woman who lost a silver coin, and when she found it, she threw a party. In Matthew 20 Jesus says, “For the Kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire workers for his vineyard.” Some came at 9:00 AM, others came at noon, at 3:00 PM and the last to be hired at 5:00 PM. Despite working for only an hour, the final group receives the same full-day wage as the first. From this parable it seems that Jesus wasn’t too hung up on whether work started in the AM or PM. Comic Gary Gulman tells about accidentally sleeping one night from 11:00 PM to 1:00 PM the next day. **He jokes that by sleeping that long he lost a whole “M.”** Gaining and losing were often on Jesus’ mind. He said, *“What good will it be for someone to gain*

the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?" (Matthew 16:26).

That's not a bad place to start with the parable we just heard from Luke chapter 16. See, if we study Scripture long enough, we'll find lots of descriptions of heaven. When Jesus told the story that is our Scripture today, it's hard to know whether he's telling us about heaven or telling us about hell. But I suppose if you know about one, then you know about the other.

In any event, here's how the story goes: "There were these two guys," Jesus said. One of them was very wealthy. He dressed in the finest clothing from around the world, he ate elaborate spreads of food and drink every day, and for him, life was very comfortable. Lazarus, on the other hand, was very poor. Of all the parables Jesus told, this is *the only time* he identifies one of the characters *by name*, which makes me wonder that this story might have occurred in real life. Lazarus was very poor, to the point that he lay at the gate of the rich man's home, hoping that some scraps of food would fall from the table for him to eat. He was gaunt, and emaciated, and the sores on his body became a sort of licking post for the dogs that hung out there.

Now, you would think, listening to Jesus tell this story, that Lazarus and the rich man had nothing in common. One was comfortable, the other was miserable. One lived in the lap of luxury, while the other lived in the gutter. Their life stories were miles and miles apart. Truth is, they didn't have anything in common except this: They both died. Yes. They both died. It didn't matter that one was rich and the other poor. They both died. In fact, death is the greatest common denominator among all human beings. It doesn't discriminate between rich and poor, Black and Asian, male and female. Statistics tell us that 100% of us are going to die. We don't know *when*, and most of us don't know *how*. But this much we know is undeniably true: Every one of us will die.

If we knew the exact day and hour, we could go through life with reckless abandon, eating, drinking and being merry, and then, in our final moments, become intensely spiritual and reach out to God. But we don't

know the day or the hour! If we believe that there is a heaven and a hell, and if we believe that we go to one of those places when we die, then we need to be ready constantly, because we never know when our time is going to come. And essentially that's what the rest of this parable is about.

Lazarus and the rich man die, but this is where the similarity ends, because one goes to heaven and is seated there comfortably for eternity. His hunger ends, his sores are healed, his tears are dried. But as for the other man, his misery is just beginning. The comfort he knew on earth is only a fading memory in the midst of his suffering in Hades. And now he is the one longing for relief—thirsty for a drink of water.

One of the most interesting things about this parable is that it doesn't explicitly tell us *why* one man went to heaven and the other man to hell.

We're left to interpret that for ourselves. Could it be that the rich man went to hell simply for being rich, and that Lazarus went to heaven simply because he was poor? Or is there more to it? I'd say there is. I know there is...

At the end of their respective lives, the rich man's hands were full and the poor man's hands were empty. That is to say, the rich man was clinging to his wealth, power and prosperity, and he had need of nothing. He was self-sufficient in every worldly sense, and perhaps he thought he was invincible. When Muhammed Ali was at the height of his boxing career, he was on a commercial airline, and upon take-off, the flight attendant asked Ali to put on his seat belt, but Ali refused. "The plane will not take off until you put on your seat belt sir," the flight attendant warned. Ali stood up and said, "I am Superman, and Superman don't need no seat belt!" **The flight attendant stood toe to toe with him and replied, "Superman don't need no plane, neither!"**

So, the rich man in the parable saw that his hands were full and he had need of nothing. But the poor man's hands were empty. No house, no money, no titles, nothing. The poor man had need of everything—including the gifts that God could give. **His hands were open wide, and he gratefully received the gift of grace. That's why one went to heaven, and the other did not.**

When we come before God, we too have a choice. We can come, clinging to all our worldly stuff—to our car keys, to our house keys, to our checkbooks, to our college degrees, and to our professional titles. Our hands will be full, but our hearts will be empty. Or we can come to God without anything—humble, broken and needy. We can come with empty hands, asking God to bless us. Think of that every morning when you come to church. If you come filled with pride over what you have, or what you've done, or who you think you are, your hands will already be full and there will be no place to put God's gift of grace and love. **But if you come empty handed, with humility and with need, God will place in your hands, his forgiveness and healing and hope, the Gift of Life itself. But it's your choice.**

Finally, consider this. The parable ends with a stunning turnaround, because for the first time in the story, the rich man is concerned for someone other than himself. "*Father Abraham,*" he says, "*Have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.*" But Abraham denied the rich man's request and said, "*Those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.*" Again, the rich man said, "*Then I beg you send Lazarus to my family, for I have five brothers. Let him warn them so that they will also not come to this place of torment.*" **Suddenly, there's an urgency to his voice, a concern for the people he loves, to know the truth about heaven and hell.** He pleads with Abraham—begs him to send a messenger from heaven. But surprisingly, Abraham says NO. If they haven't accepted messengers on earth, "*they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.*" Most Bible readers suspect Jesus is probably referring to himself, because after his resurrection, there were still many who did not believe.

What a quandary! Five brothers, wealthy and proud just like he was, racing through life with reckless abandon, clinging tightly to all their possessions, unaware of the tragic future that awaits them. **And nobody to tell them the truth about living and dying.**

In a very real sense, those five brothers are still alive. They are everywhere, all around us. They're *not* all wealthy. They're *not* all proud. They're *not* all selfish, or mean-spirited, or closed-minded. They're *not* even all brothers; some are sisters, or neighbors, or friends. But if they don't know the truth about God's grace in Jesus the Savior, and if they aren't ready to die and stand before the judgment of God, then they are lost, just like those five brothers. **Who will tell them? Who will speak to them the message of forgiveness and life and love, so they won't be lost anymore?**

After college graduation, and after Jayne and I were married, we participated in a small group Bible study with college friends. For most of my ministry I have promoted the value of small group ministry. Years ago, I attended a small group ministry conference at Fuller Seminary in Pasadena CA. That conference was enormously helpful, and it made me appreciate times of prayer, study and fellowship with other Christian disciples. Some people say that Jesus himself was a strong supporter of small group ministry because he called a small group of 12 men to follow him. When it comes to small group ministry today, there are countless churches that operate under a simple purpose statement, that says: **"God cares about lost people, and so should we."**

There are many lost people in our community and in our circles of influence, who do not know Jesus as Lord. We are mostly the wealthy ones, wearing the purple robes of royalty, feasting on bread and wine and grace. And the lost ones are lying at our gate. **Though their hands may be full, their hearts are empty.** They're looking for something and they may not even know what it is. We have it! We have what they're seeking. Paul Tillich said it this way: **"A Christian is simply one beggar telling another beggar where to find food."**

We've found it, but some are still lost. God cares about lost people, and so should we. We don't know what tomorrow holds, but those five brothers need to hear the message of God's grace before it's too late. Jesus' strange story of two dead men inhabiting different worlds is about what *ought* to be happening here *on earth* and not just *in heaven*. It can happen through us! Amen.