



Lover of Money?
1 Tim 6:6-19; Luke 16:19-31
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Right before today's assigned Gospel reading from Luke, Jesus clearly says "you cannot serve God and wealth" (Luke 16:13). And in the following verse, Luke comments that the Pharisees, "who were lovers of money" were upset and "they ridiculed him" (Luke 16:14).

So, in response, Jesus offers a parable about a chasm—the chasm created between the rich man and Lazarus. This is the chasm between those who have a hard time seeing past themselves and those who go unseen, the chasm between the lovers of money and those who lose their lives as a result, between the abuser and the abused, the violent and the violated, the oppressor and the oppressed.

The apocalyptic language that spread around the second century before Christ, was also adopted by Jesus. The usefulness of that literary genre is to declare in vivid and sometimes scary images that if true justice is elusive while we are still alive on this earth, vindication for the one excluded from fullness of life is surely to come.

The chasm in today's gospel is created not by possessions but by *love* of possessions; there is no jealousy on the side of the have-nots, only mis-placed trust, idol worship, and contempt on the side of the lover of money. When possessions consume our mind and crowd compassion out of our heart, they possess us and cause us to be blind to the suffering of others.

Let's be clear. The rich man's problem is not that he is rich, but that he has become the center of his own world. He can't see past himself.

So, what does it mean to love money? It doesn't mean to admire the green paper or the copper coins or the silver shekels. To know what it means to love money, you have to ask: What is money? Money is simply a symbol that stands for human resources. It can be used to do plentiful good. But it can also corrupt: money stands for power and can be used to control what you can get from other human beings instead of counting on God.

God deals in the currency of grace, not money: "Come, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat!" (Isaiah 55:1). Money is the currency of human resources. So, the heart that loves money is a heart that pins its hopes, and pursues its pleasures, and puts its trust in what human resources can offer.

The love of money is virtually the same as faith in money, the belief (trust, confidence, assurance) that money will meet your needs and make you happy. Therefore, the love of money, or trust in money, is the underside of unbelief in the promises of God. Jesus said in Matthew 6:24, "No one can serve two masters. You cannot serve God and money." You can't trust in God and in money at the same time.

We are born human, but we become humane. Compassion, kindness, responsibility, empathy, and concern for those around us, including animals and the environment, are all traits of the humanity we are born with.¹ It seems we are all hard-wired for altruism. We call that being created in the image and likeness of God.

Compassion moves us towards others; it trains us to be moved by the plight of others and exercise justice. The prophet Zechariah reports Yahweh saying: “Thus says the Lord of hosts: Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another; do not oppress the widow, the orphan, the alien, or the poor; and do not devise evil in your hearts against one another.”²

The Bible also instructs us to be advocates for those who suffer: "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves, for the rights of all who are destitute. Speak up and judge fairly; defend the rights of the poor and needy."³

But there are factors in life that impede a healthy development of empathy and compassion.

I think anxiety or even fear and chaos in life due to lack of safety, insufficient or insecure attachment (especially the bonding with a mother figure) may push one toward lust for power and the material means that promise a certain control in life. Attachment to things may be a factor in life that negates the flourishing of empathy and the ability to respect and acknowledge the inner worth of people and other creatures.

The rich man must have seen Lazarus regularly at his gate; he knew his name. In death, the rich man sees Lazarus with Abraham and asks Abraham to send Lazarus to get him some water. He knows Lazarus' name but doesn't address him directly. Even in such a dire circumstance, the rich man does not acknowledge the poor man's dignity. Lazarus is just a means to relief for the rich man.

When Abraham informs the rich man that the chasm he has created and maintained between himself and Lazarus is now fixed, the rich man momentarily moves away from worrying only about himself...but only enough to show concern for his five brothers. Still, the rich man maintains the chasm between himself and Lazarus.

The man's money is not the problem. The problem is his attitude about that money—the position, privilege, and prestige that comes with it. And you don't even need to be rich in order to have the same affliction as the rich man. You can be poor and be just as focused on money and love it just as much. You can be middle class and overlook people for the finer things in life. And at the same time, you can be wealthy and not love that wealth to the point that you set a chasm between yourself and others.

How can we be lovers of God and God's people more than lovers of money? Where do I see a chasm in my life? Even before we answer these questions Jesus crosses the chasm and grants us eternal life with him. How do we respond to that gift? Does our life reflect the eternal life we have been granted? Let's try to make this life look as much like God's kingdom as possible and let's bridge chasms wherever possible.

¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2013/oct/12/babies-moral-life>;

<https://www.developmentalscience.com/blog/2012/12/02/is-empathy-learned-or-are-we-born-with-it>

² Zechariah 7:9-10

³ Proverbs 31:8-9

Followers of Christ work to bridge the chasm between rich and poor, black and white, gay and straight, young and old. For that is what the kingdom of God looks like: one family united in our diversity. We have Moses, the prophets, and Jesus. Let that be our wealth. Amen.