
The Chasm of Craving: Addiction and Grace

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Proper 22C
Luke 16: 19-31

*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 some people, 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 Dives to argue for the existence of a literal hell where some of us might go when we die. I don't think so. I think it's about today. Today, I think this parable provides a window into the plight of addiction.

"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 alcohol. It is almost comfortably accepted that we can speak about alcohol addiction. I am proud of those who began the Twelve-Step program, Alcoholics Anonymous, and of those who participate in Twelve-Step programs. They 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, in 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. Maybe the great economic recession of the last three years has been an intervention, of sorts, into our cultural addiction to money.

But 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.

People are addicted to television. Some claim our society is addicted to sex. Some claim that our country is addicted to oil.

How do we discern addiction?

The first thing to say is that an object becomes an addiction when it begins to take control of us. That is what I meant in last week's sermon about the god "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.

How else do we discern addiction? Strangely enough, I believe our addictions are usually fixed on objects which we have too much of. We become addicted when we are over-saturated. It was those too many evenings of drinking. Too much food. Maybe we had too much money at one point. Some people say they are addicted to sex because it is so easily strewn everywhere.

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 Dives, 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 Dives in Hell. He cannot be satisfied.

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, called *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, 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).

Gerald May finally concludes that "the specific struggles we undergo with our addictions are reflections of a blessed pain. To be deprived of a simple object of attachment is to taste the deep, holy deprivation of our souls. To struggle to transcend any idol is to touch the sacred hunger God has given us." (Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace*, page 181).

Thus, our craving is a sign of spiritual hunger; and spiritual hunger is a good thing. It is good and proper to long for God. That craving that you have "for whatever! For alcohol, for money, for sex, for food!" that craving that you have is really a longing for God. It is a reminder that our only true satisfaction is God, and God's grace.

So, is there a healing for addictive behavior?

I believe that the answer to addiction is the same now as it was in biblical times. Jesus told this parable of the deep chasm as an unanswerable koan, a chasm that could not be crossed, because He "is the answer.

Jesus is the answer. 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, long ago, and that principle is still correct.

The only remedy to addiction is grace, a gift that 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, your only remedy is grace from God and grace from your neighbor.

Amazingly, people do change their lives, and it is grace that changes people. 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. It is grace that the old spiritual sings about:

*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.*

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

Maybe the chasm that Lazarus saw between heaven and hell seems fixed, just as an addiction is a fixation for us. The word "addiction" means to be "attached" to something, to be "fixed" on it. But that chasm is fixed only to us. God can cross it. The chasm between death and life, the chasm between evil and the good, is crossed by only one thing: the grace of God in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Watch for it. Grace comes from two places, from God and from your neighbor. Both God and neighbor want you to be set free, set free from addictions, free from cravings, free from fixations, free from chasms. Free to enjoy the life that really is life.

AMEN.

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Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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