

Gates and doors can keep us safe, but also prevent interaction with others. Jesus told a story of a rich man whose gate kept poor Lazarus out, and also kept the rich man in. There was no traffic from one side to the other. Eyes could see, voices could carry, but neither could touch the other.

Jesus' audience worshipped, prayed, sacrificed to God as their religious obligations demanded. In that world, friends were obligated to carry any invalid to a place where they could beg. Such was the setup for the story. Needs were obvious, but there was a stalemate as two men were separated by a fence.

Jesus' audience was taught that ritual cleanliness alone allowed them to remain in community or participate in worship. To touch a leper, dead body, or blood made one ritually unclean, and a cleansing process with a priest (with washing and prayers) was needed before they could enter the temple or associate with family or friends. While such laws had a practical goal of keeping disease from spreading, they brought an equally powerful reality of separation.

The rich man's gate kept him ritually clean but prevented him from helping Lazarus. Jesus' audience saw damaged goods like Lazarus as a burden that would only get in the way of normal religious, business, and a family life. The real hero were the dogs (unclean because of what they sniffed, touched, and ate.) Yet, free from human laws they had no hesitancy in coming to the aid of Lazarus and licking his wounds.

Whether the rich man was religious or just selfish, Jesus wanted his audience to understand servant love is stronger than fears, selfishness, rituals, or traditions. Later he proclaimed the same message by kneeling and washing disciples' feet.

Jesus created an obvious situation of abundance being kept from one who could benefit even from crumbs. Most situations are a more subtle and difficult to even understand. It is hard to evaluate every situation in light of this one story, and we miss the grandeur of the lesson if we are too literal in its application.

Early in my ministry one of our families adopted a daughter, who became dependent on drugs, was schizophrenic, often violent, and regularly disappeared from her home. One night, I answered a knock at our door at 1am. She was there, barefoot in the snow, asking for a place to spend the night. I hesitated out of concern for my family, but had no choice but to let her in. I told her she could spend the night in our basement family room. But I slept propped against the basement door out of concern for my wife and babies.

When to open and close doors is not always easy to figure out. Hitchhikers can be dangerous, but we would all want a ride if we ran out of gas. For months the same guy on a corner had a sign asking for money for a bus ticket, but wouldn't I hope someone would help if my own child was stranded. The life of faithful response is not always easy to figure out.

When are gates needed and when are they not? When has disappointment or loss in one situation clouded my willingness in others? When have dysfunctions of another created a burden I don't know how to carry? What is the real point of the parable, as perspectives vary depending on which side of the fence we stand, and whether or not we have control of the door or gate?

Jesus came to heal our weakness, fill our emptiness, and break down barriers that separate us from each other and an eternal life with God. He destroyed the powers of sin and death and shared his life as a model so that we know what thankful living might look like as a response. We have gifts that might seem

like crumbs but taste like a feast to some in a different situation. We can't feed every beggar, heal every disease, or provide comfort for every loss, but when we open doors, love can reach out and light can reach in.

This parable reveals how love rather than rules should shape our living. It is about more than rich and poor, as the focus is on sharing God's gifts where and when they can be most helpful. Without God's love, we would be Lazarus, begging with no hope of help. Without God's love we would be the rich man, seeking to have the world revolve only around me. With God's gifts of grace, all are wealthy beyond measure. And if God has opened the gate for us, why would we close it for others?

A wealthy man took his son for a weekend visit to his poor cousins on a farm. His goal was to inspire his son to attend an Ivy League school and make something of himself. The man hadn't visited in years, but this trip was an important lesson. At home, in their gated community, the father asked what his son thought of trip. He said, "It was neat!" The father was confused. "Didn't you see how they lived? What did you learn?" the son replied, "We only have one dog, and they have four. We have a fountain with goldfish, but they have a stream filled with trout. We have floodlights on the house, and they have a sky full of stars. Our lawn goes to the brick wall, and their pasture reaches beyond the horizon." The father was speechless. The son finished by saying, "thank you Dad for showing me how poor we really are." Perspective always changes our reality.

The parable warns about hoarding gifts and opportunities rather than figuring out how they might honor God and serve others. It is about the walls built of prejudice, selfishness, or fear and how those keep us from the freedom to love or be loved, to serve or be served. The most important gifts have nothing to do with earthly value but heavenly love! There is no sin in being rich or poor, full or

hungry, talented or ordinary. But there is no excuse to be blind to opportunities to serve, share love, or accept the love of someone else. We don't know why Lazarus was rewarded, but we do know why rich man failed!

A wonderful book called "Same Kind of Different As Me" is the true story of a homeless man who grew up picking cotton and a wealthy art dealer. It is not about their differences but by the incredible love of the art dealer's wife who helped these incredibly different men to become best friends. Better than I could hope to do, it illustrates the power of this parable of Jesus.

Do you identify with the rich man, Lazarus, or both? Whether one refuses to share blessings, or another covets the gifts of another, a gate of separation has been created. There is nothing glamorous about discipleship, which some might refer to as a dog's life, and yet, what lessons we can learn from a dog!

The real issue is whether or not Jesus' life, death, and resurrection are enough to change how we live! Will we be selfish with his gifts, or use them to share his love? Are barriers such as selfishness, guilt, anger, or fear like closed gates even to those we love? Or is God's grace the change in me which frees me to be willing to serve and be served, forgive and be forgiven, love and be loved?

It isn't ever what we do that brings us closer to God, but what we do can reveal our thanks and help us share his light in a shadowy world. What would change if we paid more attention to the openness of grace and Jesus simple words to love God and love neighbor. That is a tradition, a ritual, and a love that is closer to the Gospel truth than anything we can come up with on our own.