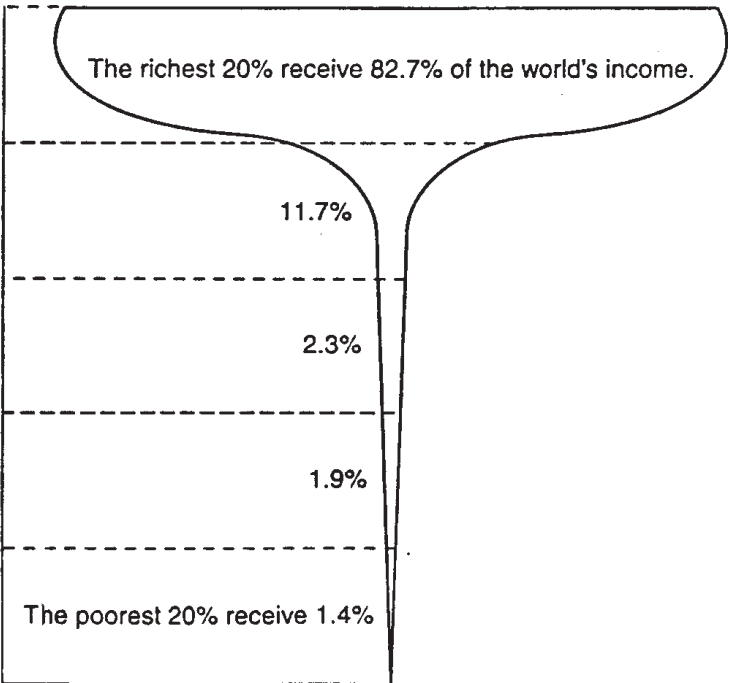


THE

RICH

POOR

GAP



The Champagne Glass Analogy. Each horizontal band represents one-fifth of the world's population.

How the Plight and Salvation of Rich and Poor People Are Linked

by Lee Van Ham, Updated February, 2004

A Reflection on the Gospel story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:19-31 within the socio-economic context of the gap between the rich and poor.

ON THE COVER:

CHAMPAGNE GLASS ANALOGY, TAKEN FROM ROSS AND GLORIA KINSLER'S BOOK, *THE BIBLICAL JUBILEE AND THE STRUGGLE FOR LIFE*, PP. 1-2, ORIGINALLY APPEARED IN THE 1992 REPORT OF THE UNITED NATIONS PROGRAM OF DEVELOPMENT

We hear lots about the rich-poor gap. It ebbs and flows over time, but lately it flows. My how it flows! The *Chicago Tribune* in a 1999 story headlined it candidly, the “Grotesque Gap.” (see pages 16-17 for data on the Gap). Its grotesque proportions breed immorality and create hopelessness among most, the 60% who “live” on 5.6% of Earth’s abundance. Somber, self-absorbing anxiety prevails among another 20% who steward 11.7% of that abundance, fearing they are moving downward involuntarily. And what’s the mood among the 20%, the so-called 1st World, who could do most about it? Intoxication with the Spirits of The Market. Self-justification. Indifference. Ostentation and pretension. Careful protecting of what they/we have. Charity and philanthropy rather than justice.

Well, not totally. The racing rate of increase has alarmed some of the people in the top 5% of wealth. So, contrary to their peers’ intoxication with it, they are thinking and acting in ways to diminish the gap. Similarly, a remnant of people throughout the top 20% of the world’s wealth practice resistance to destructive economics and live out models that put the lie to the idea that no alternatives exist.

Many who admire Jesus miss how devotedly he sought to erode, invert, and resist the economics of Gap

creation. All who do not see how intentionally he lodged his words and actions within the context of The Gap as it thrived in his day, immunize themselves from the bite of his message. Those who killed him for upsetting the socio-economic reality heard him more accurately than many do in churches today. The message of churches is that Christ died for our sins, but in the minds of those conspiring to execute him he died for his sins. Churches need to give far more attention to the interplay between these two truths. He was criminalized for activism around such beliefs as “The first shall be last, and the last shall be first” – one of his poster slogans. He believed this folk wisdom down to the roots of his soul. For us, it’s mostly joked about. Nothing deep-rooted or fruit-bearing comes from it.

Maybe he got it from his mother. Mary sang, “The poor he has filled, but the rich he has sent empty-handed away” (Luke 1:53). She sang it as a new song given to her by the Spirit, one that made real the Jubilee vision of “proclaiming good news to the poor.” Today her song, called “The Magnificat,” is mostly sung beautifully in the art of the status quo, reverberating in and confined to grand sanctuaries. By contrast she sang it out where life is lived. In honor of her let’s sing it again as a political-spiritual song in a new movement of activist witness.

The Gap story, according to Jesus, has an ending that the business media never tells. It doesn't end with philanthropic family foundations for rich people, nor with early death from absence of healthcare, starvation, or massacres for the poor people. Jesus presents the ending with imagery so loud we hold our ears, with drama so upsetting we walk out before the curtain drops. Those who stay to the end typically minimize it as gripping fantasy, great for further discussion and the reviewer's pen. Some few decide to change their lives. But most continue to live the story as it comes from the Wall Street Journal and wherever else they read the story of The Market, the good news for the rich. That's where, agree the governments, business journals, and media, to read for the true understanding of the drama of life.

Where are those who dare to say, "No. It's a lie." All who know better and believe the story of The Gap as Luke says Jesus told it need now to sing, chant, and speak out together. Our voices, if being used at all, are too separate and soft. It's time to come together and remember the true story of The Gap.

THE RICH-POOR GAP: AN ONGOING DRAMA OR A TWO ACT PLAY?

Life's rich-poor Gap dramatizes itself for us much like a continuous television drama. No end or final resolution

happens. Characters enter and leave. "Life" goes on. It's been going on for centuries now. Most "playwrights," meaning the many who write about money, markets, financial planning, and the wealthy, seem happy to create within this framework; only a few vary it.

Within this reality, the drama of "The Gap" that Jesus presents in Luke 16:19-31 stands out in creative contrast. Here the drama unfolds in two acts. He gives more time to Act Two, in which he creatively goes where others telling the story do not, than to Act One, in which he gives a brief portrayal of what dominates this drama as most write and direct it. The Luke account is not the play as it might appear on stage, but a synopsis – a brief summary of what is a great life drama.

Here then, is an analysis of the story as Luke presents it. My analysis seeks out the socio-economic context of the story and how Jesus' presentation expresses his commitment to proclaim and practice the Sabbath-Jubilee he learned from his tradition.

**ACT ONE – *LA REALIDAD*
LIFE IN THE DOMINANT ECONOMY
(Lk. 16:19-21)**

When oppressed Latinos analyze their life-situation, they often come to terms with the powerlessness of their situation by calling it *La*

Realidad, The Reality. Act One describes The Reality. What occupies many books, magazines, newsrooms, parliaments, boardrooms, and power-meetings of all kinds, Jesus presents in two sentences (vs. 19-21). Those two sentences pull us into the story as he contrasts the rich and poor with five basics of life – name, dress, food, place, and caring.

Name – Jesus names the poor man, but leaves the rich man unnamed. What a contrast to the common practice in which rich people are known by name and leave their names on buildings and signs, identifying their legacy. Poor people, on the other hand, are almost universally nameless. It is the rich of the rich-poor gap who dominate human interest. The poor don't *make* the news; though they do sometimes get *covered* by it.

This reversal by Jesus of who is named and who is left unnamed is so unnatural to us that somewhere in the telling of this story the rich man was given a name, Dives. It is the Latin word meaning “rich man” (see note in the Oxford NRSV Bible). Hardly creative, yet any name will apparently do to get us past the awkwardness we feel at Jesus' simple success in unmasking the way we arrange life in hierarchies – even to the detail of whose names we learn and whose we don't. So now we often hear the story referred to as Dives and Lazarus. Thus one of the

important points Jesus was making is lost. Let's keep the rich man nameless and feel the impact of Jesus' way.

The name Lazarus may have been pointedly chosen by Jesus for his poor character. It means “God helps” (Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*).

Dress – The rich man was covered in purple and fine linen, but Lazarus was covered with sores. The linen underwear was an import from Egypt (Jeremias). “Purple” refers to a luxury cloth dyed with a liquid extracted from a species of shellfish (see note in the Oxford NRSV Bible). Only the privileged could afford such clothes – another mark of hierarchy. The environment would not be able to supply enough for everyone. And we can also wonder whether the harvesters of the shellfish, the makers of the dye, and the assemblers of the garments made a life-sustaining wage. Unlikely. No mention at all is made of Lazarus' clothes, just his covering. The disease of the system was exhibited on the surface, the skin, of his body. Anyone looking at him would want to turn their gaze, wanting not to see. Anyone looking at the rich man would focus their gaze, not so much on the person, but on the covering of the person. Lazarus is a human exhibit, an uncovering of the disease of the rich-poor gap. The rich man is a human exhibit, a covering of the disease of

the rich-poor gap. Both need to be covered with a new, right(eous) arrangement.

Food — The rich man feasted sumptuously every day, never experiencing a hunger in his stomach that could not be readily satisfied. He did not live with the idea of having only “enough” for the day. For him there was always more than enough. Excess.

Lazarus, by contrast, awoke each morning unsure where or when he would eat. He longed to receive some of what fell from the excess of the rich man’s table. While the rich man reclined at the table daily with his guests, Lazarus reclined just outside the gate, the place where wealth and poverty separated. There he begged from all who entered and exited the gate. He begged for the enough that God intended for all.

In the context of the manna story in the desert (Exodus 16), the rich man gathered more than enough, not leaving any for Lazarus. And not sharing once he’d gathered it. The promise of the manna, the bread from heaven, was that no one should have too much and no one should be in want. The prayer Jesus taught follows this tradition: “Give us this day our daily bread.” That prayer fits wonderfully in a world where The Gap is perceived as a foe to all of us, one that it is necessary to struggle against daily. But for the rich man,

it had no life or death meaning. Wealth voids the meaning of that prayer. For all practicing the simplicity of Jubilee, which distributes God’s abundance in life-sustaining ways as Jesus did, the prayer expresses a necessary daily reminder of how to live within the framework of enough. So each day we collect our bread from God’s provision, no more or less. And in this way there is none among us who are in need.

The food for which Lazarus longed was not that which belonged to the rich man, but that which was rightfully his. It was the excess of the rich, the pieces of bread thrown under the table. Bread was used to take food from common bowls. Once you took food from such a bowl and ate, hygiene and etiquette weighed against using what remained of that piece of bread for another dip. So it was tossed under the table. Those were the pieces, collected after the meal, that Lazarus longed for (Jeremias). But Lazarus’ desire went unfulfilled – continually. The system never changed. The habits of the heart didn’t either with the exception of the charity that preserves the status quo.

Place – Lazarus was at the gate. It was where all who entered and exited crossed the line into the lifestyle of affluence. It marks loudly the property line of the rich man and thus defines the socio-economic arrange-

ment of people into spaces. The socio-economic structure is not invisible. It is very physical. You can draw it on a map. On one side life is one way; cross the line and life is very different. Furthermore, the social and economic realities on the two sides of the line are not just co-existing as contrasting parallels. They are causally connected. The rich person's choices cause the poor person's! The rich could not be rich without the contribution of the poor. The truth of the causal connection is usually lost from the awareness of the rich. They have forgotten – an important word. Economic amnesia is a disease among people who are privileged socio-economically. The Gate and the wall of which it is a part are an apt symbol of this amnesia, this walling off. So the rich man lives inside this gated neighborhood. It kept Lazarus out physically and excluded evidence that would require them to change their economic theories and ways. Lazarus was a reclining protester to the patterns of excess and “success,” making visible what all who entered and exited through that gate tried to forget.

Caring – *compassion for the variously abled and ill* – Lazarus, given the verb used to describe his position at the gate, was likely crippled. The verb implies he was placed at the gate rather than walked there under his own power. That he was reclining may have been more a

matter of necessity than just because he preferred it (Jeremias). The homeless, roaming street dogs showed Lazarus more compassion than did the rich man. The word “dogs” referred not only to animals. But at the time, Jews sometimes referred to Gentiles pejoratively as dogs, a racial slur. If both meanings apply, then Jesus observed that both street dogs and Gentiles, living without the benefit of Moses and the prophets, were better sources of compassion for the poor than were the rich of the Jewish community. Portraying dogs licking the sores thus shames the rich for their lack of compassion to one economically worthless in the system that rewarded them.

ACT TWO – God's *REALIDAD* LIFE IN THE GREAT ECONOMY (Lk. 16:22-31)

Having pulled us into the story with beguiling variations from usual Gap descriptions, Jesus now takes us into another world – literally. There we shift from *La Realidad* to *God's Realidad*. He takes us into the world after death. This clever storytelling device gives him great freedom, the freedom to present truth via the imagination. Mythology, understood not as falsehood but as imaginative story carrying truth that ordinary narrative cannot, powers truth our way.

Now the cast of characters includes

angels and the long-departed but archetypal figure Abraham. Hades is the stage. This theatre is about to elevate the drama of the Rich-Poor Gap beyond anything sociologists and economists ever do or can. Here Jesus directs the story showing how terribly wrong the Rich-Poor Gap is. He presents it as an Evil that cannot be brushed aside. To deny it or minimize it in this life only means it comes back to bite you hard in the next.

Jesus hopes that all who feel this drama will be moved to repent, i.e., to reverse their way of thinking and to bend great effort to change the arrangement so that first and last come together as they do in the Sabbath-Jubilee vision of life to which he was committed. This drama of the rich man and Lazarus is intended to convert us from all socio-economic arrangements that dominate others. It calls us to practice the 7th & 50th years of the Sabbath-Jubilee which level the hierarchies that inevitably arise. The Gap is to be made right.

Act Two moves through four “moments.” The first three all provide examples of The Gap being turned upside down. The first provides the setting; the last three are a dialogue between the rich man and Abraham. Each moment is more intense than the previous one. The dialogue between the rich man and Abraham shows the rich man’s

growing realization that the privileges and entitlements of the System to which he had devoted himself in life do not work in the next. On the contrary, they work against him. None of them gains access to Father Abraham. The conversation between the two crescendos to its conclusion, namely, it is very urgent that affluent people accept responsibility for correcting the Rich-Poor Gap in their life time.

Summarized, the four moments are:

- (1) the death of both men and a funeral cortege for Lazarus into the presence of Abraham;
- (2) the rich man requests Father Abraham to send Lazarus to him with relief and Abraham explains why the request is impossible to grant;
- (3) the rich man begs Abraham to send Lazarus to warn his five brothers and Abraham reminds him they already have Moses and the prophets;
- (4) the rich man contests that his brothers would listen if Lazarus went as one raised from the dead, but Abraham disagrees and the curtain drops.

MOMENT ONE
(Lk. 16:22)

Death! That's what begins Act Two. So mighty is The Rich-Poor Gap for many of us that it takes the mighty Power, Death, to break us free into a different view. So tight are the parameters of the reality of The Gap, that Death, the final Power, ironically serves to reveal its serious limits. When 2000 financial ministers and central bank administrators from the countries of the world meet in summit to discuss global economic policies, they are covered by all the media. They are the newsmakers. But they never get past Act One. They are trapped within the limits of a reduced reality, one they can control and intend to.

So Jesus portrays what happens when this reduced reality, so reduced that it's an illusion, is released from its confines and the drama takes place on the larger stage. Breaking onto the larger stage via Death, all people become players in the Great Economy. He opens our imaginations, unnecessary in the reductionist drama, to see The Gap in the context of the great, enduring economy. The Great Economy lies deep in the "wiring" of the cosmos. It is simultaneously the ancient economic wisdom, the intended economy for the present but repressed by the Dominant Economy (whatever the current one is) and the economy of God's future. In this

context, we see The Gap's truest, surest, and most important consequences.

Funeral cortege – As Act Two opens, we see a cosmic cortege of angels splendidly carrying Lazarus from a place of marginalization to the place of privilege. Abraham's bosom, in the Jewish mythology of the time, describes the place where we would all want to go. There, as the African-American slaves of U.S. history knew, their souls could be rocked, resting as beautifully as a baby in a mammy's rocking lap. What energy surges within all who understand the liberation of this scene! After the struggle for life in The Gap, what joy to be gathered with all who were daughters and sons of Abraham, as many as the sands of the seashores and the stars of the heavens, there to be with Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar – a family of the Spirit gathered beyond death. The disgrace of being shunned from the rich man's table pales beside the grace of being in the place of honor now.

But for the rich man, the bottom drops out. The all-important Bottom Line isn't the bottom after all. The only funeral procession he had was the one the affluent provide for their deceased. But before his family and friends had ever laid him to rest, he had already had an eye-opening moment to the reality of what his life choices meant in the Great Economy,

and what they meant for those marginalized by his ways. The economic system and practices he had devoted himself to had meant a living death for them; a hell. In Hades he sees it clearly. Consciousness begins to happen. The life he lived was an illusion, an all-consuming illusion. His privileges came from a system that could not sustain life. Never mind that his heart did not intend daily evil. Never mind that he sought to maintain a healthy attitude. He had justified the arrangement of things. He had not thought it necessary to devote himself to seek, proclaim, and practice the Great Economy. He had sought, proclaimed, and practiced the Dominant Economy. It did not sustain life for the majority. Now he sees how it couldn't sustain life for him either.

MOMENT TWO **(Lk. 16:23-26)**

The rich man: Father Abraham, please send Lazarus with a drop of water to relieve the torment I feel.
Abraham: Remember, in life you were privileged and did nothing for Lazarus. And notice, there is a great chasm between where you are and we are. No one can cross it.

The rich man's request for relief – In life, Lazarus longed for relief from the rich man and his friends in the System that excluded him, that left him at the gate. Now, suddenly, the

rich man feels the exclusion. He is now outside the System of benefits and entitlements. In the distance he sees Lazarus across a chasm. In life, he and Lazarus had been in close proximity many times, but there was an emotional and spiritual distance as well as a fixed gap of separation. Now he can see Lazarus in the position of privilege. But even now he does not relate to Lazarus. Instead, he relies on the kinship with Abraham claimed by all his people, but none more so than the privileged. He immediately and patiently appeals for relief from the torture that goes with his exclusion. He still sees Lazarus as a subordinate and asks Father Abraham, addressing him by title and name, to command Lazarus to serve him.

We must not pass through this moment without remembering thousands upon thousands who have been and continue to be tortured in this life at the hands of those who sought to preserve the Dominant System with its privileges for the rich. So in this drama of the inversion of the Rich-Poor Gap, torture appears also; but it is experienced by those who facilitated the torture in life before death. Though they once controlled the rules and the System so that they did not fear retribution, now they realize that God's Reality was always bigger than the one they controlled. They deceived themselves.

Remember – What a word! Two things we quickly forget which Jesus’ story says we must vigilantly remember. If we forget, a distortion of eternal dimension happens. First, we quickly forget (take for granted) our privileges and regard them as entitlements. Second, we quickly forget, if indeed we ever knew, the struggle of the dispossessed just to live. In both cases, forgetfulness is not just a matter of our minds. It is a matter of the System. As we seek to improve ourselves, we evolve beneficial practices into systems that harden into law and regulations. By then we have forgotten our original struggle and have lost touch (another form of forgetting) with all who are excluded from the benefits. Forgetfulness has become systematized.

It is this process of how the expectations, how the entitlement mentality emerges that must be reflected upon. This is the remembering we must do. It is a remembering for the purpose of correcting. If we cannot remember in this life, then, the story of Jesus tells us, death will jar us into it. Either we live with consciousness or we die into it.

It is in Hades that the rich man’s memory is jarred into consciousness. Note that he has to have the context recreated for him, how he feasted while Lazarus begged. He had lived with amnesia in socio-economic

matters, a malady rampant among the privileged of our world. The conscientization which he undergoes in Hades shows that he had never truly entered into Lazarus’ situation prior to his death. He couldn’t recall it because he’d never entered into it. He had to have it re-presented to him and to have pointed out just how great were the consequences of his unawareness, his amnesia. It could not, as Jesus’ story was to point out, be healed even by someone rising from the dead.

The Gap inverted – Here at the center of the story is the main point of the drama. The “upset” has happened! Left unattended in life before death, the Rich-Poor Gap inverts itself at death. The first become last, and the last become first. That is to say, in God’s Reality hierarchies must be leveled. But, if we insist otherwise, if we insist on The Reality of the Dominant System, then they are inverted.

Salvation is about socio-economic systems as well as souls. Often we hear it said that it is our attitude towards wealth that matters, not the wealth itself. That idea suits well the top 20% of the world’s population. But the second 20% are skeptical and the bottom 60% know it’s a lie. They know God provides for the poor; it’s people that don’t. It’s not that their hearts wouldn’t, but their systems don’t. The majority of God’s people know that amounts and

how they are arranged matter more than attitudes. We are, then, responsible to engage The Powers that arrange the systems into hierarchies infested with evil. The bible does not rest at the notion that our psychological state is the focus of God's salvation, that it is how philanthropic, generous or good our hearts are; we must also engage the unrighteousness of The Rich-Poor Gap. When we engage The Gap, God works to bring results beyond anything we can anticipate. But to withdraw into thinking that because we can't change the whole System we can content ourselves with keeping a "pure" heart on these matters finds little, if any, solid biblical support. Rather, it is called hardness of heart – a phenomenon well known among Pharaoh and all privileged by the Dominant System of Egypt which enslaved and exploited a whole race of people (Exodus 5-14).

MOMENT THREE **(Lk. 16:27-29)**

The rich man: Father, if Lazarus can't bring relief to me, I beg you to send him to my father's house to warn my five brothers.

Abraham: They already have the big names, Moses and the prophets, whom they profess to follow. They should listen to them.

Begging – In the socio-economic arrangement before death, Lazarus had done the begging. Now the rich man begs. The details of the inversion continue with unrelenting discomfort.

Names – Father, Child – “Father Abraham,” the rich man says, addressing Abraham in the way one would who had full access to all the rights of relationship to the one whose position at the head of his people had acquired mythological proportion. But Abraham does not respond with, “son,” the expected address, for to be called a “son of Abraham” was a valued title. Lazarus was a “son,” but was the rich man? No, instead Abraham replies with, “Child.” We can only wonder how long it has been since the rich man was called “Child.” There is affection in addressing the rich man in this way, but it also recognizes an immaturity of understanding. He hadn't come into consciousness.

To underscore the importance of being called a “son of Abraham,” we note that Jesus, so far as we know, was the first to use the parallel phrase for women, “daughter of Abraham” (Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*, 129). It was a phrase that showed dignity and respect. Jesus knew it was important to elevate women with this phrase even as it was for men. In that regard, in today's gender consciousness we need to speak not

only of “sons of Abraham” but of “sons and daughters of Abraham and Sarah.”

The ignored truth in the Tradition – Moses and the prophets – Abraham reminded the rich man that his brothers had never been impressed with Lazarus. He was a non-participant in what they valued; a non-person. If they knew him at all, it never stirred them beyond indifference and neglect. They were immersed in their own reality. So he had no credentials at all for going to warn them. Why in the world would they listen to him?

In contrast to their disregard for Lazarus, they had always spoken highly of Moses and the prophets. They revered them. They were the mainstays and shapers of the great Tradition of faith that they professed to believe. They even observed the holy days and seasons imbedded in that tradition.

But clearly, they had ignored the deepest truths of the Moses-Prophets Tradition. Moses and the prophets had taught clearly that the resources to sustain life were to be arranged without social and economic hierarchies. Swirls of wealth within a sea of poverty were not acceptable to the Lord. Sabbath was to remind them every 7 days that producing and consuming were not the essence of life, but were intended to serve it. All of it. Beasts, plants, people. And

every 7th year, the entire year was to level the playing field to bring all the Lazarus’s back into full economic participation by canceling their debt and restoring them to their ancestral property and assets. In this way no one would long have to be enslaved, nor should anyone have to beg long. And what wasn’t corrected every 7 years – well, there was the Jubilee year, that special 50th year – a year fully acceptable to the Lord in which all inequalities that inevitably arise to bring injustices and evils into relationships would be made right. It was the liberation and righteousness of God assured every 50 years, the Sabbath of sevens. True fasting was a Sabbath kind of action to do without and intentionally making sure that all had enough. The one great requirement of God was to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8).

The rich man and his five brothers had ignored the Sabbath-Jubilee of their Tradition. They had, instead, practiced a lifestyle dependent on socio-economic hierarchies of privilege for some, and exclusion for most. Having ignored this core gospel of Moses and the Prophets, why would they listen to the nobody Lazarus?

MOMENT FOUR (Lk. 16:30-31)

The rich man: But they would listen if a man raised from the dead went to warn them.

Abraham: No, they will not even listen then.
(Curtain)

Plea for a miracle – Now desperate, the rich man pleads for a miracle. He wanted God to reverse the System whose final Power was Death and to make Lazarus exhibit number one of that reversal. Such an act, he was sure, would open the eyes of his five brothers. Then they would be spared his plight.

But even in this desperate moment the plea is not for a systemic salvation of the Domination System and all the people variously arranged in the Rich-Poor hierarchy. The strongest tone of the plea is to save five affluent family members. He first appealed for mercy for himself via privilege to “Father Abraham.” Then he appealed on behalf of family members yet alive. But in all this, sympathetic though we may be to him in his blindness, his coming to awareness remains very incomplete. The grace he’d so long neglected while living in his own self-sufficiency, the grace he didn’t need then, that grace is so differently configured than anything he ever came to know in his privileged life that he cannot even now enter its reality. He still thinks only of his family, unable to include the whole family of God’s people.

Abraham’s analysis – So Abraham sees reality differently. His words

are chilling for the tormented rich man. Abraham, with whom he thought he had connection, has let him down. Hard. His earlier presumed connections in the afterlife do not exist. Furthermore, the lack of those connections is a direct consequence of his allegiance to a socio-economic reality which, in fact, was not reality at all. It was a deceptive illusion.

Abraham’s perceptions notice how the rich man, even with some additional awareness, is still pursuing the salvation of the privileged, not the world – not all people and the Dominant System which holds them captive. So, not even the miracle of Lazarus being raised from the dead would credential him sufficiently to open the eyes of the rich family to God’s Reality, or even to the struggle of the Poor in their amnesia-affected reality. End of drama.

Conclusion

In face of the Grotesque Gap, this drama warns the top 20% to repent from any thoughts and actions that let the Gap grow or leave it alone. Engaging it to reduce it is of the utmost importance now and forever.

As do his other stories, this story of Jesus opens eyes to two realities. He wants us to see The Reality arranged by the intent of the world’s Powers and to see God’s Reality. The latter

is often submerged in The Reality of the Powers and emerges into fullness in and beyond the human Struggle. Only as we see and feel the intensity of the struggle between these two realities do we cry out for salvation. If we do not see this, then our cry doesn't become truly desperate until after death, as it did for the rich man in the drama. Lazarus saw the two dimensioned reality and cried out anxiously every day for his daily bread, depending utterly on God's abundance though much of it was hoarded disproportionately in the hands of the Rich. In that desperate daily cry his soul was shaped by God. He, by using little of the world's resources, honored better God's creation; and by acknowledging his utter need for God's deliverance, received God's salvation. He is an example of what Mother Teresa meant when she said that the poor were better instruments for saving the world than the rich.

Neither the word "Sabbath" nor "Jubilee" appears in this story. Yet both are loudly proclaimed. The Sabbath-Jubilee arranges life in opposition to hierarchies. It is out of Jesus' Sabbath-Jubilee knowledge of God's Reality that this version of The Gap arises, revealing that its structures must be dealt with in this life because their impact is eternal.

This story tells what is "acceptable to the Lord" and what is not. It speaks uncompromisingly to all of

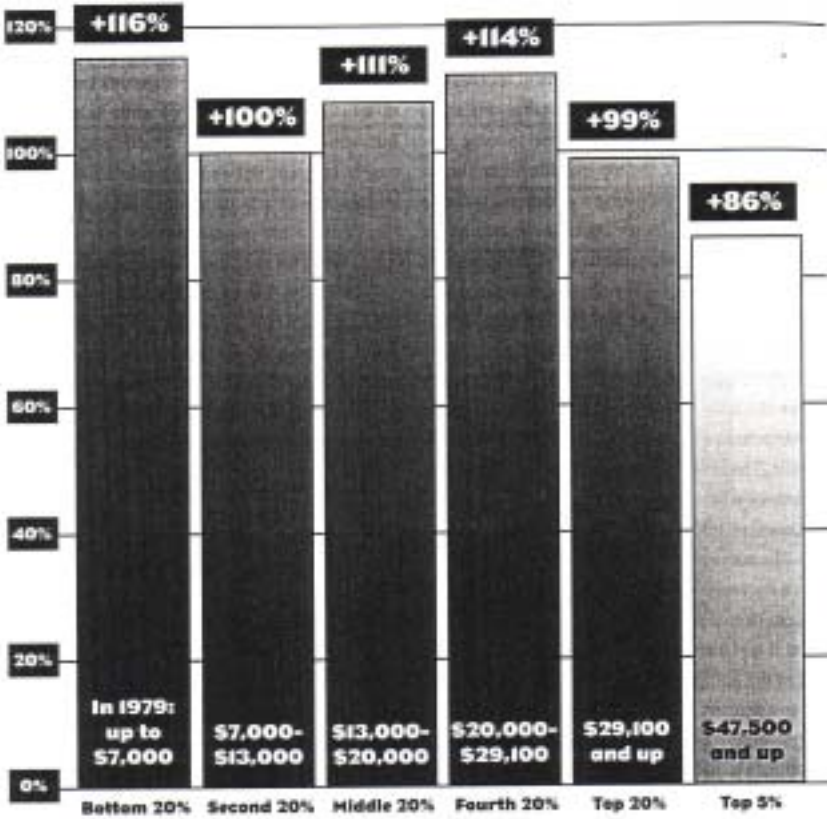
us who need to be "released from captivity" to the Dominant Reality. It proclaims "good news to the Poor," and not only because things will work out in their favor in the end, but because it confirms the correctness of their analysis in the present. They know that in God's provision there is abundance. That the scarcity comes from insecurity and hoarding and faithlessness of human beings, not from God's favor for the rich at their expense. "No one is to be in need among us." (Phrases above in quotes are from Jubilee passages in the bible.) They hear in this story how God is able to give preferences to the poor that are denied them by the Dominant System, which is in love with money. They see the truth in the son Mary sang joyfully:

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Lk. 1:52-53)

God's acceptable year eliminates the malignantly sinful hierarchical arrangements of the Dominant System. Resources are repeatedly distributed to counter the inevitable flow toward uneven accumulations. Such is the costly discipleship required by The Rich-Poor Gap today from all who have felt the power of the drama of this two act play.

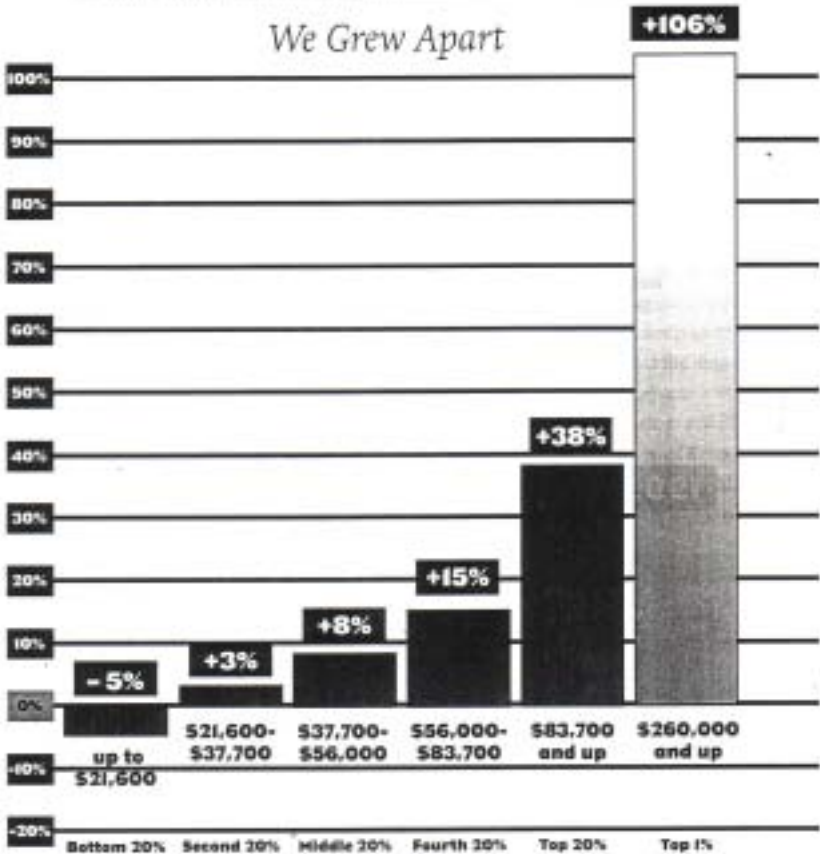
1947 TO 1979—REAL FAMILY INCOME GROWTH BY QUINTILE AND FOR TOP 5 %

We Grew Together



Sources: Analysis of Census Bureau data by Lawrence Mishel and Jared Bernstein, *The State of Working America, 1994-95*, 37. Income ranges in 1979 dollars from March 1996 Census Current Population Survey, Table H-1.

1979 TO 1998—REAL FAMILY INCOME GROWTH BY QUINTILE AND FOR TOP 1%

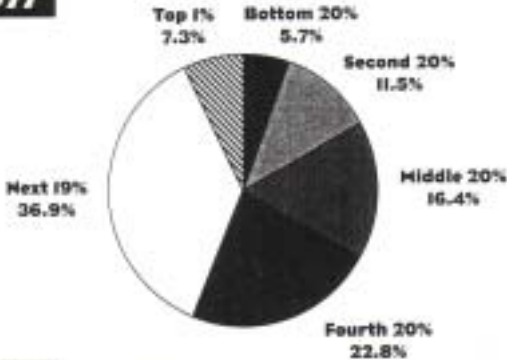


Sources: Quintiles Change and Ranges: March 1999 Census Current Population Survey, Table F-3, Income ranges in 1998 dollars. Top 1% change is for 1979-96. Calculation of Top 1% Change: 1979-89: 87.5% increase from Mishel et.al., *The State of Working America 1996-97*. 1989-96: 10% increase from Mishel et.al., *The State of Working America 1998-99*. Top 1% Income Threshold: From Federal Reserve Bank Survey of Consumer Finances data analyzed by Edward N. Wolff, January 1999. Converted from 1995 to 1998 dollars using CPI-U.

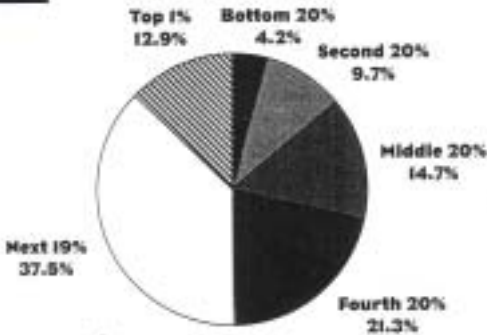
INCOME SHARES IN THE U.S.

The top one-fifth of American households with the highest incomes now earns half of all the income in the United States

1977



1999



Sources: Congressional Budget Office data analyzed by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. See David Clay Johnston, "Gap Between Rich and Poor Found Substantially Wider," *New York Times*, 2 September 1999, 14.

Acknowledgements

- Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*
- Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers*
- Notes in the revised Standard Version of the Bible, Oxford Edition

Additional Resources:

- United for a Fair Economy website: www.ufe.org
- Responsible Wealth - an organization of people in the top 5% of U.S. asset holders who seek to reduce the gap - website: www.responsiblewealth.org
- Graphs on pages 14-16 are from *Economic Apartheid in America: A Primer on Economic Inequality & Insecurity* by Chuck Collins and Felice Yeskel, and *United for a FAir Economy*, The New Press, 2000

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