

# A Great Gulf



Luke 16:19-31

Year C Proper 21

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## Parts by scene

■ = large part   ▲ = medium sized part   ● = small part

		1	2	3
▲	<b>James</b> - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲	▲	▲
▲	<b>Joanna</b> - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	●	●	▲
▲	<b>Matthew</b> - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	●		▲
▲	<b>Judas</b> - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲	●	■
▲	<b>Mary Magdalene</b> - a 'fallen woman' who became the first female disciple, the humblest member of the group due to her shame about her past	●		▲
■	<b>Jesus</b>	●	●	■
▲	<b>Rich man</b> - a grasping, arrogant, intolerant landowner		▲	

## Scene 1

James , Jesus , Joanna , Judas , Mary , Matthew

*{The disciples walk through a field on their way to a village where they have housing for the night.}*

**James**      What a great day!

**Joanna**      *[wearily]* What's so great about it? This is the longest hike we've had in a month. I'm dead on my feet.

**James**      What's great is the destination.

**Matthew**    It's just another city, isn't it?

**Judas**      It's what's *in* the city that James is looking forward to.

**Mary** I think I heard once that the food is really good there. Is that it?

**James** Nope. Actually, I didn't know that, so now there's two things to look forward to.

**Matthew** Come on, tell us. What's the other thing?

**Judas** Rabbi, can we tell?

**Jesus** I understand why you've been holding it back, but you're all in this together. You should share the hope and the risk.

**James** Okay: it's beds!

**Joanna** Well of course they've got beds. What's that to us?

**Judas** We'll be sleeping in them!

**Mary** In real beds? Truly? Oh, it's been so long!

**Joanna** Do we have friends there?

**James** Yup. And they're pretty well off. We'll each be getting a whole bed to ourselves!

**Matthew** Why didn't you tell us? Were you planning to surprise us with them?

**Judas** We weren't totally sure we'd get them, and in fact, we still aren't, totally. The city has a strict curfew. If we don't get there by sundown, we'll be turned away from the gates. But we've been making good time and I think there's no doubt now.

**Jesus** Be careful. The only things we can be sure of are the sky above us and the ground beneath.

**James** I know. Like the birds of the air. But this bird is going to sleep in a real nest tonight!

**Joanna** If you'd told us earlier, we could have walked faster. Or tried.

**Judas** If we thought it was going to be close, we would have, but we're going to make it by plenty. There must be at least a half an hour of daylight left, and the gate's not a mile away.

**Mary**            *[privately to Jesus]* Do you know something we don't? Are we going to miss out?

**Jesus**            I know nothing specific. Only that hopes often fail.

## Scene 2

James , Jesus , Joanna , Judas , Rich man

*{A well dressed man accompanied by two armed guards appears out of nowhere and confronts the group.}*

**Rich man**            Stop right there!

**Jesus**            Good day. Would you like to walk with us?

**Rich man**            *[pugnaciously]* I don't need to walk anywhere. I'm already where I belong. You're not!

**Judas**            *[cheerfully]* Actually, we're exactly where we belong: right on schedule for a stay in your fine city.

**Rich man**            And where you think you are right this minute?

**James**            *[still in a happy mood]* What, you mean this field? I suppose it must be part of a farm.

**Rich man**            It's part of *my* farm, and I don't take kindly to trespassers.

**Joanna**            We promise we haven't strayed off this road. And we won't. We're going straight to the city gates.

**Rich man**            Ah, but the road is mine, too! You've been on my property for the last half mile, and now you're going to turn right around and exit my property.

**Judas**            All right, we'll leave, but how about if we just go on to the gates? It's almost the same distance, so we'll be off your property just as quickly either way.

**Rich man**            *[sneeringly]* Yeah, right! If I let you through, everybody will be trying to cut through my fields. As long as they can get half way through before I catch them, they know they'll be able to make it all the way across. No sir!

**James** This is absurd! This is a road. Roads are meant to be used! And your farm sits right in front of the city gates. What are people supposed to do, walk all the way around every time they come and go?

**Rich man** That's exactly what they're supposed to do. And it's what you're going to do right now, if you don't want trouble.

**Jesus** *[sympathetically]* It must be a great deal of trouble for *you*, constantly patrolling your property to keep people off.

**Rich man** *[wearily, honestly expressing his feelings in a rare unguarded moment]* That it is. I can't tell you how much trouble people cause!

**Jesus** Well, then, we won't cause you any more. *[to the disciples]* Let's go. *[to the Rich man]* May God's peace be with you.

### Scene 3

James , Jesus , Joanna , Judas , Mary , Matthew

*{The group gets back to the main road and prepares to walk around the farm.}*

**James** *[suddenly realizing what this means]* Oh no! Oh no!!!

**Matthew** What's wrong? What happened?

**James** No! No! No!

**Judas** James, what is it?

**James** NOOOOOOOOO!

**Joanna** James, what's wrong? Please tell us!

*{James is beyond words, so Mary, who was aware of the problem all along, eventually jumps in.}*

**Mary** It's the city curfew. We're going to miss it now.

**Judas** *[suddenly upset as well]* Dear God, I didn't think about that! What are we going to do?

**Matthew** Run for it!

**Jesus** Even the birds of the air couldn't fly that fast.

**James**            *[grumpily]* The birds of the air could fly straight there, right over that damned field!

**Judas**            There's still time to go back and try sneaking across again. What do you say?

**Matthew**        It wouldn't be right. We agreed to leave.

**Joanna**         And it's really too late for that, too.

**James**            Curse that rich jerk! Curse them all! They'll get theirs! *[to Jesus]* Isn't that right? They'll be cut down when the Kingdom comes, won't they?

**Jesus**            In the Kingdom, there will be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor servant, neither owner or owned.

**James**            Amen to that!

**Judas**            *[not quite angrily or confrontationally, but certainly seriously, not in a light tone at all]* Not so fast. I don't think he really answered your question. *[to Jesus]* To say there will be neither rich nor poor is not the same thing as saying that the rich will be destroyed, which is what James wants.

**Jesus**            *[mildly]* And what you want?

**Judas**            *[firmly, after a pause]* Yes. I want it, too.

**Joanna**         *[trying to keep the peace]* I thought the rabbi's answer was better. The best revenge is to live well, and to forgive.

**Matthew**        *[dogmatically]* But money is the root of all evil. There can be no righteous kingdom as long as the rich remain untouched.

**Mary**            *[also trying to diffuse the tension]* Rabbi? Could you tell us a story while we walk?

**Jesus**            Very well. Here's one that I hope James especially will like. There was a rich man who lived in obscene luxury. He had dozens of servants, and so much land that he made our frazzled friend in the field back there look like a desperate pauper. At the same time, there sat at his gates, just hoping for some crumb of food to be tossed out to him, a poor, sick beggar named Lazarus.

**Mary** Is this a parable or a true story?

**Jesus** *[ignoring her question]* The two could not have lived more different lives. The rich man was so well off, he had never in his life had to so much as cut his own meat. Lazarus' whole life was one slow dying, and the dogs came and licked his sores.

**Judas** This has got to be made up.

**Matthew** No. I've known men that rich, and I've seen the poor souls who linger by their doors.

**Jesus** One day, Lazarus died of his many illnesses and was carried by the angels into Abraham's embrace. Not soon after, through an unfortunate accident, the rich man also died, but he was delivered to the gates of hell.

**James** Yes!

**Jesus** There, in torment he had never imagined possible, the rich man called out to Abraham, saying, "Father Abraham, have pity on me! I don't even ask that you release me from this place, or that you lighten my suffering by any great amount. I ask only that Lazarus might come and dip his finger in water and let a single drop fall on my tongue!"

**Judas** *[in mock humor but also a little grimly]* And here it comes.

**Joanna** Here what comes?

**Judas** The happy ending.

**Mary** *[surprisingly earnestly]* Do you think so? I hope it is!

**Matthew** *[piously]* The rich man experienced suffering for the first time in his life, and it changed him. He calls Lazarus by his name, as if they were equals, and begs him for a favor. But he also accepts his fate; he doesn't ask to be released from it. Because of this, he will be.

**James** *[repentant and no longer angry]* All right, I get it. I was mad at the guy, and I shouldn't have been. I should forgive him - and I do.

**Joanna** You're a good man, James.

**Matthew** *[to Jesus]* Can we have another story now? I really liked that one.

- Judas** *[sarcastically]* Sure, let's hear the one about how all the Romans will be admitted to Paradise because of their kindness to their horses.
- Jesus** *[continuing the first story as if he hadn't heard what anybody said]* But Abraham said, "No!"
- everybody** *[ad libbed confusion]* What? He said No? No to what? Is this the same story? *[etc.]*
- Jesus** *[portraying a stern Abraham]* "You had it good in life," said Abraham, "and Lazarus knew only misery. Was that fair? Was that right? Now he is comforted while you suffer! Is that not Justice?"
- James** *[laughing because he thinks Jesus is making a joke at his expense]* All right, all right, I get it! I was a vengeful jerk. Have pity on *me!*
- Matthew** *[anxiously]* Rabbi, you shouldn't even joke about things like that.
- Joanna** *[noticing that Mary is holding back tears]* Mary, what's wrong? It's just a story.
- Jesus** *[softly and slowly]* "And besides," said Abraham, "between us there is a great gulf that none can pass, none, so that no one can ever go to you from this realm, and no one in your realm can ever escape."
- {There is a long, thoughtful silence, and then Jesus continues with a sigh.}*
- Jesus** So then the rich man asked if Lazarus could at least be sent to his family to warn them against his fate, but Abraham again said No. "For they already have the scriptures, do they not?" "They don't believe the scriptures," said the rich man. "But if Lazarus came back from the dead to speak to them, then they'd surely repent of their ways!" But Abraham again said No. "If they have not listened to the scriptures, they will never listen, though a man rise from the dead."
- {There's another long silence.}*
- Judas** *[trying to find a way into the story]* Well, that was an odd story. I'm curious about that bit about the beggar being comforted now and the rich man suffering. It sounds almost like the *cause* of the rich man's damnation was his good life, and the cause of the beggar's salvation was his miserable one. In other words, it was not a question of being good or evil, but just being lucky or unlucky. *[to Jesus]* That can't have been what you meant to say,

can it?

**Matthew** Believe me, I've known many rich men, and none of their hands were clean. There is no way to be rich and innocent!

**Joanna** Maybe so, but does being poor automatically mean that you're guiltless? Rabbi, I'm sorry, but I think this is another parable that doesn't quite work out.

**James** That's because he changed it just to mess with us! But Matthew figured out what the real ending was supposed to be. *[to Jesus]* I think it would make a great parable if you stuck with that. It worked on me!

**Jesus** Thanks, James, I'll consider it. And I'm glad you're feeling better.

**James** Well, we'll all be rich some day, but in a better way. And it's a nice night for camping out.

*{They all walk along for a while, and then Jesus maneuvers over to Mary, who is still distressed.}*

**Jesus** Why are you so sad?

**Mary** I'm thinking about that poor man, in torment forever.

**Jesus** *[not so much making a statement as quoting Joanna from earlier]* "It's only a story."

**Mary** *[looking him in the eyes]* No, it's not! Is it?

**Jesus** *[in a neutral tone]* What makes you say that?

**Mary** You never told a parable before where one of the characters had a name. And all your parables use earthly things to teach the spiritual lesson. This one was about spiritual things up front. You weren't making up a story. You were reporting something that really happened, weren't you?

**Jesus** *[tenderly]* I can't answer that question.

**James** *[who overheard the last bit of their conversation and came over]* Then answer this one: if that was a true story, how did the rich man know Lazarus' name? You'd think a guy like that wouldn't even know the names of his servants.



**Jesus**

*[in a neutral voice, after a long pause]* They were brothers.

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*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at  
[www.WineskinProject.net/blog/rich-man](http://www.WineskinProject.net/blog/rich-man)*

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