

“REEL THEOLOGY – PARASITE”

By Rev. Victor Kim & Rev. Young Tae Choi

Luke 12:13-21, Colossians 3:1-11

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Today we come to the last of our movies in our Reel Theology series.

The movie is Parasite and it's a Korean movie, the first Korean movie to be nominated for an Academy Award for Best Picture, along with 5 other Oscar nominations.

The word parasite comes from two Greek words, “para,” meaning alongside, and “sitos,” meaning food. So, the technical, original meaning would have been “to eat at another’s table.” Of course, our current use of the word verges from the medical/biological to the sociological but the common meaning of parasite in our context is to describe an organism or a person who feeds off a host. The parasite uses another for its own gain, while adding nothing of value to its host.

In the movie, directed by Bong Joon Ho, there are two primary families, the Kims, family of a father, mother, and two university aged children, a son and a daughter, who live in a semi-basement unit in a poor, run down part of Seoul. They are unemployed and live in poverty. They have endured a series of failed businesses and their children, though bright, cannot find gainful employment. The other primary family in the movie are the Parks, a very wealthy young family, consisting of a father who is the CEO of the tech company, a mother who is young, beautiful and pampered but a bit vacant, and their two young children, a naïve boy crazed high school aged daughter and an out of control spoiled young boy, who was once traumatized by seeing what he thought was a ghost.

The son of the Kim family is visited by one of his friends, who is a university student and who tutors English to younger students, including the daughter of the Park family.

The university student needs to take a year to study abroad and so he invites his friend, the Kim family son, to take over as the English tutor. Even though the younger Kim has not qualified for acceptance into a university and feels that it would be a barrier to working as an English tutor, eventually he agrees and gets his sister’s help in forging a university acceptance document.

He is quickly able to gain the confidence of Mrs. Park and becomes her daughter's tutor. The young daughter quickly falls in love with her tutor, who calls himself Kevin. Kevin also notices that the younger son of the Parks is a bit wild and is encouraged to do art by his overly anxious mother. Kevin convinces the mother that he knows of an art therapist who is very skilled at working with children. He introduces his sister to Mrs. Park using a false identity, and she is hired by Mrs. Park to work with her son. Kevin's sister takes on the name Jessica and together they also conspire to get rid of both the Park's chauffeur and their housekeeper, replacing them with their father and mother, who all assume false identities to keep the deception going. So the poor Kim family all get jobs working for the rich Park family, who know nothing of the deception that the Kims have deployed in getting their jobs.

Ultimately the movie is a social commentary and satire on the gap between the wealthy and the poor in Korea, a social situation that isn't only common to Korea but to every country including ours. Let's take a look at the trailer.

(Click here to view the trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isOGD_7hNIY)

I've asked Young Tae to share in this morning's message because Young Tae is a film maker by background. He has directed films and he shares an eye for how a director would craft a movie, using visuals to express a point. I want to ask Young Tae to talk a bit about how the director, Bong Joon Ho, uses imagery and perspective to show the difference between the wealthy and the poor in the movie *Parasite*.

(Young Tae)

As a filmmaker, I am going to talk about how director Bong expresses a major theme of the film visually. Due to the limited time, I would like to focus on just a few production settings in detail. I hope that you will get a big picture of how director Bong shows the theme behind the cinematic settings.

In my view, the film *Parasite* is a social satire on the gap between the rich and the poor. Bong basically set up three spaces where three major families live in the movie.

Picture 1:



The first place is a luxurious house where a wealthy CEO, Dong-ik's family dwell. Geographically, Dong-ik's house is located on the high hill. To enter his place, people use stairs up to the entrance of the house through a big gate. His house was built by one of the famous Korean architects, Hyeon-Ja Namgoong, so this place is one of the top, most impressive architectural buildings in South Korea—spacious, functional, artistic, thoughtful, firm, nature-friendly, etc. Not surprisingly, what Dong-ik's family sees through the big windows of the house is the beautiful scenery of nature—blue sky and a green garden in the daytime, and shining stars at nights, just like those beautiful houses located in West Vancouver.

Picture 2:



In contrast, the second place is a semi-basement where a poor family, Ki-taek's family lives. Of course, this place is not Ki-taek's own property. He rents it monthly. To enter the place, they use narrow stairs down to the tiny door. This basement is extremely humid; there is mold on every wall and the floors of the tiny rooms; and lots of bugs like cockroaches are parasitic to this kind of place. So, what they face daily through the small steel-barred windows of the place is something completely opposite to what Dong-ik's family sees, such as people's feet passing by the windows, dust, trash, even someone urinating on the street.

Picture 3:



From these residence settings, Director Bong further makes a great contrast between Dong-ik's fine house and Ki-taek's semi-basement by showing us how two socially and economically different groups respond to rain. One day, during a sudden rainstorm, the wealthy man's family gets excited about the rain. Dong-ik's

young son puts up a small water-proof tent on a front yard. He plays alone like a Boy Scout. Dong-ik's wife begins to plan to have a party alongside her son's birthday party there, because a clean sky and fresh air will come after the rain. She hurries to make phone calls to her friends with excitement. As for them, nothing is worrisome about the rain, rather the rain gives them unexpected entertainment. On the other hand, Ki-taek's situation is terrible. His basement is flooded by the heavy rain. The whole area where Ki-taek's basement is located, where a number of poor people gather to live, is flooded by the rushing rain water. Why? Because water flows from high to low, top to bottom. Ki-taek's neighbourhood is located on the lowest ground while that of the rich is situated on the highest ground. Just like wet rats, Ki-taek's family cannot help but leave their place to a shelter in a community center that day.

Picture 4:



Director Bong shows us this geographical contrast in a long sequence in the movie. When it starts raining, Ki-taek, his son and daughter sneak out of Dong-ik's house on the hill (Victor will talk about why they can stay there later) and run down to their home. But, Bong does not simply use two cuts in terms of editing—the first cut showing Ki-taek's family coming out of Dong-ik's place

and the second cut showing when they finally get to their place. He could do that.

Actually, it could work. Yet, he decided to show how drastically different Dong-ik's social and economic position (his fancy place on the high ground) is from Ki-taek's poor status (his messy basement) in a vertically structured way—the film camera keeps following Ki-taek and his two children who have to keep coming down over and over again, passing by stairs, a tunnel, a bridge, stairs again, rough paths... Sadly and horribly, what is waiting for them is the chaotic reality being flooded. For them, a heavy rainfall is an unpleasant guest. Without any difficulty, we can see that these two different places vividly reflect the great social gap between the two families.

Picture 5:



Interestingly, director Bong designed one more place to capture the reality of the gap between the rich and the poor we face today. The third space is an underground bunker which is located in the wealthy man's house. In fact, this bunker was designed for an emergency, in the case of an attack by the North Korean military when architect Namgoong first designed it for himself. After the original architect died, Dong-ik moved into this place

but unknown to him, at the same time a poor man escaping from loan sharks started hiding here. He is the husband of the housekeeper, who used to be the housekeeper to the architect of the house. Because Dong-ik's family does not know about the bunker in his place, the wife of the poor man in the bunker takes care of him in secret by working as a full-time housekeeper for Dong-ik's family. This man has been living as a parasite to Dong-ik's family for years. Strictly speaking, the housekeeper is parasitic as well because she secretly feeds her husband by taking some of food from Dong-ik's fridge every day. This secret space soon become a battlefield where Ki-taek's family and the housekeeper's couple fight each other just as two parasites wrestle in order to own the one host, Dong-ik. By doing so, director Bong draws viewers' attention to the similar desire of the poor to that of the rich in a sense—desiring for being wealthy, at least not wanting to keep themselves poor, or taking something out of other people through competition for success in a society.

In short, director Bong depicts a social satire on the gulf between the rich and the poor, one of the serious social issues in the world, by means of this simple and yet powerful production design.

(Victor)

Once you know what you're looking for, It's amazing to discover how directors use imagery to convey their point and how effective they are at doing it. The visual imagery of up and down and how that is used creates a stark difference in reality for the rich verses the poor.

As Young Tae described, even natural phenomenon like rain is experienced by the rich and the poor in very different ways. You may have heard President Trump's State of the Union speech earlier this week where he boasted about the American economy, among other things. He stated that the American economy was doing better than ever before, quoting the success of Wall Street and the creation of wealth for all Americans.

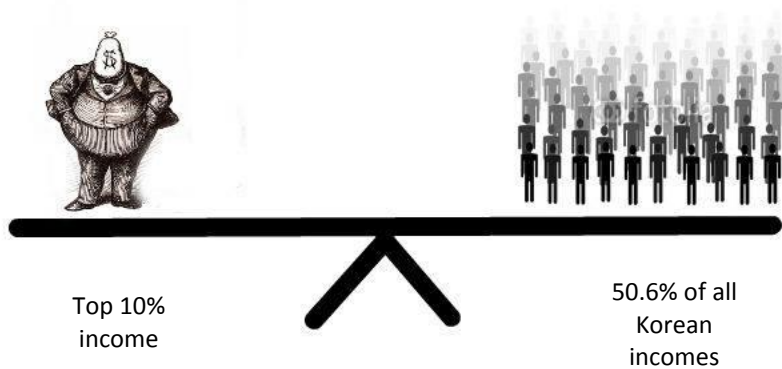
Of course, it all depends on how you spin the numbers. It is true that the poor and the middle class in America have seen a rise in their incomes. But it is also true that the rich have seen an even greater rise in their incomes, and due to tax breaks, a huge increase in their accumulated wealth. What you end up with is an increasing gap between the rich and the poor, and while it is true that the income of the poor has risen, it has done so far less than the income of the rich and the cost of living continues to leave the poor behind in many ways. This gap between the rich and the poor has never been greater and would seem to be unsustainable if American wishes to remain a civil society.

In Canada, according to a report from Oxfam in 2019, billionaires in Canada have increased their wealth by \$20 billion over the last year, while in the same time, the 4.5 percent of the country's wealth held by the poorest half of Canadians remained static. Worldwide, billionaire wealth increased an average of \$3.3 billion a day while the wealth of the poorest half of the world's population has decreased by 11 percent between June 2017 and June 2018. The fight against poverty is getting harder and harder because of growing inequality according to Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Report and Global Wealth Databook. In countries which don't have the social safety nets that we in Canada have, the results of this increasing inequality can be catastrophic. I want to ask Young Tae to speak about what he knows about the situation in Korea as it pertains to the poor and the wealth gap.

(Young Tae)

Thank you, Victor.

I would like to show you two pictures that illustrate the gap between the rich and the poor in South Korea.



Let's look at the first picture.

As you can see, more than 50% of all the income in Korea was earned by the top 10 percent according to Korea Labour Institute. In other word, if Korea had a population of 100 working people, the sum of all the income earned by the 90 people is less than that of the top 10 percent earners. This extreme polarization has been dramatically deepening over the past 25 years.



Now, let's look at the second picture on the screen.

You can see a young man popping the bubbles which represent most of a normal life's milestones—(1) the first bubble that is already popped on the left displays a woman leaving the man, (2) the second bubble represents having a baby and (3) the biggest bubble shows a happy family. The man looks so sad and depressed.

He is one of the N-Po-Generation. "N" means "Number"; "Po" is an abbreviation for "po-gi" in Korean. "Po-gi" means "to give up" in English. So, the N-Po-generation is a new term for the generation of people who have to give up numerous things in their lives in South Korea as it becomes harder and harder for them to live. This term can be modified depending on how many things a generation has to give up. For example, the "Three-Po generation" refers to a generation that gave up three things such as dating, getting married, and having a child. This picture depicts the "Three-Po generation." The Five-Po generation would give up two more things— having a house and a permanent job that

guarantees a stable income. The Seven-Po generation would give up two more things additional to the five-Po generation—having a dream and keeping a hobby. It would be reasonable to think that most of these things that they give up are what we would consider quite normal and common milestones of anyone's life.

As a result of the extreme gulf between the rich and the poor, many people who are currently in their 20s or 30s fall in this N-Po generation except for the top 10 percent with their upper-class parents. Ki-taek's children in this movie, are also part of the N-Po generation. They are overwhelmed by the never-ending rise of inflation, tuition fees, unemployment rates, and the cost of living. They know that they cannot afford to have a relationship, to study abroad, or to marry someone whom they love in a safe and clean environment. It is almost impossible for them to buy a house unless you are born into the upper class like Dong-ik's children.

(Victor)

The very interesting thing about Parasite is that the director does not romanticize the plight of the poor. The Kim family is really no different than the Park family, other than their income levels. The Kims are not a noble family who happen to be poor. They are parasites, using the naïve, insulated Parks as their hosts as they lie, cheat and swindle their way to a life they couldn't have imagined, but that they absolutely aspire to.

Both families are driven by the same sense of greed and possessions. The Kims know what they lack, and they dream of somehow getting it. The Parks don't really know what they already have, they are so insulated from the reality of the poor in their midst behind their private gates and chauffeured cars. But they are just as much parasites in that they feed off a culture that rewards the haves and punishes the havenots. They live in a culture that is driven by material consumption and their wealth comes from a cell phone based business that the father runs called Another Brick, which if you think about the fact that our modern phones so quickly become outdated bricks, is Bong Joon Ho's inside joke about our consumption based culture.

All of us are in danger of mindlessly participating in a parasitic culture where the pursuit of our comfort, our security, our sense of satisfaction often comes at the expense of others, often in ways we have no awareness or understanding of. The genius of the

movie is that while we may laugh at the scheming of the Kims and the naivete of the Parks, Bong, the director, convicts all of us of our complicity in a parasitic culture and economy.

I won't spoil the ending of the movie for those of you who may still want to see it, but let me say that the movie contains a huge twist, which is absolutely consistent with the theme, but it also transforms the movie from perhaps a comedy, a drama or a satire, to a horror film. And if you think about it, perhaps the only genre of film that adequately captures the obscene gap between the rich and the poor today is horror.

There is a corrective.

Bong, the director, doesn't point to a solution as much as he paints the problem in unforgettable ways. But Jesus offers us a solution, scripture points us in a direction that we need to remember. The parable of the rich fool, which Karleen read from Luke's gospel begins with one brother asking Jesus to mediate a family dispute about an inheritance. Jesus' response is to tell a parable.

Take care! Be on guard against all kinds of greed, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions. The parable depicts a rich farmer whose land produced many crops. Faced with the dilemma of having too much crop for his barns, the rich fool decided to build bigger barns and then to relax, eat, drink and be merry. The only problem was that he would die that night. And so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God, concludes Jesus.

His words are an indictment to the brother who asked Jesus to mediate and to his entire family, all arguing about an inheritance. You don't get it, says Jesus. If an abundance in your life causes you to build bigger barns instead of thinking about ways to share that blessing with others, then you are a fool. You may think that you're all set, planning a life of eating, drinking and being merry, but God has other ideas. If you're all about storing up stuff for this life, more than you could ever spend, and if you're not rich towards God, you're a fool.

It leads to an interesting question, what does it mean to be rich towards God?

Does God want us to give more offering?

Does he want us to build a bigger barn, a bigger building?

I don't get the sense that's what Jesus is saying. How can we be rich towards God, the God we cannot see, if we will not be rich towards the least of those who Jesus calls his brothers and sisters, those who we can see?

To be rich towards God means to be generous and compassionate towards those who are all part of God's family, including the least, the poor, the disadvantaged, the outcast, the neglected. He's basically saying to the brothers squabbling over the inheritance, I don't care who gets the money if all you care about is yourselves. If you cared about God and God's ways, you would know that generosity and kindness must guide your actions. If you don't have that, you're just a bunch of fools.

The Apostle Paul echoes those truths in his letter to the Christians in Colossae. If you've been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above... set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth... put to death whatever in you is earthly... including greed, which is idolatry... strip off your old self with its practices and cloth yourselves with the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of its creator. In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free, but Christ is all and in all.

You can hear Paul echoing Jesus, that in Christ, there is no difference in us, Christ is in all and is all. We all belong to Christ and therefore our greed, which exploits some at the expense of others, is idolatry. Greed replaces our dependence on God with dependence on our stuff and in greed we seek that stuff at the expense of others, we forget that we are all in Christ and that Christ is in all of us.

The movie is genius in its subterfuge. The true parasite, we start to realize, is the belief that all the characters in the movie share: that a perfect life can be made through wealth and consumption. It really doesn't matter who lives in the house or who lives below it; all of these bodies are just hosts for an insatiable delusion driving a cycle of radical inequality. Near the end of the film, the son, Kevin, makes a rousing speech about pulling himself up by his bootstraps, replacing the Parks, and saving his family. If we were cheering for the Kims as they knowingly manipulate the Parks, we now realize something far bleaker: the Kims are prey to the same fantasy of salvation through wealth and

consumption. The fact that Kevin's fantasy sounds so much like stories we tell about the Canadian or American, and now globalized dream, suggests that we may be playing host to the same parasite.

There is a solution, a corrective to our parasitic condition. We need to be rich towards God. We need to be generous towards those who are all the same in Christ, in whom Christ resides. We need to face our idolatry, our blind adherence to the consumption of our culture without question. It is hard work and we realize that our culture, our economics, our social structures are where they are today because people are drawn towards selfishness, towards possessiveness, towards wanting what others have. We are creatures of envy, jealousy, desire, but we also need to become more aware that we have been conditioned to be this way. When God created us, God did so with goodness in mind, and when God raised us with Christ in new birth, God did so to remind us of our original goodness, to move us away from that which has corrupted us and back to our true selves.

To follow Jesus, to live as those clothed with the new self, it means that we must make choices, choices that will put us at odds with the choices of the culture around us. We must make decisions that will cause us to be rich towards God, towards what God desires. We can't just build bigger barns. If God blesses us with more than we need, then we need to share it, not hoard it. If God blesses us, it is always so that blessing can be shared in generosity with others.

God does not guarantee everyone equal material blessings in life. Some get 5 bags of gold, others get 2, and some just get 1 bag. What matters is what we do with that which is entrusted to our care. Remember, we don't own what's been entrusted to us, we are stewards of those gifts. What's important is that we work to honour the intent of the giver, which is to be generous toward all.

Thanks be to God, Amen.

*Written by Rev. Victor Kim & Rev. Young Tae Choi
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