



The Investigator's Gospel

Session 16 – Chapter 16 – Making Friends with Money

Luke 16 can be divided into three parts, each focusing on the need for disciples to be wise and generous with the resources God has given them:

- The parable of the shrewd manager calls for faithfulness and wisdom in handling money, followed by a series of principles that develop from it (16:1–13).
- A shorter unit rebukes the attitude of the Pharisees and declares the arrival of a new era, which, though new, does not change the ethical standards God requires (16:14–18 – this raises issues, such as Divorce, which we will cover in a different session).
- Finally, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus emphasizes the ethical call God has made to be generous in meeting human needs (16:19–31). Christ's followers, unlike the Pharisees, should not be lovers of money. Recognition of the accountability God holds his disciples to has ethical and lifestyle implications, even down to the use of resources.

Luke 16:1-15 - The parable of the shrewd manager

1 Jesus told his disciples: 'There was a rich man whose manager was accused of wasting his possessions. 2 So he called him in and asked him, "What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your management, because you cannot be manager any longer."

Note that the manager has been accused of wasting (same word as in the Prodigal Son) the rich man's possessions. We assume, but are not told, he has been! Either way, he's out of a job.

3 'The manager said to himself, "What shall I do now? My master is taking away my job. I'm not strong enough to dig, and I'm ashamed to beg – 4 I know what I'll do so that, when I lose my job here, people will welcome me into their houses."

When faced with a crisis, the manager looks ahead, and comes up with a plan. One of the things for which he is commended is for taking action, rather than giving up.

5 'So he called in each one of his master's debtors. He asked the first, "How much do you owe my master?" 6 "Three thousand litres of olive oil," he replied. 'The manager told him, "Take your bill, sit down quickly, and make it fifteen hundred." 7 'Then he asked the second, "And how much do you owe?" "Thirty tons of wheat," he replied. 'He told him, "Take your bill and make it twenty-four."

The large debt suggests relatively wealthy businessmen. The actual measurements are 100 "baths" (a bath was about 8 gallons of olive oil) and 100 "cors" (a cor was about 10 bushels) of wheat. The former would have been worth about 1,000 denarii or about three years' wages for a day laborer; the latter, 2,500 denarii or about eight years' wages. The reduction of debt in each case (from 100 to 50 baths and from 100 to 80 cors, respectively) would have been roughly the same, worth about 500 denarii.

8 *'The master commended the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly. For the people of this world are more shrewd in dealing with their own kind than are the people of the light. 9 I tell you, use worldly wealth to gain friends for yourselves, so that when it is gone, you will be welcomed into eternal dwellings.*

Peterson's "Message" translation: *"Now here's a surprise: The master praised the crooked manager! And why? Because he knew how to look after himself. Streetwise people are smarter in this regard than law-abiding citizens. They are on constant alert, looking for angles, surviving by their wits. I want you to be smart in the same way—but for what is right—using every adversity to stimulate you to creative survival, to concentrate your attention on the bare essentials, so you'll live, really live, and not complacently just get by on good behavior."*

Jesus notes that the *"people of this world are more shrewd ... than are the people of the light."* That is, people in the world give more thought to their physical well-being than the righteous do to their spiritual well-being. He develops the point by a specific example: Wealth of this world should be used generously to "gain friends," so that when the resources are gone, that disciple will be welcomed into "eternal dwellings." Monetary resources, which possess a power to distort values, should be put to generous and serving use, so that heaven will be welcoming to the one who has been generous. This will be fleshed out in the next parable.

10 *'Whoever can be trusted with very little can also be trusted with much, and whoever is dishonest with very little will also be dishonest with much. 11 So if you have not been trustworthy in handling worldly wealth, who will trust you with true riches? 12 And if you have not been trustworthy with someone else's property, who will give you property of your own? 13 'No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.'*

The parable treats fundamental attitudes in how we handle resources. Jesus makes it clear here that money and the other material resources we possess are not ours, to be used in whatever we please. Rather, they have been placed into our care in order to meet the needs of those around us. What Jesus says here is similar to what Paul says in Ephesians 4:28: *"We work to earn resources in order to help the needy and to share with them."* This understanding of resources runs counter to the values of our culture, which instills in us the idea that what we have earned is ours and that we can use it as we want. Jesus makes the point that what we have is entrusted to us, and God watches how we use it.

A good example is the declaration in verse 13 that one cannot have two masters. Do we serve God, or do we serve only our resources and the pursuit of them? For many, this is the most fundamental question in life. To pursue wealth and the status that often comes with it means to worship creation, not the Creator. This is why Jesus says a person must know who he or she will serve, for when a choice has to be made, a person cannot serve both. Everything here calls on us to choose God.

“You see,” said Jesus, “worldly people, with no thoughts beyond this present life, will sometimes behave more sensibly and providently than other-worldly people, ‘the children of light.’ They will use material wealth to prepare for their earthly future; why cannot the children of light use it to prepare for their eternal future? Use the ‘unrighteous mammon’ to win yourselves friends in the world to come.”

The Connection Between the Parables – Buying Friends with Money!

But how can material wealth be used to procure friends who will receive one “into eternal dwellings” when it is no longer accessible? This parable is followed by a collection of isolated sayings, several of which are concerned with the subject of wealth, and then comes another story—the story of the rich man and Lazarus.

In it we meet a man who had plenty of the “unrighteous mammon” and used it only secure comfort and good cheer for himself in this life, giving no thought to the life to come. The time came when he would have been very glad to have even one friend to welcome him into the “eternal habitations,” but he found none. Yet he had every opportunity of securing such a friend.

There at his gate lay Lazarus, destitute and covered with sores, only too glad to catch and eat the pieces of bread which the rich man and his guests used to wipe their fingers at table and then threw to the dogs outside. If the rich man had used a little of his wealth to help Lazarus, he would have had a friend to speak up for him on the other side.

“This man,” Lazarus might have said to Abraham, “showed me the kindness of God on earth.” But Lazarus had been given no ground to say any such thing. The rich man in Hades found himself without a friend when he needed one most—and he had no one to blame but himself.

The formerly rich man hopes for mercy because he is a descendant of Abraham, but the judgment here is based on a future inversion of status. Jewish people expected an inversion of status, where the oppressed righteous (especially Israel) would be exalted above the oppressing wicked (especially the Gentiles), and also believed that charitable persons would be greatly rewarded in the world to come.

This “situational inversion” or “Great Reversal” is central to the preaching and ministry of Jesus – “Blessed are the poor,” and “Woe to the rich” are common themes in his teaching. Even Mary, upon receiving the Good News of Jesus’ impending birth, sang of it (Luke 1:52-53 – “*He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty*”). But this parable’s starkness would have been as offensive to most “financially comfortable” first-century hearers as it would be to most middle-class Western Christians today if they heard it in its original force.

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31)

19 'There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. 20 At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores.

The reference to a “gate” suggests that the rich man owns a large estate. “Lazarus” is an abbreviated form of Eleazar and appropriately means “God helps.” The picture is one of absolute degradation. A later rabbinic proverb says, “There are three whose life is no life: he who depends on the table of another, he who is ruled by his wife, and he whose body is burdened with sufferings.” Lazarus has two out of three. From society’s perspective, he has “no life” at all.

22 'The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. 23 In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side.

Abraham’s Side - Literally, “to Abraham’s chest or bosom.” The phrase probably alludes to a feast, perhaps even the messianic banquet, where guests reclined beside one another around a table. The place beside the host was the position of highest honor. Pious Jews expected to join Abraham and the patriarchs at the messianic banquet.

The rich man ends up “in Hades;” in torment, far away from Lazarus, the roles are reversed. Lazarus is in; the rich man is out. The standards of the afterlife are different from those of the appearances of this world. Death is the great equalizer, since after death the one thing that counts is the human heart. Possessions and status symbols are left behind.

24 So he called to him, “Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.”

The rich man’s view of Lazarus has not changed since his death. He still views him as beneath him, as someone who might to be sent to give him relief. This reveals the lack of heart in the rich man.

25 'But Abraham replied, “Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. 26 And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.”

Abraham must give the reply for eternity. Heaven is not like earth. He points out how the tables were reversed during life on earth: The rich man had all and Lazarus had nothing; the rich man had comfort and Lazarus coped with torment. In this reversed condition, there is one other crucial feature. “A great chasm,” an uncrossable gulf, prevents any crossing over from one arena to the other.

In effect, Abraham notes that there was a time when the rich man could have done for Lazarus what he is asking that Lazarus do for him now, but he refused to give Lazarus aid. What he measured in the past is being measured to him, only with one crucial difference: The current set-up is permanent.

27 *'He answered, "Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, 28 for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment."*

29 *'Abraham replied, "They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."*

Understanding that all is lost for him, he intercedes for his five brothers, whose attitude is similar to his own. He pleads for Abraham to send Lazarus to warn them. Abraham's reply here is crucial to understanding what was said both to the rich man earlier and to Luke's readers: *"They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them."* In other words, if one wants to understand what God asks of his people in terms of caring for others, one need only read the Scriptures. A warning is useless, since the Scripture is clear on what God desires.

30 *"No, father Abraham," he said, "but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent."* 31 *'He said to him, "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead."*

Abraham denies the request, pointing out that they already have the Scriptures to show them the truth. Even if someone were to rise from the dead they would not believe. The statement is a veiled reference to the religious leaders, who are presently rejecting the scriptural prophecies concerning Jesus the Messiah and who will continue to reject him even when he rises from the dead.

The twin morals of the story are:

- (1) Those who value riches more than God will be rejected; and
- (2) God demands a heart of love and justice for the poor and lowly.

Furthermore, the test of a heart that loves God, which is the most basic ethical command of Scripture, is that it heeds his words. How we relate to God vertically influences how we relate to people horizontally. If we love God, we must respond compassionately to his call to treat others sensitively.

Our Relationship with Money

- We should be careful not to love money but to be content with what we have. God's presence in our lives is of far greater value than a big bank account. Hebrews 13:56 says, *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'* So we say with confidence, *'The Lord is my helper (Lazarus!); I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?'*
- Money is a gift from God for our enjoyment and generous sharing, which lays up treasure in the life to come. 1 Timothy 6:17-19 says: *Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this*

way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.

- We should handle money as a trust for which we will need to give an account. 1 Corinthians 4:2 says: *Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.* Remember also the “Parable of the Talents” which Jesus told.
- Having money allows us to do good to all people, especially to believers. Galatians 6:9-10 says: *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.*
- God's love and generosity to us is a model for us to express self-sacrificing generosity to people who have needs. 1 John 3:17-18 says: *If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.*
- Our use of the resources God entrusted to us is a sign of our faith. James 2:14-17 says: *What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if someone claims to have faith but has no deeds? Can such faith save them? Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, ‘Go in peace; keep warm and well fed,’ but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.*
- The time to act compassionately is now! Proverbs 3:27-28 says: *Do not withhold good from those to whom it is due, when it is in your power to act. Do not say to your neighbour, ‘Come back tomorrow and I’ll give it to you’— when you already have it with you.*